



"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 2 of 2

A Right To Our Own Opinion

We say in matters of opinion that everyone has a right to their own opinion. Or I say I have a right to have an opinion on that subject, but no one ever says this about knowledge. I don't say I have a right to my own knowledge on this subject. I may say I have a right to know something, but I never would use the word my own in the expression "I have a right to my own knowledge."

Now this right to have an opinion on a subject or the right to have

my own opinion on a subject is, I think, one of our basic civil rights. It is a right we talk about all the time these days in terms of freedom of thought and liberty of conscience. This right is a right that I think perhaps is more contested in the contemporary world than any other right we have.

Lloyd Luckman: Now, Dr. Adler, just a minute. I don't want you to leave this point too quickly because if I heard you right, you indicated that we can have freedom of thought only about matters of opinion. Now when you talk about freedom of conscience as you did, this usually applies at least in my thinking to religious beliefs. And am I to infer then from what you are saying that all religious beliefs are merely matters of opinion?

Mortimer Adler: That's a very tough question, Lloyd. And I wouldn't like to try to answer it today. Perhaps, however, I can return to that question and the other question that is involved in what you say next time when we go a little deeper into the difference between knowledge and opinion and draw the line between the scope of knowledge and the scope of opinion and see where religion falls. If I don't do it, remind me next time.

Lloyd Luckman: I shall.

Mortimer Adler: Let me go on now to my third main point or criterion of distinction or difference between knowledge and opinion. We say that matters of opinion are subject to conflict, that we are acquainted with the conflict of opinions, the diversity of opinions on many subjects. But when we are dealing with any subject about which there is knowledge, we do not speak of the conflict of knowledge. We don't say there is a conflict of knowledges on this point as we say there is a conflict of opinions on this point. Because it is the very nature of what it is that we have an opinion about to be subject to conflict and that is not true of things that we can know.

I think that conflict of opinion is as familiar to all of us as the very air we breathe. Let me give you just two examples. Anyone who can remember a national or a local election is in the presence of a basic conflict of people's opinions about candidates or issues. But let me give you another even more familiar example of the insistent attention on conflict of opinion. Our newspapers are full of it every day: public opinion polls. These opinion polls keep us aware of what the general state of public opinion is, and show us the disagreements which prevail upon many issues.

Now the significance of this conflict of opinion that we are so aware of is that on matters of opinion, reasonable men can disagree and still remain quite reasonable. This is a very important thing to remember because of what opinion is. Where there is a conflict of opinion usually it is the case that reasonable men can disagree and, though they disagree, still remain quite reasonable.

Now to my fourth point of differentiation between knowledge and opinion. And that is to call your attention to the fact that all of us are aware that it is only with respect to opinion that we talk about taking a consensus. In fact, we say a consensus of opinion. Or we speak of a majority opinion as opposed to the minority opinion. Or we speak of expert opinion as opposed to inexperienced opinion. But notice we never say a consensus of knowledge. We never say the majority knowledge as opposed to the minority knowledge. We never say expert knowledge as opposed to inexperienced knowledge, because there isn't any inexperienced knowledge? Now this is, again, I think a fundamental aspect of opinion that sharply differentiates it from knowledge.

And I should like to tell you about a rule that Aristotle developed for all arguments involving matters and opinions where a consensus of opinion might be taken. Let me read you the passage from Aristotle. Aristotle's rule runs as follows; he says, "In arguments dealing with matters of opinion' I quote, "we should base' our reasoning on the opinions held by all. Or if not by all, at least those held by most men. Or if not by most men, at least by their, wives. And in the last case, if we are basing it on the wives, then we should try to base our opinion or arguments on the opinions held by all the wives or if not by all the wives then by the most expert among them or at least by the most famous?" That is a fairly prudent piece of advice.

Now in this matter of the consensus of opinion, we seldom have unanimity, though every now and then in the rare case the consensus of opinion will approach unanimity. Let me give you two illustrations of this rare phenomenon of a consensus of public opinion approaching something like unanimity. You all remember the great festivals that used to take place under the Nazi regime in Germany. Massed crowds, thousands of people, all of them facing Hitler would shout in unison, "Sieg heil! Sieg heil! Sieg heil!" That looks like almost unanimous consensus of opinion.

Is there anything like this that happens in our country? Well, you have all been at baseball games when Babe Ruth or someone like Babe Ruth has hit a homer and the stands to a man get up and

cheer, that is a consensus of opinion almost unanimous.

Now I think what we have learned today is chiefly that all of us understand the difference between knowledge and opinion. Notice that I said all of us understand this difference so that you know what the difference is. I think what we have learned is that our grasp of the difference between knowledge and opinion is not itself an opinion. It is not like an opinion. It is something we know and understand. And I think the reason why we all recognize this is that the difference is something understood by us in terms of five or more criteria, each of which is as clear as it is familiar to us. Such criteria as that opinions are either true or false, right or wrong, and that opinion is subject to doubt or to belief, or that opinion is something where one says, I have a right to my own opinion. Or, I have a right to have an opinion on that subject, or that opinion is something about which reasonable men can disagree and still remain quite reasonable, that opinion is something always subject to the possibility of a conflict between men; a disagreement, a diversity of views on their part. Or that opinion is, something about which we take a consensus, that in the case of opinion, counting noses counts. It means something to count noses

None of these things applies to knowledge as it does to opinion. That's how we know the distinction. But though we know the difference, and I really think we do know the difference, between knowledge and opinion, there are a lot of things about the subject that we don't know so readily.

Questions to Answer About Opinion

Lloyd Luckman: Well, I'd be curious to know what some of these were.

Mortimer Adler: Well, let me see if I can state them for you in the form of questions. For example, the question that comes to my mind is the question about what sort of things can we have knowledge as opposed to the sort of objects, the sort of things about which we can only form opinions? On this point Plato had tilt position that only about things that are permanent or eternal, only things which are unchanging, the world of fixed being, is it possible to have knowledge; whereas about the whole world in flux the world as becoming, the most we can have is opinion, unstable opinion. Aristotle disagreed with this. Aristotle held that it was possible to have knowledge about the physical world as well as about the world of eternal ideas.

Another question that we ought to face some time is the question of the psychological difference between knowing and opining. The processes of thought might look the same in both cases. We make judgments, we infer, we reason, and yet there is a deep psychological difference between the act of knowing and the act of opining. That is another problem to investigate.


And another question is Whether we can have knowledge anti opinion about the same thing. Is it possible for a person to hold at one and the same time something—a state of mind which is knowledge of something and at the same time regard himself as holding only an opinion about that. Let me change that question a little bit. Is it possible for one person to know something which another person has only an opinion about? Can there be two individuals, one having knowledge and the other opinion, on the same point?

A fourth question that is worth considering, in fact, I think I'd say it is the 64-thousand-dollar question, How much knowledge do we have? To what extent are the things that we suppose we know really things we know as opposed to things that we only opine.

Socrates, you may remember, took the position that only God knows; that for the most part men have nothing better than opinion. And he went on to say that to know this is wisdom.

Lloyd Luckman: That strikes me as something of a contradiction, Dr. Adler. Wouldn't you say it was too?

Mortimer Adler: I think it sounds like a contradiction unless you respect the fact that Socrates is being quite ironical here. He didn't rest in a shallow skepticism. He intended to go on with inquiry. In fact, the very questions I've just mentioned were questions he himself pursued and that I hope we can pursue next time as we go on.

Now next time I hope we can reach a deeper understanding of the difference between knowledge and opinion. I trust this subject interests you and I hope you will be with us again next time as we continue with the discussion of the idea of Opinion. 

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.