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## HUTCHINS AND ADLER

Hutchins and Adler

Had careers of great promise

Before both were shot down

By the books of St. Thomas.

*—Armand T. Ringer*

CHICAGO! DEAR OLD LOOPY, AS CHRISTOPHER MORLEY called it in a little book of praise for the Windy City.

Having lived in Chicago for some fifteen years, I got to know the city well, on foot and with the help of streetcars and the elevated. It was my first introduction to a giant metropolis. Years later, when I lived a comparable time in Manhattan, I never felt the same about the city. It was too much like Chicago, but less friendly. Chicago is spread out. New York City, squeezed on a small island, is jammed upward. Tables in restaurants, and seats at counters, are far apart in Chicago. In New York they are close together.

New Yorkers are in a hurry. Chicagoans move slowly. They are more polite. They say, "Thank you" and "You're welcome." You can have a heart attack in Manhattan and lie on the sidewalk for thirty minutes

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before anyone notices you or phones 911. Even doctors won't stop to help for fear of a lawsuit.

I loved Chicago. Although I never hated Manhattan, the feeling was never quite the same. I had no urge to explore the city. I already knew what big cities were like. I read E. B. White's hymn to New York, which ended with his writing that "not to look upon" the city "would be like death." I said to myself, how can anyone be *that* enamored of *any* big city?

I lived in Chicago because the University of Chicago was there. I had intended to go to Caltech to become a physicist, but Caltech then required that students first spend two years at a liberal arts college. I gathered promotional literature from several universities that I assumed would accept me, and the literature from Chicago impressed me the most. The handsome Robert Hutchins, former dean of Yale's law school, had just been made president. At age thirty he was the youngest president of any major American college. At Chicago he had adopted what was called the New Plan, devised earlier by several professors. It was a radical change. Class attendance, for example, was never checked. You could "audit" any course without getting credit. However, you were required to take four survey courses on physical science, biological science, social science, and the humanities. If you passed a test for any of the four, you could skip it. This was true of other courses. By passing tests you could advance rapidly and obtain a bachelor's degree in a year.

These incredible freedoms greatly appealed to me after my poor grades in high school. As a freshman,

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sitting the first day in a class on English literature, I heard the instructor, Norman Maclean (he later wrote a best-selling novel titled *A River Runs through It*) say to us, “You never learned anything in high school. Now you are going to begin your education.” The remark sent shivers along my spine.

I had no difficulty being accepted by the university. I passed a test for the physical science survey course, which allowed me to skip the course but get credit. I reveled in the freedom to attend any class. I think that during my four undergraduate years I audited more courses than I took for credit.

Mortimer Jerome Adler, Hutchins’s good friend, was there. Hutchins had made the mistake of appointing Adler a professor of philosophy without consulting any of the philosophy faculty. This so enraged most of the philosophers that they resigned from the university, crippling the philosophy department for years. Hutchins was forced to move Adler to the law school as the school’s only philosopher.

During the time I was at the university, Hutchins and Adler energetically promoted the Great Books movement, a movement that had earlier started at Columbia. The idea was that a general education required an acquaintance with the greatest books of the Western world. Later the University of Chicago would publish a set of the Great Books edited by Adler. The university bought the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, also to be coedited by Adler in a new fifteenth edition. It broke the set into two parts: the *Syntopicon*, a two-volume index of short articles, followed by the usual multivolume set of long articles by experts.

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Adler was a peculiar fellow. Raised by Orthodox Jewish parents, he became enthralled by neo-Thomism, a Catholic movement based on the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the greatest of the medieval scholastics. For various personal reasons, which he never made clear, for most of his life Adler refused to convert to Rome even though intellectually he believed the church's doctrines. In 1935 he gave a speech, recorded and released in mimeograph form, which I have carefully preserved to this day. In it he stated that *if* the Catholic Church is what it claims to be, God's one true church, then it was justified in executing heretics! Adler later, greatly embarrassed by this speech, renounced it, but, alas, the speech was recorded for posterity.

In his classes Adler worked hard to convince students that Aquinas's five proofs of the existence of God are valid. Much later he would clash with the French Thomist Jacques Maritain over his (Adler's) growing skepticism about the proofs.

In my senior year, as a philosophy major, I had the following letter published in the *New Republic* (December 13, 1940):

The text of Mortimer Adler's recent paper, "God and the Professors" (to which Sidney Hook replied in the October 28 issue of your magazine), has just been printed in full in the student newspaper of the University of Chicago, and I have just finished reading it.

As a former graduate student in the positivistic-minded philosophy department of the University, and a present resident of the campus community, I would like to make a plea to the readers of *The New Republic*.

*Pray for the conversion of Mr. Adler.*

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Mr. Adler has stated many times that he intellectually accepts the doctrines of the Roman creed, but that he lacks the divine faith necessary for conversion and entrance into the Church. There is strong traditional precedent for such an attitude. Gilbert Chesterton, for example, wrote his *Orthodoxy*, one of the greatest of modern Catholic apologetics, almost fifteen years before he joined the Church.

So let us unite in prayer for Mr. Adler. And on the date that he enters Rome, let academic circles proclaim a day of rejoicing and thanksgiving. For Mr. Adler's brilliant and exasperating rhetoric will at last have found a home; and out of the dialectic fog will emerge a shape definite enough to be recognized, and solid enough to be worthy of honorable combat.

A few days after the letter appeared, I was sitting with a lady friend in Reader's drugstore, on the south side of the Midway, enjoying coffee. Adler and a lady were sitting not far away. He was staring at me intently. I suspect his friend had said, "That young man sitting over there is the one who sent that letter to the *New Republic*." It took many decades for the prayers I suggested to be answered. Shortly before his death at age ninety-seven, Adler was baptized a Catholic. He had earlier joined the Anglican Church, of which his second wife was a devout member.

I once described Adler as a man doing a comic walk with one foot on the curb, the other on the street. In many ways he had a superb mind. He authored many books of which the best, in my opinion, was *Art and Prudence*. His ego was enormous. If you check the *Syn-*

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*topicon*, you'll find his picture heading a biographical sketch longer than the sketches of Bertrand Russell and other contemporary philosophers, none of whom rated a picture.

I once heard Bertrand Russell and Adler debate. The topic was whether there are eternal standards in education. Adler argued that Russell surely believed in such standards because he wrote a book titled *Education and the Good Life*. Did not the term "good life" imply standards of goodness? Russell responded by saying that Adler had been misled by his book's American title. In England the book was called *On Education, Especially in Early Childhood*.

An indication of the great influence of Aquinas on Adler, and Adler's great influence on Hutchins, is that Gilbert Chesterton's book *Thomas Aquinas* (the great French historian of Christian philosophy, Etienne Gilson, called it the best book ever written on the saint) was reprinted, in its entirety, in one of the volumes in *The Great Ideas Today*, a series of books edited by Hutchins and Adler. Hutchins's promising career was severely damaged by his association with Adler, and Adler's equally promising career was demolished by his infatuation with Aquinas. A "Peeping Thomist," someone once called him.

When philosopher Richard Rorty was working for his master's degree at the University of Chicago (his thesis on Whitehead was supervised by Charles Hartshorne), he wrote in one of his many letters to his mother that there was a campus rumor that Hutchins didn't exist. He was "merely a Great Thought in the mind of Adler."

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I will have more to say about Hutchins and Adler in later chapters. For more details about their curious friendship, see the first chapter, “The Strange Case of Robert Maynard Hutchins,” in my book *Order and Surprise*.