

PART V

ACPA

Award of the Aquinas Medal to Mortimer J. Adler

by Jean T. Oesterle

I am honored to have been chosen as the representative of the American Catholic Philosophical Association to present to Mortimer Jerome Adler the Aquinas medal.

For me, it is a very personal pleasure and honor to make this presentation. I first met Dr. Adler almost forty years ago and it was through his encouragement and instrumentality that I was enabled to attend Manhattanville College. There, the incoming president of this Association, Sister Mary Clark, was a fellow-student in my first, and many later, philosophy courses. I am indebted to both with respect to my education.

It was the reading of John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* which set Dr. Adler upon the path of his philosophical career. He was at that time fifteen years old and working on the *New York Sun*, having been dismissed from high school through a misunderstanding. What struck Mortimer Adler was the fact that Mill, at the age of five, had begun reading—in Greek—the Platonic Dialogues and had understood the difference between the content of the dialogues and the discipline involved in their method. Immediately purchasing a set of the *Dialogues*, Dr. Adler, too, became fascinated by the Socratic search for truth and the method of that search.

He soon put his new knowledge to use, both in his reading and with others and, having acquired by his own effort the necessary credits, entered Columbia University at the sophomore level. Upon completion of his studies, though denied a B.A. degree for failure to comply with the physical education requirement, he enrolled in the graduate school and received his Ph.D. from Columbia in 1928. Undoubtedly this personal experience contributed, in part, to his later criticism of the educational enterprise. To

these beginnings, can be traced his rich and varied philosophical life, as well as his constant and vigorous effort to engage, not only philosophers and scholars in every field, but laymen also in the dialogue of philosophy.

After obtaining his Ph.D., Dr. Adler taught in the Psychology Department at Columbia from 1923 to 1929, and as professor of Philosophy of Law at the University of Chicago from 1930 to 1952. There, with Robert M. Hutchins who was then President of the University, he conducted seminars which became notorious for provoking students to think, reason, and even riot, in their search for the truth of philosophical ideas. One of Dr. Adler's books, *A Dialectic of Morals*, captures the spirit of these discussions. During this period, too, the two professors formulated not only a criticism of the academic system of education as not properly educative, but their own rather revolutionary proposal to establish authentically liberal education in the schools.

Because Dr. Adler has always maintained that philosophy is or should be the concern of every literate person, he took philosophy into the marketplace by conducting seminars in the Great Books with various adult groups. To this day and at all levels, he has carried on the work of stimulating others to think reflectively and of engaging them in the dialectic of philosophy, most recently and notably, in his annual summer sessions with professional and business men's groups at Aspen, Colorado.

Bill Moyers' Journal recently showed one of these sessions on public television interspersed with Mr. Moyers' interview of Dr. Adler. The alternating discussions illustrated both the originality of Dr. Adler's thought and his skill in engaging participants. The interview, besides elucidating Dr. Adler's ideas on the ages of schooling and the nature of philosophy, explored the most significant questions in ethics, namely, in what the good life consists, and what is its ordering of goods. The discussion with the seminar participants concerning Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, raised the issue of the real difference between the communist political, economic, and social system and what Dr. Adler calls "universal capitalism." He proposed the latter as the means by which Western societies could create the equality of conditions—not, be it noted, economic equality—necessary for man's pursuit of real happiness. Typically, the span of that single hour constituted a uniquely stimulating and illuminating course in the practical areas of philosophy.

From his time at Chicago and continuing to this day, Dr. Adler's lectures have constituted a forthright presentation and dialectical defense of truth. They range, for instance, from the first I attended while yet a student at Manhattanville, in which he engaged Professor Sydney Hook on the subject of God, to the last I attended at Notre Dame on the relevance of St. Thomas' "Treatise on Law" to student protest-activities in particular, and to protests against the law or the political system in general.

Throughout, his efforts are directed, not at being popular or provocative, but at making us think, at engaging us in fulfilling our most human capacity, the active pursuit of truth.

His books manifest this same purpose. From his earliest work, appropriately entitled *Dialectic*, to his recent *The Time of Our Lives* and *American Testament* which is a philosophical examination of the "Declaration of Independence," his concern is always to involve us in philosophy itself, i.e., in the project of seeking out the truth and of meeting the challenges to it, whether they be in theoretical or practical matters. This is manifested in his advocacy of reading and discussing the Great Books as an educational instrument. He directed the monumental publication of *The Great Books of the Western World*, which includes the ingenious *Syntopicon* with Dr. Adler's extraordinary essays on each of the 102 Great Ideas. In these he focuses on the continuous dialogue between the greatest minds of the thirty centuries of western civilization on the problems which have concerned man in every age, and which cover the whole range of man's speculative and practical interests. As editor of the latest, the 15th, edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, he has made it not only a reference work, but one that can be used by both the intelligent layman and the scholar interested in an area other than his own, to gain genuine understanding and insight into various fields of human knowledge and major topics of human interest.

Dr. Adler's work, however, has not been wholly concentrated on practical or educational matters. It includes also works of original philosophical research and analysis. This is exemplified in his *Art and Prudence* and *The Conditions of Philosophy*. *The Problem of Species* analyzes this question in the fields of logic, philosophy of nature, and metaphysics. *What Man Has Made of Man* delineates the fields of competence proper to philosophy, modern science, and, in particular, psychology. It not only gives evidence of his understanding yet critical analysis of the great philosophers, but shows Dr. Adler, as philosopher and dialectician, doing in one area that task by which philosophy is defended and extended. *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes* involves a nuanced and creative presentation of the traditional distinctiveness of man. *St. Thomas and the Gentiles*, his Aquinas Lecture at Marquette University, presents and commends the dialectical tasks by which philosophy is kept alive; it inspires one to be a true philosopher, dedicated in our day, as was St. Thomas in his, to "the love and service of truth." Finally, *On the Idea of Freedom*, a three-part work written by Dr. Adler but involving the collaboration of a whole team of researchers and consultants, represents the kind of work in which Dr. Adler is now engaged as Director of the Institute for Philosophical Research in Chicago.

This brief summary of Dr. Adler's work in philosophy cannot do justice to his enduring concern: the confrontation of any and all denigrators of the philosophical enterprise, and the defense and exposition of philosophy's

unique competence to answer the questions, both theoretical and practical, which beset every age. In this respect, he is, like Socrates, both a gadfly and a midwife. In his courageous and deliberate defense he has been, like Aristotle and St. Thomas, not only a defender and upholder, but also one who has taken the offensive. He is unhesitant and assured in regard to perennial philosophy's ability to lay the truth before us. His vast comprehension and perceptive evaluation of the philosophical positions on the crucial issues, drawn from his lifelong reading and discussion of the Great Books, and the pivotal position of Aristotle and St. Thomas in his thinking, writing, and polemic, both with those outside and those within the tradition, make him uniquely worthy of the honor we pay him tonight.

It is, therefore, with deep appreciation and as representative of this distinguished Association, that I now present the Aquinas Medal to an eminent educator and philosopher, an indefatigable expositor and defender of perennial philosophy, Dr. Mortimer J. Adler.

*University of Notre Dame
South Bend, Indiana*