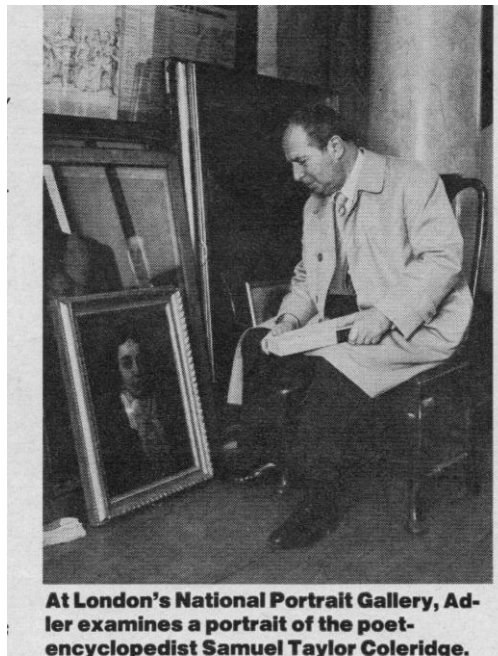


IN HIS OWN WORDS

BRITANNICA'S MORTIMER ADLER MUSES ON TRUTH, TASTE AND TOMORROW



*At 72, philosopher, teacher and author Mortimer Adler is taking a sabbatical from his Chicago-based Institute for Philosophical Research. He is currently residing in London with his second wife, Caroline, 38, and their two young sons while he writes. One project is his memoirs, tentatively titled *Philosopher at Large*. Another is a Bicentennial commentary on John Locke titled *The American Testament*, which will deal with the British philosopher's contribution to the American political heritage. For years Adler was absorbed in planning and publishing the Encyclopaedia Britannica's radically new and controversial 15th edition,*

which celebrates its first anniversary this month. With this perspective in mind, Adler, recently sat down in the gold-and-white drawing room of his rented Kensington Park town house to discuss taste, truth and the present state of man's knowledge with Jerene Jones of PEOPLE.

Why did the editors decide there should be a new Britannica?

It's been 207 years since the *Britannica* set out to be a compendium of the arts and sciences, but it was only a few years ago that the editors of the 14th edition finally recognized the defects of the alphabetical encyclopedia. The new 30-volume *Britannica 3* has a one-volume *Propaedia*, which, in 10 major segments, outlines the whole of human knowledge. Then there is the 10-volume *Micropaedia*, with short articles alphabetized. And finally, the 19-volume *Macropaedia*, with longer articles.

How do you use the new Britannica?

If you want a thumbnail sketch of a certain subject, you simply find the brief listing in the *Micropaedia*. If you want more detailed information, you turn to the *Propaedia* for a reference to the appropriate longer article in the *Macropaedia*.

Are there other differences?

The average encyclopedia makes a list of articles and commissions them without indicating any boundaries to the subjects. We outlined the whole thing before we started. It took two years just to do this outline, which the writers saw before they did their articles, so there was no overlapping and no omissions.

In what sense is the new Britannica more "international"?

The *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* was written by people with a nationalist point of view. The French, Dutch and Italian encyclopedias all have a parochial slant. Because of the rise of English as a world language replacing French, we've tried to make it international in character.

Did you use non-English-speaking experts?

One-third of the contributors to the *Encyclopaedia* are not English-speaking. Their articles have been translated from 54 different languages. We found the best scholar in the world for each article. Religion, philosophy, law and history were the most difficult subjects to handle.

Since the Britannica's role is essentially one of explaining facts, how do you define a fact?

Logically, a fact is what is stated by a true proposition. You can say that Columbus discovered America. It is that which is. If there is such a thing as a truth, there is a fact. That ashtray on the table is a fact. So is gravitation. A liar is a person who says the opposite of what he knows. Fact is a troublesome word. Truth is what you have in your head.

Then what is truth?

The exact sciences are matters of truth. These subjects are transcultural. Mathematics is the same whether you are in London or Outer Mongolia. There are agreed-upon methods of getting at the truth. Scientists may disagree about what to think, but they agree on how to think. And when something is a matter of truth rather than of taste, there are ways of reaching agreement.

What is the role of taste in determining truth?

Even with a world community, there will always be ethnic differences of cuisine, dress, theater. In matters of taste, tolerance is the rule. But in matters of truth you have no right to your own opinion. People can agree on how to find the truth; they do not do this with taste. There is mathematics on the one end—truth, and cooking on the other—taste. Between the two extremes there are gradations of the two. There is no black and white.

Where do truth and taste most often conflict?

There are two fields, religion and philosophy. If you ask the proponents of one religion, they will work things around so that their beliefs are more true than others. Philosophy is not so difficult.

Is history then mostly a matter of truth or of taste?

A little of both. In histories of the Roman empire, we had Tacitus, Polybius, Livy. The past was recent to them. We still need their accounts. Then there was Gibbon in the 18th century. But history doesn't contract as time goes on; it enlarges. Each time in the telling it gets perhaps a little bit closer to the truth. Gibbon says he regards the fall of the Roman empire as the triumph of barbarism and Christianity. Others—noted Soviet historians—see it in economic terms. In that mélange of fact and opinion there is history. It is not a fairy tale. In the last 25 years we have seen the rise of the statistical historian who feeds data into the computer. His tory requires two different skills, research and poetry—the art of storytelling.

Aren't some governments actively engaged in rewriting history?

There are some areas where human prejudice is intractable. The situation in the Middle East is an example, or the British in Northern Ireland. Until things change, the interested parties in these sensitive areas will try to revise history their own way.

Does history simply belong to the victor?

History belongs to mankind. Someday there will be a history of mankind acceptable to all.

How close to that goal are we?

The United Nations Charter is an agreement across national boundaries—the Bill of Human Rights. We must agree on what is just and unjust or there can be no world government. But most people treat moral problems as matters of taste, not truth.

Is there such a thing as wisdom?

Oh, yes! But there aren't many wise men and women. Still, there is wisdom. In all the enumerations of major virtues, wisdom is one. Wisdom is a virtue of the intellect; it is not a science that can be taught.

In what fundamental way does man now see himself and the universe differently?

Let's think of the contrast between today and the last 300 or 400 years. Before, man had no notion of the size of the universe. Now he knows our solar system is just a dwarf in the universe, and that there may be human life on other planets. In other centuries—especially at the end of the 15th century—the prophecies of doom were emotional and religious. We are the first to have scientific

grounds for taking a dim view of the future. Our sense of doom is more concretely factual.

In what way?

We have pollution, ecological and energy problems, perhaps more wars.

Should we despair?

Well, just before the discovery of America and the invention of movable type, the Nuremberg Chronicle announced the end of the world within 100 years.

Has science in effect overturned the optimistic applecart of the 18th-century rationalists and the 19th-century romanticists?

The 19th century was the optimistic century, with advances in science and technology and the growth populations. But now we have experienced two world wars, the atomic bomb, the population explosion. Certainly there is no moral progress today. Is the idea of progress more and more, or better and better? Whether things will ever get better in a qualitative sense is highly questionable.

Are you as pessimistic as you sound?

I am a moderate pessimist. When you realize the human race—the hominid family—has been on the earth for two million years and *homo sapiens* for 250,000, I don't think we should give up on the species yet. From the optimistic point of view, we are aware of the problems. Remember Shakespeare said: "Can such things be and overcome us like a summer's cloud without our special wonder?" We are at least watching the cloud go by. I'm not as optimistic as I was 20 years ago, but I've not given up on the human race.

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