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—Mortimer Adler

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THE NEGLECT OF THE INTELLECT: SLOTH *

by Mortimer Adler

I propose to consider the disuse or nonuse of the intellect, for which the most appropriate name is sloth.

That English word is the translation of a Latin term in the Christian catalogue of mortal sins set forth by St. Gregory the Great. It also became the name for an almost completely dormant mammal that is usually found hanging by its claws on the branch of a tree. Because of this latter identification, sloth has in ordinary speech come to signify gross physical inactivity. In borrowing that term from both ordinary speech and from theological discourse, I have adopted it to designate an almost total neglect of the intellect or an inadequate use of it.

In the catalogue of mortal sins, sloth stands for spiritual lethargy or torpor. With their connotation of deep sleep, the words “lethargy” and “torpor” may be inappropriate for what I mean in using the word “sloth.” But what I have in mind is conveyed by emphasis on the spiritual, not physical, dimension of our conduct. It is the intellectual, not physical, inactivity of a person for which I am using the word “sloth.”

The ideal of intellectual virtue portrayed in the preceding chapter can be approximated in some degree by anyone who has the ability and willingness to make the effort. There are some human beings who, because of minimal or defective intellectual endowment, may not have the requisite ability. But there are a great many more who have sufficient ability to make the effort and fail to do so. It is those persons that I am charging with the fault of not using their intellects in the proper fashion.

Sloth is a moral fault, but unlike injustice that results in misconduct toward others, sloth is a moral fault that causes the misconduct of the individual’s private life. In this respect, it is more like the lack of temperance, which is abstinence from sensual pleasures or the lack of fortitude, which is a habitual unwillingness to take the pains involved in doing what one ought to do for the sake of leading a morally good life.

One ought to make good use of one’s intellect in order to lead a morally good life. Stated another way, one ought to lead an intellectual life. But many of us do not lead intellectual lives. Many of us are anti-intellectual. Many do not use their intellects beyond those uses they cannot avoid its cooperation with the sensory powers in acts of perception, memory, and imagination.

If they go beyond such cooperative uses of the intellect, which confer conceptual illumination upon the things we perceive, remember, and imagine, they do not

use their intellects for the purpose of increased knowledge and augmented understanding, sought for their own sake and not for some ulterior, practical purpose. They do not engage in the pursuit of truth for the love of it and for no other reason. They do not count the sheer delight of thinking well among the joys they prize and seek.

Those who do not lead intellectual lives deploy their intellectual powers in the work-a-day world of earning a living for the sake of getting ahead in that world. If they were not compelled to use their intellects for that purpose, they would not be inclined to do so. When they are not immersed in the economic rat race, they resort to various forms of play and entertainment for the sake of recreation from the fatigues of toil or in order to kill the time that lies heavy on their hands. It never or seldom occurs to them to use free time for the exacting pursuits of leisure instead of for recreation or the pleasures of play.

The pleasures of play are intensified by great skill in one's participation in whatever sports or games to which one is inclined. One has to use one's intellect to acquire such skill. But that use of the intellect, taken together with its use for economic or even political advancement, is hardly a sufficient use. While it is not total abstinence from intellectual activity, it is certainly an inadequate employment of whatever degree of intellectual power we have.

In sharp contrast, what I have called the exacting pursuits of leisure are all forms of intellectual activity in which the intellect is (1) used productively in making things that are useful and enjoyable, (2) used practically in making judgments about things to be done for the sake of a morally good life, and (3) used speculatively in the pursuit of truth and in all forms of learning for the sake of gaining knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

These three uses of the intellect will, if they become

habitual, confer upon a person the intellectual virtues that Aristotle named in Greek antiquity—art and prudence, understanding, knowledge, and wisdom.

On the part of those who have sufficient intellectual ability to do so, sloth is either a habitual reluctance to employ one's intellectual power adequately, or it consists in almost total abstinence from an active engagement of the intellect in pursuits of leisure.

Anti-intellectualism gives rise to the most extreme, the most morally deplorable, form of sloth. It is to be found in persons for whom the ultimate objectives in life are the maximization of pleasure, money, fame, or power and who, thus motivated, express their contempt for those who waste their lives in purely intellectual pursuits. It is almost as if they wished they did not have the burden of having intellects that might distract them from their fanatical devotion to nonintellectual aims.

It is man's glory to be the only intellectual animal on earth. That imposes upon human beings the moral obligation to lead intellectual lives. The slothful are blind to the glory and neglectful of the obligation.

* From his book *Intellect: Mind Over Matter* (1990)

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Mr. Weismann,

I watched the whole tragic event on television yesterday (9/11) and couldn't believe my eyes. I lived in New York City for seven years (from 1990 to 1997) and completed my college education there. I was baptized there, and I got to know Dr. Adler's books there. I have many friends in New York. My girlfriend Connie, a nurse who works in Downtown Hospital, also lives there (in Chinatown in lower Manhattan). New York City

means so much to me. I really miss the place. So it came to me as a great shock when I saw the twin towers of World Trade Center being hit by hijacked planes and explode and subsequently collapse.

I am terribly sad and angry about the incident. The terrorists must have been insane to have committed such inhuman crimes. They will, I believe, eventually be hunted down and brought to justice, for international terrorism will not be condoned. In the meantime, American people must stay calm and firm, and be united, knowing that all sane people in the world are on their side. Justice will prevail.

My prayer will be with all of you who are in America.

Wing-Chiu Ng, Hong Kong

Max:

I found the videos to be all that I expected and plan to collect more of them. I have told others that a one hour program with Dr. Adler as a guest is of more value than a thousand hours of any other TV. (That's probably an underestimation, but you get the point.) I found the discussion on his book on God mesmerizing and the tape of him showing you how to conduct a seminar very instructional.

Thanks for making them available.

Steve Lloyd

Max,

In the light of two recent articles in the Spring/Summer issue of Philosophy Is Everybody's Business (The Invincible Ignorance of Science by Brian Pippard and

Science and Philosophy by Mortimer Adler) as well as the Appearance and Reality articles in the Great Ideas Online issues # 142 and # 143—(all of which touch upon the views that most physicists have on the nature of the reality of the microscopic world, and the conflict that exists between the philosophical view of reality and the scientific view of reality)—I want to bring to your attention and other members a new theory that has recently been proposed (The Theory of Elementary Waves in Physics Essays, March 1996) that appears to resolve all of the quantum puzzles and paradoxes that are normally associated with all of the current interpretations of quantum theory (a theory that describes the atomic and subatomic realm of reality).

I have not found any main-stream scientists that have acknowledged the existence of this new theory. Maybe they are not aware of it yet. It takes a while for a new theory to propagate throughout the scientific community and eventually the wider general public at large.

Dr. Lewis Little has discovered a fundamental error at the heart of quantum theory that was made by theorists at the beginning of the development of the theory. In his paper, Dr. Little argues cogently for his new theory based on his reassessment of all the empirical data gathered from experiments over the last several decades and his reliance on some of the basic logical and philosophical principles—such as the law of non-contradiction as a rule that governs reality as well as our thought, and the law of cause and effect that governs the physical universe from the microscopic to the macroscopic realms. Like Dr. Adler, Lewis Little appears to be a classical realist based on his emphasis on common sense, critically examined and expanded upon.

Similar to what Dr. Adler expounded in his book, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, delineating the serious errors made in modern philosophy as a result of “little errors in the beginning”, Dr. Lewis Little exposes the

serious errors and consequences that have followed in the development of quantum theory as a result of one little error made in the beginning. He clearly shows, as Dr. Adler did with respect to modern philosophical theories, how quantum theory has been unduly complicated, generating many difficulties of interpretation in the process, as a result of physicists unwittingly circumventing the result of the one small error made in the early days of quantum mechanics.

Dr. Little argues that the little error made in the beginning is simple to state and that once corrected eliminates all the non-causal, non-local, indeterministic interpretations of reality in the subatomic realm that have evolved out of the current quantum theory. In short, he has managed to reformulate a new quantum theory that eliminates all of the “paradoxes” and “weirdness” that have been associated with the current quantum theory. In my opinion, it is a brilliant, beautiful theory of the description of reality in the subatomic realm.

The new theory confirms the reality of elementary particles having a definite position and momentum. It reaffirms the law of cause and effect throughout reality from the microscopic to the macroscopic realms. There is no more need for the notion that an elementary particle is both a wave and a particle. Reality is determinate at the microscopic level as indicated by the theory, which by the way adds further support to Dr. Adler’s philosophical argument concerning the determinate character of the atomic realm. It is able to predict the experimental measurements for all phenomenon to the same degree of accuracy as the old theory, while at the same time eliminating the super-fluous mathematical equations and special calculation techniques that have previously had to be used to make accurate predictions of the experimental measurements.

But this is not all that the new theory has achieved.

Since it is a more objectively true theory than the old one, it is a much more richer theory because of the amount of potential fruit that will grow from it in deepening our understanding of the nature of reality and how the microscopic and the macroscopic realms are connected.

For example, as Dr. Little has shown, it gives us a clearer and deeper understanding of the nature of Einstein's Special and General Theories of Relativity. Empty space, which is "nothing", is no longer viewed as a "something" that is curved. It offers a viable solution to the problem of unifying the force of gravity with the other three known forces that up until now has not been achieved with the use of the old theory. It also has the potential of facilitating the development of a complete elementary particle theory that has not been achieved with the old theory.

It would appear that we finally have a coherent and consistent theory describing reality at the atomic level that is in agreement with our critically examined common sense. As Dr. Little says: "Logic works. If one encounters a contradiction, all that the contradiction proves is that one has made an error. Reality doesn't make mistakes, only physicists do."

We could be entering another revolution in physics at the beginning of the 21st century that is sure to inflate passionate arguments in the physics community, which in the end has the great potential (if it is accepted as the correct theory) to bring the scientific community back into alignment with the critically examined common sense view of reality, after so long wandering in dark and confusing mazes.

The new theory adds much support to Dr. Adler's own philosophical arguments regarding the nature of reality. As Dr. Adler so often taught concerning the unity of truth, there should be no conflict between the

truths in science and the truths arrived at in philosophy.

It may also be added that since science is so well respected by the public at large (as opposed to the philosophical enterprise) and has tended to support and spread the idea that all truth is relative and subjective, this new theory, if fully accepted in the coming decades, will help to spread and confirm Dr. Adler's philosophical arguments that he fought for all of his life: that descriptive truths are objective and universal, and that reality is completely independent of the human mind and how the mind thinks about reality.

In addition, the TEW also confirms once again the sound logical and philosophical principles that were seemingly forgotten or rejected in the 20th century, basic principles that should be in everybody's tool bag when embarking on the journey for the search of the truth about reality. When we throw those principles out the door, all kinds of nonsensical, antirealistic opinions about reality will always be the result.

Dr. Lewis Little's "Chapter 1" from his upcoming book *The Theory of Elementary Waves* gives an excellent laymen's introduction to his theory, his philosophy of science, and his discussion of how a major scientific error pyramid came about in the 20th century. I have attached "Chapter 1" (obtained from Dr. Lewis Little's website) for your perusal.

The technical paper "The Theory of Elementary Waves" published in *Physics Essays* (March 1996) presents the theory more completely, and can be accessed on Dr. Lewis Little's website:

<http://www.yankee.us.com/TEW/>

Stephen Speicher's three part article outlining the TEW for a non-technical audience, and information on the moderated TEW discussion list can be accessed on his website: <http://compbio.caltech.edu/~sjs/tew.html>

(for those physics members interested in joining the on-going debate on the TEW).

You might want to contact Dr. Lewis Little and ask him if he would like to contribute an article on his philosophy of science and/or an essay on the scientific error pyramid generated in the 20th century in a future issue of Philosophy Is Everybody's Business. I'm sure his expositions would be enlightening for all Center Members.

Ivan Bilich

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