

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## *FIRING LINE - CONTINUING TO LEARN*

with  
**William F. Buckley, Jr.**  
and  
**Mortimer Adler**

**(3 of 3)**

**BUCKLEY:** Well, let's present Mr. Leon Botstein, who is, as I've said, the president of Bard College. He went to the University of Chicago and subsequently to get advanced degrees at Harvard, where he taught history. He was also assistant to the department of education in New York State, and, by the way, has been associated formerly with Professor Adler in his Paideia proposal. Mr. Botstein.

**MR. BOTSTEIN:** Thank you. I am in the peculiar position of admiring much of what has been said and will take a devil's advocacy position. I prefer Kant to Aristotle to begin with [*laughter*] and believe that there is a redemptive creed in democracy, Mr. Buckley, that is, that in it the redemptive creed is a world of universal freedom and individuality, that redemptive is not in the sense of after death, but there is a teleology, there is a purpose to it.

**BUCKLEY:** But the purpose of freedom is to do the right thing, isn't it? And I don't see that liberalism instructs you in that, do you?

**BOTSTEIN:** Well, whether liberalism instructs you in that, ideally freedom is a moral virtue and therefore, it is a reasonable one, and therefore, behavior —

**ADLER:** Freedom is a great human good. It isn't a virtue.

**BOTSTEIN:** To live freely is, I think —



**BUCKLEY:** It's a procedural virtue.

**ADLER:** All the virtues are good uses of freedom.

**BUCKLEY:** Yes.

**BOTSTEIN:** But before I get sidetracked here [*laughter*], I want to raise what I think is a fundamental question, and that is that the distinctions that Mr. Adler makes, the information, tools, understanding and wisdom, one could argue that these are really impositions, that they have no truthfulness to themselves. They are purely divisions by words which try to put on, as you say, the heterodox and pluralistic world that makes no sense — this chaos of the world out there — distinctions which don't really hold up, that they really are arbitrary categories which allow you to organize knowledge in ways which seem coherent which lead to ultimate truths. But I took a skeptical position and said that I don't know that there are those ultimate truths, and furthermore, the way I get there is not through the notion of general education, but through specialized learning that there is no distinction between specialized learning and general education. For example, if I wanted to really understand the world, the world is too large to understand in a total coherence. The only way I could really understand it is through finding the narrow range of that which I can command and that would mean that specialization should be not the foundation of learning — general education should not be the foundation of learning, but the end point of learning, that we should start out by training special-

ists who really understand the world as it works, really study science, really study the empirical — the world that we can actually verify and understand, and from that narrow vantage point, then realize the resonances that maybe lead to a larger world, but that larger world I really can't see. It really doesn't exist, all these truths and wisdoms. Where do you find them, other than by your own authority?

**ADLER:** I never would appeal to my own authority, Leon. And I think I would have to challenge you that these distinctions between information and knowledge and understanding and wisdom, are imposed. They exist throughout the literature of the subject. You know that most of the information that is sought in the game called Trivial Pursuit is of no importance at all. That is information, pure information with no understanding at all. And much of the knowledge that is taught in school is knowledge of facts without the facts being understood. The reason for the facts, the underlying principles of the facts is not understood. I think we can leave that aside. The other point you make is, I think, answerable seriously. I don't take your dismissal of information, knowledge and understanding and wisdom as serious. But the other one is serious, and I agree with it, that specialization is important and should come at the level of college and university, but before you get there, there should be the beginnings of general learning, at the *paideia* level, at the level of elementary and secondary schools, and particularly the cultivation of the skills — the skills of the language arts and the mathematical arts and the scientific operational skills. And then, after you've had the specialized learning that a college can give you in a narrow field — you never understand the whole world in any of those narrow specializations — then led a life, after you become a specialist in chemistry or in law or in medicine or in engineering, some branch of technology, one should go on with the three subjects that I think are of basic values to human life and understanding and action: history — understanding human events and biography, the great literature, forms of the other arts that are nonverbal arts, and philosophy, which deals with ideas.

**BOTSTEIN:** Yes, but again, I want pick up what you easily dismissed. Let me give you a specific example. Again, my sympathies are clear. I am trying to render the opposition more powerful here. If one, for example, takes music and the idea of beauty, I don't think it's possible — I am just speculating here — that it's possible to separate information from the wisdom of beauty, if one can talk in those lines. I'll tell you a good example. Without the specificity of information — information being the knowledge or hearing of concrete sounds, of knowing something very much in particular,

and this is true in science as well, it seems to me that without retaining that information, living information, you speak as if that information, you could lose it, that somehow it's separable. It seems to me that method, content and understanding are really inseparable, that you cannot cut those things apart so readily.

**ADLER:** Well, let me take a contrary. You would say a telephone book contains information, wouldn't you?

**BOTSTEIN:** Of a certain kind, yes. More than you think.

**ADLER:** I know that. And directories contain information and dictionaries contain information, and in the great encyclopedia with which I am connected, we have a whole section called the micropedia, which is mainly informational content.

**BOTSTEIN:** But in every piece of information, is there not an underlying perspective and philosophical claim?

**ADLER:** Well, information, when organized and rationalized, becomes knowledge. Knowledge, when the underlying principles of it are sought and grasped, is knowledge understood. But let me refer to the point that you were making. I defy you to say that you know an idea as opposed to understanding an idea. Ideas are not the objects of knowledge. They are the objects of understanding. There are no ideas I can think of and say, "I know that idea."



**BOTSTEIN:** Yes, I agree with you, but in order to know an idea, it is impossible to separate that idea, I would argue, from the concrete what you would call fact. You trivialize the idea of fact. In every fact — For example, if I describe an historical fact. Mr. Buckley is known to do this a lot. That is to say, he will describe an event and in the process of description, there is implicit explanation of an event. There is an implicit point of view. There is an implicit philosophical claim that is imbedded in what you call the fact.

**ADLER:** I am not denying that a person who has understanding shouldn't have some knowledge and a person with knowledge doesn't have information. I am only saying in this intellectually heterodox age of ours, when one thing should be as good as another, knowledge is more important than mere information, knowledge understood is better than mere knowledge, understanding is superior to knowledge because it deals with something that knowledge can't reach, ideas, and beyond understanding is something that's higher still — the ultimate goals of life and the ultimate principle, which is wisdom.

**BOTSTEIN:** Yes, but I'm concerned —

**ADLER:** And that's a distinction that — I'm not saying those are separate, one can get along without —

**BUCKLEY:** Why can't you say, Mr. Adler, "I know Marxism"?

**ADLER:** Well, that's not an idea. It's a theory or doctrine.

**BUCKLEY:** It's a theory which —

**ADLER:** "I know the Marxist doctrine."

**BUCKLEY:** "I know the doctrine."

**ADLER:** "I understand the idea of property. I don't know the idea of property."

**BOTSTEIN:** How can you understand the idea of property without owning, or having —

**BUCKLEY:** Oh, sure.

**BOTSTEIN:** — owned it, I mean, without some concrete relationship. That's a bad — I withdraw that. I withdraw that. It's too easy. [*laughter*] The question is how would you know the idea of property without in fact — I'm concerned about the abstraction of —

**ADLER:** I didn't say — See, I didn't say — You misused my word. I don't know the idea of property. I understand the idea of property. But I agree with you, I ought to have some economic knowledge and economic knowledge will involve some economic facts. I'm not, you see — You think that because I made a ladder of learning there, that I've left the lower rungs out. I don't kick the

lower rungs off when I reach the higher rungs. I step down and use them. But I am saying there is an ascending order.

**BOTSTEIN:** Yes, okay, but what I worry about in an autodidactic way is the notion that people talk about ideas in a kind of deracinated, cut off way, but let me choose another point.

**ADLER:** Not me. [*laughter*]

**BOTSTEIN:** I was stung by the notion that youth is an insuperable obstacle to learning —

**ADLER:** Well, you're too young to understand that.  
[*laughter*]

**BOTSTEIN:** I would think the opposite. I would think that, while I agree with lifelong learning and the pursuit of wisdom — and here I take a position which is not popular with the philosophical position — Schopenhauer, I think once has said that no child should ever be given any serious idea before the age of 18 lest they get them wrong, but it seems to me that there is something about youth which is in all its boldness and its youth that makes it in fact a great invitation to serious learning. You seem to postpone wisdom to an age where —

**ADLER:** It's impossible. To say a wise young person is equivalent to saying a round square. Wise and young will never go together. It's impossible.

**BOTSTEIN:** Let us take poetry. Let us take poetry and music.



**BUCKLEY:** It's like saying young and venerable, isn't it? [*laughter*]

**BOTSTEIN:** Let us take two people, Verlaine and Mozart, or the early Mendelssohn.

**ADLER:** You wouldn't say Mozart was ever wise, would you?

**BUCKLEY:** God, no. [*laughter*]

**BOTSTEIN:** I think in the realm of —

**ADLER:** Good musician, but not wise.

**BOTSTEIN:** I would take the opposite. A wise human being? Mozart? How about Keats?

**ADLER:** No.

**BUCKLEY:** No.

**BOTSTEIN:** I think we obviously disagree about what wisdom is. I am suggesting that —

**ADLER:** A great poet, but not wise.

**BOTSTEIN:** I think the young Einstein was a wise man.

**ADLER:** No, a very, very, very learned man, but not wise.

**BUCKLEY:** Not wise at all.

**ADLER:** Not wise at all.

**BUCKLEY:** Even by his own calculations.

**ADLER:** That's right. Leon, let me make a remark about myself and then ask you to contradict it. I think that without too much immodesty I could say that I am now a generally educated human being and I would date the truth of that statement from about my 60th or 65th year. I don't think I was generally educated much before then. I know I wasn't generally educated in college. And for many years when I taught for all the years that I taught at the University of Chicago, some 25 years, I was not generally educated. I have slowly become generally educated because it takes a long, long time. One must become more mature and really rid oneself of the details that occupy one's youthful —

**BUCKLEY:** That distraction. There was, of course, one great exception, Jesus.

**ADLER:** Well, that, again, is supernatural.

**BUCKLEY:** That's right. Yes. About Jesus, what was so widely remarked about him was his wisdom.

**ADLER:** Practical wisdom.

**BUCKLEY:** Practical wisdom, yes.



**BOTSTEIN:** It may be a matter of terminology —

**ADLER:** Your youth, I think —

**BOTSTEIN:** Maybe, but since I am growing old and it's something I look forward to, but not necessarily in the pursuit of —

**ADLER:** I hope you do. [*laughter*]

**BOTSTEIN:** The matter of wisdom is, I think —

**BUCKLEY:** Let's put him down — Let's ask him whether this is an oxymoron. Can one be precociously wise?

**ADLER:** No.

**BUCKLEY:** You wouldn't say that the young Napoleon or Alexander were precociously wise in that they showed that they exercised skills and that they applied them prudently in a way one would not have expected of people in their twenties.

**ADLER:** Prudence —

**BOTSTEIN:** Let me come back to one issue and then I want to raise another issue if I may before the time runs out. And that is, when I said Mozart was wise, I am suggesting that in a Schopenhauerian way, to quote a philosopher, that insofar as music reflects some notion of the world and ideas and wisdom, that in Mozart you sense a recognition, a wisdom, about human nature and about



beauty, that is profound. But I want to argue that point for the moment. If one accepts your argument, both of you, then we come to the uncomfortable question in democracy, or perhaps its failings, of in this case, who should govern? If in fact there is this hierarchy of developing knowledge and in fact it is coincident with age, which I would assume is your argument — We do have a president who qualifies by age, but [*laughter*] apart from —

**BUCKLEY:** And a Constitution that says you can't be wise until you're 35.

**BOTSTEIN:** That's right. But that's —



**ADLER:** But seriously, the age of becoming a citizen is much less than the age of becoming an official. The age of the president — I think I would move the age up to 45 from 35 —

**BOTSTEIN:** But you only became generally educated when you were 60.

**ADLER:** I know. Now, but you were talking about—Generally educated is one thing, wisdom is another. Now, if you ask me what intellectual properties or professions should every citizen have, which our schools should give them, is: They should be able to read, be able to listen, and be able to think critically. Now, those are skills you can teach the young —

**BOTSTEIN:** I know, but how about to govern?

**ADLER:** No, remember now, each person has only one voice in the total electoral process, and though I think the young would not govern wisely if given the ultimate authority of government, their voice, along with the voices of others, of older persons in the surrounding context of citizenship is all right.

**BUCKLEY:** You mean as a constituent voice.

**ADLER:** Yes. I certainly would not want a young person to be a judge of the Supreme Court. I would not want a young person to be president of the United States or a member of the cabinet. By young I mean under 30. I really think — I have to say one other thing. Maturity, the age of the officers, the general officers of the continental army of the United States in the rebellion, the War of Independence, was 30. Alexander Hamilton was the secretary of the Treasury at 31. And the reason is that at that time, they graduated from college at age 12 and 13. They matured much earlier than we do. We have postponed maturity and created adolescence, which is one of the worst diseases in the world. My grandfather went to work at the age of 15, was married at 16, had children at 17. He was a mature man long before my children are mature. So that that question of maturity varies with time.

**BUCKLEY:** Was Robert Hutchins mature when at age 27 he was named dean of the Yale Law School?

**ADLER:** No. No, he was immature when he became president of the University of Chicago at 30. And his immaturity and mine — we both were immature — caused much of the trouble at the University of Chicago. *[laughter]*

**BOTSTEIN:** I would also suggest that—

**ADLER:** He was there when we caused the trouble. *[laughter]*



**BOTSTEIN:** No, no, I think the trouble you created would only have been possible — Had you been immature, I would say that we have benefited by the immaturity you displayed then. *[laughter]* But let me go to another question. Obviously, we didn't owe this scheme. There is some sense of a compelling and clear truth. You started out this conversation by talking about the 20th century and about its being pluralistic and heterodox. It is another way of saying something that many people have said, which is that there seems to be no coherence any more in what people believe and —

**ADLER:** Some values are more important than others.

**BOTSTEIN:** That's right. Or on order of values or as Mr. Buckley pointed out that there are the culturers and so forth and explored the possibility, and you responded by saying, well, finally you think that all humans are moral. You came down to — All human societies have some sense of morality and —

**ADLER:** Right.

**BOTSTEIN:** I think you went close to saying that there is some kind of universality to —

**ADLER:** To morals.

**BOTSTEIN:** —to moral truth and finally behind that curtain, in the human sense, behind that curtain is finally some sense of what Mortimer Adler believes, finally, all this process of learning will lead to is a recognition of truth with a capital T, that those skeptics who would say, "There is nothing but my truth or the truth of my age," a relativist, says, "We believe what our culture makes us believe," or "We believe what our time believes." But you are thinking that there is something out there that —

**ADLER:** I think there is objective and absolute truth with small letters. Small o, small a, small t. Not big t. Because only God has truth then.

**BOTSTEIN:** How do you distinguish someone who makes that claim from someone who makes it and how do you distinguish the person who is right from the person who is wrong?

**ADLER:** There is only one way that all questions are adjudicated. That is by reason and argument. One never appeals to authority. If you and I are differing as you say, we are differing for the purposes of this occasion and we had all the time, I would spend all the time I could to persuade you that you are wrong. And if I didn't persuade you, you would try to persuade me.

**BUCKLEY:** Aren't you using the word adjudication a little bit loosely, Mr. Adler?

**ADLER:** Yes.

**BUCKLEY:** Because arguments are disposed of in one of a number of ways. It might be by democratic vote in which the majority vote for Hitler, which has nothing to do with the validation of that person's —

**ADLER:** No.

**BOTSTEIN:** But the rule is a validation, who establishes their —

**ADLER:** I would like to suppose that you and I, belonging as we are, out of the West, would on the whole, appeal to the same principles of logic.



**BOTSTEIN:** How about another culture which did not —

**ADLER:** I have some difficulties. When I go to the Far East and deal with my friends in Japan, I find that their logic is different from mine, and there I have difficulty and all I can do is persist in trying to persuade them that the law of contradiction applies in Japan as well as in the United States.

**BOTSTEIN:** But lurching finally to the more ultimate and practical insofar that we are dealing between East and West and various cultures battling around very fundamental questions, how would one bridge — How does this process of education contribute to bridging that gap where the rules of argument or the rules of adjudication or validation seem to be very disparate?

**BUCKLEY:** I have to abort that. I am very sorry. Thank you very much, Mr. Botstein, the president of Bard; thank you very much, Mr. Adler, the author of *A Guidebook to Learning* and thank you, ladies and gentlemen from the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, celebrating its 20th anniversary here in New York City. 📖

*Taped on Jan 27, 1986 (New York, NY)*

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max

I just finished reading the first two transcripts of Buckley's interview with Adler. This material is simply excellent. A big thank you to you, Marie and Ken for your tireless efforts to make Adler's work accessible.

Paul Baier

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBER

**Dr. Patrick Hudson**

*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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