

Our schools are not turning out young people prepared for the high office and the duties of citizenship in a democratic republic. Our political institutions cannot thrive, they may not even survive, if we do not produce a greater number of thinking citizens, from whom some statesmen of the type we had in the eighteenth century might eventually emerge. We are, indeed, a nation at risk, and nothing but radical reform of our schools can save us from impending disaster. Whatever the price we must pay in money and effort to do this, the price we will pay for not doing it will be much greater.

—Mortimer Adler



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## EDITOR'S NOTE

We close this year with a two part essay by Mortimer Adler addressing his lifelong crusade—reforming education in our schools. Although first published in 1939, in essence, it could have been written today.

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## THE CRISIS IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

Mortimer J. Adler

- Part I -

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CRISIS IS A TURNING POINT. In pneumonia, it is the point at which the patient gets either better or worse. But the present crisis in education is different. Things can't get worse. They can only get better. We have reached an extreme in the swing of the pendulum. Progressive education in all its forms was a sound and genuine reaction against the extreme aridity and empty formalism of classical education, which had reached the limit of its own degradation at the end of the last century. Unhappily, as always, the reaction went too far. The opposite extreme has given us an educational program which is equally preposterous, though for different reasons. Professor Dewey himself has of late scored the excesses of some of his would-be followers. What is obviously indicated, to avoid a false issue which offers a choice between undesirable extremes, is a moderate position, one which would agree with progressivism in correcting the abuses of the classical program but which would rectify progressivism itself by retaining whatever was essentially right in the classical approach. If one sets out to remedy abuses, one should remember that one is doing so because something good has been spoiled. The trouble with most reforms is that they start out to remove flaws and end by throwing the good away with the bad. We must eliminate the present excesses of progressive education without discarding the basic insights which motivated the movement.

There is no name readily available for designating the middle position. *Traditionalism* indicates that tradition, as well as progress and novelty, is a factor in education, but the name itself fails to

mention the latter factors. *Essentialism*—apart from its being a barbaric name—has been used for a doctrine that does not seem to me an adequate formulation of the moderate policy. For want of a name, therefore, I shall refer to the solution of our difficulties as the Hutchins program. As I understand it, this combines what was vital in classicism—formal discipline and tradition—with what is sound in progressivism—the emphasis upon the present rather than upon the past and the insistence upon activity as indispensable to the learning process. Tradition and invention are the two factors which constitute every living culture: without invention, a culture dies; without tradition, a culture cannot begin to live. So we must have these two factors, in the right proportion and order, in education if the educational process is to preserve and enhance culture. In these terms I shall defend the reforms proposed by President Hutchins. I say “defend” because they have been so widely, so violently, so blindly attacked.

Much of the attack has been name-calling and does not deserve serious attention. If the real issues were properly understood, there would be an end to all this nonsense about fascism and authoritarianism, for it would be clear that to ask for discipline in education is not to advocate Prussian drill and the goose step; to ask for the abolition of the elective system is not to desire totalitarian regimentation; to emphasize the rule of reason in human life is not to abridge our liberties. It is only license we retain without the discipline of reason. *The Hutchins program cherishes all the goods which seem to motivate its opponents*: it is forward-looking, valuing the cultural heritage the past transmits only for the sake of intelligent, i.e., prospective, living in the present; it is truly liberal, if the essence of liberalism is respect for persons made free and independent by the discipline of their rational powers; it is fundamentally democratic, for it abides by the principle of universal, popular education, though it distinguishes liberal and vocational training and realizes that even democracies need leaders.

I shall try, therefore, to locate the crucial issues and to discuss them briefly, in the hope that objections arising from misconceptions will be answered and that the real basis for demanding the reform of contemporary education will be understood. I may even hope that with such clarification, name-calling may cease, though I dare not hope that rational argument will overcome the inertia of the vested interests.

There are two basic issues which divide President Hutchins and his opponents. Both are philosophical. The first has to do with the *nature of knowledge* and the distinction between science and phi-

losophy, as different kinds of knowledge having different histories and different utilities. The second has to do with the *nature of man*, whether he is merely an animal whose biological destiny is adjustment in the struggle for existence, or, though an animal, also rational and having a uniquely human destiny of self-perfection. The educational consequences of affirming that man is a rational animal, different in kind and not merely in degree of intelligence, and that philosophy is more eminently knowledge than science, having a validity which is independent of scientific findings, and a utility superior to that of science—these determine the main points in the Hutchins program. The errors of progressive education are similarly determined by the educational consequences of the opposing denials.

It would be naive to suppose that these issues could be adequately argued in short scope. Even in a fairly long book, I have failed to argue these matters with rhetorical effectiveness. Not only does the resolution of these issues rest upon profound and extensive considerations, but the mere statement of the affirmative theses arouses so many and such violent prejudices in minds which have suffered the kind of education which their denial has sanctioned, that it is almost impossible to get a hearing, even from persons who call themselves liberal. It almost seems that being educated under the Hutchins program is a necessary prerequisite for understanding the educational philosophy on which it turns. Similarly, the educational philosophy of our teachers' colleges is received as the obvious truth by those who have been educated under its auspices. *But unless everything is just a matter of opinion, and the might of the majority makes right, these issues are genuine, and the truth lies only on one side.* Furthermore, philosophic truth is not a private intuition. It is capable of such explication and demonstration that it becomes the public property of all minds free enough from prejudice to be convinced by evidence and reasons.

Since adequate argument is not possible here, I must content myself with trying to sharpen the issues themselves. I choose to do this in a frankly polemic manner—for there is no point in concealing an adherence to the truth as one sees it—by defining the philosophical errors which underlie progressive education. I shall discuss, first, the twin myths of progress and utility which are the misleading notions of pragmatic positivism; second, the false educational psychology which denies or ignores man's rationality; and, finally, the way in which the progressive program has been determined by these errors.

1. It is no play on words to say that *the myth of universal progress, progress in all things, lies at the heart of progressive education*. This myth of progress is a nineteenth-century notion, due partly to positivism and partly to illicit extensions of the doctrine of evolution. Progress differs from change in that it is change in a definite direction and is measured by standards which evaluate stages in a process as better and worse. The growth of a plant or animal is a progress from infancy to maturity, to the point where the organism reaches its biological perfection. But everywhere in nature growth is followed by decline, maturity by senescence. The one possible exception to the rule that natural progress is not interminable is that which the panorama of evolution appears to present. But even here, taking the facts as they are usually told in the story of evolution, it is only by a questionable extrapolation of the curve that one could conclude that there is interminable progress in the development of forms of life. Yet it was just this uncritically reached conclusion which propagated the notion that the law of progress rules all things, and that as we move into the future we go endlessly from worse to better, from lower to higher.

The other source of this myth of progress was a view of cultural history, dictated by positivism. If one supposes, as the positivists do, that science is the only form of valid, general knowledge about the world, and that the technical application of science to the control of things is the only kind of utility which knowledge has, then there appears to be uninterrupted and interminable progress in human affairs as well as in nature. For does not Auguste Comte tell us that there are three stages in human history—the superstitious or religious; the speculative, conjectural, or philosophical; and the stage of positive knowledge, or the scientific—and is this not progress? In the era of science itself does not every century see the ever increasing scope of scientific knowledge and the ever enlarging domain of technology? As the years roll by, we have more and better knowledge, bigger and better inventions or utilities. The positivists are so enraptured by this picture of progress and by the dreams of the future it generates that they are somehow able to forget that in our moral and political affairs a Hitler and a Mussolini and their followers are not much of an improvement upon a Nero or a Caligula and the gangs they led. But this flaw in the picture must not be forgotten, for it is the clue to one of the two great exceptions to the law of progress in human affairs which make the notion of universal and perpetual progress a deceptive illusion.

The first exception is human nature itself. If we can discriminate between nature and nurture, we can understand the sense in which human nature is constant throughout all the variations of cul-

ture and all the transformations of history. Man is a biological species, and if a species means anything it means a constant nature which is transmitted from generation to generation. When that constancy fails, when another specific nature is generated, we have, whether by mutation or otherwise, the origin of a new species. It must follow, then, that so long as what is generated remains specifically man, human nature remains constant from generation to generation. By human nature I mean the native abilities and the organic needs which everywhere constitute the same animal, known as man.

The second exception is more difficult to discuss, for it turns on the essential difference between philosophy and science. The positivists cannot accept biological science and deny the specific constancy of man; they can remain positivists and still recognize how the unchanging character of human nature explains the failure of progress in social and political affairs. But they cannot remain positivists and agree that philosophy is knowledge which is not only nonscientific in its method but also independent in its validity of all the ever changing findings and formulations of research. Since I cannot argue the point here, I shall try only to indicate how affirming philosophy affects our view of cultural history.

As I have said elsewhere, the positivist is right in his effort to de-ontologize science, to define science as knowledge of phenomenal relationships, generalizing the correlation of diverse sensibles and being totally unconcerned with substances and causes. He is wrong only when he is a negativist, that is, when he denies philosophy, which is ontological knowledge, which is concerned with substances and causes, and which seeks to penetrate beneath the sensible to the intelligible. There is a clear distinction here between the formal objects or noetic aims of science and philosophy; and that distinction is accompanied by a distinction in method. All human knowledge arises from sense-experience, but the activity of the senses alone can account for no generalizations of the sort which distinguish both science and philosophy from history. Intelligence or reason must work reflectively, analytically, inductively over the materials of sense-experience. These two factors, sense and reason, observation and reflection, experience and thought, are common to both science and philosophy. The difference in their methods lies in the fact that science requires special experience, the data achieved by all kinds of research, investigation whether experimental or otherwise; whereas philosophy arises from reflection about the common experience of mankind, the experience which all men have everywhere and at all times as a result of the noninvestigative use of their senses, and which is always the same because the sen-

sitive powers of man are as constant as his nature and the natural world on which they operate is the same.

From this distinction in object and method arises a basic difference in the historical careers of science and philosophy. Science is progressive, and interminably so, as long as men are ingenious and industrious in their efforts at research. There are no apparent limitations to the progress in scientific knowledge except the width, breadth, and depth of the world to be investigated. But philosophy does not grow with an enlargement of experience. Its data are always the same. It grows only by a refinement in the intellectual prowess itself, by profounder insight, by better analysis. Its development is restricted by the limitations of man's intellectual powers; and if our ancestors have accumulated philosophic wisdom, we can improve little on their work. I am saying no more here than what Whitehead means when he says that the history of European philosophy is nothing but a series of footnotes to Plato. I cannot resist adding that Aristotle wrote most of the footnotes.

In short, there is perpetual progress in scientific knowledge because of the nature of science itself, the contingency of its conclusions as relative to the available data; but there is no such progress in philosophy or wisdom because its conclusions are not contingent, and the *relevant* experience is always the same. The historical movement of science is a straight line ever upward. The historical movement of philosophy is a deepening spiral, in every turn of which the same truths and the same errors reappear. Professor Gilson has magnificently demonstrated this in his William James Lectures on "The Unity of Philosophical Experience."

The essential difference between science and philosophy bears not only on the myth of progress, but also on the utility myth. The positivist, regarding only science as knowledge, thinks that the only utility knowledge can have is to give man control over the operable things of nature. But the things which we can control are utilities only in the sense of means. None of them is an end in itself. Clearly the difference between intelligent and unintelligent operation lies in referring means to ends. Furthermore, everyone can see that science is the kind of knowledge which can be used for evil purposes as well as good, according as the means it provides us with are ordered to the right or the wrong ends. But what determines the ordering of means to ends, and what provides the criteria for judging ends as good and bad? Either this is mere opinion, and again might makes right, or it is knowledge. But it is clearly not scientific knowledge, for otherwise science could protect itself and all mankind from the misuses to which it is so readily put. It is phi-

losophical knowledge, which in the practical order is called morals and politics, that must direct us in intelligent operation toward the right ends. The utility of philosophy is thus superior to that of science, and what is even more obvious, science without moral wisdom—a command of utilities without right direction—is a dangerous thing. The more science we have, the more we are in need of wisdom to prevent its misuse. *The imminent tragedy of the contemporary world is written in the fact that positivistic modern culture has magnified science and almost completely emancipated itself from wisdom.*

One further point must be added. Philosophy's independence of science holds in the practical as well as in the theoretical sphere. We have not progressed in moral wisdom. All the advances in science have not changed the moral and political problems which men face, except to make them more difficult because men have more implements at hand to gain their ends.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### HELP!

Dear Max,

I have been reading some of Adler's earlier works such as:

*What Man Has Made of Man*

*Problems for Thomists*

The Demonstration of God's Existence from "The Thomist" V,  
(January, 1943) 188-218

Rough Draft of a Second Article on the Demonstration of God's  
Existence

These were written before Adler began writing for most people instead of academics. In most of these works he uses some Latin and understanding the Latin is important to understanding the works. I have slowly been building an **Adler Latin Dictionary**. Is there someone among the Center's membership that could help me correct and complete my dictionary?

I have my Adler dictionary as an Access database, an Excel spreadsheet, and a Word document. I will be happy to share this with members who request it by email. Once I have found help in correcting and completing it, I will e-mail it to all those who have requested it.



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