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Adler's *The Idea of Freedom*

The establishment of the Institute for Philosophical Research in San Francisco in 1952 represented for Mortimer J. Adler the achievement of a dream that went back to his Columbia University days in the late 1920s. As he has told the story so well in his *Philosopher at Large, An Intellectual Autobiography*, it was Professor John Erskine's course in the classics of Western civilization that set him in the direction of studying the Great Ideas as expressed in the Great Books. Also, as a young student of philosophy and graduate instructor in psychology, Adler's natural temperament turned him toward the ideal of a *Summa Dialectica*, a treatise matching for the twentieth century the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas in the thirteenth century. But where Saint Thomas tried to give answers, Adler's ideal was a summa that "would rigorously abstain from making comparable judgments, contenting itself with constructing a vast but inherently uncompleteable map of the universe of discourse in which theories (which may or may not be true) are placed in revealing logical relationships to one another" (PL 92).

A further step towards what was to become the *The Idea of Freedom* occurred in the late 1940s when Adler undertook the production of the *Synopticicon*, the two-volume study of the Great Ideas that served as an analysis of the key concepts considered by the authors of *The Great Books of the Western World*. This project, some six years in the doing, involved the organization of team research in the humanities. While team research (that is, a number of experts working together to resolve a problem or construct a study) was sometimes done in the natural sciences (for example, the Manhattan Project to develop our atomic bomb), it was unusual in the realm of literature or the history of ideas. True, the original French Encyclopedists, or the organizers of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, were, in a sense, precursors of what Adler and his staff at Chicago did in the 1946-52 period, but what the Adler associates accomplished in researching the 102 great ideas was unmatched in American letters. It entailed great skills of organization and classification, the very qualities in which Adler excelled;

in addition, the hard work of writing the introductory essays themselves to present the thoughts of the authors in an unbiased way developed Adler's dialectical skills.

Writing 102 essays was like writing 102 books. Each had to be adapted to the unique idea it dealt with. Each was a fresh start. In addition, I thought it imperative that ideas be written with dialectical objectivity—that they should be point-of-viewless while suggesting the diverse points of view in the great books about a given idea. It was not until I reached the ideas which began with L that I finally achieved the requisite style for writing these introductory essays, a style that involved generous quotations from the great books, so that the conflicting opinions of the authors could be expressed in their own words (PL 250–51).

This laborious exercise was to reap dividends later, in the dialectical construction of the arguments over the issues about the different kinds of freedom in the second volume of *The Idea of Freedom*. By this time, Adler had mastered the technique of placing the words of the philosophers together in such a way that there was created the give and take of a conversation on some particular point of dispute.

Thus, as Adler approached his fiftieth birthday, changes were in the offing. Robert Hutchins, with whom Adler had worked for some twenty-five years in partnership promoting the use of the discussion of great books in adult seminars, and who had headed the enterprise of producing *The Great Books of the Western World* set while Adler was in charge of the editorial tasks, had left the University of Chicago to become vice-president of the Ford Foundation. And it was with the support of the Ford Foundation that Adler was able to move closer to his objective of a *Summa Dialectica* through the creation of the Institute for Philosophical Research in San Francisco. It was here that the research published in the two volumes of *The Idea of Freedom* took place.

The original home of the Institute in San Francisco was a large mansion on Jackson Street in the Pacific Heights area. The building had been formerly the German Consulate and its many rooms served as offices and studies for the almost twenty Research Fellows who made up Adler's research team. Later, in an economy move, the building was sold to the California Historical Association and the Institute moved a block away to the Stern mansion, an equally stately home built by one of San Francisco's pioneer families.

The Adler group at first undertook to study the idea of man, but the many issues and complications soon made it evident that they should narrow their focus. Hence, they came to concentrate on the idea of freedom. In those first months, a great deal was accomplished, as the team studied basically the affirmation and denial of freedom of choice. By March of

1953, an impressive document was prepared for a conference at Princeton University in which the analysis of freedom was organized around the three letters: D-A-M; the D philosophers, such as Hobbes and Hume, denied free choice; the A philosophers, such as Aquinas and Descartes, affirmed it; and the M philosophers, mainly the evolutionary minded process thinkers such as Bergson, Tillich, Whitehead, and Weiss, affirmed it for the whole range of nature in some way. It was this version that was presented to representatives of local philosophy departments in 1953, and it was here that I had my first encounter with the work of the Institute on Freedom.

As Adler explained in his autobiography, he and Hutchins were hoping at this time to use the work of the Institute to promote the objective of an international academy of intellectuals, a sort of summit of great minds. The work of the Institute was to be preliminary—a kind of clearing of the way for later discussion and perhaps resolution. The technique to be used was that of the dialectical construction. Adler described early in Volume One the general character of the Institute's approach. Here are the five principles that guided the work as he listed them (*IF*, I, xix–xxi).

- It is a non-historical study of ideas.
- It is a non-philosophical approach to philosophical ideas.
- It strives to achieve a non-partisan treatment of philosophical positions or views.
- It tries to approximate comprehensiveness in scope.
- It limits itself to what can be found in the written record of philosophical thought, but it goes beyond what can be explicitly found there by trying to explicate what is there implied or only implicit. (And, as Adler adds, "In this respect the Institute's work is not mere reporting, but interpretive and constructive.")

Thus, a research fellow served Adler as a reader who specialized in certain authors, such as Hume, or a particular tradition, such as the Aristotelian tradition. As the research fellow would read, for example, Maritain's *Freedom in the Modern World*, he would note significant passages that were relevant to the issues of the debate between determinists and the defenders of free choice. These passages would be photocopied and returned to the researcher, who would underline the quotable parts and indicate on the wide margins why he believed the section was valuable. These photocopies would then go to Adler, who would arrange them in multiple files. And when Adler came to write that section he would so arrange the quotations that he would be "creating" a conversation transcending the historical context of the original passage, but being true

and accurate to the original author's intent and meaning. And so a challenge to freedom of self-determination by Hobbes might be countered by a reply from Aquinas wherein Saint Thomas, analyzing the inter-causality of the intellect and will in the act of choosing, might seem to have anticipated the difficulty raised by Hobbes. This "dialectical reconstruction" was entirely the work of Adler; the associates served as his eyes, as it were, to scan the whole range of philosophical literature from the ancients to our contemporaries, for we made the attempt to study the recent periodical literature for articles that would be relevant to our study. Late in the afternoon, whatever Adler had written that day would be circulated to the research staff for their criticism and comments. It was a work of collaborative research, but Mortimer J. Adler was the sole author.

The expression "non-philosophical approach to philosophical ideas" meant that the Institute's objective was to clarify the meanings of freedom and the controversies that had developed about them, not to determine which were true and which were false. The work was regarded as a contribution to clarifying the debate, for, as it soon came to be noted, rarely did one philosopher meet the challenge of his predecessors or contemporaries. More often, a philosopher "created" the opponent he then proceeded to demolish. Thus, a determinist would insist that free choice had to be an "uncaused event" or a "chance event," and since there are no such things, there is no freedom of choice, and so on. In a paper before the American Catholic Philosophical Association in 1956,¹ Adler noted how rarely philosophers meet each other head-on in genuine disagreements; there are a few, but most of the time they hardly seem to be talking to each other. One objective, perhaps the principal objective of the Institute's work, was to prepare the way for later generations to undertake such an authentic debate.

The five categories of freedom are well known, but deserve to be reviewed again.

The first meaning of freedom recognized was named "The Circumstantial Freedom of Self-Realization"; this freedom is a freedom any being has that is not tied down or in some way restricted in its movements. (Note, it is not confined to human beings, as are the others.) Popularly, it is the freedom to do as one pleases, unhampered by one's surroundings. Obviously, a dog on a leash, or a bird in a cage, or a convicted criminal confined to a prison would lack the freedom of self-realization, abbreviated to

¹Mortimer J. Adler, "Controversy in the Life and Teaching of Philosophy," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, XXX (1956): 3-22.

SR freedom in the literature. Any number of authors, ranging from Hobbes to Nowell-Smith, affirm this as the only meaning of freedom they recognize. (Note, this group often coincides with the determinists who deny freedom of choice.)

The second category of Freedom was called "The Acquired Freedom of Self-Perfection." This understanding of freedom has a long history, ranging from Plato to Gabriel Marcel; it was featured by the Stoics, such as Epictetus and Seneca, and generally affirmed by the great teachers of the Christian tradition, such as Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Barth, and Tillich. Not everyone enjoys this freedom, for it is the freedom of the virtuous person, whose higher self dominates his passions or lower self; it is acquired by the hard work of developing good habits, and one of the controversies of the second volume relating to this freedom was whether or not it could be acquired independently of the help of divine grace.

When most people think of the question whether or not they are free, they are raising the third category, which was called "The Natural Freedom of Self-Determination." This is basically the ability, everything about you being the same, to have made a different choice; it is the power to do otherwise. It is called freedom of choice,² *liberum arbitrium*, since, at the crucial moment of choosing, a person makes a judgment insofar as his will as an efficient cause either determines itself to a particular good or directs the intellect as formal/final cause to continue deliberating, examining other particular goods as alternatives. It is this freedom that strikes determinists as impossible, for it seems to involve an uncaused event, the self-movement of the will on the created plane for which Adler coined the insightful phrase, *causal initiative*: the ability to be a cause without having been an effect. It was this notion that seemed such a scandal to the determinists, who judged it contradicted the premise that any state of affairs was the effect of the immediately preceding state of affairs, and from one set of causes, one and only one effect can follow.

The fourth freedom, Political Liberty, is simply a variation of self-realization; however, Adler and his associates, noting that it had received such attention in political literature since the end of the Middle Ages, judged it should be recognized with a category of its own. Political writings speak of the full freedom of citizenship, the right to vote, to be a can-

²It is called *free choice*, rather than *free will* since, in the Scholastic tradition, the will is determined to seek Absolute Goodness, or the Good as such.

didate or to rally support for the candidate of one's choice, as well as the freedom Americans associate with their First Amendment.

The final freedom, "Collective Freedom," is the most recent to appear in the literature, dating back only to the middle of the last century. This is freedom promoted by such philosophers of history as Auguste Comte, Mikhail Bakunin, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, who argued mankind is, in a way, enslaved or at least not yet emancipated. Men in general are leading lives burdened by the forces of nature or oppressed by the consequences of the private ownership of the means of production. Some time in the future, when living men gain control of their lives, through science or a political revolution, they will come into their own and enjoy a collective freedom. This is the time hailed in Marxist rhetoric when political oppression will cease and the state will wither away. Interestingly, these authors identified with collective freedom are not classed as affirming the other categories of freedom that were distinguished. Thus, there is no philosopher the Adler associates studied who affirmed all five categories of freedom. However, a small number are listed as affirming the first four: SR, SP, SD, and Political Liberty. These philosophers are Aquinas, Locke, Maritain, Montesquieu, and Yves R. Simon.

Again, it is of special interest to the American Maritain Association members to note that three of the five are closely allied to each other and to us. Jacques Maritain was a consultant to the Institute and, while not directly active in the work, was kept in touch with the work in progress. Some years earlier, at a banquet in New York heralding the publication of *The Great Books of the Western World* with its *Syntopicon*, Maritain had supported the project of a *Summa Dialectica* and praised Adler's work. Maritain said:

At the core of the work undertaken in publishing *Great Books of the Western World*, there is abiding faith in the dignity of the human mind and the virtue of knowledge. Such a work is inspired by what might be called humanist generosity (PL 257).

Nor was Yves R. Simon's work neglected. His various writings relating to freedom were regularly quoted, especially the *Traité du libre arbitre* and *The Community of the Free*. In fact, it was out of this work of the Institute that Adler's assistant—Peter Wolff—and I worked together to prepare for publication the translation Simon had made of his own work, but had left unfinished with his untimely death in 1961.

In concluding volume one of *The Idea of Freedom*, Adler proposed a general understanding of freedom that sought to clarify the common denominator of the different meanings. He took a number of pages to develop his analysis, which reads:

A man is free who has in himself the ability or power whereby he can make what he does his own action and what he achieves his own property (*IF*, I, 614).

While distinguishing the different meanings of freedom was a formidable task for Adler and his associates, the publication in 1958 of Volume One was in a way only the start of the dialectical preparation for the debate over freedom. Each meaning had not only supporters and opponents; even those who agreed on a type of freedom disagreed in turn over a number of issues within a certain category. There is not time to go into these issues here, but, in *The Great Ideas Today*, volumes for 1972 and 1973, Charles Van Doren has a long, masterly essay that distills the essence of this work. Van Doren's analysis is not a mere digest or abridgement of the Adler volumes but a re-statement that represents the study according to his own structure.³

The reception of the two volumes was disappointing. That should be qualified. Those who read the volumes were practically unanimous in their praise. A reviewer such as James Collins could write of the second volume:

Knowing the existence of this massive report on the status of the question of freedom we would be well advised to consult it before launching out on the next phase of thought on what makes men free, if they are free.⁴

But there was a significant gap between those assigned to read the book as reviewers for different journals and the general audience of those teaching philosophy in the different departments of our colleges and universities. My impression is that the book did not come into their hands or, if it did, it was too much for them to sit down and read. I cannot document this guess, but I can give a couple of further instances that support my conjecture.

In the mid 1960s, two important encyclopedias in English were in production: *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* and *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The article on "freedom" in the latter by Professor H. Partridge mentions the Adler set in its bibliography, but the content of the article does not reflect any use of the Adler categories. The article on "determinism" in the same set by Richard Taylor gives a classic account of the

³Charles Van Doren, "The Idea of Freedom—Part One" in *The Great Ideas Today*, 1972; Part Two, *The Great Ideas Today*, 1973.

⁴James Collins, *America*, Jan. 13, 1962.

variations of determinism, but, again, reflects no acquaintance with the Adler analysis nor any mention of the work in his bibliography. Of two articles by Paul Nolan in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* relating to free choice and psychological determinism, one mentions Adler in its bibliography while the other does not, but in neither article was use made of the substance of the Adler study (although interestingly, reference was made to the essay on the idea of "liberty" in the *Syntopicon*). Jacques de Finance de Clairbois, a professor at the Gregorian University, wrote the "freedom" article and he mentioned both the *Syntopicon* and *The Idea of Freedom* in his bibliography. Granted, this sampling of encyclopedias is small, but, to repeat, they were both published in 1967 and so it is fair to assume the articles had been assigned and were being written a few years after the Adler Volumes appeared. Even stranger to me was the fifteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, whose editor was Mortimer J. Adler. Checking the articles on "free will" and "determinism" in the *Micropaedia*, only a couple of paragraphs were given on each topic and there was no bibliography.

Vernon J. Bourke's *Will in Western Thought; An Historico-Critical Survey*⁵ did better by Adler, since he refers to Adler's analysis a number of times and in a footnote presents a summary of the five distinct meanings. Bourke's book developed out of a seminar he conducted at Saint Louis University in the early 1960s. In similar fashion, Professors Robert E. Dewey and James A. Gould, in their textbook on *Freedom: Its History, Nature, and Varieties*,⁶ included a selection of some eight pages summarizing the varieties of freedom. This was not entirely surprising, since Robert Dewey was one of the original research fellows recruited to work at the Institute when it began in 1952. But this analysis is all too spotty, being limited to a few books that happen to have been on the shelves of my office when I came to sum up.

More important than this is to reflect on *The Idea of Freedom* as a stage or marker in Adler's intellectual career.

It is now some thirty years beyond the publication of Volume One, and just short of thirty years since the production of Volume Two, which constructed the controversies about the different freedoms. Adler was in his late fifties when this was done, at a time when most intellectuals are at the

⁵Vernon J. Bourke, *Will in Western Thought; An Historico-Critical Survey* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964).

⁶Robert E. Dewey and James A. Gould, *Freedom: Its History, Nature, and Varieties* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

peak of their productive years. These later chapters took enormous concentration and energy as he created the exchanges over causal initiative, predictability, responsibility, and the theological issues. As we associates would leave the Institute at five p.m., we would hear the click clack of the typewriter as Mortimer worked on, and in the morning he would be in before others as if he had been working all night.

However, this was only a stage in a most productive and still productive career. As the work on *Freedom* came to a close, the dialectical examination of the meaning of other ideas was under way. After the move was made for Adler to return to Chicago, volumes studying other ideas came out on love, justice, progress, written by Adler associates with his guidance and support.

Then, in his own mid-sixties, when other academics are moving towards retirement, Adler launched into a new phase of amazing creativity.⁷ Year by year one important book followed another: *The Conditions of Philosophy* (1965); *The Difference of Man and the Difference it Makes* (1967); *The Time of Our Lives* (1970); *The Common Sense of Politics* (1971); *Some Questions about Language* (1976); *How to Think about God* (1980); *Six Great Ideas* (1981); *The Angels and Us* (1982); *How to Speak, How to Listen* (1983); *Aristotle for Everybody* (1983); *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (1985); *We Hold These Truths* (1987), and, along with these, the extraordinarily interesting autobiography, *Philosopher at Large* (1977). Further, all along went the editorial work on the fifteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the annual yearbooks to the Great Books set, *The Great Ideas Today*, and now, in the 1980s, the enormous work devoted to the reform of our education system with the series of writings relating to *The Paedeia Proposal*.

Further, as Adler indicated in talk last evening, still forthcoming are his works on *Reforming Education* and *Intellect: Mind over Matter*, in about 1990. What a truly remarkable career as a philosopher and teacher!

At this meeting devoted to the associates of Jacques Maritain, I offer this paper on *The Idea of Freedom* in recollection of my association with Adler some thirty years ago.

⁷In the discussion following the paper, Adler volunteered that it was Jacques Maritain who insisted at this time that he had devoted enough effort to the dialectical process, and that it was now time to write as a philosopher presenting his own position.