

IN MEMORIUM

It is with great sorrow that we report the death of our dear friend and member, Richard S. Wolfe.

Mr. Wolfe succumbed to complications from ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) February 3rd at 11:00 PM at the Hospice of Palm Beach County. His wife, Rosemarie, was at his side. He is survived by his two daughters, Karin Wolfe Grifoni of Rome, Italy and Jeanette Wolfe Knight of Buxton, Maine and a grand-son, Antonio Grifoni.

Dick Wolfe was a staunch friend of the Center in both deed and generosity—he will be sorely missed.



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 VII

SUMMING UP

Weismann: Although we started this discussion examining your views on aspects of Human Nature, Nurture, Culture and their relation to Natural Justice, you have called to our attention a multitude of egregious mistakes made and proliferated by generations of philosophers, and scientists, that are consequential to a correct understanding of these ideas and issues.

I would like to conclude this discussion with your thoughts relative to the genesis and history of these errors and your prognosis for the future.

Adler: I would start by quoting my old friend, Aristotle, who wrote in the fourth century B.C., "The least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousand-fold," and by paraphrasing Thomas Aquinas, who sixteen centuries later echoed Aristotle by saying in effect that little errors in the beginning lead to serious consequences in the end.

I would add that neither Aristotle nor Aquinas had in mind the philosophical mistakes—all little errors in the beginning—with the mistakes we have discussed here. These are modern philosophical errors made by philosophers since the seventeenth century—an era marked by departures in thought initiated by Thomas Hobbes in England and by Renee Descartes in France.

These mistakes lead to serious consequences that not only pervade contemporary philosophical thought, but also manifest themselves in popular misconceptions widely prevalent today. They are not cloistered errors of merely academic significance. Many of us have unwittingly harbored some of these mistakes in our minds without knowing whence or how they came there.

Weismann: Are you, by calling these philosophical mistakes "little errors," minimizing their gravity?

Adler: Not at all. What I am saying is that they are extremely simple mistakes capable of being stated in a single sentence or two; and, the truth that corrects them is correspondingly simple and similarly capable of brief statement. However, their simplicity does not preclude certain complications.

Seen in their simplicity, or even with their attendant complications, they are mistakes that occur at the outset of a long train of thought, leading from erroneous premises through many steps to the false conclusions or consequences that those premises ultimately entail.

At the very beginning, before the consequences are discerned, the mistake appears innocent and goes unnoticed. Only when we are confronted with repugnant conclusions to which cogent reasoning carries us are we impelled to retrace our steps to find out where we went wrong. Instead of retracing the steps that lead back to their sources in little errors at the beginning, modern thinkers have tried in other ways to circumvent the result of the initial errors, often compounding the difficulties instead of overcoming them.

Weismann: Are you are saying that the advances in modern thought have been insignificant?

Adler: No. What I am saying is that the outstanding achievement and intellectual glory of modern times has been empirical science and the mathematics that it has put to such good use. The advances in philosophical thought that have occurred in the last three hundred years have been mainly in logic, in the philosophy of science, and in political theory, not in metaphysics, in the philosophy of nature, or in the philosophy of mind, and least of all in ethics.

Weismann: If science and mathematics have flourished in modern times to what are we indebted to the ancient philosophers?

Adler: 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 for 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 made the indispensable distinctions that provide us with the means for correcting these mistakes.

Weismann: How then would you compare the contribution of modern science as against philosophy?

Adler: At its best, investigative science gives us knowledge of reality. Philosophy is, at the very least, also knowledge of reality. But better than that, it is knowledge illuminated by understanding. At its best, it approaches wisdom, both speculative and practical.

Precisely because science is investigative and philosophy is not, one should not be surprised by the remarkable progress in science and by the equally 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 that common experience, philosophy came into maturity early 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—the observational data—on which science as an investigative mode of inquiry must rely. Philosophical knowledge is not subject to the same conditions of change and growth. Common experience, or more precisely, the common core of that experience, which suffices for the philosopher, remains relatively constant over the ages.

Weismann: What then could modern thinkers have done to avoid the philosophical mistakes that have been so disastrous in their consequences?

Adler: When they found a prior philosopher's conclusions untenable, they should have gone back to his starting point to see if he has made a little error in the beginning. All of the philosophical puzzlements, paradoxes, and pseudo-problems that linguistic and analytical philosophy and therapeutic positivism in our own century have tried to eliminate would never have arisen in the first place if the little errors in the beginning made by the likes of Locke and Hume had been explicitly rejected instead of going unnoticed.

Weismann: What can you tell us about how those little errors in the beginning emanated in the first place?

Adler: 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.

A second answer is that the errors are made as a result of culpable ignorance—ignorance of an essential point, an indispensable insight or distinction, that has 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 corruptions in the tradition of learning and, on the other hand, to an antagonistic attitude toward or even contempt for the past, for the achievements of those who have come before.

Proceeding, therefore, in ignorance or misunderstanding of truths that could have been found in the

funded tradition of almost two thousand years of Western thought, these modern philosophers made crucial mistakes in their points of departure and in their initial postulates.

The explanation of the antagonism lies in the character of the teachers under whom these modern philosophers studied in their youth. These teachers did not pass on the philosophical tradition as a living thing by recourse to the writings of the great philosophers of the past. They did not read and comment on the works of Aristotle, for example, as the great teachers of the thirteenth century did. 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 critically.

Weismann: Are you saying that 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?

Adler: Yes, and they are evident and prevalent in the writings of our own day. You 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 the 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 perplexities of modern philosophy by the very strenuousness—and even ingenuity—of their efforts to extricate themselves from the muddle left in their path by Descartes, Locke, and Hume.

Weismann: What then is the prognosis for modern philosophy? Can you shed light on a way to extricate ourselves from this "muddle"?

Adler: Yes, to make a fresh start, it is only necessary to open the great philosophical books of the past (especially those written by Aristotle and in his tradition) and to read them with the effort of understanding that they deserve. The philosophical doctrines that result from the study of the Great Ideas are to be found in these books that deal with them and state a sound and satisfactory understanding of one or more of the Great Ideas.

The analysis of Ideas is a dimension of philosophy, not the business of science, history, mathematics, or poetry. Those engaged in other intellectual disciplines have to become philosophical when they engage in the study of Great Ideas. This would eventuate the recovery of basic truths, long hidden from view, and would eradicate errors that have had such disastrous consequences in modern times.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max:

I thought you might like to know that we are at last getting our philosophical group off the ground. "Colloquium" will have as its objectives: "To assemble a group of men and women who have a desire to share and discuss intellectual topics from history, philosophy, literature, science and the arts."

We will begin meeting in April and I will be the first presenter with a reading of *Only Adults Can Be Educated* by Adler and Weismann—an appropriate opening program. We presently have eleven persons with interest. I look for it to grow to about twenty-five members in this small community of Nacogdoches,

Texas.

Thanks for your help.

Dr. Max Morley, Professor of Music
Stephen F. Austin State University

Max,

Thank you for sending the image of Dr. Adler on the cover of Time magazine. Also, thank you for the series on Human Nature by Dr. Adler, always a subject of current news. I find Dr. Adler's critical insights help-ful in my personal reading. Right now that reading includes Professor Paul R. Ehrlich's recent book *Human Natures: Genes, Cultures, and the Human Prospect*.

Charley Countryman

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As always, we welcome your comments.
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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE is published
by the Center for the Study of The Great Ideas
Founded by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
1151 N. State Street - Suite 272
Chicago, IL 60610
312-943-1076
E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com
Homepage: TheGreatIdeas.org
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.