



*Lecture of Dr. Mortimer Adler
University of Alberta
Friday, November 22, 1985*

Part 1 of 3

Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen; it is a pleasure to be here as a guest of St. Joseph's College, and my pleasure is increased many times by the fact that St. Joseph's College will be introducing a new course in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas in January 1986. Dr. Platt also tells me that on the campus of this University, as on the campuses of all the Universities I know in the world except a few, very few indeed, St. Thomas is hardly a favorite, in some quarters not even very well known. This is characteristic of almost all the secular universities in our time. When I went to Columbia University in 1920, there was not a single volume of Aquinas in the University Library.

My talk to you today, about the state of Philosophy in the modern world, and even more, in the contemporary world, will therefore be highly relevant to the position of St. Joseph's College teaching Thomistic Philosophy in a generally secular University.

I would like to begin with a short biographical digression about my own career in Philosophy, and how I came to be where I

am today. I met Socrates for the first time when I was fifteen years old by reading the' early dialogues of Plato. I was brought to that, because, while working—I was a dropout from high school—on the editorial page of the New York Sun, I took a course in Columbia which required me to read John Stuart Mill's Autobiography, and I found that John Stuart Mill had read all of Plato in Greek at the age of five. Here I was fifteen and never had read any of Plato at all. I managed to find on a neighbour's bookshelf a copy of the Harvard Classics Selections from Plato and met Socrates; that turned me from other courses of life, and decided me that I was going to become a Philosopher and a teacher.

At Columbia in the years 1920-23, I had an extraordinary teacher in the History of Philosophy who introduced me to Aristotle. And I think I can almost date my being an Aristotelian from the year 1922. I was impressed by what I think most people don't recognize in Aristotle, the eminent common sense of that philosopher, the wisdom that is rooted in common sense and in common experience.

I met Saint Thomas a little later. We had a course at Columbia, invented by John Erskine, called "The Great Books Course," in which we read about sixty or seventy classics of the great western tradition in the course of two, years, and the only Aquinas available that Professor Erskine could recommend was a translation by Father Rickeby, S.J., of a short section from St. Thomas's *Summa Contra Gentiles*, on Happiness. That disturbed me. Here I had met St. Thomas, but wasn't there something else that he had written? I couldn't find anything in the library. Finally someone told me there was a bookstore, way downtown in New York, called Baenziger's, where they had St. Thomas. I went down there and found the twenty-two volumes of the *Summa Theologica* on the shelf in the Dominican Fathers' translation. You'll know something about inflation when I tell you that I bought the first volume for two dollars.

I started to read the treatise on God. I read it with some friends of mine, out loud. I was incredibly impressed by the intellectual manner, the way in which objections were raised, objections were answered, arguments were set forth and qualified. It was fascinating. I hadn't met anything like this in the whole course of my reading up to that point. From that time on, to make a long story short, I taught St. Thomas in a variety of ways over the years, and came under the influence of a great French Thomist, Jacques Maritain, who was a colleague of mine at the University of Chicago. It all came to a happy climax in 1974 when the American Catholic Philosophical Association awarded me the Aquinas Medal. All of my recent books, beginning in the late 1960's,

Conditions of Philosophy, How to Think About God, The Angels and Us, Six Great Ideas, and the most recent one, the one that I am going to be talking about this afternoon, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, represent, not a doctrine of mine, but an attempt on my part to make available in the contemporary world the wisdom I've found in the writings of both Aristotle and Aquinas. I think that these two great thinkers have important truths that have been lost, literally lost, in the modern world. Two of the crises in philosophy I am going to talk about involve the loss of the funded wisdom of the West that came down to us from the Greeks through the Middle Ages.

The first of these crises is a crisis that occurred in the seventeenth century, beginning with Descartes, in France, with Hobbes, in England, and going on with Spinoza and Leibnitz on the continent. It continued in Locke, and Berkeley, and Hume, coming to a crisis that really turned modern philosophy upside down with Immanuel Kant at the end of the eighteenth century.

These are the great modern philosophers, and they are great because they are great thinkers, even though they made extraordinary mistakes. The mistakes they made turned philosophy from the path of common sense and common experience, and got it into one muddle after another. All these mistakes stemmed, I think, from neglect or ignorance of the philosophical wisdom to be found in Aristotle and Aquinas. The line from Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza and Locke to Hume, and from Hume to Kant and Hegel, produced on the one hand the existentialism and phenomenology we find on the continent, and the analytical, linguistic positivism on the Anglo-American scene that is rampant in all of our western universities.

The errors and the befuddlement of these three centuries led to a second crisis, a crisis which I have dated as beginning in 1930.

In the early part of this century, when I was studying philosophy, there were still philosophers such as John Dewey, William James, and George Santayana, on this side of the Atlantic; and on the other side of the Atlantic, Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, and Bergson, who still wrote philosophy as if it were something addressed to the mind of the common man. They wrote philosophical books of a sort that were published generally for people to read.

If you begin to look at the productions of philosophers either on this continent, or in Europe, since 1930 to 1935, you see a remarkable change. Philosophers now write books for other philosophers to read, not for ordinary people to read. Philosophy has grown technical and specialized; it has removed itself from the world of general learning. It has become as specialized as its

branches of mathematics or logic. It has retreated from the tradition it long had through the centuries.

I should like to talk about ten philosophical mistakes about which I have written a book, published in March, 1985. They are little errors in the beginning. But as Aristotle said, way back in the fourth century B.C., little errors in the beginning, if left uncorrected, lead to very serious consequences in the end: If you have an error in your original premises, and proceed logically from those premises, you will deviate further and further, like a man, who, coming to a crossroads, and taking the wrong turn, gets into a situation more and more serious, until he finds himself a long way from the place he wants to be. These little errors, I say, carried out logically, 'lead not only to untenable conclusions, but to conclusions utterly repugnant to common sense.

Let me very briefly tell you what the ten errors are, and then mention an eleventh which I did not put in the book. The ten errors are modern errors. The other error, which is very serious indeed, and has had a great modern influence, is to be found in Plato.

The first error is that of supposing that we are directly aware of the contents of our own minds when we are engaged in thinking. That is simply not the case. We are not aware of our own ideas, we are not aware of our percepts, our memories, our concepts. There is no introspective content at all. We are aware only of the objects that we perceive in order to understand. St. Thomas, long before John Locke and Descartes made this error, in one of the questions in the treatise on man asks, "Are ideas, *that which* we apprehend, or that *by which* we apprehend whatever it is we apprehend?" And he answers very plainly and clearly, "Ideas are not *that which* we apprehend, but that *by which* we apprehend." In other words the contents of our mind are not that which we apprehend, but that by which we apprehend. They are the instruments for apprehending whatever we apprehend, that is, the intelligible objects or sensible objects, the objects of memory, or the objects of imagination.

This mistake, made flatly by Locke in the very opening sentence in his great essay on understanding, and made by Descartes as well—ideas as objects of the mind—this mistake leads to all forms of subjectivism, and carried to its logical conclusion, to solipsism, which reduces each of us to being a prisoner in his own mind, locked up in the confines of that mind.

The second mistake is that of failing to distinguish between two distinct realms of thought, perceptual thought on the one hand, and conceptual thought on the other. This is accompanied by an even more egregious mistake, that of denying that there is even such a distinction, thereby reducing all thought to the level of sense

perception and imagination. This mistake leads to the denial of any distinction between the human mind with its conceptual powers and the mind of brute animals, with nothing but perceptual powers. Ultimately it has a bearing on the recent research on artificial intelligence. This research, I believe, will never produce a machine that can think.

The third mistake is the failure to give an adequate account of how the words we use in communicating with one another acquire the meaning they possess. To correct this failure, to give an adequate account of how words get their meanings, words being originally meaningless notations, signs and marks on paper, that gain meaning, it is necessary to recognize that meanings derive from the ideas in our minds. Let me say very plainly: words, and all other signs, all other physical signs, have meanings, get meanings, change meanings, lose meanings, have multiple meanings. Ideas are meanings; an idea is a meaning. That is why, when we have ideas, we have before our minds only the things they mean. We don't have the ideas. They are meanings. And unless there were things in the world that are meanings nothing would ever get meaning.

The failure to understand the distinction between what are called instrumental signs and formal signs—a distinction first made in one paragraph by Aristotle, in the *Organon*—underlies the absolute failure of modern linguistics to understand or to give an account of meaning.

The fourth mistake is the failure to understand the distinction between genuine knowledge and mere opinion, the mistake, for example, of placing the philosophy and religion in the twilight zone of mere opinion. That is a mistake which has its origin in the closing chapters of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. The correction of this error acknowledges that philosophy can rightfully claim to be knowledge, knowledge that is more fundamental, and of greater practical value than science, history, and mathematics. This corrects the positivism and scientism of our age.

The fifth mistake is that of relegating all moral value judgments to the realm of mere opinion. It makes moral values, standards, and prescriptions entirely relative and subjective. This is what is known today as non-cognitive ethics. This undermines the whole doctrine of natural human rights, and, even worse, leads to the dogmatic declaration that might makes right. The correction of this error, done in two or three simple sentences in Aristotle, restores moral philosophy and human values to having legitimate authority in the conduct of our lives and in the operations of our society.

The sixth mistake is that of identifying happiness with having a good time, with the psychological state of contentment because our momentary wants are being satisfied. The whole understanding of happiness in modern times, beginning with Spinoza, Locke and Kant, represents a failure to understand the distinction between happiness as a psychological word and happiness as an ethical word, meaning a morally good life, not something one can experience or enjoy in itself. The correction of this error lies in recognizing that happiness does not consist in having a good time, or getting what one wants from moment to moment, but rather in leading a morally good life, and possessing all the things that are really good for us and which fulfil our natural needs. There is a fundamental difference between “wants” and “needs.”

The seventh mistake is that of failing to understand the affirmation of free will or free choice. It is the error of the determinists, for example, who identify free choice with something that happens without cause, and so is entirely a matter of chance. Hume makes this error because he thinks that an act of free choice cannot be predicted with certitude, and since any chance event is incapable of being predicted with certitude, then an act of free choice is an act of chance. But if free choice were an act of chance, all moral responsibility would be undermined. You cannot be responsible for what happens by chance. An act of free choice is not an act of chance. It is a caused act of free choice, even if it is unpredictable. The way in which it is caused makes it unpredictable in the way science predicts the phenomena of physical nature.



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 Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.