

Today, as we continue with the subject of learning, we shall consider the role of conversation or discussion in the life of learning.

The human mind can learn in a number of ways, but we have seen one basic division in the ways we can learn, the division between learning by discovery on the one hand and learning by instruction on the other or learning without the help of teachers and with the help of teachers.

LEARNING BY DISCOVERY AND BY DISCUSSION

Now I'd like to tell you about another basic division in the ways that men can learn, which looks very much like this first one but is really quite different. It is the distinction between learning by discovery on the one hand and learning by discussion on the other. Discovery, as you see, is common to both distinctions or divisions. But it would be a mistake to think that learning by instruction is the same as learning by discussion.

The first division is the distinction which is made in terms of teachers, learning by instruction and learning by discovery, with teachers and without teachers. The second division is made in terms of communication, learning by discussion and learning by discovery. Now, as you see, discovery is common to both. And if discussion were the same as instruction, then the two divisions would be the same. But I am going to try to show you that that is not the case.

Let me explain the principle of the first division. In the first division, everything turns on whether one human being helps

another to learn or whether a human being learns directly from nature without the help of any other human beings. The second division turns on the point of communication, whether or not, for example, the learning involves the communication of one man with another or just the communication between men and nature.

I am going to try to show you that discussion, properly considered, is the method by which adults learn from one another. And as so conceived, it differs quite strikingly from that sort of learning in which an older person teaches a younger person.

Lloyd Luckman: Now before you do that, Dr. Adler, there is a question I'd like to ask. A moment ago you explained the second division by saying that discussion involves some sort of communication between men, whereas discovery involved only communication between men and nature. I wonder, did you really mean that? Because if you did, then does learning by discovery involve actual conversation between man and nature?

Mortimer Adler: Well, kind of. Yes, in a metaphorical sense but only in a metaphorical sense. Let me explain. Human beings are talking animals. And so, we tend to introduce discussion into every aspect of our understanding or our theory of learning.

I'll never forget the words that were engraved in stone over the entrance of the science building at Columbia University in which I worked when I was a young man. The legend read, "Ask nature questions and it will answer you." There you see the process of scientific discovery itself being regarded as a kind of conversation between the scientist and the natural world.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, then I guess one metaphor would lead to another because didn't you yourself indulge in one last week when you suggested that the whole art of reading, that it is the whole art of reading a book that boils down to simply asking questions between yourself and the author and even talking back to him? That was a metaphor, wasn't it?

Mortimer Adler: Yes, that was a metaphor too, just a way of describing reading by comparing it with live conversation. In that very phrase "live conversation," you have the whole story. Real discussion consists of two or more persons talking to one another, each asking questions, each answering, making remarks and counter-remarks. When we ask nature questions, we ourselves, the scientists who do this, have to formulate the answers. In fact, the whole method of discovery is to formulate the answers which

nature is giving. And when we ask a book questions or an author questions, we have to figure out for ourselves—the author isn't there to answer—we have to figure out for ourselves what the author is going to answer.

So scientific discovery and reading a book are really quite artificial, one-way conversations. But real conversations, live conversation is a two-way affair in which all parties to it are equally active. And, I'd like to add that such conversation is at its best when the parties to it tend to regard each other as equal. That really is the heart of the difference between learning by discussion and learning by instruction.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, I'm not quite sure that I see what you are driving at. See, you promised a little while ago to explain this point. Now how about it?

Mortimer Adler: Well, now let me try to explain. To explain the point, we must first distinguish between three methods of teaching, the kind of teaching that goes on in classrooms and college lecture halls. The three methods are, let me name them first: indoctrination, lecturing, and questioning. Now *indoctrination* is that method in which the teacher tells the student something the teacher wants the student only to memorize, only to remember just long enough perhaps to pass the answer back in the examination. It is the worst method of teaching, if it can be called a method of teaching at all.

The second method, that of *lecturing*, is much better. It also consists in the teacher telling the student something but now not for the sake of mere memorization, but for the sake of the student understanding what he is told. And so the student in this case is encouraged to ask questions to pursue his understanding, to find out what the teacher means.

But the best method of the three is the method of *discussion* or questioning, teaching by asking instead of teaching by telling. It's much harder, but it's better. This is the method, by the way, that Socrates used in teaching the young men of Athens. And the reason why it is the best method is that like lecturing, it aims at understanding, not at memorization. But in addition to that, it is better than lecturing because it requires the greatest activity, the most active thought on the part of the student in the course of learning.

As against all of these methods of teaching, there is adult discussion or conversation. This is that sort of discussion in which

each person who takes part in it learns by asking and by answering. The heart of the difference is, the essential difference here, is that in adult learning by discussion, each party to the discussion is both a teacher and a learner. Just as in the political republic each citizen is ruler and ruled in turn, so in the adult republic of learning, each adult is both teacher and taught.

THE THREE PRECONDITIONS FOR DISCUSSION

With this background, let us consider the nature of adult conversation. And let's consider the rules which should govern it if such conversation is to develop into good, profitable discussion, profitable as a means of learning.

Let me begin by saying something which I'm sure all of us know, a perfectly obvious thing, that all conversation is not for the sake of learning any more than all reading is for the sake of learning. We saw last time, for example, the distinction between reading for pleasure, for amusement and recreation, as opposed to reading for learning's sake or information or enlightenment.

There are two kinds of conversation. The first kind is on the emotional or personal level. This is what we call the heart-to-heart talk. It is a wonderful phrase, isn't it? The heart-to-heart talk makes one think of people in love. In contrast to that, the other kind of conversation I would call the mind-to-mind talk about basic issues and fundamental ideas.

I am going to use the word "discussion" for the second kind of conversation, the mind-to-mind talk, which should result or may result in some enlightenment, in some increase of understanding on the part of all who are participating. What is the nature of such discussion? What must conversation be like in order for it to become discussion that functions as a means of learning?

There are three things that are required of conversation for it to become discussion in this good sense. First of all, the subject matter being discussed must be the sort of subject matter which permits genuine discussion to take place. Not everything is discussible and not all the things which are discussible are equally discussible. For example, facts are not discussible. To introduce facts into a discussion is to kill the discussion. If there is a question of fact, the best thing to do is to go to a dictionary, an ency-

yclopedia or an atlas or reference book and look it up. You can't settle a question of fact by discussion. No, ideas are discussible and the more fundamental the ideas, the more controversial they are, the more discussible they are. Just as I think it is true that the Great Books are the ideal books to read if we are trying to read for enlightenment, so I also think that the Great Ideas are the ideal subjects for discussion if our aim in discussion is to learn.

The second condition or prerequisite for good discussion is that right motive must prevail. The purpose we have in carrying on our conversation must be to learn, really a deep, serious purpose to learn, not just to pass the time in idle chitchat or small talk. And if big talk happens to develop and persons get engaged in serious discussion of serious themes, then their aim must be, as they carry it on, to get at the truth, not to win the argument.

The worst thing we can do is to let discussion become a form of personal aggression. Our aim should always be to learn, to clarify ideas, not to do the other fellow in. Our rule here should be not to be contentious or disputatious. And above all, we should remember that there is simply no point in winning the argument if we know we are wrong.

The third and perhaps the most important requirement of good discussion is that we should talk to the other person, not just at them. This means that listening is an important, an essential part of discussion. In fact, I think I would say that listening is more important, even as it is more difficult, than talking. Because if one person doesn't listen to another, what that person then says in the course of the conversation is not going to be very relevant. And without relevance, you aren't going to have a conversation but only the appearance of one.

You all know the kind of conversation that I'm talking about. You've all had this experience in which two persons talk to one another and each talks and then remains silent while the other person talks but isn't listening to the other person because he is thinking of what he is going to say when it becomes his turn to talk when the other fellow stops.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, I certainly do, Dr. Adler. And in my experience, that isn't discussion at all. Why, it's really nothing more than the exchange, an expression of prejudices, first on one side and then on the other.

Mortimer Adler: That's right. Most conversations, most political discussions are like that. Now Mr. Luckman and I aren't actors. But I think we can show you what we mean. I make a long speech at you, Lloyd, not to you but at you, in which I argue with many repetitions that if the government would keep its hands off business and regulate the labor unions instead, the country would be a lot better off.

Lloyd Luckman: Yes, and while you're talking I'm waiting in a fidgety sort of way for you to finish, so that I can go on saying what I was saying before you started talking. And when you do stop, then I go back to my pet gripe, which is, of course, that if businessmen would just be farsighted enough to see that they have to support increase in foreign loan, everything would be all right.

Mortimer Adler: Then I, "Yes, but" you, and start saying in a somewhat louder voice that the Taft-Hartley Act wasn't strong enough.

Lloyd Luckman: And without even a "Yes, but," I go on in a louder voice and say that isolationism will be the ruin of us all.

Mortimer Adler: There you have it. A conversation? A discussion? No, just an ordinary spit back between a Republican and a Democrat.

THE TEN RULES FOR CONDUCTING A DISCUSSION

Now, let's get back to real discussion. I just finished telling you the three basic requirements that conversation must meet if it is going to become discussion, that is profitable for learning. I would like to give you, quickly, some of the rules that we have to observe to make discussion profitable in this way. I'm going to give you two "external" rules, followed by five "intellectual" rules, followed by three "emotional" rules.

First of all, there are two rules about the externals of discussion, the mere externals of it. The first is to pick the right occasion, pick a time when everybody who is going to be engaged in the discussion is at leisure, not too busy, not occupied with other things; pick a time when they are free from distraction and so can be genuinely patient with discussion. You know, most business conferences go on with interruptions by telephones, by secretaries coming in, all sorts of interruptions, which, usually with too

little time allowed, makes for a discussion under the very worst circumstances.

The second basic external rule is, pick the right people. Not everyone is temperamentally fit for discussion. Some people are too shy, some too aggressive. Nor is everyone intellectually fit to discuss all subjects. There are some subjects on which persons have closed their minds; they've decided never to change their mind on that subject. Such persons are not the right persons to carry on a discussion about that subject.

Now supposing that these externals are provided, that you have the right occasion and the right people; now let's turn to the rules, the inner rules of discussion, the rules which govern your conduct of yourself, my conduct of myself, as we engage in conversation with one another. These rules fall into two large groups: first, a set of rules governing the use of your mind in discussion; second, a set of rules governing the control of your emotions in the course of discussion. Let me just tell you about these rules in that order.

First, let me state for you the intellectual rules, the rules concerning the use of your mind in the course of discussion. Here there are five rules which I would like to state for you simply and comment on briefly. The first rule is, Be relevant, which means "find out what the issue is and stick to it, but don't stick to it like fly paper." Divide the issue into its parts; every complex issue has parts, and move along from one part to another.

The second rule is, Don't take things for granted. Everyone, you included, I included, make certain assumptions as we come into a discussion. State your own assumptions and see if you can get the other participants to state theirs. Make an effort to find out what the other person's assumptions are.

The third rule is try, if you can, to avoid arguing fallaciously. Now I haven't time to tell you all the many fallacies to which human discussion is prone. Let me take out some of the more obvious ones. First, don't cite authority as if they were conclusions. George Washington may have said to avoid entangling foreign alliances, but I don't think George Washington's authority controls American foreign policy in the twentieth century. Don't argue *ad hominem*. That means: don't argue against the person as opposed to against the point. And above all, avoid that most vicious of all fallacies, the bedfellow argument. Don't say to the

other fellow, "Oh, that's the kind of thing Republicans say or Communists say or Socialists say," as if calling it by that kind of name necessarily proves it wrong. That, I'm afraid, is a terribly fallacy of guilt by association. Don't take a vote as if that would settle the matter. And beware of using striking examples, for they often prove either too much or too little.

The fourth rule here is, don't agree or disagree with the other person until you understand what that person has said. To agree with another person before you understand what that person is saying is inane. To disagree before understanding is impertinent. Don't do what most people do, say all in one breath, "I don't know what you are talking about but I think you're wrong." This rule requires all of us to do something quite simple, yet it must be hard to do because we do it so infrequently. It requires you in the course of discussion to say to the other person, "Now let me see if I can say in my own words what you have just said." And then having done that, you turn to him and say, "Is that what you mean?" And if he says, "Yes, it is; that's exactly what I mean," then you are for the first time privileged to say to him, "I agree with you," or "I disagree with you," and not one moment sooner.

And the fifth rule is that if, after understanding the other person, you do disagree, state your disagreement specifically and give reasons why. Many people state their disagreement by simply saying, "You're a dope," or saying, "Oh, you're all wrong. Everything you say is wrong. You don't know what you're talking about." This doesn't help. Remarks like "You don't know what you are talking about" don't help anybody.

You can tell the other person what is wrong with his argument in four very sharp, specific ways. You can say one of four things. Kindly and politely you can say, "You are uninformed of certain relevant facts and I will show you what they are." Or you can say, "You are *misinformed*. Some of the things you think are relevant facts aren't facts at all, and I will show you why they are not." Or you can say, "You are mistaken in your reasoning and I will show you the mistakes that you have made." And finally you can say, "You don't carry your reasoning out far enough. There is more to say than you have said and I will tell you what it is." These are all very polite and much to the point.

Now let's turn to the other set of rules, the rules that govern the control of your emotions in the course of argument. And here

there are just three simple rules. The first is, keep your emotions in place. That means "Keep them out of the argument, for they have no place in the argument." The second rule is, catch yourself or the other person getting angry. And there are very simple signs of this. Starting to shout, repeating and overemphasizing the point by repeating it again and again, or pounding on the table, using sarcasm, teasing, getting a laugh on the other fellow, all these are signs that someone's temper is getting out of hand. And finally, the third rule here is, if you can't control your emotions, at least beware of the results of emotional disorder. Try your best to realize that your emotions can lead you either to say things you don't mean or stubbornly to refuse to admit things you really do see.

ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS IS THE KEY TO GOOD DISCUSSION

The rules of good discussion are easy enough to state, as I've just stated them. And I think they are just as easy to understand. But the hard thing to do is to follow them. I'm sure that as you heard them you recognized at once that they were clear and sound, good rules to follow. But I hope I do you no injustice when I say that my guess is that you violate them just as I violate them every day of our common lives.

But the hardest thing of all to do in discussion is to know how to ask good questions, the kind of questions that by their very nature generate good discussion. And let me tell you, this is the hardest thing because asking good questions is much, much harder than answering them.

Lloyd Luckman: Do you have some rules then too for the asking of questions?

Mortimer Adler: Well, Lloyd, in one way the rules of logic, the rules of what I would prefer to call dialectic are just such rules. Let me give you a few examples of what I mean. We ought to be able to distinguish between questions of fact on the one hand and questions of interpretation on the other, such questions as whether something is the case or exists and on the other hand what it means, what it implies, what consequences it leads to. And then we should be able to distinguish between questions of fact and questions of value. Here we ought to know whether we are asking about

whether something happened or whether it was good, how someone behaves or how he should behave, how he ought to behave, questions of what is the case as opposed to questions about what should be or what ought to be.

And then, it's very important for us to be able to distinguish between asking someone what he thinks and asking him why he thinks so. Asking him for a statement of his belief or his opinion is different from asking him for the reasons to support that belief or opinion. And above all, we should be able to ask hypothetical questions and recognize them. Many discussions go on the rocks because someone says, "Let me ask you a hypothetical question. If such and such is the case, then—" And the other person says, "But that isn't the case." And the person says, quite rightly, "Well, I didn't say it was the case; I only said if." And no one listens to the "if."

I wish there were time to go more deeply into this matter of how to ask questions, but we must now close. I would like to remind you that next time we are going to consider that important contemporary problem of whether and how we can learn from television.