



HOW TO THINK ABOUT PHILOSOPHY

Mortimer Adler

(Part 4 of 4)

HOW CAN PHILOSOPHY PROGRESS?

Today we conclude the discussion of Philosophy as a Great Idea. From the letters we've received I would judge that the two things of greatest concern and interest to you are, first, the disagreement among philosophers. What should be done about this disagreement of philosophers? And secondly, the progress or lack of progress in philosophy.

Lloyd, does this accurately represent your sense of the questions we have received?

Lloyd Luckman: Exactly. Would you like me to give some samples?

Mortimer Adler: I wish you would.

Lloyd Luckman: My first is a letter from Mr. Desmond J. Fitzgerald in San Francisco. His question is, “How do you account for such a diversity among philosophers?” And he goes on to ask whether you think, as some suggest, that an established solution of the basic questions would be the death of philosophy.

Mortimer Adler: I do not. I don’t think so. And I shall try to explain why I don’t think so more fully in a moment.

Lloyd Luckman: Very well. Another one was from Mr. Lawrence Webber in San Francisco. “Dr. Adler, would you tell us whether progress in philosophy means that the philosophers today can or should be able to give better answers to the basic questions than the philosophers of antiquity?”

Mortimer Adler: The answer to that question is yes, Lloyd.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, then if that is yes, does it mean that John Dewey was a greater philosopher than Plato?

Mortimer Adler: No, Lloyd, it does not mean that. It doesn’t mean that at all. But it does mean that John Dewey was in a position to make a great contribution toward the advance of philosophy, living as he did in the twentieth century.

Lloyd Luckman: Then there’s the question from Mr. Thomas K. Lay in Berkley. He says, “Would not group participation of five philosophers, a pooling of ideas, an exchange in discussion of viewpoints, contribute toward progress in philosophy? This procedure,” he says, “has long been followed by many branches of science.” And he wants to know then whether it might not prove useful in philosophy also.

Mortimer Adler: Indeed it would, Lloyd. What Mr. Lay suggests is precisely what we at the Institute for Philosophical Research are trying to do. For the first time in history there is the collaboration of philosophers doing teamwork, just as scientist do teamwork in laboratories.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, now the parallel with scientific research, Dr. Adler, occurred to many others who have been asking about the work of the Institute. And I have as an example here a question from Mr. Maurice O. Nordstrom, Jr., who lives in Berkeley, and wants to know whether when you use the word “research” in the title of your institute, does it mean that you employ something like the methods of science?

Mortimer Adler: As I hope to be able to show you, Mr. Nordstrom, the answer is yes. What we are doing at the Institute is very much like scientific research involving data, inductive generalizations, hypotheses, prediction, and verification.

Lloyd, are there any other questions about the methods of the Institute?

Lloyd Luckman: Oh, very many, Dr. Adler. But I think there is one that you will want to answer right away. It comes from someone who signs his name just J.H. And he asks like many others about the goal of your Institute, but particularly he wants to know whether you and your staff stick to your armchair.

Mortimer Adler: For the most part, we stick to our armchairs. But every now and then someone may get excited and get out of his armchair, trying to argue a certain point.

When the Institute began its work, there was some misunderstanding about its nature and function. You know the word *philosophy* has some queer meaning out here in California. In the early days we received a great many phone calls asking when we were going to begin to conduct services or when we would be ready to receive patients. In fact, the title of the Institute caused a good deal of trouble. I have here two items that I would like to read you. One is a bill from R.H. Macy's addressed to us as follows: "The Institute for Philharmonic Research." And here is a telegram from Chicago reading: "The Institute for Philanthropical Research."

One afternoon as I came out of the Institute, a cable car was going by on Jackson Street and the conductor leaned over the rear platform and said, "Hi, Dr. Adler, How's philosophical research coming along?" And that is the question I am going to try to answer for all of you, I couldn't answer to him that afternoon.

PHILOSOPHERS WILL ALWAYS DISAGREE

I would like to begin this answer by going to the first point which you are all deeply interested, the problem of the disagreement of philosophers, which is the point of departure of the Institute's work. Now if we avoid the false inference from an improper comparison of science and philosophy with respect to disagreement and agreement, I think we see that disagreement is the very essence of philosophy, that there will always be disagreement in philosophy. This is not regrettable. On the contrary. Imagine the opposite.

Imagine all philosophers agreeing. That would be, to answer the question you asked earlier, Lloyd, that would be the death of philosophy. In fact, the absence of disagreement in philosophy would be as much the death of philosophy as the absence of experimentation would be the death of science.

But there are two bad extremes here, not one. One of these bad extremes is the unity of agreement which would be the death of the philosophy, but at the opposite end of the scale, as bad a condition, is the chaos of disagreement which exists today. And in between is what should exist, a disagreement that is based upon understanding of the diversity and of the issue. Disagreement in philosophy is profitable only in proportion as those who are disagreeing really join issue, really communicate with one another and understand the whole diversity of opinion and the reason for this diversity. Moreover, disagreement in philosophy is profitable only in proportion as all sides of the issue or of the issues are taken into account.

On both these counts disagreement has become less and less profitable in our time. For today, philosophers are not meeting squarely in issue with one another. And they are not succeeding in communicating with one another. And I think the general state of affairs is that we do not understand, we haven't gotten an intelligible conception of, the diversity of opinions on basic issues. Moreover, the contemporary discussion tends to be shallow and constricted, only contemporary voices are heard in it. It lacks the wide variety of points of view that are relevant to it.

You would agree, I think, that a man does not understand an argument if he understands only one side of the argument. So a man doesn't really understand an argument if he understands only some of the sides to it when there are many more sides which he has not, or is not hearing.

Now on both these counts the Institute is trying to provide a remedy. We are engaged in an effort to see if we can formulate the issues on which philosophers will meet and argue against one another. We are trying to find the conditions which will produce communication among them. And we are certainly trying to describe the diversity of opinion and to explain why that diversity exists. Furthermore, we are trying to expand rather than diminish the disagreement. We are trying to increase the disagreement and bring all voices in, all the viewpoints from the whole tradition of Western thought, many of which are either ignored now or not even known.

What we are not doing is trying to solve the problems. We are not trying to establish the final truth on these basic issues. On the contrary, our aim is to achieve with as much dialectical objectivity as we can master and understanding and clarification of the great philosophical controversy. And we think if we do this, we shall provide philosophy with the first condition of progress.

You recall last week I discussed the two conditions of progress in philosophy and compared the progress of philosophy with the progress of science. Let me remind you what the two conditions of the progress of philosophy were, by looking at this chart with me. The first condition of progress in philosophy is dialectical clarification, which brings about a progressively enlightened controversy through a better understanding of the issues and a more adequate statement of the alternatives. And this dialectical clarification is the basis for making theoretical advances in which new theories or insights produce a more coherent and comprehensive restatement of old truths.

Now I think the title of the Institute for Philosophical Research is sometimes misunderstood, because people think that the philosophical research of the sort we are doing is an effort to bring about these theoretical advances. In fact, our whole aim is here, it is an aim to bring about the dialectical clarification, which is the basis of making those theoretical advances.

MAKING SENSE OF PHILOSOPHICAL DISPUTES

Mr. Luckman: I can see that what the Institute is doing is of great value to philosophers and to philosophy itself but I'm not a philosopher, at least not professionally. I am an educator concerned with the problems of liberal education. And I'm quite sure that there are many others like myself who are concerned about this particular problem, that supposing that the Institute is successful in its technical efforts, what will the value be of that success specifically and generally to the layman and to liberal education and the humanities in general?

Mortimer Adler: Thank you, Lloyd. Let me say at once that a direct result of the Institute's work must be the improvement of philosophy in this generation and then in the next. In this respect I would say the Institute is exactly like another Ford Foundation supported project, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, which is as you know now trying to locate here in the Bay Area. I'm sure that the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences hopes that its work will also indirectly benefit

mankind and human society. But I'm sure that in its direct efforts, the Center is trying to improve the work of the behavioral sciences, research and method in those sciences. So, too, the Institute, after it does its primary work of bringing about the conditions of better work and progress in philosophy, hopes that its work will be of great value especially to the whole sphere of liberal education as well as to the layman who is faced with fundamental problems.

Let me see if I can talk about the value of both of these things, the value of the Institute to the layman and the value to liberal education, in that order. You know you had that question, Lloyd, from Mr. Fitzgerald. Let me read the first paragraph of Mr. Fitzgerald's question because it leads right into the question of the value of the Institute's work to the layman. Mr. Fitzgerald writes, "The conflict among philosophers is such a scandal for laymen that seeing the disagreement among the great thinkers he despairs of the possibility of even attempting to find answers to the fundamental questions for himself." That states what the problem is. But, Mr. Fitzgerald, it is not the conflict among philosophers, but the unintelligibility of the conflict which makes the layman despair.

On a recent occasion, Mr. Fitzgerald, I said, commenting on the very point you have just raised in this letter, that if the layman supposed he could understand the issues of basic importance to him by somehow comprehending the conflicting views of the adversary, he might be willing then to examine them and to pursue intellectual inquiries into the sphere of his own basic problems. But he is deterred from doing this by his feelings that he cannot possibly make sense of the controversies as they are currently carried on. And he is quite right in that feeling. So the Institute hopes to make the basic controversies intelligible, and thereby restore the layman's confidence in his ability to deal with the conflict of ideas, as that affects his own life.

And I went on finally to say that in this way the layman may be cured of what is the most current disease in America, a deep anti-intellectualism; because he will be cured of this when he no longer despairs of the possibility of understanding fundamental issues or of taking sides on them.

Now I would like to illustrate this from some current work we are doing on freedom. Let's suppose that an intelligent layman or even a philosopher, if I may make the distinction, were to sit down and read through in succession all the great literature on the subject of human freedom, a hundred or more basic documents. I think if he were to do this, the result would be that he would get the impres-

sion very much of the sort that William James says the baby has when the baby first looks at the world; that it is “a great, booming, buzzing confusion.” Or to use another comparison, the literature on freedom if he just went at it that way, with no preparation, would look to him as the world of nature, the world of living things, plants and animals must have looked to a primitive, untutored savage in a primeval forest or jungle. Consider how different that world looks to us, the world of living things, when you and I walk through a zoo or a botanical garden or a museum in which the whole of biological science is made visible to us; and we see the world of nature not as a disorderly jungle, not as an unintelligible variety, but as an orderly, intelligible pattern.

Let’s consider the world of living organisms, of plants and animals, as I said a moment ago. To the untutored savage before he had the benefits of scientific discovery, it was a disorderly, unintelligible pattern, an amazing, bewildering disorder. But to those of us living in the twentieth century, fortunate enough to be instructed by biological classification, genetics, and the theory of evolution, the world of living things is an orderly and intelligible scene.

Now let me make the comparison by then going to the world of philosophical thought. In the world of philosophical thought the conceptions and the opinions of the philosophers are here like the plants and animals in the world of nature. And the conceptions and opinions of the philosophers to the layman or to the philosopher, before the kind of philosophical research we are doing at the Institute is done, is the same kind of bewildering jungle of conflicting, confused opinion in which one can’t find one’s way around, where one doesn’t see the pattern of the diversity. But if the work of the Institute is done and if we will ever be enlightened by a dialectical ordering, an explanation of the intellectual diversity, that jungle world of philosophical thought will become as orderly to our eye and to our senses as the world of nature, the world of living things, is when we see it set forth in the exhibits at a museum or in a zoological garden.

So let me come to the second point which has to do with the value of the Institute’s work for liberal education. Now I forgot one thing. Before I come back to that, there is one thing I want to add. In that comparison I just made, the work the Institute is doing—I remember Mr. Nordstrom’s question—is very much like the work of scientific research. Just as the biologist looks at the specimens of nature, analyzes them, classifies them, draws up great classificatory charts and then, with something like genetics and the theory of evolution, explains how that diversity arose in the development of

things in time, so the work of the Institute follows a similar pattern of research very much like that of science. We too are looking not at plants and animals but at thoughts, at the world of conceptions and opinions. And we must see if we can classify them. We must see if we can develop hypotheses that give us charts of comparison and enable us to develop hypotheses explaining how this tremendous diversity has arisen. And in doing this, we, working with ideas, with conceptions and opinions, just as the biologist works with plants and animals, working with the materials in front of us, we develop hypotheses that we can put to the test in exactly the same way. In that sense our work is very much like scientific research except it is at the level of ideas instead of the level of things.

PHILOSOPHY AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

Now let me talk to the second point we raised, the value of the Institute's work in relation to the whole of liberal education. The basic fact here is that liberal education and philosophy rise and fall together. The decay of liberal education in our time results, I think, from two things: the decline of philosophy in our time and also the loss of faith and the lack of skills in the basic disciplines of discussion. Both of these things must be restored, both philosophy and skill and faith in discussion must be restored if liberal education is to be restored to the vigor it once had.

Why is this so? I think the answer is twofold. First, because the very substance of liberal education is The Great Ideas, The Great Ideas understood in terms of the widest diversity of conceptions and opinions about them and also in terms of the deepest grasp of the issues to which they give rise. But how can this be communicated? How can this understanding of The Great Ideas be communicated to the generation of students? I say it can only be done by discussion carried on with the utmost dialectical objectivity and clarity, and by discussion in which all sides of the issue are fairly represented, represented impartially and with a sense of their contribution.

Now it is at this point that one might ask, How does The Institute for Philosophical Research and its work makes its peculiar contribution to the advancement, more than the advancement, I would say in this case, Lloyd, the *restoration* of liberal education in this country? My answer is that every college concerned with liberal education, or perhaps I should say, the students and faculty of every college that is concerned with liberal education, should be doing all the time the kind of work that the staff of the Institute is doing, should be engaged in the study of The Great Ideas and in develop-

ing the methods of communication, the methods of discussion which are involved in the study of The Great Ideas, indispensable for their communication among many. If this is what every college faculty and student body should be doing if it is pursuing liberal education, then I think the peculiar function of the Institute, doing this more intensively, is to actually function as a pilot plant to discover and to perfect the methods for such discussion and analysis of The Great Ideas, to find the procedures by which men can think collaboratively about them, and above all, to put these methods and procedures to work in such a way that we produce some results that not only exemplify the goodness of the procedures and the methods, but also themselves are useful to schools and colleges engaged in liberal education.

Now I hope, Lloyd, that that begins to answer, answers a little, explains a little, if not fully the work of the institute in relation both to the layman and to liberal education.


Lloyd Luckman: Well, answering your question now, Dr. Adler, both as a layman concerned with his own position on philosophical issues and as an educator concerned as well with liberal education, I must say that I do think I see and understand more clearly, though perhaps not as completely as I would like to, the program and work that is being conducted at the Institute. And it is also clear to me that this indirect objective of the Institute which I asked you about is also going to be particularly dependent upon the attainment of your immediate aims and objectives. And, of course, that is in the main field of philosophy.

Mortimer Adler: Right.

Lloyd Luckman: Now speaking about the main field of philosophy, I think I have learned a very important thing with you this afternoon. And that is that the Institute is not undertaking to find the ultimate answers to all questions, rather it is addressing itself to the more modest task, though at the very same time a very difficult task, of creating a condition whereby the philosophers of the future, the next generation, will be able to do better work and to come up with the results that our questioners are asking us for and demanding of philosophy today. And if that is the case and you are that way enabling philosophy in the future to come up with the answers of ultimate truth, I am then, I think, required to ask you one more question.

Mortimer Adler: Sure.

Lloyd Luckman: And I think others who are in the same position as myself are vitally concerned in that question. And that is simply this, that considering the progress you've made thus far at the Institute, what do you estimate now are the chances for your ultimate success in the main issue?

Mortimer Adler: Well, Lloyd, if you'll let me knock on wood while I answer that question. I think I am willing to say that the chances look very good to all of us at the Institute. We think that we have licked the toughest part of the job, which is to find the right method for doing this kind of work which has never been done before, a kind of scientific work at the level of ideas, like the scientific work done in the classification and explanation of variety of living things. We have learned moreover how to do philosophy by teamwork in intensive collaboration with one another. And we have made great headway, I think, in applying these methods and these procedures which we have only recently invented in our present efforts to clarify and understand the difficult and basic controversy concerning human freedom. 

[We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.](#)

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