

## Memo

July 14, 2007

To: Robert Wiley  
From: Maury Seldin  
Subj: Comments on Great Books Style of Four Explorations in Philosophy

The first session of the course was very stimulating, especially looking at it in the context of the series of topics. That context is noted later in this memo.

Since I really try to restrain my participation, I thought I would send you some comments that you may use or not, share or not, as suits you. I have kept them as brief as I could and focused on discussion leading to the second topic and putting the discussion of liberty in the context of why the essay is important.

Your opening statement on a way to approach reading the essays is well taken. The first part on understanding what the author is saying is clear. The second part, on understanding why it is important, may be interpreted as why is it important to the author, or why is it important to us, individually or collectively.

The context of the author's comments is important because the issues he is addressing are relevant to his concerns, thus his paradigm will be directed to deal with the issues of concern to him. However, once written, the essay may have different meanings in different contexts. Thus, why the essay is important to us will depend on the perspective we are taking in identifying its relevance.

The first essay, Adler's "The Logic of Truth," is clearly focused on laying claim to the word *truth* to mean truth as is correspondence theory, that which is an accurate statement for all time. His straw man of "poetic truth" is used to explain the "real meaning" of truth as in correspondence theory. He does not deal with truth in the Biblical sense of not what is but what ought to be.

If we consider the essay in the context of what it means to us, then what pops out is the brilliant selection of four topics (truth, liberty, happiness, and justice) that tie together in what may be one of the most important statements in Western civilization, "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."<sup>i</sup>

The "We hold" simply states our position. It is a claim without evidence and may be a truthful claim in the Adler sense, but remains to be proven. The "These truths to be self-evident" is a claim of reason, an empiricist view. The phrase "that they are endowed by their Creator" invokes the Biblical view of truth, that what ought to be rather than what is.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, whatever the basis of the belief, the statement is deemed true in one sense or another. The significance is that this belief, even if in error, is the basis for decisions.

The “created equal” in the phrase “all Men are created equal” is ambiguous as to what dimension, but probably as to rights rather than ability or opportunity. But, the realization of equality is a matter of justice, the subject of the fourth topic. Justice, however, is relevant in the discussion of liberty.

The John Stewart Mill essay, “On Liberty,” focuses on negative liberty,<sup>iii</sup> i.e., not being interfered with rather than the positive liberty which is oriented towards capacity which is related to the equality ambiguity mentioned earlier. In particular, the concern is with “the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual.” The relevance to Mill’s concerns is indicated by a sentence in his second paragraph, “By liberty, was meant protection against the tyranny of political rulers. This protection may be in avoidance of the breach of duties of a ruler, or in a constitutional protection.

The evolution of this protection moved to the position that the authority was derived from the people. The political exercise of this source of power is further discussed, but the key is in individual rights, consistent with the quote from The Declaration of Independence quote.

The other essay, “On Pluralism,” by Isaiah Berlin, in short takes the position that no one set of values is the truth for all people for all time, but there is a commonality of human values.<sup>iv</sup> The contrast to monism is critical to the concept of liberty and the discussion of values is a good transition to the next two topics.

I have included explanatory footnotes in order to keep this memo as short as practicable. As noted, please feel free to use them or not, as well as the memo itself.

Thanks for an enlightening class. See you Tuesday.

Maury

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<sup>i</sup> Consider the following quote from Edward O. Wilson’s *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*; “In short, transcendentalism is fundamentally the same whether God is invoked or not.” [Page 261.] Then he comes up with a powerful statement on our American civil religion.

“For example, when Thomas Jefferson, following John Locke, derived the doctrine of natural rights from natural law, he was more concerned with the power of transcendental statements than in their divine or secular origin. In the Declaration of Independence he blended secular and religious presumptions in one transcendental sentence, thus covering all bets: ‘We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.’ That assertion became the cardinal premise of America’s civil religion, the righteous sword wielded by Lincoln and Martin Luther King, and it endures as the central ethic binding together the diverse peoples of the United States.” [Page 261.]

In discussing the transcendent view as compared to the empiricist view, Wilson notes that since the transcendent view has been so perverted (one might say abused), we might do well to take empiricism more seriously. The following is a set of excerpts from three paragraphs.

“The importance of the empiricist view is its emphasis on objective knowledge...

“[We] should be able to fashion a wiser and more enduring ethical consensus than has gone before. The current expansion of scientific inquiry into the deeper process of human thought makes this venture feasible.

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“The choice between transcendentalism and empiricism will be the coming century’s version of the struggle for men’s souls...Where it settles will depend on which world view is proved correct, or at least which is more widely *perceived* to be correct.” [Page 262.]

- ii Consider the following entry, by Steven S. Schwarzschild in *Encyclopedia Judaica*;  
“In Judaism truth is primarily an ethical notion: it describes not what is but what ought to be. Thus, in the Bible, truth is connected with peace, righteousness, grace, justice, and even with salvation, ‘The world rests on three things—truth, justice, and peace’... “God acts truthfully in that He keeps His word. Human truthfulness is to be faithful to God and man. This is specified in many ways: to speak truth even in one’s heart; always to quote correctly; to engage in commerce honestly; and to abstain from all deceit and hypocrisy. In sum, as God is truth so Judaism as a whole is the practice of truth. “Jewish philosophers generally accepted the Greek notion of truth as ‘correspondence with reality.’ Even such intellectualism, however, is ultimately superseded by biblical ethicism.’ In modern Jewish philosophy, Hermann Cohen designates the normative unity of cognition and ethics as ‘the fundamental law of truth’. Martin Buber also identifies Jewish faith with truth as interpersonal trust. Thus, truth as a human, ethical criterion is commonplace throughout the mainstream of Jewish thinking.

The same point on what ought to be is made by Karen Armstrong in *The Battle for God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), page 253, as follows: “Where the rational empiricism of the West concentrates on what *is*, the Orient seeks the truth that shall be.”

- iii The quote that follows is from an Isaiah Berlin essay, “Two Concepts of Liberty.” The first concept, using the label of negative liberty, is “What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?” The second concept, using the label of positive liberty, is, “What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?” [Four *Essays on Liberty*, pages 121-122.]

Berlin sees a conflict in these two perspectives of liberty in that they are different values, even though they are related, and there may be some overlap in the answers. There is one long paragraph by John Gray in his book, *Isaiah Berlin*, which is especially enlightening on the comparison and contrast. It is as follows:

“It will readily be seen that, if negative freedom as Berlin understands it presupposes the capacity for choice among alternatives, it shares a common root with positive freedom. Unlike negative freedom, which is freedom from interference by others, positive freedom is the freedom of self-mastery, of rational control of one’s life. It is plain that, as with negative freedom, positive freedom is impaired or diminished as the capacity or power of choice is impaired or diminished, but in different ways. An agent may be unobstructed in the choice of alternatives by other agents, and yet lack the ability or power to act. This may be because of negative factors, lacks or absences - of knowledge, money or other resources – or may be because there are internal constraints, within the agent himself, preventing him from conceiving or perceiving alternatives as such, or else, even if they are so perceived, from acting on them. Such conditions as phobias or neurotic inhibitions may close off an agent’s options, even to the point that they remain unknown to him, or else he may be constrained by irrational and invincible anxiety from acting so as to take advantage of them. In this case the power of choice has been sabotaged or compromised from within. An agent may possess very considerable negative freedom and yet, because he is incapacitated for choice among alternatives that other have not closed off from him, be positively unfree to an extreme degree. What both forms of unfreedom have in common is the restriction or incapacitation of the powers of choice.” [Page 16.]

- iv An explanatory quote on pluralism from another Isaiah Berlin work, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* is as follows:

“...the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other, as we derive it from reading Plato or the novels of medieval Japan – worlds outlooks, very remote from our own. Of course, if we did not have

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values in common with these distant figures, each civilisation would be enclosed in its own impenetrable bubble, and we could not understand them at all; this is what Spengler's typology amounts to. Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is only possible because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them. But our values are ours, and their values are theirs. We are free to criticize the values of other cultures, to condemn them, but we cannot pretend not to understand them at all, or to regard them simply as subjective, the products of creatures in different circumstances with different tastes from our own, which do not speak to us at all. [ Page 11.]