

Ten Philosophical Mistakes?

By John Smithin

Ten Philosophical Mistakes: Basic Errors in Modern Thought – How They Came About, Their Consequences, and How to Avoid Them is the title of a book published 35 years ago by Mortimer J. Adler. Adler (1902–2001) was a well-known philosopher, educator, and popular author. He was an editor of the series *Great Books of the Western World* by *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and one of founders of the *Institute for Philosophical Research*. As these activities indicate, he (Adler) was not at all in sympathy with the mainstream cultural and philosophical trends of his day. He thought that the ‘mistakes’, as he saw them, had had serious negative consequences for, as he put it, ‘our understanding of our lives, our institutions, and our experience’. To me, that statement has a particular resonance at the present time.

I have put a question mark after the word ‘mistakes’ in the title because not everyone will agree that they *are* mistakes. Nonetheless, whether we accept Alder’s arguments or not, I still think that it will be a very useful exercise for our *Aurora Philosophy Club* to discuss each one of them, in turn, and hopefully in some depth. Going through the list, they seem to cover most of topics and debates that recur again and again in philosophy. They certainly seem to touch many of the bases that we have come back to, time after time, in our *APC* discussions.

The term ‘modern’, as in Alder’s notion of ‘modern thought’, has a specialized meaning in philosophy. It does not just mean recent, or up-to-date. Much of recent thought is not ‘modern’ in the philosophical sense at all, it might more correctly be described as ‘post-modern’. The time span is from the early 17th century (Descartes), through the ‘Rationalists and Empiricists’ that Henry discussed last time, then on to Kant and the German idealists of the 19th century, and into the early 20th century. In short, the term modern, in philosophy, is used simply by way of contrast with the ancient or classical philosophy of the Greeks and also with the medieval philosophy of the scholastics. Adler thought that this modern philosophy is riddled with mistakes, and that it would be better for us to return to the wisdom of their predecessors, in particular Aristotle and Aquinas.

Alder admitted that his own title was somewhat misleading. In reality, there are many more than just ten philosophical mistakes. A more exact title would have been *Ten Subjects About Which Philosophical Mistakes Have Made*. Be that as it may, for our purposes a simple list of the ten subjects will suffice. These are;

Consciousness and its Objects
The Intellect and the Senses
Words and Meanings
Knowledge and Opinion

Moral Values
Happiness and Contentment
Freedom of Choice
Human Nature
Human Society
Human Existence

So, this a very wide range of topics. and I hope that we will be able to discuss and debate some or all of these subjects at length during APC meetings in the 2020/21 season, and beyond. My idea is that if any of us has a particular interest in any of these, we could take it upon ourselves to lead a discussion (perhaps by taking a look at Adler's chapter first, and going from there).

To give some idea of the sorts of issues that may arise, briefly consider the first topic *Consciousness and its Objects*. The basic issue, as Adler sees it, is the question of what it is that we are conscious of, when we are indeed conscious. The mistake, he thinks, is that many people, including modern philosophers, tend to suppose that what they are directly conscious of, and all they are directly conscious of, is the content of their own minds. This is true in some instances, when we directly feel pleasure or pain, or strains and aches in our bodies. (It applies to a class of 'thoughts' that we might call *sensations*. However, it does not apply to those contents of the mind that we might more properly call *ideas*, such as memories, perceptions, concepts, *etc.* In the case of ideas, Adler's view is that always the idea's object of which we are directly conscious not the idea itself. The ideas are not 'that which we apprehend', but 'the means by which' we apprehend the object. To take the opposite view 'locks up' the separate individuals in their own subjective headspace, and leads to all of the pseudo-problems and paradoxes of modern philosophy, such as the need to 'prove' the existence of an external reality, the critique of knowledge, skepticism, solipsism, idealism, and so on.

Adler identifies John Locke, in the 17th century, as the first to have made the crucial mistake, by wrongly using the term 'idea' to stand for all the contents of the mind, including sensations. By the same token, Locke also seemed to use the word 'thinking' as a blanket term to cover all the activities of the mind, without exception. Locke was therefore unable to meaningfully distinguish the 'intellect' and the 'senses', which brings us to Adler's second topic. And, all of the remaining subjects are, in one way or another, related to this fundamental error in the beginning. Adler argues that the original mistake by Locke was never picked up. It was common to all of the British empiricists including Hume, and then carried on uncorrected in Kant, Hegel, and onwards. Adler's remedy, as I say, would be to go back to the drawing board to recover the insights possessed by (some of) the ancients and scholastics, notably Aristotle and Aquinas. But *not* Plato, Plotinus, or Augustine.