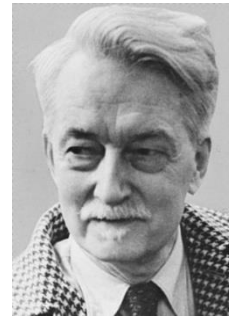


# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

November 2018

*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

Nº 969



## Recollections of Three Thinkers: Adler, Simon, and Maritain

**Donald A. Gallagher**

Part 1 of 3

In my mind's eye, M.J. Adler stands forth as the Demonstrator and Remonstrator of our time, Y.R. Simon as the Argumentor and Distinguisher of our period, and Jacques Maritain as the Synthesizer and Prophetic Voice of our age.

In this presentation, I view Adler, Simon, and Maritain from the perspective of personal recollections moving back in time to the 1930s and 1940s and in terms of the impact they exercised on young teachers and students in that period. It is then obviously not a philosophical evaluation, even though I recognize that recall involves selection and a sort of implicit evaluation.

I refer to these thinkers by their last names, not out of disrespect but out of regard for their stature and status among the Great Ones. One does not denominate Hegel as Professor Hegel but quite simply as Hegel because he is one of the Great. Let me proceed to a conspectus of each of three philosophers and then to my concluding remarks.

### **I. Mortimer J. Adler**

I did not have the privilege of knowing Adler as colleague or friend. I did enjoy several meetings with him, especially in the 1940s, usually in a group situation. In Saint Louis and other cities, he delivered lectures I attended. His books and articles, which were published in a regular and rapid rate and which I read avidly, exerted a lasting influence upon me. The first lecture by Adler I ever attended I recall vividly. It was given in 1938 at a Catholic women's college in Saint Louis. He contended, in a theme developed at length in his *How to Read*

a *Book*, that, in an exacting sense of reading, few people including scholars ever read a book, even those who devour hundreds of tomes. It was above all in the middle ages that the mental atmosphere was conducive to thorough reading. Few ancients and hardly any moderns have really *read* a book. The medievals did read books.

The exceptions to Adler's rule fortify his thesis. The Cistercians of the Strict Observance, the Trappists as they came to be called from the monastery *La Trappe* in Normandy, were in Rance's day allowed only one or two books for pondering and digesting during the Lenten season. Abraham Lincoln, from what we know of his youth with little formal schooling, had only a few books at his disposal. These he mastered along with the language he spoke so eloquently. The tradition of *Lectio Divina* in European monasteries scattered far and wide from the patristic era to the middle ages and continuing into modern times promoted *reflective reading* (which is in reality Adler's "reading"; after all, one does not really read if reflection is lacking) of every work handled.

At the present time, it surprises me to realize that Adler was in his late thirties in 1938. To me in my early twenties, he seemed mature and knowledgeable.

In those days, there was much talk about Catholics being in a ghetto and having a ghetto mentality. (The English Catholic writer Wilfrid Ward spoke of Catholics beginning to emerge from their "siege mentality.") The ghetto notion, wrenched out of its original context, has always seemed somewhat ambiguous to me and so I hesitate even to refer to it here. At the risk of digression, let me point out that in the 1930s and 1940s when I was studying and teaching at Catholic universities in the Middle West of our country, there was, at least as I recall the situation, little or no mention of Catholics being confined to ghettos. (Of course, I say half-seriously that one may be so immured in a ghetto that one does not even realize it!) It was only when I was teaching at Boston College in the 1960s that I heard talk about Catholics in the ghetto. Perhaps in that environment, they had been in or were just breaking out of one. Some Irish-Americans, Irish in a distinctively Bostonian style, had received higher education at Ivy League schools and were inclined to disparage the basic values of their culture as well as its narrownesses.

On the one hand, there was in the 1930s to the 1950s (at least) a certain narrowmindedness, a defensive mentality inherited from immigrant forebears who huddled together for protection and guidance. On the other hand, Catholic intellectuals were making contact with their great traditions going all the way back to the middle ages, expanding their horizons, and were thus less provincial than many of their secularist contemporaries.

This seeming digression serves some purpose if it helps us the better to understand the value and the impact of Adler's writings and speeches in the period of which I speak. The scholar who had come from the secularistic world, who repudiated it, and who now championed the Great Tradition that we Catholics were beginning to assimilate and appreciate, was a friend in a time of need.

In *Philosopher at Large*, his autobiographical work, Adler acknowledges that he was sometimes too brusque and brash in his criticisms of the "moderns." In "God and the Professors," a piece he wrote around 1940, he argues that the most serious threat to democracy is the *positivism* of the Professors, the central

corruption of modern culture. Democracy has more to fear from the mentality of its teachers than from the nihilism of Hitler. (All this at a time when the hordes of Hitler were conquering Europe and terrifying the peoples of the world.) Adler's logic in these accusations was perhaps irrefutable but this rhetoric (as he admits) was not calculated to influence the people he intended to persuade. Of course, it is arguable that Adler's procedure was necessary at the time and was aimed at shocking those entrenched in their own secularist ghetto into sanity.

One is reminded of Maritain, shortly after his conversion to Catholicism, writing *Anti moderne* (in the book itself he says it should perhaps have been entitled *Ultramoderne*). It is one of the finest books written by the youthful convert. It contains a scathing denunciation of modern trends as well as a recognition of values brought to light in this time.

In retaliation for his attacks upon the Professorial Estate, some critics called Adler a "dialectical typewriter," a species of heartless logic-machine. Even some Catholics began to be critical of Adler. They were irritated at his criticism of Catholic mediocrity and of the failure of Catholics to appreciate their own priceless tradition. Some persons could not understand why he did not become a Catholic. It was reported that a religious sister who questioned him on this matter was given the simple answer, "I have not received the Gift of Faith!" There was admittedly something paradoxical about a man who accepted much of Aquinas' theology as well as his philosophy and did not go further. (It should be mentioned that Adler himself treats this sensitive topic in *Philosopher at Large*.)

Adler would readily acknowledge that he was more interested in human thought than in human beings. At the same time, his capacity for friendship presents us with another paradox about his personality. On the occasion of his sixtieth birthday (a time much later than that to which we devote attention here), the roster of those who paid tribute to him reads like a roll-call of the leaders in the gallant fight for the Great Tradition. Buchanan, McKeon, Barzun, Fadiman, the Van Dorens, Rubin, Mayer, and many others: these persons he calls *friends*.

Pride of place is reserved for his friendship with Jacques Maritain. Over and over in his writings and early and late in his career, he refers to Maritain as his close personal friend. In *What Man Has Made of Man* (1937), he praises *The Degrees of Knowledge* (1932) as constituting "the outlines, at least, of a synthesis of science, philosophy and theology which will do for us what St. Thomas did for philosophy and theology in the middle ages." In *Philosopher at Large* (1977), Adler praises Maritain and conjoins him with Aristotle and Aquinas as the ones from whom he has learned the most and as those who are the great champions of living Tradition.

Adler the arch-intellectual does not disdain the common man. On the contrary, he esteems him. In his later period, one of his books is entitled *Aristotle for Everybody* and he says it is intended for the Professors. It should be emphasized that one of the distinctive insights of Adler resides in his respect for and his appeal to the judgment of the common man. He maintains that the so-called "common man" is able to grasp basic truths (for example, certain of the Great Ideas, especially those in the moral order). The "common man," an appellation often used and much abused, is in the final analysis the "uncommon man." It seems to me that, in this view, Adler in his own way is at one with Pope John Paul II, who names each human person "this unique individual," and with

Jacques Maritain, who refers early and late to the basic dignity of each person. (In a somewhat special reference bearing on the same theme, Yves Simon argues that intellectuals and landed proprietors should not have more than one vote, but one the same as every other individual. Simon argues this way *because he trusts the good judgment of the average citizen.*)

Furthermore, I find an affinity between Adler's perspective on the uncommon common man and Maritain's idea in his educational philosophy that emphasis should be placed in liberal education (from high school years and the following, or from what in many countries are called the *lycee* or *college* years) upon what he terms *natural intelligence*. Only later on does the student, with his intelligence fortified by intellectual virtue, tackle advanced stages of knowledge. It should be noted that Maritain emphasizes the importance of educating the "natural intelligence" and at the same time devotes attention to advanced students, who are led to develop the *habitus* of philosophy for themselves by way of a more formal and rigorous discipline. In my view, while he makes perceptive observations on *habitus* in *What Man Has Made of Man*, Adler does not bring out these distinctions as clearly as does Maritain.

At this point, I should mention the influence that the reading of Adler had upon me in the 1940s and 1950s. Every book and article Adler put forth was an event for me. Of his plentiful writings, of which I still retain records and jottings from the text, I take as example a book already mentioned, *What Man Has Made of Man*. This important study of philosophical and empiriological psychology as well as of psychoanalysis I read over and over and found it (as I still do) of exceptional value in my teaching of what was then termed "Rational Psychology" and later "Philosophical Psychology" or "Anthropology." The book was presented in outline form, which threw some people off, but even in that shape I regarded it as immensely serviceable.

In this period, Adler co-authored with Father Walter Farrell, O.P., a study of democracy. Well thought out and closely reasoned, it nevertheless became a subject of controversy. In fact, I disagreed with some aspects of the authors' thesis and published a critique of it. I hasten to add that one does not lightly disagree with Dr. Adler. One hesitates to engage in disputation with the Great Disputant. One needs the argumentative skill of a Simon and the insight of a Maritain to fare well in any such encounter.

Yet, when all is said and done, Adler welcomes debate. In his *Idea of Freedom* (vol. II), he praises *rational debate*. His complaint is that there is so little of the rational in the interminable arguments about philosophical and related issues. In medieval times, he points out, the Schoolmen in their disputations and other intellectual jousts afford an example of truly rational debate. Most moderns, including some classed as great thinkers, lunge past each other and assail strawmen.

An unfortunate example of a debate lacking rationality was supplied on the occasion of Adler's study on *The Problem of Species*. An uncalled-for attack was launched on the work by Professor B.J. Muller-Thym of Saint Louis University. He was my thesis mentor at the university and I held him in esteem. In his critique, he not only countered Adler's thesis but questioned his scholarship and competence. I can never forget how Maritain rebuked Muller-Thym and, though he did not agree altogether with Adler's ideas, defended him

against what he considered outrageous charges.

I trust I have provided some understanding of what Adler meant for young scholars at the time of which I speak. In a period when Catholic colleges were laboring under material handicaps and certain intellectual disadvantages, the example and inspiration of Adler were heartening. Even when one did not agree with every particular proposition he maintained, his dedication to defending his position was conducive to our appreciating all the more our own traditions.

For those reasons, I consider Mortimer Adler one of the outstanding teachers of our time. I call him the Demonstrator and Remonstrator. Even at my present age, I regard Adler not as venerable but as surprisingly active and thought-provocative for a man of his years.



---

---

## 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 Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.