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FIRING LINE - CONTINUING TO LEARN

with
William F. Buckley, Jr.
and
Mortimer Adler

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BUCKLEY: Yes. Okay, now, we didn't talk about wisdom.

ADLER: No.

BUCKLEY: The understanding—let's say your understanding of liberty leads you, or does not necessarily lead you, to making wise decisions in respect of, let's say, what is required to maintain that liberty?

ADLER: With respect to wisdom, I think we have to pay attention to one very important distinction that is less important, less necessary in the case of knowledge and understanding. And that is between theoretical wisdom—what the Greeks called philosophical wisdom, for which they used the word *sophia*—*philosophia*, love of wisdom and the other kind of wisdom, which is practical wisdom, for which they had the word *phrenesis*, what we call prudence. Philosophical wisdom is understanding the ultimate principles and causes of everything. In some sense, the reason why theology and metaphysics is the top of the line in terms of understanding is because there you are dealing with first principles and

relevant causes. In the practical order, its last ends, the underlying beginnings of knowledge, its roots and principles, are of course the ends of which you got your life. You know that wonderful remark in the scripture that a fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. I've often wondered about that, and I finally think I understood it. The reason why the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord calls your attention to the ultimate ends of life, the last things. And I would say that practical wisdom consists, therefore, in always taking in respect of anything the longest-term point of view you can. Folly consists of short-term calculations, short-term judgments. To be wise in life is to make all one's judgments about what should be done, what ought to be done, what ought to be avoided in terms of the most ultimate goals one can see. That's practical wisdom. Now, the two go together, I think.

BUCKLEY: Yes, the political scientist at Harvard who wrote *The Unheavenly City* made the distinction between the upper class and the lower class—and it has nothing to do with economics, of course.

ADLER: Yes.

BUCKLEY: It has to do with the extent to which you can make decisions with reference to ultimate rather than to immediate satisfactions. And if you are wise, you will omit Monday's pleasures in return for Tuesday's serenity.

ADLER: Moral virtue, one of the great advantages of persons who have moral virtue, is that they manage to habitually cultivate deferred gratification. Deferred gratification is very important.

BUCKLEY: If you're talking about final ends, do you have a difficulty, for instance, with political liberalism, which has no eschatology? There is really no redemptive creed built into democracy or liberalism, is there?

ADLER: I think again, as we always have to, we have to distinguish between a secular and a religious examination of the same point.

BUCKLEY: Well, communism is also secular. It has eschatology.

ADLER: Yes. On the secular plane, one the plane of natural law, not the supernatural, the last end is a completely good human life, and a social life, a good society. That's what one must act in terms of those ends and not in terms of immediate gratification and im-

mediate goods. In terms obviously of a larger view, a theological view, one's ultimate salvation is the greatest end.

BUCKLEY: Right, right. In which case the fear of God is not really a metaphor, is it?

ADLER: That's right. No.

BUCKLEY: But it's useful metaphorically in any event. So the fear of God really is the fear of thoughtless consequences. If all of a sudden Don Giovanni sits there and he sinks under the stage in a burning fire and he sees his past life.

ADLER: Fear of the Lord is also involved in Pascal's wager.

BUCKLEY: Yes, that's right. That's right. What about the distinction which you find so useful between what you call episteme and paideia?



ADLER: Well, that distinction—Those two Greek words, both of which have the common meaning of learning or knowledge in the broad sense, are distinguished in Aristotle's writings—episteme or episteme is special, or the knowledge of the expert, whereas Paideia, the Latin equivalent of which, by the way, is humanitas, is the general learning—the general learning—which should be in the possession of the human being. Now we, I think—I have to comment on this because we, I think, in the 20th century, have greatly misused the word humanities.

If humanitas is the translation of paideia, in the original meaning of humanistic, the approach to any subject, I would say, I hope that Mr. Botstein agrees with me on this later, mathematics as much belongs to the humanities as music does, because both can be approached either way, as generalists in terms of their human values and their human significance, or they can be approached as a specialist would approach them, in terms of technical competence and

the technical mastery of the field. In the 20th century, what we did about the humanities was to say, “Here are the natural sciences, the physical sciences, the biological sciences, the social sciences. Now what’s left over? History and religion and literature and the other fine arts, music and dance and philosophy. We have no name for those. We’ll call them the “humanities.” Now that’s wrong, because specialized scholarship in literature, specialized scholarship in music, specialized scholarship in history is just as narrow and specialist as specialized scholarship in mathematics or physics or chemistry. Any subject approached and William James said this, by the way, even before Ortega said it. Ortega said it in 1930 in the revolt of the masses; William James said it at the beginning of the century. That any subject approached historically and philosophically is humanistically approached. Any subject approached from the point of view of a narrow specialist is not humanistically approached. So I think it would be wonderful if we could clear that word up, because I think the National Endowment for the Humanities misuses the word and most of our colleges misuse the word. As a matter of fact, Bill, I think, one of the points I try to make in this book is how badly we misuse such ordinary words as art—

BUCKLEY: Philosophy.

ADLER: —and poetry and philosophy. Let’s take art for a moment. Most people think that art exists in museums. As a matter of fact we say museums of art. Now, what exists in a museum, in most museums, in fact all of them, are forms of visual art: paintings, sculpture are the visual representations. Music is as much an art as painting and sculpture and so is poetry. We ought to understand the word art to mean any product of human skill. And then we can define the arts into the useful arts and the fine arts. And the fine arts are the arts of the beautiful and literature and music and the dance are just as much fine arts as—again, we use the word fine arts as if they were again the plastic arts, the visual arts. And we misuse the word poetry when we use the word poetry for lyrics written in verse, whereas the word poetry in its ancient meaning is any great narrative, whether written in verse or prose.

BUCKLEY: It has to have a narrative.

ADLER: Well, there are two kinds of poetry, narrative and lyric, and narrative divides into the dramatic and the epic, novels and plays. But really what the word poetry stands for is all forms of imaginative literature. I would not think poetry was of great importance if it were confined to lyrics—the sonnets, for example, or rondelets or short songs. And the distinction verse and prose has

nothing to do with poetry. We always think of poetry as in verse, but it's not necessarily in verse at all. *War and Peace* is a great poem. Fielding, when he writes *Tom Jones*, calls it a history or a poem. And the other word we misuse is philosophy, of course. Philosophy, as it is now taught in most of our schools, is as specialized as logic and mathematics. It is not concerned, as it once was concerned, with the understanding of the great ideas, the basic ideas. And the worst misuse of the word philosophy comes in—

BUCKLEY: The degree, yes.

ADLER: —the PhD degree, which was invented in Germany to— In the German universities of the 19th century, a great deal of research was done in fields other than law, medicine and theology. They had degrees. Doctor of law, doctor of medicine, doctor of theology. So what do you do about a man who is doing research in history, research in archaeology, research in zoology, research in economics, you see? Well, they took the word philosophy for all departments, all the non-professional departments at the university and created the PhD degree. You don't say doctor of philosophy by itself, you say doctor of philosophy in chemistry, doctor of philosophy in geology, and of course you're not a philosopher at all.

BUCKLEY: Yes, right, right, right. It simply signifies now an elevated degree, doesn't it?

ADLER: That's all. And a research degree in one specialized department of non-professional learning, learning other than engineering, accountancy, law, medicine and theology.

BUCKLEY: Well, since you touch on a matter of different kinds of truths, why don't you go on and tell us what you mean in your book when you refer to the prescriptive and obligatory truths.

ADLER: Well, I think that is probably the most important distinction of all, Bill. And that's what makes—There are two things that make philosophy in some ways—I hope I'm not special pleading in this case more important than any other branch of learning, at least at the natural level, leaving divine theology out, leaving sacred theology out. One is that only in philosophy does one have prescriptive as well as descriptive truths.

BUCKLEY: Explain what you mean by that.

ADLER: Descriptive truths are truths saying what is or is not the case. The operative words there are is and is not. Prescriptive

truths are truths that involve statements or propositions that say ought or ought not. “What ought I to seek?” “What means ought I to use to achieve it?” There are no oughts in science, there are no oughts in history, there are no oughts in poetry. There are only oughts, if there are any true oughts—and I would say there are true oughts and ought nots in philosophy. And that distinction between the prescriptive and the descriptive is of the greatest importance in the world, because otherwise there are no truths guiding our action at all. The other thing that’s important about philosophy, for anyone that thinks that religion is an important part of a human life, is that philosophy is the only branch of human learning that takes one to the edge of human learning where one stops with natural knowledge and opens one’s mind to what may be supernatural or revealed truth. Science doesn’t do that, history doesn’t do that. And that’s why I think the Middle Ages called philosophy the handmaiden of theology.

BUCKLEY: Right, right. Well, then the great prescriptive truths you would say are cultural or philosophical?



ADLER: Philosophical. There are truths in moral and political philosophy. The great truths of moral—that is, that virtue is indispensable, that one ought to seek virtue because without virtue one can’t lead a good human life is a prescriptive truth.

BUCKLEY: Well, we were given the Ten Commandments about, what, 16–17–1800 years before we were told by Immanuel Kant how you could figure out the same thing without the need for revelation, right?

ADLER: I don’t think you can. Oh, I shouldn’t say that. I withdraw that statement. The Ten Commandments as part of sacred scripture are revealed truth.

BUCKLEY: We accept them prescriptively. Those are—

ADLER: Yes, thou shalt or shalt not.

BUCKLEY: That's right.

ADLER: But those, if one takes Aristotle's ethics—I would much prefer Aristotle to Immanuel Kant—who—Aristotle, I think, is able to, on the natural plane, without revealed truth, establish an equivalent set of oughts and ought nots. That is, if you take the four cardinal virtues of prudence and temperance and courage and justice, they—the precepts of justice, the precepts of prudence, the precepts of courage and temperance give you the oughts and ought nots that are the moral equivalent of the Ten Commandments.

BUCKLEY: And he deduced them, right? And therefore, I guess the point that you're making is that they don't rest on revelatory pillars, which is, of course Kant's point also.

ADLER: Yes.

BUCKLEY: So how is it then that you hesitate for a moment in expressing doubt—

ADLER: I can't—

BUCKLEY: —doubt as to whether or not you can free yourself entirely from revelation in order to grant the necessary authority to the codes by which we seek to live?

ADLER: I'm not sure I know the answer to that question, Bill.

BUCKLEY: Well, this is really a historical program. [*laughter*]

ADLER: The moral law, as stated in the Ten Commandments, is very specific: Thou shalt do this—In fact, some of the Commandments would not be deducible or inferable from the principles of moral philosophy.

BUCKLEY: “Thou shalt not use the Lord's name in vain.”

ADLER: Or “Thou shalt honor thy father and mother” is, I think—That is a very special Commandment, “that thy days may be long in the land that the Lord, thy God, giveth thee.” Ask yourself what that means, or the first, “Thou shalt have no other gods but me,” “Thou shalt not have graven images.” Those are not on the plane of natural morality at all.

BUCKLEY: or—

ADLER: “Thou shalt not kill,” “Thou shalt not commit murder,” “Thou shalt not steal,” “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” are different, I think, from that.



BUCKLEY: Or “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s goods.”

ADLER: That’s right. So that the Ten Commandments are really on two planes.

BUCKLEY: Yes.

ADLER: One contains precepts, the equivalent of which can be stated in moral philosophy, the other does not.

BUCKLEY: Well, when Johnson and Burke spoke of prescriptive truths, did they not refer to those truths by which we are brought up? Now, you say these are really philosophical truths, but aren’t there significant cultural distinctions? For instance, certain things that would be tolerated in the West would not be tolerated under Hinduism.

ADLER: There is, among the races and ethnic groups of mankind, great diversity of manners and I think really no diversity of morals. There is no tribe, no tribe on earth, that does not proscribe some forms of killings and call them murder. They don’t agree about which kinds of killing are—Killing and murder are not the same. Now, there are justifiable killings and unjustifiable killings, and murder is unjustifiable killing. The Eskimos, for example, would differ from us about what killings are justifiable or not.

BUCKLEY: Or anybody who practices infanticide, for that matter.

ADLER: Correct. But there is no, I think, no tribe on earth that does not proscribe some killing, no tribe on earth—Well, I shouldn’t say that, because there are some tribes, very primitive, where there is no private property, in which case you can’t have theft. But I

would think that the basic moral prescriptions, when they are arrived at from an understanding of human nature and human needs, are the same, are universal for mankind everywhere and at all times. I think moral philosophy would not have its authority if it did not claim to be universal—in spite of the differences—

BUCKLEY: And of course specifically in the Kantian scheme this would be impossible, because he imposes the universal test, does he not?

ADLER: Yes, but here you see, the Kantian scheme is based upon, I think, inadequately on human reason, whereas the Aristotelian scheme is better because it is based not on human reason alone, but on human nature, which I think is a much better foundation, philosophical morality, than pure reason is.

BUCKLEY: Well, to spend just a minute or two before we turn to our examiner on the mandate of your book, it really is, is it not, to continue to seek education after you leave school in pursuit of wisdom—

ADLER: Read and discuss.

BUCKLEY: Read and discuss. Read and discuss. And as you recently said, that the emphasis that you now put on seminars, on interaction, is even higher than it was just a few years ago. Now, do you find that there is a developing anxiety among Americans who are 20 years out of school, say, to continue to refine their minds?

ADLER: I find generally in terms of my mail, in terms of people I meet around the country, a great interest in learning. The human mind is hungry. It is hungry not for specialized details or specific knowledge. It is hungry for the kind of understanding that refreshes and gives it, shall I say, the enjoyable fruits of one's intellectual activity. I think we underestimate the mind's desire to learn, and its enjoyment of learning.

BUCKLEY: Are there reinforcing data for instance, that have to do, with any growing sales in mature books to older people?

ADLER: I don't know the figures if there are.

BUCKLEY: Because you yourself have experienced this at Aspen at the Institute and so on.

ADLER: No question about it.

BUCKLEY: Over and over again.

ADLER: No question about it. And if you look at mature people engaged in learning, they almost instinctively turn to the forms of learning that I think are the refreshments of the mind. They turn to poetry in the sense of the great novels, great plays—of course they learn a great deal, they gain some understanding of human life and human needs. And to history, biography and history. And when philosophy is offered them—unfortunately, it isn't offered them often enough—with any discussion of ideas, I have never had any experience of anyone turning away from a discussion of ideas. From taxi drivers up and down. Ideas are the very pabulum of human understanding.

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Jerry Devoe

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