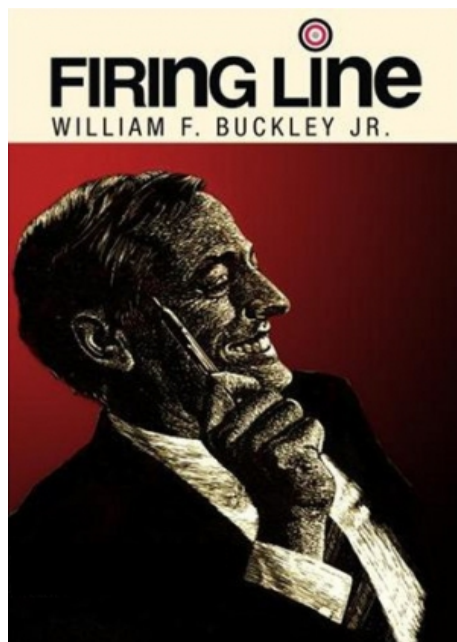


# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

JUN '12

*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

Nº 672



**PROGRAM # 193**

March 13, 1970

**GUEST: Mortimer J. Adler**

Part 1 of 2

**William F. Buckley, Jr.:** Mortimer J. Adler is the Director of the Institute for Philosophical Research, and unquestionably the single most prolific educator in America. He is devoted to the idea that there are great ideas that they are discernible and communicable. It was he who conceived and then largely produced the famous Syntopicon, which was described by somebody as “the first Baedeker to 30 centuries of Western thought.” It is an index of ideas, of the ideas of 74 writers and thinkers from Homer to Freud who are the spine of Western culture. Adler was born in New York and took a Doctorate in Psychology from Columbia in 1928. He taught at Columbia until lured to the University of Chicago by Robert Hutchins, where he taught the philosophy of law, and, with Mr. Hutchins, organized the Great Book series which have now graduated to a series on the great ideas, the ideas of justice, of love, of progress, of happiness and of law, During the entire period Mr. Adler has written a dozen or two of his own books, one of these

which he wrote in sixteen days was called *How to Read a Book: the Art of Getting a Liberal Education*. It was published 1940 and became a best-seller and is acknowledged as a classic. His most recent book, published in January of this year, is called *The Time of Our Lives, the Ethics of Common Sense*. Mr. Adler believes that we need very badly in America an educational and a moral revolution. He thinks that a smaller proportion of America is literate today in the real meaning of the term than in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. I should like to begin by asking him whether this is so because of defective educational standards or because the democratists appetite for educating even the uneducable.

**Mortimer J. Adler:** I think it's both. We have, in the first time in this century, we have decided to do something that no other society, no other prior civilization ever even dreamed of attempting, to take the whole population to school, and keep them there for a fairly prolonged period. But, while we've been democratic in the sense of taking our responsibilities to give schooling to the whole generation as comes along, we haven't begun to solve the problem of how to do that. And I think one of the reasons why are failing so badly is because it's an incredibly difficult problem. When you had, go back to 1900, you had less than 10% of the eligible age groups in high school. That 10% that was in high school in 1900, came from a fairly selective portion of the population. It was relatively easy for classic, what used to be called classical high schools, to do a fairly good job in reading, and writing and mathematics and exact science. Today, with all the children in school, children who come from incredibly disadvantaged homes, where the school is beaten almost before it starts, we haven't any solution to the problem. Now, I say two things: (1) I think our responsibility, the one we've taken, namely, to give a liberal, I shouldn't say it that way, because in fact, we haven't taken it yet but our responsibility is



**BUCKLEY:** It's our theoretical mandate.

**ADLER:** Yes. To take, give liberal schooling to every child who is not asylumed or hospitalized because he's pathologically feeble-minded. That's a very large order. By liberal schooling I mean up to the Bachelor of Arts degree.

**BUCKLEY:** Well, now, would you explain, Mr. Adler, your impatience with current curriculums. You've even said that you sympathize, you said that the rebellion of the students in our colleges and universities is thoroughly justified by wrongs they are suffering at the hands of their institutions. The wrongs of which most of them are only dimly, at best inchoately, aware.

**ADLER:** I think they are aware, what they are aware of is that the colleges they go to are suborned, as it were, are subjugated by the Graduate Schools. The professionalism at the Graduate School overhangs the college. The college, instead of being an institution of liberal learning, concerned only to liberate the mind, to discipline it, and liberate it, gives it its fundamental ideas in its fundamental discipline, becomes nothing but a channel, a conduit, into the specializations of the Graduate Schools, and professional schools. I would emancipate every college from the university. I mean I would literally have no colleges in universities.

**BUCKLEY:** Well, how are you going to cope with the problem of getting inspiring teachers? Or do you reject the notion that a teacher in order to be inspiring must himself be a pioneer in his class?

**ADLER:** Yes. I'd have two kinds of teachers. I would not have teachers with PhD's. The PhD is purely a research degree, and far from preparing anyone to teach, is the very opposite. It can become a crippling course of study for a future teacher. I would have a graduate degree; in fact, Dr. Berg and I have been talking about this, a graduate degree called Dr. of Liberal arts, not PhD, let the PhD go, for the PhD in chemistry, the PhD in psychology, the PhD in economics, preparation for research and professional work in that field. Let it be a professional union card. And then, let's have Graduate schools in the humanities, Graduate schools in the Liberal Arts to train future teachers whose interest is general learning. Let's produce...

**BUCKLEY:** To train them in pedagogy, or to train

**ADLER:** No, not in pedagogy, to teach them, to teach them things.

**BUCKLEY:** I see. Yeah.

**ADLER:** And my definition of a good teacher, which I have a hunch you will share, is a person who is himself dedicated to continued general learning. That is, the best teacher in my own experience, is the teacher who in the course of teaching is learning. The teacher who has learned it all, and is merely becoming a means of transmission, of dead knowledge, knowledge is dead for him because it's not being actively acquired at the time, is, I think, use your word, not inspiring. The inspiration that happens in classrooms is when the students see the teacher learn something. Thinking, learning, ideas occurring. And that means a teacher has to be, you know, I know it's kind of trite to say that Socrates was the greatest teacher, but he was. And he was, simply because he was teaching while he was conducting an inquiry. His teaching was the conduct of an inquiry, in which the students were engaged in the inquiry with him. Now, that, it seems to me, is the kind of teaching that should go on in college.

**BUCKLEY:** Well, Socrates was also, was he not, philosophically wedded to the notion that his principal job was to bring out that which was already latently inside the students, is that correct?

**ADLER:** In the Theaetetus he describes himself as, when asked what he understands himself to be doing, he says, my performance is very much like that of the midwife. I don't give birth to ideas. The learner, with whom I'm conversing, gives birth to the ideas; and like the midwife, I'm here to make the labor pains of birth

**BUCKLEY:** The maieutic function.

**ADLER:** a lot easier. In fact, the Socratic conception of teaching is one that is based upon the truth of the proposition that nothing can be learned needs a teacher. Anything that can be learned can be discovered by the learner without the aid of a teacher. The teacher is never more than an aid in making it easier, sometimes quicker, but never indispensable. That is, the active learner is a student. St. Thomas used the same distinction, he discussed, makes the difference between learning by instruction and learning by discovery. When you look at St. Thomas's analysis of the difference between learning by instruction and learning by discovery, it's really distinction between learning by aided discovery and learning by unaided discovery. Instruction is nothing but aided discovery, but the essence of learning is the discovery on the student's part. That's what Socrates was doing.

**BUCKLEY:** Yeah. Well, now you are considered very much a Conservative as regards the whole business of knowledge, as I under-

stand it. You are what they call an epistemological optimist. You believe that there are certain great ideas. Right? That they have been discovered, that they have almost an objective validity. Now, this puts you very much against current fashionable notions about learning, does it not? It puts you against the Deweyites, for instance, and others who are relativists and pessimists.

**ADLER:** I am, that remains a little unclear for me. Let's clarify it

**BUCKLEY:** Yeah.



**ADLER:** In the first place I wouldn't speak of the validity of an idea, because an idea really is a vast area of inquiry. But the great ideas, ideas like justice, or freedom, or labor, or language, or law, or infinity, or immortality, or the soul, or mind, take any one of them, represent the whole area of human inquiry in which there are true and false propositions. The idea is neither true nor false. It represents a world for the mind. Each idea is a kind of small world for the mind to investigate. Now, I do believe, at least, in the Western tradition, and I have to say that I'm limiting myself to the Western tradition. One of the projects I don't think I'm going to live long enough to see through is an attempt to do something about a Syntopicon for the East, do something about, let's say the Confucian tradition in China, and the Western tradition, or the Buddhist tradition in India and the Western tradition. But leaving, taking the Western tradition, I would say that the hundred or so odd ideas that are to be found to discuss throughout the whole range of the Great Books represent the major areas of inquiry that the human mind has undertaken. Now, as a young man, I found myself in opposition to Dewey, particularly at Columbia, where he was my teacher. As I've grown older, I've decided that Dewey is, as far as educational principles go, greatly misunderstood. And that what I'm opposed to is not Dewey, but his followers, whom I think have grossly misunderstood him. The book he wrote in 1916, called

Democracy and Education, I think, is the turning point in the understanding of what education should be. Dewey in that book speaks so clearly, firmly and soundly against vocational training of all kinds as anyone could. Dewey, in that book looks at the population we have, a population in a society in which all children are destined for citizenship, in which all children are destined for ample free time, in which to engage in pursuit of leisure, and insists that the education, the schooling of all children, should be, they shouldn't be divided into sheep and goats.

**BUCKLEY:** Yes.

**ADLER:** but they should be prepared for a life of, the life that our kind of society permits them to lead.

**BUCKLEY:** No, I wasn't thinking of the Dewey who was thought of as an advocate of vocational, but I'm thinking of a Dewey around whom a whole philosophy has grown up.

**ADLER:** Progressive education,

**BUCKLEY:** Well, no, not so much progressive education as, really as the notion that that which is worth knowing is that which is instrumental knowledge in a particular season. Under the circumstances, even though he was a rigorously trained philosopher himself, I don't think that he would have been so enthusiastic about the kind of thing that you're up to, as other people,

**ADLER:** On the surface, I think you're correct. I mean, in fact, I do remember a colloquy between Dewey and Stringfellow Barr, you mentioned earlier which appeared, I think, in Fortune, at the time that St. John's College instituted the Great Books program. And, on the surface, Dewey seemed to be the opponent and Barr the defendant, but, in fact if you look at the marks on education, if you look at Dewey's definition of education, as growth, and ask, let Dewey answer what the end is, the end, curious enough, I think, is the correct, both he and he said all education is for the sake of more education. All learning is not for the sake of action, but for the sake of more learning. Quite unpragmatic is the notion that Dewey made learning issue immediately in action, some pragmatic consequence, is not true for Dewey. Growth is what he's emphasizing, human growth, and I couldn't agree with him more.

**BUCKLEY:** But it's true of some of his followers. Kirkpatrick,

**ADLER:** Oh, yes. There is no question about it.

**BUCKLEY:** Okay. Now.

**ADLER:** It's what they teach in colleges I'm against, not Dewey.

**BUCKLEY:** Yeah. Sure. Now, in the course of attempting to revive an interest in the Great Books, and in the great idea, you are, in effect, making a commitment to their perennial usefulness.

**ADLER:** I'm glad you didn't say relevance.

**BUCKLEY:** Yeah. Now. The accent on education, I understand to be different now. The accent on education has more to do with what it is that we can find out at this particular moment that permits us to adapt to the historical situation. And this is different from the account that you seek to

**ADLER:** Well, you know, even that's a curious thing. You realize that at the time England was the leading nation in the Western world, Imperial power running half the world, during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Empire was at its height, what was the training of its very efficient civil servants who dealt with the problems of the day? They went to Oxford and took Ancient Greek. And what they did do at Oxford, four years, taking Ancient Greek? They read Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Politics. And that was the essential training of the functioning, on the whole, very efficient, civil service, not the elective, the stable civil service of the British Empire. I am not now defending the British Empire I'm only saying that a careful study

**BUCKLEY:** You may, if you like.

**ADLER:** I'm not. I have some admiration for the Queen. But the careful study of a few basic texts, particularly when they're as good as The Republic, which raises every kind of question about the State, or the Politics, which, by the way, as most students who don't read the Politics any longer don't know, has all of the Machiavelli in Book 6 on Revolution, the great account of revolution and the modes of revolution is Book 6 of the Politics, you see. The unfortunate thing is the students today are totally unaware, totally unaware, of the riches, and the riches in terms, if I may use their word, the riches in terms of relevance.

**BUCKLEY:** Well, now, why is that?

**ADLER:** Because their teachers are ignorant.

**BUCKLEY:** Why?

**ADLER:** Because they were badly taught.

**BUCKLEY:** Well, now, don't you assume that most people who have a Doctorate have read Aristotle and Plato?

**ADLER:** No.

**BUCKLEY:** Oh, really?

**ADLER:** What I'm going to say now is very shocking. In this last book of mine, which really is nothing but an attempt—and I shouldn't have to do it—rewrite Aristotle's Ethics, which I think is the only sound, pragmatic and undogmatic book in moral philosophy ever written. The only reason why, but I tried to do is to rewrite it in 20<sup>th</sup> century terms, change the language a little bit, changed the imagery, but insists it's essentially a doctrine. I wrote a post script that book, which is a 50 or 60 page commentary on Aristotle's Ethics. And in writing the postscript, I examine the whole literature of commentary and all I can say to you is that the reading of Aristotle's Ethics now by contemporary, the writers of the last hundred years, hundred and fifty years, comes as close to being a non-reading as anything I could. I mean, literally a non-reading. The missing of the point is so egregious, stands out so plainly, that I can't, I think it's the great unread look. I would wager that if you went to any leading college or university in this country and took a poll of the students, and said how many of, take the list, let's say ten,

**BUCKLEY:** Well, how about asking the students from Columbia, here?

**ADLER:** Well, let's ask them how many of you have read Aristotle's Ethics at least once?

**BUCKLEY:** Gosh. Pretty impressive.

**ADLER:** All in the colloquial I, how many of you have read the Politics, once at least? Boy,

**BUCKLEY:** How about that?

**ADLER:** That's extraordinary. I'd hate to ask them what they understood.

**BUCKLEY:** This was a plot that we have

**ADLER:** I see. But, you missed a selection. Well, all I can say is I'm delighted. Now, you read it again, because I assure you, and I'm now saying something which I assure you is just as simple



now. I read Aristotle's Ethics when I was

**BUCKLEY:** Seven?

**ADLER:** Twenty-one. No, I read Plato's Republic when I was 15. Aristotle's Ethics at Columbia, and Professor Woodbridges course in the history of philosophy. And I then started, having read it in General Knowledge, which is a Great Books course, I then started to teach, and I read it a second time, and I understood a little better. I've now been teaching the Great Books, reading the Ethics and the Politics and the Republic and John Stuart Mill, for some 50 years, and I assure you, and I know this is going to sound strange, and I hope you'll find it at least partly credible, that I've only begin to understand the Ethics on the 10<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> reading. It is not a book that, Aristotle is not an easy writer.

**BUCKLEY:** Well, do you need to have read it the 14<sup>th</sup> time in order to bring it to it what you brought the 15<sup>th</sup> time, or can you skip the first 14?

**ADLER:** Other people maybe, other people may be brighter than I am.



**BUCKLEY:** Well, even in your own book, on How to Read a Book, you said you ought to read something three times.

**ADLER:** At least three times, at least. But I also think, by the way, which is interesting, Aristotle in the Ethics, I hope you all remember this, in Book 1, says that ethics should not be taught to young people. Young, young men are not proper students of ethics. And the reasons are very good ones. In order to understand the kind of judgments, the moral philosophy he was making about what is right and wrong and good and bad, one has to have, on the one hand, more experience, more actual experience of life and conduct;

and also a little more emotional stability, than most young people have. And I think that's true. I mean, they are, I know it's wonderful to be young, but it's also quite wonderful to be old. There are things that happen in life that are accretions, and I think, I would almost make a wager with you—but I won't be here to collect from you—if you were to reread Aristotle say at 30, and then at 40, and then at 50, your understanding of it would change you would understand more of it, you'd see some things about it you didn't see before because you would have faced more problems that you hadn't faced in life before.

**BUCKLEY:** Well,

**ADLER:** I am delighted that you have produced this demonstration for me.

**BUCKLEY:** Yeah, how about that?

**ADLER:** I wish I could spend the time to do a little private examination after the seminar is over.

**BUCKLEY:** Well, I don't know if, that's kind of risky. I don't even read the books I write three times. Mr. Adler, here is something which I think has been this singular failure in modern pedagogy, and that is to establish in convincing terms to a general audience, the actual utility, now, before you jump on me, let me explain my use of utility. The utility of a knowledge of the great liberal literature. Now, when I say utility, I don't mean that it's going to make you earn half again as much money as you otherwise would earn, or anything of the sort order that it will teach you how to change a tire, in a snowstorm, but that it is going to add something which you desire to add, whether emotional maturity or sense of purpose, a sense of serenity, a sense of integration

**ADLER:** Just two weeks ago.... You know, I moderate the Executive Seminars in Aspen. I've been doing that for the last 20 years. You know, the Executive Seminars at Aspen, we have two seminars in the winter for skiing executives, and five seminars in the summer for fishing executives. And I almost always have done the summer seminars. This is the first time, because my wife likes to ski, that I went and did the winter seminars. The seminar includes 15 or 20 presidents and vice presidents in our leading industrial, commercial corporations, with some resource people from government or journalism or other professions. And what we read at Aspen is some mixture of the Great Books, Plato's Republic and the first two books of the Republic, the first book of the Politics, Machiavelli's Prince, Locke's Civil Government, Sophocles Antigone, and then some American material, the Declaration of Inde-

pendence, some Jefferson correspondence, Horace Mann, Henry Joyce and so forth. The executives these are men who have reached the, well, they're successful man. They've at least, whether their success is in part luck, or in part effort they've

**BUCKLEY:** Skiing executives are successful.

**ADLER:** Yeah. And, you are one yourself, aren't you? And what fascinates me is to watch their minds open, when they read de Tocqueville, have you all read de Tocqueville? This must be him a much better educated group that I've ever met before. Because these 15 executives we had at Aspen recently, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and so forth more than two thirds of them had never seen the insides of Democracy in America before. When they read de Tocqueville, when they read Locke's On Civil Government, begin to understand that there is liberty under law, as well as liberty in the interstices where the law, as Locke says, where the law prescribes not, there's two different kinds of freedom, they're coming across ideas, and when they read Plato's problem about whether it's better to do or suffer injustice, and read Thucydides attack on justice in terms of defending the proposition that might is right, they're beginning to under, all their lives they've talked about justice and liberty, and equality, and at the beginning of that seminar these words are really empty phrases in their mouths, and they don't know what they're talking about, as most people don't know what they're talking about when they use the words. By the end of two weeks, in which they've been dealing with a small number of difficult texts and examining the ideas two hours at a time, they have some refinement of mind. They won't go back, I mean, they won't go back to their corporations, or their communities and talk the loose junk they talk about when they use

**BUCKLEY:** Well, that's certainly a contribution,

**BUCKLEY:** You say that's all that's involved.

**ADLER:** I shouldn't say that's all that's involved. Let me put it one other ways so that a certain amount of impatience

**BUCKLEY:** Well, can you tell somebody who has, can you tell from the quality of a person's thought, can you infer whether or not he has done what you would consider to be the essential? For instance, think of now, for a moment, about the Presidents of the United States during this century. Can you instantly point to the ones who you think probably had done the kind of thinking that you expose those executives to? Or the kind of reading? Are they obvious, do they stand out?

**ADLER:** It's an interesting point because we've only had three literate presidents in this century

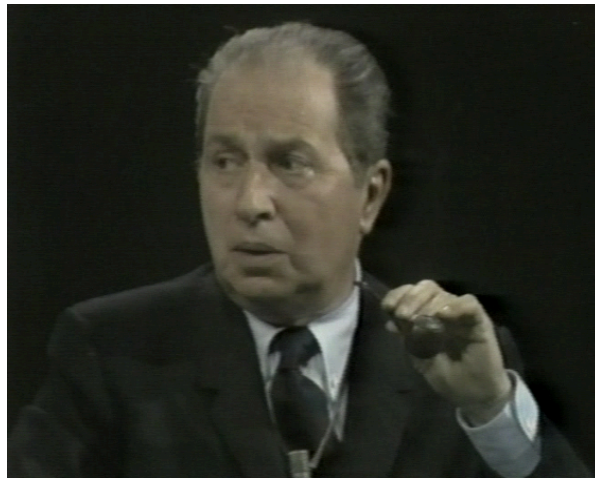
**BUCKLEY:** Wilson's supposed to be the most formally educated.

**ADLER:** or four, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Kennedy

**BUCKLEY:** Now, it seems to me that this is historically inaccurate. Hoover was much much better read than Roosevelt, the second Roosevelt

**ADLER:** Yes, he

**BUCKLEY:** He even translated something into Latin.



**ADLER:** I stand corrected, you're quite correct. And yet, may I say, that Hoover was much better read, but I think, technologically oriented. I don't, certainly Wilson and Kennedy were better read in what I am going to call moral and political discourse than Hoover. I mean I'm not thinking of the speeches. Hoover's speech, that famous document that became a crying point, rallying point, rugged individualism, is a very poor, poorly thought out analysis of the problem in relation to the individual and the state. But I have to admit that Hoover was a well stocked mind. But I don't think, it's, of course, it's, and one can often be deceived by the way, about presidents, in terms of the character of their ghostwriters. (Laughter) so that, one isn't sure, one isn't sure what one is judging. At any rate, it is

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## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

### CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.