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Mr. Adler and Matthew Arnold

I hope it will not seem frivolous if, in casting about for some way to respond to the invitation of the American Maritain Association on this occasion, I venture to say something about the connection, as it seems to me to be, or at least the parallel, between Mr. Adler and Matthew Arnold. It should at any rate not seem far-fetched. Nothing is better known about Arnold than his decision, made after the publication of two books of poems, to devote himself thereafter to criticism, on the ground that poetry could not again be the great thing it had been until criticism had provided it with a "current of fresh and new ideas" on which to draw. Nothing has been more important in Mr. Adler's intellectual development than his belief, arrived at early on from his reading of Lovejoy and Husserl, that philosophy cannot again be the great thing it has been until someone has clarified the ideas on which it can stake its claims—an undertaking he calls dialectical, and to which he has devoted the greater part of his career. And this is but the most obvious point of comparison between two men who in other ways also have made it their business to describe "things as they really are," in Arnold's famous phrase, correcting what they conceived to be errors, challenging the assumptions of modernity as they went along, and signing even with the same initials.

Of course it does not prove, just because propaedeutic efforts—the one to poetry, the other to philosophy—were made in each case, that there is any similarity to the efforts as such. They may have been undertakings quite different in substance—as different, perhaps, as the difference between poetry and philosophy—and, if so, we would not expect to learn anything we do not already know from measuring them against one another. But in fact it is rather less simple than that. For one of the subjects to which both Arnold's criticism and Mr. Adler's dialectic are directed is poetry itself, in which Mr. Adler has taken what may be called a philosophical interest, and on which he and Arnold have reached different conclusions. They have reached different conclusions as well about a second subject, which is education, and which belongs to neither of them

entirely. Thus the difference between them seems to be something more than the ancient quarrel, as Plato said it was, between poetry and philosophy. It is a difference rather in the assumptions with which the two men began, and in the larger intention of their lives, notwithstanding that both of them have in a sense had the same mission, or thought so.

How Arnold began, or at least came to his decision, is well known. As stated in the Preface to the reissue of his poems (1853), he had come to think that the longest one of these was lacking in the qualities a poem should have, which were such, he said, as would constitute a "criticism of life." The poem in question, "Empedocles on Etna," in his judgment had failed of that purpose, and so he had not reprinted it. This failure he thought not personal to himself, however, but a consequence rather of the modern spirit, as he believed it was, in which he perceived a "bewildering confusion" that made it incapable of accomplishing what he thought poetry should accomplish, which was to render what is "great and passionate."

What he meant by this he explained in "The Modern Element in Literature," his inaugural lecture as the Professor of Poetry at Oxford. There, he said that the modern defect in poetry was a failure of what he called ideas, without which "facts" could not be regarded in the critical spirit that was required if a literature "adequate" to them were to develop. What he thought adequate to the ideas of its time was the literature of ancient Greece. What he thought inadequate was, for example, the poetry of his own age—the poetry of Byron and Shelley and "even Wordsworth"—that, greatly felt as it was, "did not know enough," by which he meant that those poets did not know "the best and most permanent ideas" by which men live, and for the reason they had not read enough in the writers who understood such ideas.

In "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," having gone on to define criticism as "a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world," Arnold explained why this now needed to be done, and why he had decided to be one of those who tried to do it. The critical power, he said, was not the same as the creative power, which he conceded was the greater thing. Yet the lesser thing in this case was prior, he said, to the greater. As he put it, the critical power "tends . . . to make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can ultimately avail itself . . . to establish an order of ideas if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces; to make the best ideas prevail." Criticism could supply that order, he thought, and must in times like those in which he found himself—times unlike the epoch of Aeschylus and Sophocles, when ideas had been made easily available. "In an epoch like that is, no doubt, the true life of literature," he said of this; "there is the

promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon"; to which he added, with the Virgilian melancholy he recognized in himself and sought earnestly to escape, that it was a promised land which he and his contemporaries would not enter; that they must die in the wilderness, content with having desired to enter that land, "to have saluted it from afar."

We cannot help being reminded, I think, reading these familiar essays, of the dialectical function that Mr. Adler has undertaken to perform over the course of his long career in the service not of poetry but of philosophy. Arnold's sense of the historical moment is more acute than that of Mr. Adler, who does not have his quasi-religious fervor; and Arnold's use of terms, as with the word "ideas," is doubtless very imprecise as compared with what Mr. Adler would require. But the conviction in both is that a lack of power in their respective disciplines has developed, and that it cannot be overcome without a preparatory effort on someone's part. Absent this, both disciplines are seen as ineffectual—which is to say, as incapable of realizing their proper ends.

Mr. Adler's interest in dialectic shows up very early, in the book he published with that title—a book that should have been his dissertation—when he was only twenty-five. Here already, having in mind what Scott Buchanan had called "the great conversation" in the Western tradition of thought, Mr. Adler conceived the grand outline of a *Summa Dialectica* that would transcend both doctrine and dogma in organizing the field of philosophical discourse. He was diverted for a time from this ambitious scheme by other projects, such as the work on evidence he wrote with Jerome Michael and his remove from Columbia to the University of Chicago, where he was caught up in the battle of what he hoped would be an academic revolution. But the project he envisioned was soon enough begun, after a fashion, and on a smaller scale. Indeed, it is fair to say that a dialectical purpose has never been far from his thought, having appeared explicitly or implicitly in nearly every book that he has written and every sizable project—such as the *Syntopicon* to *Great Books of the Western World* and the schematically reformed *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—he has directed.

A couple of illustrations only will suffice for this discussion. Thus, in *A Dialectic of Morals* (1941), Mr. Adler defined what he called "the dialectical task" as being one that did for the modern age what the Greeks had done for themselves. What the Greeks had done for themselves was to sift through the opinions of men with the aim of determining what knowledge they could be said to contain. This, Mr. Adler said, was and is the necessary condition—in the sense of providing the necessary material—for philosophy to maintain that the one position or another, on any subject, is true. The focus was on morals, and the cultural moment was one, Mr. Adler felt, in which skepticism denied all truth to moral propositions, be-

cause it denied any possibility of what it thought of as objective knowledge to those propositions. In this predicament the only recourse for the philosopher was, Mr. Adler said, to do what philosophy had done when it was dialectical—that is, at the time of Plato and Aristotle—and prepare the ground by challenging opinion once again to discover what it might be said to know. He recognized the social implications of this venture. “I have chosen the topic of moral knowledge—the objectivity and universality of moral standards—because it is so relevant to this critical moment in our culture,” he said:

It will not be necessary to engage in distinct dialectical enterprises for the *separate fields of ethics and politics*. If skepticism about moral truths can be overcome at all, if any judgments about good and bad can be shown to have the status of knowledge, then a foothold is won for political as well as moral standards.

Without such a foothold, he maintained, no philosopher who argued for this position or that as true in ethics would be taken seriously. To which he added: “I am assuming, of course, that a philosopher who is alive today should try to talk to his contemporaries, and by this I mean an audience much wider than the inner circle of his like-minded fellows in the philosophical enterprise.” We all know, I think, how seriously Mr. Adler has come to take that obligation.

Later, when he had set up the Institute for Philosophical Research and commenced the project we now know of as *The Idea of Freedom* (1958–61), he described this task in still more general terms—or perhaps I should say, he advance still farther toward the *Summa Dialectica* he had once imagined. The two large volumes devoted to Freedom were a very ambitious undertaking—the work of many hands and the distillation of much study—in which every serious treatment of the subject was considered. Yet the limits of even so vast an effort were acknowledged in the report of its success. “The dialectician’s contribution to the pursuit of philosophical truth,” Mr. Adler wrote,

lies solely in the clarification of a field of thought for the sake of progress in that field. The progress itself must be made by the philosopher, not merely by the creative effort which adds new theories or insights but also by the equally creative efforts to supply the arguments and counter-arguments that are called for by the issues which exist and either have not been disputed at all or have been inadequately debated.

And, despite this claim for creativity in dialectic, which Arnold never made for criticism, Mr. Adler subsequently, recalling the very words here quoted, characterized what the Institute had done (by that time, with Love, Progress, Happiness, and Justice, in addition to Freedom) as

“second-order work in philosophy . . . of the dialectical type represented by the Institute’s efforts to clarify philosophical opinion. . . .” At the same time, he expressed the hope that, if the work of the Institute is ever carried out, “there need be no division of labor between the dialectician working at second-order tasks and philosophers trying to answer first-order questions”; that philosophy “might finally become the collective and cooperative pursuit that it should be.” One may recall here Arnold’s praise of Goethe as one who, more than any other modern, combined the virtues of the poet and the critic.

The issue between Arnold and Mr. Adler in the matter of art or at least poetry, to which I have referred, is a real one, notwithstanding this similarity in their aims—and its reality is a function, as I have suggested, not so much of the real difference between poetry and philosophy (assuming one knows what the real difference is) as of what seems a different bent of mind in each case. We note the tone of high moral seriousness in Arnold, the “spiritual perfection” he expected not only of criticism but, ultimately, of poetry itself. It is true, the way to this perfection seems in his view to have been psychological, or perhaps the perfection itself was that, at least to start with. His notion, at the time of his preface to *Poems*, was that poetry should have a therapeutic effect, raising the spirit of the reader about the tendency to inertia and mental distress that the age seemed to him to foster. He wanted, as Lionel Trilling has written, “the stability or poise of the faculties which follows upon the *catharsis* Aristotle had described, the quieting of the mind in equilibrium, not the bald presentation of confusion itself.” But, for all the Aristotle there is in this—and there is certainly some—Arnold clearly has in mind the reader, not the thing read, as the end, and the poem itself as a means. “His theory of poetry,” Trilling acknowledged, “is a theory for mental health.” Or in Mr. Adler’s terms, what for Aristotle is merely a property of poetry—its moral and psychological effect upon the audience—is for Arnold the essence of the thing. He is thus at bottom a Platonist, not an Aristotelian, in the way he thinks about poetry, like his spiritual descendant in criticism, T.S. Eliot. Of course we find Mr. Adler objecting to any such notion—that is, to the idea that there is a correlation between the goodness of the work of art and the goodness of the man to whom it is directed, on whom it is conceived to have a salutary or an injurious effect. Not “the good man in every sense,” but only the man who is “good intellectually, whose aesthetic sensibility is technically trained,” is Aristotle’s concern in the *Poetics*, Mr. Adler writes—and while I am not sure how complete the correlation between art and virtue really is for Arnold, it is sufficient, I think, to be defining.

The same can be said with respect to education as between Arnold, the reluctant inspector of schools, and Mr. Adler, the critic of them and, in

recent years, the proponent of a scheme for their reform. Arnold's belief that the State was the medium through which education could come, and must, is once again Platonic, while it is not surprising to find Mr. Adler recalling that in the *Laws* Plato advocates a Minister of Education who would also be a censor—something Arnold would perhaps not have opposed, were the censor's efforts aimed in the right direction. The "culture" of which he spoke in *Culture and Anarchy* had as its object "to make reason and the Will of God prevail," and Arnold does not let us doubt the moral and ultimately even the religious sense of this—a sense, to be sure, that was not explicitly doctrinal, but which as we consider it has very much the flavor of Christian piety.

We would not expect such a man to trust, as Mr. Adler does trust, the myriad outcomes of classes in locally regulated schools to bring about a social change that is, all the same, hardly less complete, as envisioned, than what Arnold called for. Mr. Adler seems to believe in the capacity of all human beings everywhere to teach themselves what they need to know. Perhaps he would allow that Arnold was right, as far as then could be seen, to lack faith in what struck him as a rabble in the populace, for, when he wrote, the democratic age had hardly begun in the Western world. But it is an interesting contrast, all the same, this trust of Mr. Adler's as compared with the whip that Arnold thought would be needed before "reason and the Will of God" prevailed—interesting because Mr. Adler is so much more severe as a critic than Arnold was, even when taking on poor Bishop Colenso, or the otherwise forgotten Francis Newman, and because severity and trust do not seem temperamentally to go together. It is more than interesting, it is strange to find such trust in reason on the part of a man who finds so little of it going on about him—almost as strange as that a man who believes so strongly in good will, as Arnold did, should have said it must be coerced. But these are perhaps only minor paradoxes in the different philosophical positions, as I think they are, that have been noted here.