



*Lecture of Dr. Mortimer Adler
University of Alberta
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Part 3 of 3

This leads me to another point which I want you to see. We live in an age which we proudly call the information age. We are also proud of the fact that we live in an age in which the knowledge explosion is taking place. I don't think anyone would dare say that we live in the age of understanding, or that we live in an age in which wisdom has finally come into its own. And yet, when you look at those four basic terms, information, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, you see a hierarchy of the goods of the mind. Most information is useless, not worth bothering with. Any information you don't have in your mind you can look up in a reference book. You don't have to carry it around with you. Just as information can be used for good and evil purposes, so knowledge without understanding can also be used for good and evil purposes, though knowledge is seldom as useless as information is. But understanding is never useless, and understanding can never be used for evil purposes, and least of all can wisdom ever be so used. It is impossible for a wise man to be morally vicious or for a morally virtuous man not to have some wisdom.

Understood knowledge is better than bare knowledge. And understood knowledge, together with the understanding of the

ideas that lead to wisdom, is the best of all. That's why I think that the abdication of philosophy from its proper place in culture is one of the great evils of the twentieth century. Philosophy is not central to modern culture as it should be. In the middle ages theology was the queen of the sciences, and philosophy its handmaiden. In any secular culture, which is pluralistic with respect to religion, philosophy should certainly be at the apex. Without philosophy, we do not have thoroughly understood knowledge; we have no understanding of fundamental ideas, and we have very little wisdom.

The cultural crisis, then, which is upon us, can be briefly summarized as follows. We have more and more science and technology, but less and less understanding and wisdom. We have more and more power at our disposal, but less and less direction of it, to the right goals that we ought to seek.

Now, in the few minutes which remain to me, let me return to those ten philosophical mistakes, that I dealt with briefly at the beginning of this lecture. I would like, in conclusion, to try to answer three questions about them.

How might modern thinkers have avoided these mistakes? What caused these mistakes to be made in the first place? And how did earlier mistakes lead to later ones resulting in the disaster that is modern philosophy?

The outstanding achievement and intellectual glory of modern times has certainly been empirical science, and the mathematics that it has put to such good use. No question about that. The progress that science and mathematics have made in the last three centuries, and the technological advances that result therefrom, are breathtaking. The equally great achievement and intellectual glory of Greek antiquity, and the philosophical developments of the middle ages, have given to us a fund of accumulated wisdom. These, too, are breathtaking, especially when one considers how little philosophical progress we have made in modern times. This is not to say that no advances in philosophical thought have been made in the last three hundred years. Advances have been made, mainly in logic, in the philosophy of science, and in political theory, but not in metaphysics, not in the philosophy of nature, nor in the philosophy of the mind, and least of all in moral philosophy. Let me add this: though metaphysics and the philosophy of nature deal with the same object that science deals with, namely the world in which we live, only philosophy provides us with any moral knowledge. There are no normative or prescriptive judgments that are based upon scientific evidence. Only philosophical thought can validate our "I ought" or "I ought not."

Nor is it true to say that in Greek antiquity and in the later middle ages, from the fourteenth century on, science did not prosper at all. On the contrary, the foundations of science, of mathematics, of mathematical physics, of biology and of medicine, were laid in those centuries. It is in metaphysics, the philosophy of nature, the philosophy of mind, and moral philosophy, that the ancients and their mediaeval successors, did more than lay the foundations of the sound understanding and the modicum of wisdom we possess. They did not make the philosophical mistakes that have been the ruination of modern thought. On the contrary, they had the insights and they made the indispensable distinctions that provide us with the means for correcting these mistakes.

At its best, investigative science, all the natural sciences as well as the social sciences, give us knowledge of reality. As I have argued, philosophy is, at the very least, also knowledge of reality, but not just that. Philosophy is much more than knowledge. Science is *only* knowledge. Philosophy is knowledge to a slight extent, but it is knowledge illuminated by understanding. It is the understanding of the knowledge we have from science and of the knowledge we have as the result of our common experience. Understanding is the important thing that philosophy contributes. At its very best it approaches wisdom, both speculative and practical. Precisely because science is investigative and philosophy is not investigative, one should not be surprised by the remarkable progress made in science, nor by the equally remarkable lack of it in philosophy. Precisely because philosophy is based upon the common experience of mankind, and is a refinement and elaboration of the common-sense knowledge and understanding that derives from reflection on the common experience of mankind, philosophy came to maturity early, in the fifth and fourth century BC, and developed beyond that point only slightly and slowly. Scientific knowledge changes, grows, improves, expands, as a result of refinements in, and accretions to, the special experience of the observational data on which science as an investigative mode of being must rely.

Philosophical knowledge and understanding are not subject to the same conditions of change or growth. Common experience or, more precisely, the general lineaments or common core of that experience, which suffices for the philosopher, remains relatively constant over the ages. Descartes and Hobbes in the seventeenth century, Locke, Hume, and Kant in the eighteenth century, Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell in the twentieth century, enjoy no greater advantage in this respect, than Plato and Aristotle in antiquity, or than Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Roger Bacon in the middle ages.

Now how might modern thinkers have avoided the philosophical mistakes that have been so disastrous in their consequences? I have already indicated the answer, but I want to repeat it, for it is so important. Finding a prior philosopher's view untenable, the thing to do is to go back to his starting point and see if he made a little error in the beginning. A striking example of the failure to follow this rule is to be found, as I said a moment ago, in Immanuel Kant's response to Hume. Hume's sceptical conclusions about mathematics, particularly about the investigative sciences, his phenomenalism, were unacceptable to Kant, even though Hume's conclusions awoke Kant, as Kant himself admits, from his own dogmatic slumbers. But instead of looking for the little errors in the beginning that were made by Hume, and then dismissing them as the cause of the conclusions that he found unacceptable, Kant thought it necessary to construct a vast piece of philosophical machinery designed to produce conclusions of an opposite tenor. The intricacy of the apparatus and the ingenuity of the design cannot help but evoke admiration, even from those who are suspicious of the sanity of the whole enterprise, and find it necessary to reject Kant's conclusions as well as Hume's. Though they are opposite in tenor they do not help us to get at the truth, which can only be found by correcting Hume's little errors in the beginning, and the little errors made by Locke and Descartes before that. To do this one must be in the possession of insights and distinctions, with which these modern thinkers were unacquainted.

What I have just said about Kant in relation to Hume applies to the whole tradition of British empiricist philosophy from Hobbes, Locke, and Hume on. All the philosophical puzzlements, paradoxes, and pseudo-problems, that linguistic and analytical philosophy and therapeutic positivism of our own century, have tried to eliminate, would never have arisen in the first place if the little errors in the beginning, made by Locke and Hume, had been explicitly rejected instead of left unnoticed.

But what caused these mistakes to be made? How did these little errors in the beginning arise in the first place? One answer is that something which needed to be known or understood had not yet been discovered or learned. Such mistakes are excusable however regrettable they may be.

The second answer is that the errors were made as a result of culpable ignorance, ignorance of an essential point or indispensable insight or distinction that had already been discovered and expounded. It is mainly in the second way that modern philosophers have made their little errors in the beginning. They are ugly monuments to the failures of education, failures due, on the one hand to corruption in the tradition of learning, and on

the other hand to an antagonistic attitude toward, or even contempt for, the achievements of those who came before. The explanation of the antagonism lies in the character of the teachers under whom the modern philosophers studied in their youth. These teachers of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, did not pass on the philosophical tradition as a living thing, by recourse to the writings of the great philosophers of the past. As a result modern philosophers do not do what Aristotle said they should do, examine what one's predecessors have said, and sift the true from the false, the wheat from the chaff.

In the thirteenth century, Aquinas, as a teacher at the University of Paris, brought in the *Physics* of Aristotle, or the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle, and read the text to the students. He then commented on the text, and he and his students discussed its meaning. The reason why a mediaeval teacher was called a "lecturer" is because he was a reader. In fact still today, teachers in some English Universities hold the title of "Reader in Philosophy." Formerly, lecturing consisted in reading a text. The students did not have any texts, for there were no books available. The teacher read the text and commented on it. When you get into the century of books, they begin to have manuals and text books. Now there is nothing worse than a manual or a textbook in philosophy. All such books distort the subject.

Yet that became the way in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, when these men that I remember talking about went to school. Corrupt, degraded, scholastic teachers, for the most part clerics of one kind or another, did not read the great texts and comment on them. They taught their students out of manuals in a most dogmatic fashion. Not surprising that bright young men revolted against this kind of teaching. That, I think, is one explanation of the antagonism to the middle ages that has occurred in modern times.

The repugnance of early modern thinkers, though certainly explicable, may not be wholly pardonable, for they could have repaired the damage by turning to the texts of Aristotle or Aquinas in their mature years and by reading them perceptively and collectively. That they did not do this can be ascertained by an examination of their major works. When they reject certain points of doctrine inherited from the past it is clear that they did not properly understand them. Their misunderstanding is perfectly obvious. In addition, they make mistakes that arise from ignorance of distinctions and insights highly relevant to the problems they intended to solve.

Part of this, of course, is due to the Protestant Reformation. If you take Plato and Aristotle as in some sense the substance out of which mediaeval thought developed, and then think of

mediaeval thought as Roman Catholic in its ecclesiastical relationship, the rejection of the Catholic Church might well lead to the rejection of the whole intellectual tradition. You will not read Plato and Aristotle, because they were the substance used by the theologians you rejected because they were Catholics—hardly the way the intellectual life should be conducted.

With very few exceptions such misunderstanding and ignorance of philosophical achievements made prior to the sixteenth century, have been the besetting sin of modern thought. Its effects are not confined to philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They are in evidence in the work of nineteenth century philosophers and in the writings of our own day. We can find them for example in the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, for all his native brilliance and philosophical fervor, stumbles in the dark, in dealing with problems on which his pre-modern predecessors, unknown to him, have thrown great light. Modern philosophy has never recovered from its false starts. Like men floundering in quicksand, who compound their difficulties by struggling to extricate themselves, Kant and his successors have multiplied the difficulties and complexities of modern philosophy by the very strenuousness and even the ingenuity of the efforts to extricate themselves from the muddle left in their path by Descartes, Locke and Hume.

To make a fresh start it is only necessary to open the great philosophical books of the past and to read them with the effort and the understanding they deserve. The recovery of basic truths long hidden from view would eradicate errors which have had such disastrous consequences in modern times.

Thank you very much. (Long applause)



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Max Weismann, Publisher Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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