Mission of the Center for the Study of The Great Ideas

The Center has two primary missions: One, to help awaken citizens from their moral and intellectual slumbers and to help them understand why philosophy is everybody's business: the possibility of finding sound and practical answers to questions about the good life and good society. And philosophy's ability to answer the most basic normative questions, what ought we seek in life? and how ought we seek it?

Two, to promulgate the insights and ideals embedded in Dr. Adler's lifelong intellectual work in the fields of Philosophy, Liberal Education, Ethics and Politics. To continue functioning as THE resource for, access to, and the on-going interpretation of his work.

Programs

The Center has and will continue to fulfill these missions through its tireless efforts to provide Dr. Adler's vision, guidance, and resource materials through both live and on-line seminars, educational and philosophical consultation, international presence on the Internet, access to the Center's library collection of books, essays, articles, journals and audio/video programs. It should be noted that the Center's programs are unique in that they do not replicate other existing programs either started or developed by Dr. Adler, such as those offered by The Great Books Foundation, the Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults at the University of Chicago, The Aspen Institute, The Paideia Group, or the Great Books curricula now found in some colleges and universities.

While we sanction and applaud the type of programs that these institutions offer as essential to a liberal education, the Center pushes the studies and inquiries further in following the lead of Aristotle who said in Nicomachean Ethics Book II, Chapter 2:

The purpose of the present study is not as it is in other inquiries, the attainment of knowledge, we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it. For that reason, it becomes necessary to examine the problem of our actions and to ask how they are to be performed. For as we have said, the actions determine what kind of characteristics are developed.

Hence, the thrust and aim of the Center's efforts are not only to help students and citizens to develop a cogent understanding of practical philosophy, which is essential to understanding the good society and the extent that it bears on the conditions required for responsible citizenship and the pursuit of happiness, but rather to motivate them to engage in the kind of conduct in their personal and public lives necessary to make a really good life for themselves.
It is our conviction that this understanding can be uniquely facilitated through a process of liberal learning based on syntopical reading, thinking about, and discussing Socratically The Great Ideas inherent in the great literature of our Western Tradition.

**Manifesto**

The only standard we have for judging all of our social economic, and political institutions and arrangements as just or unjust, as good or bad, as better or worse, derives from our conception of the good life for man on earth, and from our conviction that, given certain external conditions, it is possible for men to make good lives for themselves by their own efforts.

There must be sufficient truth in moral philosophy to provide a rational basis for the efforts at social reform and improvement in which all men, regardless of their religious beliefs or disbeliefs, can join. Such common action for a better society presupposes that the measure of a good society consists in the degree to which it promotes the general welfare and serves the happiness of its people—this happiness being their earthly and temporal happiness, for there is no other ultimate end that the secular state can serve.

**A PLANNED LIFE**

Plato’s Socrates observed that the unexamined life is not worth living. Our understanding of what he means will lead us to conclude that an unplanned life cannot be lived well. Therefore we ought to seek—a sound and practical plan of life that will help us to make our whole life good.

A plan of that character consists of a small number of prescriptions about the goods to be sought and the manner and order of seeking them. These prescriptions, formulated with a universality that makes them applicable to all men without regard to their individual differences or the special circumstances of their individual lives, constitute what little wisdom is possible for the moral philosopher to attain with reasonable certitude, and that little is nothing but a distillation of the wisdom of common sense.

**CATEGORICAL PRESCRIPTIONS**

That what is involved in making a good life for one’s self can appeal to the truth of two basic propositions -- both self-evidently true, both intuitively known.

(1) The good is the desirable.

(2) One ought to desire or seek that which is really good for oneself and only that which is really good.

**SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS**
The truth of the categorical prescription that underlies every piece of reasoning that leads to a true prescriptive conclusion is a self-evident truth. We acknowledge a truth as self-evident as soon as we acknowledge the impossibility of thinking the opposite.

**GOOD vs. RIGHT**

It is a mistake to give primacy to right over the good; it stems from ignorance of the distinction between real and apparent goods -- goods needed and goods wanted.

It is impossible to know what is right and wrong in the conduct of one individual toward another until and unless one knows what is really good for each of them and for everyone else as well.

Real goods, based on natural needs, are convertible into natural rights based on those same needs.

To wrong another person is to violate his natural right to some real good, thereby depriving him of its possession and consequently impeding or interfering with his pursuit of happiness.

The only goods anyone has a natural right to are real, not apparent, goods. We do not have a natural right to the things we want; only to those we need.

To each according to his wants, far from being a maxim of justice, makes no practical sense at all; for, if put into practice, it would result in what Thomas Hobbes called "the war of each against all," a state of affairs he also described as "nasty, brutish, and short."

The denial of natural rights, the natural moral law, and natural justice leads not only to the positivist conclusion that man made law alone determines what is just and unjust. It also leads to a corollary that inexorably attaches itself to that conclusion -- that might makes right. This is the very essence of absolute or despotic government.

**MIND AND REALITY**

The human mind differs only in superficial respects from one time or culture to another, therefore common sense persons concur in thinking

(a) that the human mind is the same the whole world over, not only in all times and places but also in spite of the diversity of languages and cultures;

(b) that there exists a reality that is independent of our minds;

(c) that we have minds that enable us to know and understand that reality which, being independent of our minds, is the same reality for all of us, and;

(d) that our human experience of that independent reality has enough in common for all of us that we are able to talk intelligibly about it to one another.
THE CORE OF COMMON EXPERIENCE

The definition of common experience . . . involves two points, one negative, and the other positive. The negative point is that it consists of all the experiences we have without asking a single question that calls for steps of observation especially contrived for the purpose. The positive point is that it includes experiences which are the same for all men everywhere at all times.

PHILOSOPHY -- A PUBLIC ENTERPRISE

A mode of inquiry aiming at knowledge has a public character:

(1) if the participants in the enterprise are willing and able to answer the same questions;

(2) if the questions or problems to be faced by the participants in the enterprise can be attacked piece meal, one by one, so that it is not necessary to answer all the questions involved in order to answer any one or some of them;

(3) if it possible for the participants to disagree as well as to agree about the answers to be given to the questions that direct the inquiry

(4) if disagreements among the participants, when they arise, are adjudicable by reference to standards commonly accepted by participants in the enterprise;

(5) and if cooperation is possible among the participants; that is, if it is possible for a number of men working on the same problem or question to make partial contributions which are cumulative and which add up to a better solution than any one of them proposes.

LIBERAL EDUCATION, FREE MEN, AND DEMOCRACY

Liberal education is absolutely necessary for human happiness, for living a good human life.

Adult liberal education is an indispensable part of the life of leisure, which is a life of learning.

The aim of education is to cultivate the individual's capacities for mental growth and moral development; to help him acquire the intellectual and moral virtues requisite for a good human life, spent publicly in political action or service and privately in a noble or honorable use of free time for the creative pursuits of leisure among which continued learning throughout life is preeminent.

Liberal education is education for leisure; it is general in character; it is for intrinsic and not an extrinsic end and, as compared with vocational training, which is the education of slaves or workers, liberal education is the education for free men.

If democratic citizens must be free men, they must have free minds, and minds cannot be made free except by being disciplined to recognize only one authority, the authority of reason.
Our schools are not turning out young people prepared for the high office and the duties of citizenship in a democratic republic. Our political institutions cannot thrive, they may not even survive, if we do not produce a greater number of thinking citizens, from whom some statesmen of the type we had in the eighteenth century might eventually emerge. We are, indeed, a nation at risk, and nothing but radical reform of our schools can save us from impending disaster. Whatever the price we must pay in money and effort to do this, the price we will pay for not doing it will be much greater.

The individual may be a good person in the sense of being virtuous. But a good person does not always succeed in the pursuit of happiness -- in making a good life for himself or herself. Virtue by itself does not suffice for the attainment of the ultimate good. If it did, mankind would have little or no reason to carry on its age-old struggle for a good society, with liberty, equality, and justice for all.

If, in some way, the generations to come would learn what a good life is and how to achieve it and could be given the discipline, not only of mind but of character, that would make them willingly responsive to the categorical oughts of a teleological ethics, perhaps, then, the moral and educational revolution might begin and take hold.

To hope for this is to hope for no more than that the restoration of a sound and practical moral philosophy will enable enlightened common sense to prevail in human affairs.