

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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FIRING LINE: ON CONTINUING TO LEARN

with
William F. Buckley, Jr.
and
Mortimer Adler

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MR. BUCKLEY: This is the first of two hours we shall most happily spend with Mortimer Adler, by general consent, in which I acquiesce, the premier public educator in the country. He has shared with us in a half dozen preceding hours, his views on education, philosophy and in general, the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom, the relationship between which we might just end up exploring one more time.

The first hour is devoted to the questions raised in Mr. Adler's new book, *A Guidebook to Learning*, subtitled, "For the Lifelong Pursuit of Wisdom." Professor Adler's thesis is that the end of one's formal education, when we present ourselves for a degree, in high school or college or graduate school, is a date of utter insignificance in the learning process which in fact continues more fruitfully after schooling than before, because it is then that we can add to whatever we have acquired in the way of a mastery of the tools of learning and of factual data, an evolving biological and intellectual maturity that brings with it extra powers with which we struggle in the direction of wisdom. The second hour we will explore developments and non-developments in Dr. Adler's famous

Paideia proposal, as he has termed the program by which schools should be guided.

Mr. Adler is, of course, the director of the Institute for Philosophical Research and the editorial director of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. His career, after graduating from law school at Columbia University, was for many years associated with that of Dr. Robert Hutchins of the University of Chicago. Most people reach a moment when they retire from productive commercial or intellectual life. The difficulties presented by Mr. Adler's prodigious output is nicely stated in a letter I happened to see, addressed to him by a student at Georgetown University, which ended: "I must say one last thing. My mother and I love you so much that we give you up for Lent, and because she practices her religion, she wishes that you would not publish your next book during those self-sacrificing 40 days. The temptation to buy it would be too great." [laughter] If Mr. Adler wrote more often, Firing Line would simply become a weekly seminar devoted to the exploration of his mind. [laughter]

Our examiner is Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, about whom more in due course.

Mr. Adler's book, like so many of his other books, has the additional virtue of being succinct, a mere 160 pages. It is divided into four parts, and I am tempted to pursue the discussion in the order in which he pursues his thought in his *A Guidebook to Learning*. He begins with what he calls, "Alphabetiasis: From A to Z." And I would like to begin by asking Mr. Adler, what do you mean by alphabetiasis and what is it doing to us that you wish we might avoid, and how?



MR. ADLER: I think that the best way I can answer that question is by saying the 20th century differs from all preceding centuries in its approach to the organization and the understanding of the range of human knowledge, and that is because we live in a century, particularly in the west, dedicated to cultural pluralism and intellectual

heterodoxy. In all preceding centuries, men did not in the ancient world, the medieval world and the modern world almost up to the end of the 19th century—men did not hesitate to arrange knowledge in either an ascending or a descending order, some type of hierarchical so you went from less important to more important and understood the relation of different parts of knowledge. In the 20th century, that violates neutrality, that violates our detachment. We mustn't evaluate things in any particular way, so we resort to the alphabet. Our encyclopedias are alphabetical from A to Z, if you look at a college catalog it's from astronomy to zoology, our libraries are arranged alphabetically. If you look at any 20th century organization of knowledge, except one or two that I mention in the book, one that I tried in the *Syntopicon* and one that I tried in the propaedeutic of the encyclopedia, it's flat. One subject is as important as another and that's the reason for the alphabetiasis in the 20th century.

BUCKLEY: Yes, I think it's a nice metaphor. It probably undermines to a certain extent one's common reliance on the alphabet. So far as I know there is no movement that says that there is equality between the letter Z and the letter A.

ADLER: No.

BUCKLEY: But it is certainly true that people tend to teach today as though there had been no antecedent thought in that particular subject.

ADLER: Right. Of course the alphabet is useful in the encyclopedias and dictionaries as a means of reference, for looking things up, as in the telephone book. But our college catalogs seldom give the students who look at the college catalog a picture of the organization of knowledge as to beginning here and going there and a progressive, shall we say, approach to a higher level of learning. And that's the picture I —

BUCKLEY: And since your second section proceeds under the title, "The Organization of Knowledge Prior to the 20th Century," in which you travel from Plato to Herbert Spencer. Did you select Herbert Spencer because he is most usefully pointed to as the last scholar who explicitly relied so directly on antecedent knowledge?

ADLER: I think in that section of the book Herbert Spencer and Auguste Comte, the French positivist, represent the 19th century's reliance mainly on science, not on poetry or philosophy or history. Both are given to the organization in terms of the order of the sci-

ences. If you go back to the ancients or go back to the Middle Ages, theology was queen of the sciences and philosophy her handmaiden, and I think that — Take the 17th century. As I wrote this book and studied Francis Bacon, I gained more and more respect for Bacon's picture of the organization of knowledge and the advancement of learning, because he chose the three words which I end up with as the three principal forms of knowledge: history, poetry and philosophy. Not the empirical sciences.

BUCKLEY: Well, in your book, in which you give these very short takes on these prominent thinkers, you designate the extent to which they in some cases explicitly relied on preceding thought.

ADLER: Indeed.

BUCKLEY: And then you also, for instance in the case of Locke, you designate, as you did in your book *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, where there was a sort of great lacunae in this treatment.

ADLER: Indeed.

BUCKLEY: Now, is it an intention, a design, of yours, to assist people in pursuing knowledge to identify these mistakes and profit from them?



ADLER: Well, in this particular book, I try to show that although in the earlier centuries, antiquity, middle ages and modern times from the 17th century to the 19th, there are insights about the organization of knowledge that are worth recovering. None of them, I think, will satisfy the 20th century. I reviewed a little quotation from Aristotle that in studying any subject, it is required to take into account the views of one's predecessors in order to sift, when you take account of them, truth from error and preserve the truth and throw the error away. And so I looked at all these prior organizations of knowledge and found points that seemed to me worth saving. The importance of metaphysics in the order of philosophical subjects, the importance of history and poetry in relation to phi-

losophy. These are things worth, I think, saving, but you have to say them in a way at least I find it necessary to say them in a way in the 20th century, in spite of the cultural pluralism and the intellectual heterodoxy that prevails in our day, to say all these subjects are not of equal importance. Science is less important, unless it's approached humanistically and philosophically, than history and poetry are for the advancement of one's mind.

BUCKLEY: Okay. Well, let's move into the section in which you proceed under the rubric of contemporary efforts to organize knowledge. This is really what we are heading for. The specific challenges of the 20th century you've touched on. Now, this cultural pluralism is exemplified how, for instance, in a college curriculum?

ADLER: Well, in many colleges — There are a few exceptions: St. Johns College is one exception; Bard College, Mr. Botstein's college, is another exception. But if you look at most colleges across the country, particularly the colleges in our large universities, the undergraduate section, you will find the college — There is no — Students are allowed to major and minor according to their whims and wishes, without any sense that one subject demands more of him than another, and that they ought to study one subject prior to another in a certain order and ought to advance in their study from one subject to another. And often — Even the core curriculum at Harvard, I think, fails to do that, you see. Now the advantage of St. Johns College is that they do, in the course of four years, deal with the whole range of great books from the Greeks down to the present day and do come in contact with the fundamental ideas, I think, and one of the things that we are trying to the Paideia thing tries to do at the level of basic schooling, where I think it belongs even more, is to cultivate that kind of approach to — The important thing, it seems to me, is this: It's to understand the difference between being a generalist and a specialist. Everyone should be — everyone in our kind of very complex society, one has to be a specialist to earn a living in a sense. But one must be, in addition to being a specialist, be a generally educated man. And not all subjects are equally important from that point of view. You can specialize in this narrow field or in that, in one professional field or another, in one science or another, one branch of mathematics or another. But for general education, it seems to me certain things are absolutely requisite and no college — our colleges now, most of our colleges, are places of specialization rather than a general education.

BUCKLEY: It's interesting that you should cite Bard College and St. Johns, it seems to me from a number of points of view, but at least from one point of view, because Bard, when it was called St. Stephens, is where Albert Jay Nock was schooled, and his only mature enthusiasm was St. Johns, and he made really the point that you made in his famous Virginia lectures, didn't he?

ADLER: Yes.

BUCKLEY: Let's say that you had a cataract problem and needed an operation —



ADLER: I would want a specialist.

BUCKLEY: You would want a specialist, okay.

ADLER: But I would hope — I would want a specialist if my car stopped working.

BUCKLEY: Sure.

ADLER: I would want a specialist — I mean, if I go to a concert, I would hope that the musicians are specialists in their — The violin player or the cello player is a specialist in his field. But every one of those fellows has a life to lead, a human life to lead, and should try to become in the course of a lifetime not in school; no one can become a generally educated person in school. As I have said to you many, many times before, it is impossible to become educated in school because youth itself is an insuperable obstacle to becoming educated. [*laughter*] One has to become educated in adult life. And if you think of those two things: being a generalist, having a general education, and being a specialist, it seems to me that in our present situation, basic schooling and this is really the main point of the Paideia program—basic schooling, K-12, should be devoted entirely to general education.

BUCKLEY: Yes, but let's not linger too long on that point, because we have another hour devoted to it.

ADLER: And specialized education should be placed in college and university and then after all schooling has ended, one should in the course of one's own learning, as an autodidact, conducting one's own learning, try in the course of one's growing maturity, to become a generally educated human being.

BUCKLEY: Now, in your well-known distinction, in which you enumerate the four goods of the mind, the first, of course, is intimation. And one can go on accumulating information for the rest of one's life without beginning to exhaust what's there. The second, which is mastery of the tools of learning, is presumably something that you do acquire and live off, if you like, for the rest of your life. Right? Learning how to read and learning how to listen, about which you've put so much emphasis.

ADLER: Yes.

BUCKLEY: So one is an inconstant, the second is a constant. The third is understanding. Now, that's always evolving, isn't it?

ADLER: That's the thing that grows and grows and grows. The wonderful thing about understanding — Information you can lose very easily. In fact, we forget information on a daily basis.

BUCKLEY: Sure.



ADLER: And I think the pursuit of it is strictly a trivial pursuit. Information can be used and misused. Most of it is useless. Most of what it requires is useless. And the information we lose we can regain by going to reference books. We don't have to carry it around in our mind. A great deal of the knowledge we have, knowledge of fact, is unaccompanied by understanding. We simply know the fact

without understanding the fact. And understanding is different from — you can forget even what you know, what you've once learned and had knowledge of, one never forgets what one understands.

Understanding is a permanent acquirement. As it grows, it grows cumulatively. In addition to which, understanding differs from knowledge. It occurred to me recently that one never says, "I know the idea of liberty, I know the idea of justice, I know the idea of God." one says, "I understand it." Ideas and even ideals are objects of understanding, not of knowledge. I would say that you are — Again, even in our intellectually heterodox age, I think you can say information is much less important than knowledge — knowledge particularly without understanding. Knowledge understood is better than knowledge without understanding. Understanding is a higher form of learning than knowledge is, and ultimately this leads to wisdom. Without understanding, no wisdom comes at all.

BUCKLEY: Yes. Other languages than our own seem to intuit this in that they use the word appreciate slightly differently, don't they?

ADLER: Yes.

BUCKLEY: Appreciate is not only to be grateful for, but is also to apprehend.

ADLER: That's right.

BUCKLEY: And the two go hand in hand, don't they?

ADLER: Yes.

BUCKLEY: So that if you appreciate the idea of liberty, you understand it, do you not?

ADLER: That's right. One can't know the idea of liberty, which — You don't know ideas. You understand them.

BUCKLEY: That's right. You don't remark it.

ADLER: That's right. Yes.

BUCKLEY: So your point is that having got the insight, it is permanently with you, like learning to ride a bicycle? You don't have to develop that understanding?

ADLER: Right. No, I think the understanding does develop. It grows and deepens. But that distinction of the four kinds of learning—information, knowledge, understanding and wisdom should be accompanied by another distinction, fourfold also, between the modes of knowing: Knowing that, knowing what, knowing how, of the skills and arts, and knowing why and wherefore.

BUCKLEY: Yes. Yes.

ADLER: Now knowing why and wherefore is understanding and wisdom. Knowing that is history and science without much understanding. Knowing what is science at its best, knowing what as well as that is science with some understanding.

BUCKLEY: Yes.

ADLER: So that distinction, of knowing that, knowing what, knowing how, knowing why and wherefore —

BUCKLEY: Why and wherefore.

ADLER: — is like the same distinction of information, knowledge, understanding and wisdom.

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