

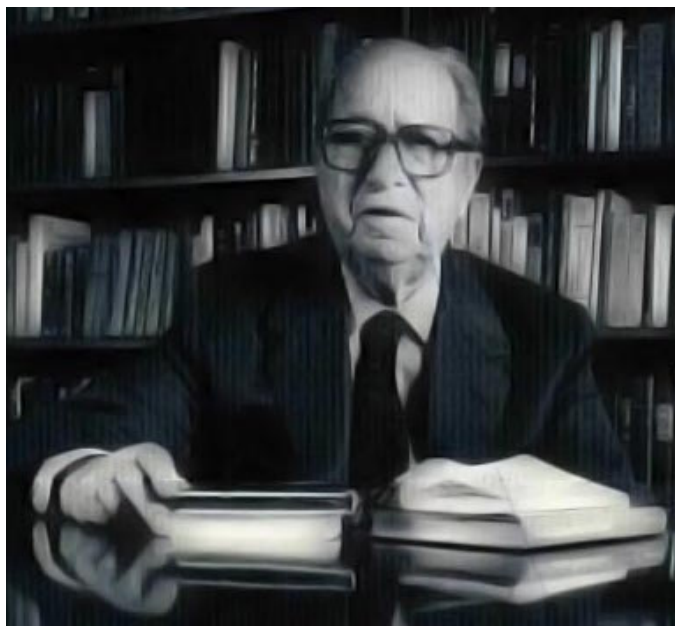
# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## ONLY ADULTS CAN BE EDUCATED

**Max Weismann interviews Mortimer Adler**  
(1995)

Part 2 of 3

**WEISMANN:** How would you respond to the person who may suppose that this is a novel educational insight: this insistence that education belongs to the mature, and schooling, at the level of training and habit formation, to the young?

**ADLER:** I would reply that except for our own century, all the great periods of Western culture have recognized and acted on the simple basic truth I have stated as my central thesis. If we go back to the Greeks, for example, I think I can show you in the works of the two great thinkers of antiquity, Plato and Aristotle, the presence of this fundamental insight.

In Plato's *Republic* he outlines the ideal education of the best men to govern the ideal state. The course of study is as follows. Listen

to its time schedule. From the beginning until the student reaches the age of twenty, the curriculum is confined to music and gymnastics. Here music stands for the cultivation of the sensibilities and imagination; and gymnastics stands for the acquisition of all the basic bodily coordinations. Between the ages of twenty and thirty there occurs training in the liberal arts, particularly the arts of mathematics (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music), and the basic arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Then, at the age of thirty, the young person goes out into the world. He leaves the academy and undertakes civic duties or public responsibilities, thus becoming a little more mature. He returns to the academy at thirty-five, for the study of philosophy, or the contemplation of ideas. And this continues until the age of fifty, when his formal education is completed. Here is a time schedule which recognizes how slowly the processes of education take place and how maturity is required before the understanding of ideas can occur.

There is another indication of this in the opening chapters of Aristotle's *Ethics*. He points out that you can train the characters of young men, you can form the moral virtues in them by reward and punishment, but, he says, you cannot teach them ethical principles. You cannot teach them ethical theory because they are immature. Lacking moral and political experience, being more or less under the influence of wayward passions, they cannot possibly understand moral and political principles, nor are they in a position to make sound judgments on moral questions. Think of how we violate this insight in our schools today. One of the major subjects for the young, soon after kindergarten, is social studies. Aristotle would not have thought it possible to teach these to young children because to understand the theory of society requires mature experience and judgment.

Perhaps I can communicate my basic insight by a reference to my own biography. When I went to Columbia College, and read the great books under an extraordinarily fine teacher, John Erskine, I read them very studiously. I thought I knew what they were about. I thought I understood them perfectly. To show you how young I was, let me tell you two things about myself. I recall quite clearly what my reaction was to Plato and Aristotle the first time I read the passages I have just reported to you. I was quite sure Plato was wrong that one could not understand ideas until after thirty-five or forty. He must be wrong, because there I was, at twenty, doing it. And Aristotle must be wrong that ethics could not be taught to young men. There I was, a young man who thoroughly understood the principles of Aristotle's great book on *Ethics*.

I now know how silly I was at the age of twenty. I was fortunate enough to have to read again and again in the course of the next sixty-five years the same books I read in college. This experience of reading these books over and over again, during years when I was growing up a little, taught me how much such growth, through experience and living, is required for the understanding of the Great Ideas found in the Great Books. I have often looked at old lecture notes, or at notes written some years earlier in preparation for leading Great Books discussions. I realize then how far I have come. It is not that I have grown more intelligent, but simply that my capacity for understanding has changed, deepened a little, as a result of the intervening experience.

**WEISMANN:** Suppose that everything you have said is so. Suppose we agree with you that schooling should consist largely in the training of good habits in the young, and that education is principally learning by adults who are mature human beings. What are the consequences of this proposition?

**ADLER:** I think that they are very radical indeed, so radical that it would take almost an educational revolution to put them into effect. If it is true that education is primarily a matter for adults, then what we do when we send our children to school, how we understand why we are sending them there, what we do about ourselves after school, and how we understand the necessity for us to continue learning—all these things would follow.

**WEISMANN:** If I understand what you are saying, adult education, or education for adults, is necessary for all adults, not just for those who suffered deprivation in youth through lack of this or that part of formal schooling. It is not a matter of what is necessary for the other fellow; it is a matter which each of us must face for himself.

**ADLER:** That is correct. Let me now divide the consequences of this proposition into two parts: first, the consequences for the school system; and second, for adults.

I should like, first, to make a few remarks as background for the consideration of the reforms which should take place in the school system. I assume, without any argument at all, that we are committed to a democratic society, a democratic government, and democratic institutions. And I assume without argument that you understand this to mean acceptance of the basic truth about human equality, which expresses itself in the political principle of universal suffrage. What distinguishes democracy from all other forms of government is the extension of the franchise to all citizens, men

and women, without regard to race, creed, or color. The only just limitations on universal suffrage involve the exclusion of infants and children, the mentally incompetent, and criminals who have forfeited their political rights by acts of moral turpitude. No one else is justly excluded according to a democratic conception of government. The educational consequence of this political principle is that all children must go to school. Education must be universal and compulsory because, in a democracy, all children must be trained for citizenship. This means, I say, building enough schools and finding enough teachers to take care of the whole population of future citizens in our democratic society.

**WEISMANN:** We almost have succeeded in doing this in this country. We seem to have, in the course of this century, recognized the educational obligations of a democratic society. We have built a tremendous number of schools and trained a vast horde of teachers. We have poured great funds of taxpayers' money into school budgets.

**ADLER:** That is satisfactory as far as it goes, but it does not go nearly far enough. If you have children in school, or know anything about what is going on in most of the schools today, public or private, you will know that most of the children are not being democratically educated. Most of the children—I think I can even safely say more than 75+ percent—are, in fact, being given almost no education at all. They are being given vocational training. Vocational training is training for work or for the life of the slave. It is not the education of the future citizen, of the free man who has leisure to use. Liberal education, as distinguished from vocational training, is education for freedom, and this means that it is education for the responsibilities of citizenship and for the good use of leisure.

**WEISMANN:** What do you mean by the “good use of leisure?”

**ADLER:** Again I am using a word “leisure” that is generally misunderstood in this country, if not everywhere, in our times. Just as the phrase “adult education” is an unfortunate phrase because most people think that education is something that is done with children in school; so the word “leisure” is an unfortunate word, certainly for most Americans, because by “leisure” most of us mean spare time—the time one has to kill, the time one has to use up somehow because it is left over from the time needed for work and sleep. Leisure time, as most Americans think of it, is playtime or pastime, time to fritter away, to occupy with a variety of time-killing or time-consuming, unimportant activities. In terms of this conception

of leisure, liberal education has no meaning at all. You might as well close all the schools down. Let me give you another conception of leisure. Human life is divided into four basic parts, not three. Let me deal with work first. Work is that part of life which consists of the activities all of us must perform, if we have any self-respect, in order to earn and deserve our sustenance. Sleep is that part of life which is spent in recuperating from the fatigues of work. In this sense, no one deserves to sleep who does not work. Sleep is for the sake of work. Play or recreation or amusement is on the same level as sleep. It is not the same as sleep, but it is not much better than sleep. Let us think for a moment of the word “recreation.” Recreational activities would seem to be for the sake of re-creating our energies, getting over fatigue, washing away the weariness that comes from labor. So, like sleep, recreational activities also are for the sake of work. This leaves a set of activities through which we can discharge our obligation to acquire every human excellence which can grace a human person. These—and they are not play in any sense—are the activities of leisure. They are intrinsically good activities, for the sake of which everything else is done—for the sake of which we earn a living. Education is not for the sake of earning a living. American parents and teachers have for many years thought otherwise, unfortunately. Most American parents send their children to school in order to help them get ahead in the world—by beating their neighbors. They think school is the place to learn how to make a better living—“better” only in the sense of more money. This is not the meaning of school or of education. No one has to go to school in order to earn a living. Our grandfathers did not. Perhaps we need schools to train men for the learned professions, but not for the ordinary jobs of an industrial society. The basic tasks of an industrial society can be learned on the job. There is no need for vocational training in the schools.

**WEISMANN:** Then, if I understand what you are saying, we need to go to school, not in order to learn how to earn a living, but in order to learn how to use the life for which we are going to earn a living—to learn how to occupy ourselves humanly, to live our leisure hours well and not play them all away or seek to amuse ourselves to the point of distraction or boredom.

**ADLER:** Precisely, we need to learn how to do well what we are called upon to do as moral and political agents, and to do well what we must do for the cultivation of our own minds. These are the aims of liberal education. Liberal education must be begun in school. If you understand what democracy is and what leisure is, and that to be a free man is to be a man of leisure as well as a citizen, then you will realize that all children not only should go to

school, but should also be given a liberal education there. I would go so far as to say that all vocational training should be removed from our schools. I would even go further and say that by liberal education for all the children I mean education for all up to what is now regarded as the Bachelor of Arts degree.

**WEISMANN:** When you say this, I have the image before me of large audiences of school teachers. On their faces I see horror. They tell me, as I am sure they have told you, that it is easy for us to say these fine things. You and I have never faced the ordinary school classroom with the ordinary assortment of children, of whom you say should go on to college and receive their degree of Bachelor of Arts. If we had their experience, we would find, as they have found, it almost impossible to accomplish with a majority of children even the beginning of what you mean by liberal education. It was all right, they say, to try to provide liberal education a hundred years ago when we had a much smaller and a more select school population. How would you respond to them when they say, but now that we have democratically taken all the children into school, it is no longer possible to give that same kind of education?

**ADLER:** I would reply that as we made the transition from our colonial society, which was aristocratic, to our present society, which is democratic, we must undertake to give the same kind of education that was given then in the eighteenth century to the small governing class (the Thomas Jefferson's, the Alexander Hamilton's, the John Adams', the men who wrote the Constitution and the Declaration) now in the twentieth century to the large governing class (all the citizens of the United States today). Nothing else will do. Nothing else is democratic.

**WEISMANN:** Would you admit that in one respect the teachers are right. Children are containers of different sizes. They do not all have the same capacity.

**ADLER:** Yes but the question is not one of the amount of education to be given each child, for no child can receive more than his capacity permits. The question has to do with the kind of education to be given each child, according to his capacity. Let me illustrate this with a simple metaphor. Let the child of low intelligence and weak natural endowments be represented by a pint container; and the child of extremely high endowments and intelligence, by a gallon container. According to the democratic concept of education, you must put into the pint container whatever kind of liquid you put into the gallon container, even though only one pint can go

here and a gallon there. It will not do to put cream into the gallon container and, say, water—dirty water, at that—into the pint container. Vocational education is the dirty water we are now pouring into our pint containers. Liberal education is the cream we are giving the few.

**WEISMANN:** But don't you think that school teachers, parents, and the country in general have been misled on this point because the problem is so difficult to solve?

**ADLER:** Yes, but the teachers took the wrong turn, though the easier one, when they were first faced with the problem at the turn of the century. They discovered that they did not know how to put cream into the pint container. Instead of doing what was required of them—taking the time to face and solve this very difficult problem of finding pedagogical techniques, methods, or means for putting cream into every container, large or small, they backed away, and accepted vocational training for the great majority of children as the much easier thing to do. This profound mistake must be corrected. We must give liberal training, training in the liberal arts, to all the children who are going to inherit the rights of citizenship and free men in their adult years. As Jacques Maritain pointed out many years ago, "If a liberal education is not made available to every person, political democracy is a delusion, and the aristocrats who argue that only they need a liberal education and everyone else a vocational one or none at all are right."

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