

A PHILOSOPHER LOOKS BACK AND FORWARD

Mortimer Adler

I dream of a postmodern era maturing in the next century, one in which the viability of the planet is ensured, in which world peace is established and becomes perpetual, and in which a better culture emerges, fostering an intellectual climate that is more congenial to philosophical thought than the philosophically deprived and recessive culture against which I have struggled during my lifetime.

I will try to give my reasons for thinking and hoping that this dream has a good chance of being realized. But, first, let me explain that in over seventy years of dedication to philosophical thought, I have come to associate the word “belief” with an expression of religious faith—faith in truths that lie beyond the power of reason and experience to establish. Within the sphere of matters ascertainable by experience and reason, I prefer to speak of what I know, think, or opine, seldom beyond the shadow of a doubt, sometimes beyond a reasonable doubt, and often merely by a preponderance of the evidence. When doubt accompanies one’s knowing, thinking, and opining so also do hope and fear—hope that what is only probable will eventuate, fear that it will not.

The vocation of a philosopher is the pursuit of truth about God, the physical cosmos, and the human world—man’s nature and culture. With respect to human life and society, philosophy seeks not only descriptive truths, but also truths that are prescriptive and normative. The latter are statements about how we “ought” to conduct our lives, privately and socially, and what we “should” do to constitute a just political and economic order.

I regret that I have been compelled to say that the twentieth century has not been a felicitous time for philosophy. In my judgment, philosophy has reached its lowest level in a steady decline since the seventeenth century. My most fundamental conviction is that the manifold mistakes in modern philosophical thought began in the seventeenth century with little errors in the beginning that have led to disastrous consequences in the end. Instead of correcting these errors, modern philosophers in successive centuries have tried to solve the puzzles and paradoxes to which “they” gave rise.

Since the days of Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, these initial errors have gone uncorrected, and their consequences have been multiplied in the centuries that followed, especially in German thought—in Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche—at the end of the eighteenth, and in the nineteenth century.

The cause of these errors and their consequences was the ignorance, misunderstanding, or neglect of the philosophical wisdom to be found in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Only two of the mistakes that have plagued modern thought have come down to us from antiquity and have been perpetuated in modern times—the atomistic materialism that we find in Hobbes and the Platonic dualism (mind “and” body) that we find in Descartes.

To the baleful influence on twentieth-century philosophy of Hobbesian materialism, Cartesian dualism, and German idealism and transcendentalism must be added the mistake made by Russell and Wittgenstein in our own century. This was the mistake of supposing that symbolic and mathematical logic, together with a psychological theory of knowledge, lies at the basis of all philosophical thought.

I must confess to having made the same mistake in my early twenties, but fortunately I grew out of it. By the time I was thirty, I began to grow up philosophically and corrected the error of my immaturity by looking to metaphysics for the foundations of philosophy—a metaphysics that has its roots in common sense and is in no way affected by the findings of modern mathematics and science.

With this controlling conviction about the history of philosophy, I have devoted my intellectual energies to restoring the neglected and misunderstood truths that have been lost in modern times and trying to add some things to the foundations they provide. With few exceptions, mainly William James, George Santayana, Jacques Maritain, and Etienne Gilson, I have learned little or nothing of value from those who have come to prominence in the last sixty years, especially not from those whom the contemporary world has honored as the philosophical eminences of this century—Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger.

Another characteristic of the twentieth century that makes it inhospitable to the philosophical enterprise as I conceive it is the uncritical and unfounded assumption that, for solid truth about anything, one must go to science. The truths attained by the exact sciences in the study of the cosmos, physical nature, and man are seriously limited to what can be known by measurements yielding numbers that can be fed into mathematical equations. The many important aspects of reality that are immeasurable lie beyond the reach of exact science.

In four successive generations, great scientists such as Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, and Hawking have allowed themselves to slip from saying ‘what is not measurable by physicists has no reality “for” physicists’ to saying “what is unmeasurable has no reality.” Immeasurable simultaneity, the immeasurable reaches of infinite time, the determinate but indeterminable velocity and position of electrons do not exist in the physical world.

Not only do the immeasurable aspects of reality lie beyond the world of the physicist, but also, if there are truths to be learned about God, they are to be learned by philosophy, not by science. In addition, science cannot establish a single prescriptive truth about how we “ought” to conduct our affairs.

The moral problems we face in the twentieth century are in all essential respects the same as those faced by our ancestors in antiquity. The many technological and institutional changes we have experienced in this century do not make the problem of leading a morally good life more or less difficult to solve. The best philosophical guidance we can get is to be found in Aristotle’s “Ethics,” written in the fourth century BC. The last three centuries have contributed little or nothing of value in ethics.

With respect to political theory, the situation is different. Here contributions have been made by modern thinkers—by Locke’s “Second Treatise on Civil Government” and by J. S. Mill’s “Representative Government” and his essay “On Liberty.”

This leads me to call attention to two facts about the twentieth century that hold out promise for the postmodern age that lies ahead. The word “democracy” has been misused for many things, but we have at last come to use it strictly for constitutional government with truly universal suffrage (disfranchising only infants, the mentally incompetent, and felonious criminals) and with all natural, human rights secured, economic as well as political. Political democracy and, inseparable from it, socialism in the economic order came into being for the first time in this century and so are still feeble and fragile.

The other fact is that this is the first century in which there has been in any society a privileged majority and oppressed minorities. In all societies before 1900 there was a privileged minority and an oppressed majority. This extraordinary shift, like the crossing of a great divide, augurs well for a future in which the ideals of democracy and socialism will be more fully realized. Only then will we see the elimination of all oppressed minorities.

What is now happening in the former Soviet Union leads me to think, and also to hope, that in the next century the two major economies that have been pitted against one another will converge to produce a worldwide economy that we cannot at present fully envisage but in which the “difference” and the “antagonism” between the two forms of capitalism—state capitalism and private

property capitalism—will cease to exist in a completely industrial world that is everywhere capital intensive.

If in the next century a new economic order emerges that combines efficiency with justice and that provides the economic underpinnings of political democracy, then another hope of mine may be realized. The insuperable obstacle to world federal government has been the heterogeneity of the major powers in their political and economic institutions. That obstacle would be removed if the economic and political institutions of the major powers were to become essentially homogeneous, differing only in detail.


Without a world federal government replacing a relatively impotent United Nations, I can see no hope for this planet as a viable place for vegetative, animal, and human life. I once thought that world federal government was needed to prevent a nuclear holocaust and the destruction of civilization as we know it. The prevention of nuclear holocaust is no longer the reason for world government. That threat has all but disappeared and has been replaced by the threatened puncturing of the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, and other irreversible deteriorations of the environment that can be effectively countered only by enforceable legal regulation of human activities on a worldwide basis.

Finally, I come to the world that lies outside my ivory tower. Detached from the world of action, I have been able to carry on my philosophical pursuits even in this inhospitable and intellectually deprived twentieth century. I must confess that I have always found dealing with ideas more pleasurable than trying to solve problems that involve dealing with people. I must also confess that in dealing with human problems, whether political, economic, or educational, I have always persisted in taking the long-range view. Nothing worth accomplishing in the realm of action can be achieved by quick fixes and superficial remedies. I, therefore, have little interest in the ebb and flow of current events—the reports that fill daily newspapers, weekly news magazines, and news programs on radio or television.

In the realm of action, outside the world of detached thought, I have been engaged for many years in the radical reform of the thoroughly undemocratic, as well as ineffectively conducted, school system in the United States. The difficulties I have encountered are not in the sphere of what is thought to be the relevant educational ideas. I think that the Paideia program, which my associates and I have developed, contains the needed ideas about teaching and learning and about the obstacles to be overcome in

delivering the same quality of education to all children in the first twelve years of school. All the difficulties that have been encountered arise from the recalcitrance to change and the desire for quick fixes on the part of the human beings that must be dealt with in accomplishing a nationwide educational reform, one that may take fifty years or more into the next century to achieve.

Nowhere in the contemporary world is there a truly democratic school system in which equal educational opportunity genuinely exists and in which teaching is conducted as a cooperative art that respects the activity of the learner's own mind as the primary cause of all genuine learning. This is not surprising in view of the extraordinary recency of democracy and socialism. But now that these two institutions have at last come into being, my hopes increase for the radical reform of schools all over the world.

These reforms could not have been initiated without the advent of constitutional democracy and democratic socialism. Being involved in their initiation has been for me personally the greatest opportunity afforded by this century. Political and economic democracy will never be able to reach their full maturity without the accomplishment of these educational reforms. They are necessary to prepare all human beings for the intelligent discharge of their duties as citizens, for a beneficent use of their opportunities as owners of capital, and for the philosophical pursuit of truth, which may become, as it should become, everybody's business. 

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