



*Lecture of Dr. Mortimer Adler
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Part 2 of 3

The eighth mistake—a most extraordinary modern mistake, which I think is epitomized at the very root of existentialism—is the mistake of denying that there is any such thing as human nature, a nature that is common to all members of the human species. This is an error due to not understanding that human nature is different from the natures of other animals. Animals are born with determined specific natures, and our human nature, when we are born, is nothing but potentialities. We have physically determined characteristics, our blood type, the number of our teeth, and the number of our bones. But in the field of behaviour we are born with no determinate characteristics at all, only with potentialities. And therefore acculturation and nurture produce all the racial and ethnic differences among humans. This does not deny human nature. Human nature flourishes as the common root of the potentialities of all these cultural differences.

The ninth error is that of regarding all forms of human association in families, tribes, and civil societies, or states, as

coming into existence by conventions or agreements voluntarily adopted. This leads to all the myths in support of the social contract which was intended to explain the origin of human societies. The origin really lies in natural need and rational determination. This error is corrected by the understanding that all human societies are both natural *and* conventional: natural in their response to the needs of human as social and gregarious animals and conventional as a result of the voluntarily adopted ways by which human beings form their association with one another.

The tenth mistake is that of regarding the atoms, or the elementary particles that constitute our physical being, as the only realities, and all the physical things we perceive with our senses, including ourselves, as illusory fabrications or fictions of our mind. This error is corrected by reversing the picture, and attributing greater reality to the wholes of which the atoms are elementary particles. The organized whole is greater than its parts, and the parts exist only virtually in that whole. They only exist actually when the whole is decomposed. In a pile of bricks, the bricks are actually separate. But in us, as organized wholes, and in any physical object, the constituent atoms, or molecules, or elementary particles are not actually there. They are only virtually present. They become actual, as in a cyclotron, only when the composite body of which they are part is decomposed. This, by the way, is ultimately to be understood in terms of the Thomistic distinction between the actual, the potential, and the virtual.

To these ten errors I must add one more, one that was first made by Plato, then corrected by Aristotle. Unfortunately the correction was not understood by Descartes, who repeated Plato's error and even made it more extreme. It is the error of regarding mind and body as if they were two separate substances, miraculously conjoined in the existence of the human being. The picture that Plato has of the soul or mind and of the body is that of a rower in a row-boat, or a driver in a car. These are two separate substances. You could wreck the car and the driver would jump out. The rower could get out of the boat. It is as though soul and body were two separate things. Man is not characterized by the dualism that leads to all the pseudo-problems that have plagued modern philosophy since the seventeenth century. These would never have existed if it had been understood that mind is not a separate substance, that man is *one, one* substance formed in a certain way, as all substances are. Not a single modern philosopher has ever bothered to consider Aristotle's correction of the Cartesian error that was first made by Plato in the fifth century BC. Plato made the error, Aristotle corrected it, and Descartes was totally unaware either that Plato had made the error, or that Aristotle had corrected it.

All of the errors I have enumerated are refutable by a *reductio ad absurdum*. In each case the absurd conclusion, to which the erroneous: premise leads, is absurd by virtue of its being incompatible with, or contrary to, common experience, or common sense understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live. None of these errors I have talked about was made by Aristotle or Aquinas. In fact, the truths which correct these errors are to be found in their works. Indeed, most of the mistakes were mistakes that they recognized and explicitly corrected.

The mistakes made by Descartes, by Locke, and especially by Hume, who was said to have awakened Kant from his dogmatic slumbers, produced a reaction in Kant. But instead of correcting Hume, Kant simply viewed him as unacceptable. The natural thing to do when you find someone's conclusions unacceptable is to go back to his premises, and find out what was wrong in the premises which led to those conclusions. But Kant does not do this. Rather he takes Hume's conclusions and tries to correct them. The correction is the most enormous confection. Kantian philosophy is an amazing feat of the mind, but totally useless. It should never have been undertaken in the first place. I really do not understand how anyone can take Immanuel Kant seriously in the twentieth century, though he is regarded as a great modern philosopher. The reason is this. His whole effort was to show, against Hume, that the truths of Euclidian geometry, could be known as synthetic *a priori* truths. He invented a whole apparatus of the mind to establish the certitude of Euclidian geometry and the certitude of Newtonian mechanics. After he died, non-Euclidian geometries came into existence, and we know that Euclid is precisely one geometry based upon arbitrary postulates, not *the* geometry, not *the* truth. And we now know that Newtonian mechanics is not the whole of physics. History by itself makes the Kantian effort a meaningless endeavour.

Kant's "Copernican revolution" in philosophy, opened the door to the absolute idealism of Hegel, and other forms of idealism in German philosophy. The fantastic philosophical systems constructed by these German philosophers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced in turn a reaction, beginning with Kierkegaard and Husserl, that consisted in the existentialism and the phenomenology that is still regnant on the European continent in many diverse forms. The Anglo-American reaction was against all speculative philosophical thought, identified with German philosophical systems. When contemporary positivists use the word "metaphysics" they are not talking about Aristotle or Aquinas; they are talking about Hegel and Schopenhauer and Schlegel.

Thus we have, for example, the Viennese positivists. After 1930, in most of the leading universities of England and the United States, we have logical positivism, often called analytical and linguistic philosophy, and the kind of therapeutic positivism developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein. He attempted to get out of the mess and the muddle created by modern philosophers from the seventeenth century on, the mess and the muddle of the pseudo-problems, paradoxes, contradictions, and absurdities to be found in modern thought, all of which could have been avoided.

Concomitant with this result we find philosophers retreating from thought about reality, to thought about thought itself, and about the language in which thought is expressed. This is combined with a feeling of inferiority toward, and envy of, the achievements of science, and an effort to emulate the precision and method of mathematics, a precision and method not at all appropriate to philosophy.

With these developments since the early thirties, all of them consequences of the basic philosophical mistakes by the French and English philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and by the German philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, philosophy has become as specialized as other disciplines in this age of intense specialization. Philosophers since the nineteen-thirties write only for other philosophers, not for mankind generally. In my judgment, there has not been anything like a great book written in philosophy since 1930, and unless trends are radically reversed, I think it unlikely that there will ever be one written again. The most important reason why this has happened is that philosophers in the twentieth century do not do what Aristotle did, nor what Aristotle said philosophers should do. He said that philosophers should proceed by attempting to take into consideration the thought of their predecessors.' Philosophy should be a co-operative enterprise. Aristotle did not write a system of philosophy. All the works of St. Thomas, even the *Summa*, are not a system of philosophy. Systems of philosophy begin with Descartes, Leibnitz, and Hobbes. They wrote systems, and their German successors made matters even worse. Hegel is the extreme example of a systematist. Aristotle and Plato and the great mediaevalists dealt with problems, and they took into account what other people had thought.

I want to read you two passages from Aristotle that I think are the maxims every philosopher should follow, and you will see at once why I think they are so important. One comes from the second book of the *Metaphysics*, chapter one. Aristotle says:

The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is

able to attain the truth adequately, while on the other hand we do not collectively fail. But everyone says something true about the nature of things. And while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed.

And the second statement by Aristotle comes from the first book of *De Anima*, the book on the soul, chapter two:

It is necessary to call into council the views of our predecessors in order that we may profit from whatever is found in their thought and avoid errors.

Now if, starting with Descartes, you look at the succession of modern philosophers, you will see that this is what they do not do. Each one starts as if he were creating philosophy from the ground up, as if he had no predecessors. This is not entirely true, for Kant does refer to Hume, and Hume does refer to Locke. But actually, if you look at their writings, the reference to the predecessors is only to point out an error they made, not to build on them. That is not the way philosophy should be done. And it was not done that way in the ancient world; it was not done that way in the mediaeval world. The cooperative aspect of philosophy is of the greatest importance.

A second thing I want to comment on here is the relation of philosophy to common sense and common experience. Philosophy, like science, is empirical. But the difference between philosophy and science, a difference not understood in the modern world, is that the experience that philosophy uses is the common experience of mankind. It is the same kind of experience the mathematician uses. Both philosophy and mathematics are armchair thinking. A philosopher who got out of his armchair to investigate anything, would not be a philosopher. Philosophers are not investigators, not researchers, not people who use apparatus, who go out and do field research, any more than mathematicians do. They have the common experience of mankind to appeal to, and they use their minds reflectively and analytically. As a result, the empirical basis of philosophy is quite different from the empirical basis of science, and this accounts for the difference in the progress in science and the progress in philosophy, and the change in science and the change in philosophy. One modern philosopher who understood this very well is George Santayana. He wrote a book in 1923 called *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. I want to read you a paragraph. This is the way a philosopher should speak:

For good or ill, I am an ignorant man, almost a poet. And I can only spread a feast of what everybody knows. Fortunately exact science and the books of the learned are not necessary to establish my essential doctrine. Nor can any of them claim a higher warrant than it has in itself. My doctrine rests on public experience. It needs to prove it only the stars, the seasons, the song of animals, the spectacle of birth and death, of cities, and wars. My philosophy is justified, and has been justified in all ages and all countries, by the facts before everyman's eyes. In the past or in the future my language or my borrowed knowledge would have been different. But under whatever sky I have been born, since it is the same sky, I should have had the same philosophy.

That is a profound indication of how a philosopher should proceed. And I assure you that it is not the way that philosophers have proceeded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries or even in modern times. This text makes the point that philosophy is independent of science, is not affected by changes in research. It is affected only by rational arguments based upon our common experience.



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