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An irresolvable disagreement about any matter that properly falls in the sphere of truth would constitute an intellectual scandal, but we also think that it is their obligation not to rest in their efforts to resolve such disagreements until they finally succeed in doing so.

—Mortimer J. Adler



THE NATURE OF MAN

The Nature of Man was an appropriate title for the first formal lecture given at the opening of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. That lecture was given by Mortimer J. Adler on July 1, 1950. Now, in this interview, forty-five years later (1995) he sums up his views on aspects of Human Nature, Nurture, Culture, and their relation to Natural Justice and Natural Rights. (in seven parts)

PART IV

CULTURAL UNITY and CULTURAL PLURALISM

Weismann: So far, we have learned that the unity of mankind and the human mind underlies all the differences that are caused by differences in nurture and by their consequences—differences among diverse human creatures. That being the case, should not an ultimate desideratum of human life on earth be the formation of a single cultural community to which all human beings belong—a single, global cultural community?

Adler: My answer to your question is twofold: First, because world government is necessary not only for world peace, but also—and now more urgently—to preserve the planet as a viable place for human life. In 1943, I wrote a book that argued for world government as indispensable to permanent world peace, and predicted that it would occur in about 500 years. In the years subsequent to 1945, after the destruction of Hiroshima by the first atomic bomb, I changed my prediction of world government to 200 years because of the then threatening nuclear holocaust that would make life unlivable on a large portion of this planet. Now as we near the end of the century and the threat of a nuclear holocaust has dwindled almost to disappearance, another and more serious threat has loomed up—the prospect of climatic and environmental changes that, when they become irreversible, will make the planet unlivable for human beings.

It is clear that without worldwide enforced control of all human activities that pollute the environment, its degeneration will continue to the point where lethal disabling environmental conditions are irreversible. To enforce such worldwide control of human activities world government is necessary. The United Nations will not suffice. Nor will the global commons.

This leads to the second reason: World government is impossible without world community; but the existence of world community requires a certain degree of cultural unity—unity of civilization.

Weismann: These things being so, I can foresee many major aspects of the problem to be solved, e.g., what is the kind and the degree of cultural unity that is required for world community as a basis for world government? How much cultural diversity or pluralism should persist? How much is appropriate and tolerable? What is the basis for determining the matters with regard to which it is reasonable to expect worldwide cultural unity as well as the basis for determining the matters with regard to which cultural diversity or pluralism should be tolerated because it is not incompatible with the unity of mankind and of the human mind? I must assume that to solve problems of this magnitude on a global scale you must be ready to divulge a key to the solution.

Adler: You are quite correct, and you may be surprised to learn that the key to the solution of the problem as stated is to be found in a fundamental difference between matters that belong to the sphere of truth and matters that belong to the sphere of taste, together with the moral obligations imposed upon us by our commitment to the pursuit of truth with regard to all matters that properly fall in the sphere of truth. And, of course, we must also take account of a principle that should regulate our pursuit of truth—the principle that the sphere of truth is itself unified, that it is not divisible into a plurality of separate and incompatible domains.

Weismann: Would you offer some examples to illustrate the difference between matters of truth and matters of taste?

Adler: Let us start with clear cases at the extreme ends of the spectrum. At one extreme, clearly belonging to the sphere of truth, is mathematics, and associated with it the exact sciences, especially the experimental sciences. Placing these disciplines in the sphere of truth does not mean that there is perfect agreement among all the practitioners in those fields. But it does mean that when they disagree, we expect them to be able to resolve their disagreements by rational processes. An irresolvable disagreement about any matter that properly falls in the sphere of truth would constitute an intellectual scandal, but we also think that it is their obligation not to rest in their efforts to resolve such disagreements until they finally succeed in doing so.

At the opposite extreme, clearly belonging to the sphere of taste, are such matters as cuisine, social manners, styles in dress or dance, and so on. Here we do not expect that men should be able to resolve their differences in taste. We do not expect them to achieve uniformity. On the contrary, we would regard as monstrous any attempt to impose conformity upon all with regard to any one culinary program or set of social manners or style of dress. Here the adoption of one style rather than another is an act of free choice, not an act of the intellect necessitated by objective considerations.

Weismann: Between these extremes, where there is no doubt that we are dealing with matters of truth on the one hand and with matters of taste on the other, where do philosophy and religion fall?

Adler: The prevalent view today, in academic circles at least, tends to place philosophy and religion on the side of taste rather than the side of truth. I hold the opposite view—that philosophy belongs to the sphere of truth, not of taste.

Tabling for the moment the very difficult problem of

locating the position of religion on one or the other side of the dividing line, I will turn to the bearing of the points so far considered on the problem of cultural unity and cultural pluralism. Two things should be immediately obvious. We have already achieved a high degree of transcultural agreement in mathematics and the exact and experimental sciences and we should expect it to continue and approach completeness. There is no question about cultural unity with respect to the principles of technology that are now also transcultural—adopted worldwide.

Weismann: Is there one whole of truth no matter how many diverse parts there are, and no matter how diverse the methods by which the truth of the parts is attained?

Adler: Yes, the irrefragable unity of the sphere of truth is merely an extension, but nonetheless a very important extension of the principle of contradiction: that two propositions—or sets of opinions or beliefs—cannot both be true if they contradict one another. Truth in these different parts may be attained by quite different methods: investigative and experimental, noninvestigative and nonexperimental, intuitive, mystical, or even by the acknowledgment of divine revelation. The principle of the unity of truth entails the consequence that the several parts of the one whole of the truth to be attained must coherently fit together.

Weismann: If there cannot be irreconcilable contradictions between one segment of the whole truth and another, are you saying that what is regarded as true in philosophy and religion must not conflict with what is regarded as true in science?

Adler: Yes, but since it is only in the spheres of mathematics and experimental science that doctrinal agreement has been achieved in large measure, the truths agreed upon in those areas at a given time test the claims to truth that are made in philosophy. In other words, a particular philosophical view must be rejected as false if, at a given time, it comes into conflict with the scientific truths agreed upon at that time.

Weismann: Then would the same mandate that has been operative within the Western tradition be operative when we go beyond and consider the philosophies of the Far East?

Adler: Yes, the truths of mathematics and science that are agreed upon at a given time have been employed as the test for accepting or rejecting Western religious beliefs or philosophical views, so, in exactly the same way, they should be employed as the test for accepting or rejecting Far Eastern religious beliefs or philosophical views.

Weismann: Does the fact that the fruits of technology are now universally put to use confirming global doctrinal agreement about the best approximations to truth that we have made so far in mathematics and experimental science, mean that you are saying that that agreement involves an agreement about rules of logic and of discourse enabling men to pursue the truth cooperatively and to resolve their disagreements?

Adler: Yes. The logic of science and of mathematics is, like science and mathematics, global, not Western.

Weismann: Though the method of philosophy may not be the same, is the basic framework of its logic the same?

Adler: Yes. A contradiction is a contradiction whether it occurs in philosophy, in mathematics, or in science. Unchecked equivocation in the use of words generates fallacious arguments, whether in philosophy or in mathematics or science.

Weismann: What about the difficult problem of religion?

Adler: The problem of religion is much more difficult than that of philosophy. If religion claims to involve knowledge, then we must face a further question. Is it distinguishable from philosophy as a branch of natural knowledge, or does it regard itself as quite distinct from philosophy and all other

branches of natural knowledge because its beliefs are articles of faith, not conclusions supported by empirical evidence and rational arguments? This problem is so difficult that it requires a separate discourse on the plurality of religions and the unity of truth that we will have to cover in the future.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max,

In an effort to become a good reader, I have come across a mental quandary. How do I criticize the masters, the authors of the Great Books? No I don't mean that I will not agree with them, I am sure that will come readily enough, but do I dare to actually disagree? It almost seems blasphemous to disagree with Plato or Aristotle; Herodotus or Hobbes; Galileo or Newton; Shakespeare or Cervantes; Weismann or Adler. Intellectual etiquette dictates that I first understand before I render criticism, so that day may actually be sometime off.

But I want to thank you and the Center for the Study of the Great Ideas for exercising a mind that has not been put through its paces. Reflecting back to my high school and college careers, my mind laid dormant compared to the activity it goes through consuming just one great book. William Hazlitt rhapsody in "My First Acquaintance with Poets", correctly describes my former state of mind with it's current condition: "I was at that time dumb, inarticulate, helpless, like a worm by the wayside, crushed, bleeding, lifeless; but now... my ideas float on winged words".

Grateful Member,

Herminio Rivera

Dear Fellow Members,

You may remember our special holiday gift offer from December. It was so popular that we're making another special offer to friends of the Foundation.

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Best wishes,

Peter Temes
President, Great Books Foundation

(To help provide solace during the tax season, we are making this offer through April 15, 2001.)

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