

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Sep '14

Philosophy is Everybody's Business

Nº 784



"I'd say it's your gallbladder, but if you insist on a second opinion, I'll say kidneys."

HOW TO THINK ABOUT OPINION

Mortimer Adler

Part 1 of 2

Today we begin our discussion of Opinion. And like other Great Ideas that we will discuss, this idea is best considered in relation to its opposite. Just as we will look at work in relation to leisure or love in relation to desire, so we'll consider opinion in relation to knowledge.

Lloyd Luckman: Dr. Adler, I can certainly see that knowledge is a Great Idea and perhaps then the consideration of opinion in connection with knowledge would be of great importance, but I must confess that I'm rather surprised you've picked "opinion" itself as

a Great Idea. Could you develop this just a little bit? Is there some way you could help me see this quickly, briefly before you go on?

Mortimer Adler: Well, perhaps, Lloyd, the easiest and the briefest way of doing just that is to report the history of the discussion of opinion in Western thought, the development of that idea in the Western tradition itself.

Is Everything a Matter of Opinion?

Let me do that for you under two headings, first, the theoretical significance of opinion and then its practical significance.

Let me begin with the theoretical significance. The great problem of the distinction between certainty and probability is connected with this distinction between knowledge and opinion. When human beings tried to assess the goodness or worth of opinions, what made one opinion better than another, they developed the theory of probability. And by the way, this theory had its first applications in games of chance, in gambling where men were betting on their opinions.

Then I think we ought to remember that opinion is the great weapon of the skeptic. The skeptic is the man who claims that we do not know anything, or not very much, that we only have opinions. In fact, the first principle of skepticism is to say that everything is a matter of opinion, The skeptic often goes to the extreme of saying that one opinion is as good as another, that there is no way of making one opinion appear preferable to another, that opinions are all relative, subjective, each a matter of taste.

And then, opinion is connected with the great theoretical problem of the agreement and disagreement among human beings, their conflict and diversity on almost every fundamental question. And anyone who faces this phenomenon of human disagreement must be interested in considering the nature of opinion and the causes why people hold the opinions that they do.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, you said that was a theoretical problem, but it's a practical problem too, isn't it? In fact, I think it's one of the great practical problems which face our society today; I'd call it the problem of conformity versus dissent. It seems to me that I remember a remark by President Eisenhower in which he indicated that we must not confuse loyal dissent with disloyal subversion, because the dissenting opinions of the loyal citizens in a democracy are its very lifeblood.

Mortimer Adler: That is precisely the case, and I think it shows us why opinion is an idea of the greatest importance to all of us today.

Now let me go on to say a little more about the practical significance of this idea, opinion. I think all of us recognize without any question the importance of freedom of discussion and sustained public debate of public issues in order that we can reach the soundest public opinion on matters that concern us all. In our day the word controversial has become a term of rebuke, a derogatory term. And controversy itself has almost become a disreputable thing. I hope we shall have time to see why we all have a moral obligation to be controversial or at least hospitable to controversy. Another practical aspect of opinion is connected with the whole business of majority rule. Majority rule is one of the basic principles of democracy. And if we are going to understand what is right about democracy, we have to understand why adopting the opinion of the majority is right. And we also have to know how to protect what is sound in the opinion of the minority.

So far I have emphasized the political significance of opinion. It isn't only that. Opinion is of the greatest importance today in business and in industry. Most great corporations, manufacturing or selling, depend very greatly upon the advice of public relations counsel or advertising men. Public relations and advertising are two agencies for forming opinion, forming opinions favorable to their clients. You know at one time the head of a large corporation wouldn't turn around without the advice of corporation counsel. And now most corporation heads won't say a word without the advice of public relations counsel.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, I must say, Dr. Adler, that you have done what I have asked you to do in emphasizing the importance of opinion. And I am satisfied now that it is an important idea not only theoretically but practically, too. In fact, you have shown that it involves so very, very much, I don't see how we are going to have time to even scratch the service of this important subject.

Mortimer Adler: We have four programs including this one, and if we can't cover all the points of interest, at least we can hit the high spots. And let me tell you how I propose to proceed in these four sessions on opinion. Today I should like to deal mainly with the characteristics of opinion as contrasted with knowledge, and then next time go a little more deeply into the difference between knowing and opining, so that we can deal with the limits, the line

that divides knowledge from opinion or opinion from knowledge. And then in the succeeding session I should like to deal with the importance of opinion in the life of the individual and the life of society, and particularly with such problems as opinion in relation to human freedom and the institutions of government. And finally I would like to come back to this problem of controversy and the importance of controversy in our lives and what it means for us to maintain free discussion so that controversy can contribute to the soundness of the opinions by which we live.

Now I'd like to begin right away with the characteristics of opinion as contrasted with knowledge. I have a number of points here I want to make, but the first one or two I want to make in terms of the relation of truth to both knowledge and opinion, or to see the difference between knowledge and opinion in terms of truth. But to do that you and I have to have the same understanding of truth. We have to at least have some agreement about what it means to say that any statement is true.

So I'd like to propose that here we follow the clear definition: a statement is true if it says that that which is is, or if it says that that which is not is not; and a statement is false if it says that that which is not is, or that that which is is not. I think anyone who has ever told a lie—and who hasn't?—understands what this means: putting is where is not should be put or is not where is should be put.

Opinion Versus Knowledge

Now in terms of this definition of truth, let me talk about knowledge and opinion. Knowledge consists in having the truth and knowing that you have it, because you know why what you think is true is true. Whereas opinion consists in not being sure that you have the truth, not being sure whether what you say is true or false. And even if what you say happens to be true, you aren't sure because you don't know why it is true. This, I think, explains a difference all of us feel in the way of the words we use when we say, "I know that," or a person says "I don't know that; I only think that," meaning I opine that, I don't know it.

In the conduct of trials before judges in our courts there is a famous rule called the opinion rule. The opinion rule says that a witness giving testimony must report what he saw or what he heard. He must not report what he thinks happened, because that would be giving an opinion, not knowledge by observation.

Now the second point here, one which everybody knows, everyone

is familiar with it, but perhaps you've never thought of it in these terms before, is the simple fact that opinions can be true or false. Opinions can be right or wrong. We all recognize this, I think. But think a moment, knowledge can't be false, knowledge can't be wrong. If something is knowledge, it's impossible for it to be false knowledge or wrong knowledge.

Lloyd Luckman: Now I don't really see how anybody can disagree with that, Dr. Adler. And I gather from what you've said now that the skeptic who would hold that there is no such thing as knowledge would have to admit that if there were knowledge, it would be exactly as you've described it and defined it here. Now

this point though that you've just made, how about that? Is that knowledge or opinion?

Mortimer Adler: Well, if you were right, and I happen to think that you are, then no one can disagree with this way of distinguishing between knowledge and opinion. And if that is the case, then it is something we know and not just something we opine.

Mr. Luckman has just introduced, by the way, another criterion for distinguishing between knowledge and opinion. The criteria is whether or not something is universally agreed to or perhaps I should say whether or not something must be agreed to, because sometimes opinions are universally agreed to. But here the point is, must everyone agree to this? If everyone must agree, then it isn't opinion but knowledge.

Now I hope to come back to this point, Lloyd, in a moment as I now go to develop three or four other criteria for distinguishing between knowledge and opinion. In fact, I have four additional criteria I should like to present to you. The first of these is in terms of doubt and belief. Doubt and belief are relative only to opinion, never to knowledge.

Let me illustrate this by giving you two simple examples, one of knowledge and one of opinion. Two plus two equals four. I know this and I understand it. I do not doubt it and I cannot even properly say that I believe it. The word "believe" is not right here. I don't believe that two plus two equals four; I know it. "Belief" is too weak a word for this truth that two plus two equals four. But if I turn from that statement to this one, "Gentlemen prefer blondes," here I have something I do not know and I certainly wouldn't like to say I understand. Some people doubt it; some believe it; no one knows it; no one understands it.

Perhaps I ought to give you a better and perhaps a little less obvious example of knowledge and opinion to make this point. Here is a statement of knowledge, that there is always a state of war, either a cold or a hot war between sovereign nations. Anyone who thinks for a moment will see that this is true and that every-one understands it to be true. But here, in contrast, is another statement about war which is only an opinion. The opinion is that there will be another World War, a hot or a shooting war in the next 25 years. No one knows that. At most it is a probable prediction. Some people may believe it and some may doubt it, but it is not a statement of knowledge.

Perhaps I can give you one more example of this difference between knowledge and opinion with respect to doubting and believing. I have here some dice. And as I roll those dice I can only say it is my opinion that they will come up a certain number. I don't know it. I can make bets in terms of it, but I certainly don't know what number will turn up. Now I have in my pocket here another set of dice which are loaded. These dice are so loaded they will only come up seven or eleven. And as I shoot these dice I have no doubt, not a bit of doubt, that each time they will turn up either seven or eleven. That is something that I know, not doubt or believe.

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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.

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