

PHILOSOPHY AND THE GOOD LIFE

Mortimer J. Adler

I believe that in any business conference one needs to have at least one speaker who will make the delegates think and reflect on matters not immediately relevant to their own businesses.

We are particularly fortunate today in having Dr. Adler a philosopher of world renown. He is an American, being born in New York City. After teaching at Columbia University, where he received a Ph.D. in 1928, he became Professor of the Philosophy of Law at the University of Chicago.

He currently heads the Institute for Philosophical Research in Chicago, which was founded in 1952 to study various aspects of philosophy. Additionally he has been a member of the Encyclopaedia Britannica Board of Editors since its inception in 1947. A major portion of his time for the past 15 years has been given to the planning and development of the new edition in his capacity as Director of Planning and Chairman of the Editorial Executive Committee.

In addition, he is the editor of a number of books, and I think that his address today may lift us from the material side of our normal routine into the realms of philosophical reflection.

Sir Robert Crichton-Brown

Though the considerations with which I begin may appear abstract and theoretical, I think you will see that the analysis I am going to present will be of great practical significance to you as individuals and to your Institute.

There are two questions that anybody is reasonably entitled to ask about philosophy. First, is it knowledge in the same sense as science, even though its method is clearly not the same? Second, even if it is knowledge, is it useful knowledge and, if so, to what use can we put it?

My answer to the first question is emphatically affirmative though, in the brief scope of this address, I cannot give you the reasons for thinking so.

I am going to concentrate on the second question, even though the answer to it depends in part on the answer to the first. In all the years I have talked philosophy at the University of Chicago, at the beginning some bright student has asked, "Professor Adler, this is all very interesting—but what use is it?" Knowing the meaning of 'use' in the student's mind, I would say, "No use at all."

And my reason for saying that is because persons in the world today have a very restricted meaning when they speak of 'useful knowledge'.

They think of the kind of technological applications which science makes possible. Philosophy would build no bridges, bake no cakes, cure no diseases. If we mean by "useful knowledge", knowledge that is technologically applicable, it is totally useless. But that is not the only use to which knowledge can be put.

Knowledge is useful as a guide to action as well as a basis for production. And it is in this second sense of use that philosophy is practically useful, socially and individually. It is a directive of our conduct and our efforts to lead good lives individually and manage and operate a good society for our people.

But it is useful in this way only if it tells us truly the end we ought to seek and the means whereby we ought to seek it. Practical philosophy, which means moral and political philosophy, can do this.

In all spheres of action, the controlling terms are 'means' and 'ends'. We deliberate about the means to be chosen only in the light of the ends we seek. For if every end we sought was in itself a means to some further end, our deliberations would be without basis.

What would such an ultimate end be? Is there any end that has the character of something obligatory for us to see? And the answer is, I think, at once evident: namely, the ultimate end we all ought to seek is that which when attained would leave nothing left further to be desired because attaining it would satisfy all one's desires.

Is there such an end, both for ourselves as individuals and for society?

Each man has conscious wants

The good and the desirable are correlative terms. No one could fail to see that when we say 'good' of anything, we are saying it is 'desirable'; and when we say it is 'desirable', we are saying it is 'good'.

An immediate question arises. Do we call things 'good' simply because we do in fact desire them—our desires being the basis for attribution of goodness to them—or ought we desire things because they are really good, whether in fact we do desire them or not? The relation between the good and the desirable is different if our desires themselves are the basis or cause for our thinking things are good; or, in the reverse, things being really good, we ought to desire them.

To understand this double relation between 'good' and 'desire', I want to make the most basic distinction I can between individual wants and natural needs, both wants and needs being in a sense desires. As individuals, each of us has his own conscious wants. One man wants what another man doesn't want; our wants vary as we vary as individuals. But though in our individual conscious, wants varies, all of us have the same natural human needs.

Our needs are the same, whether our needs represent our wants or not. For example, being animals that vegetate, we all naturally need food. Being social animals, we all need friendship and love. Being persons with freedom of choice, we all naturally need freedom. Even though we don't want these things—though most of us do—we would need them. And we would all need them, because we are human, though what one man wants for himself and his family may differ from what another man wants.

Anyone of common sense would recognize that we often in our lives want what we do not need or want much more than we need; and we may not want what, in fact, we do need. With this distinction before you, let me then say that that which is really good for us, whether we consciously want it or not, are the things that correspond to, and satisfy, our natural needs. And that when our individual wants are not identical with our natural needs, then the

things that we want only appear to be good for us and may not really be so.

The self-evident principle

This distinction between the real and the apparent good corresponds with the distinction between natural needs and individual wants.

If moral philosophy—ethics—is to have a basis in clear principle, it must have some first self-evident principle that will generally be acknowledged to be true. I would like to submit to you such a principle.

It is simply that we ought to desire everything that is really good for us, and we ought to desire nothing else. If you think that is true, it is because you recognize the relation between the notion of what is really good and the meaning of the word ‘ought’.

We may, in fact, desire many things that are not really good for us, but the only things we ought to desire are those things which by the very nature of our being are things that are really good for us. This is my own version of the categorical imperative, the one basic moral obligation that binds us all.

In the light of these very brief insights into natural needs and individual wants—the real and the apparent good—I think I can show you that happiness is not only the ultimate goal that all of us seek, but that it is a goal which is the same for all of us and, only as the same, is it the goal we all ought to seek.

I know this runs counter to the way in which most people speak of happiness. They think of happiness as something each man defines for himself, that its pursuit varies as each individual varies; but I would like to show you that those common views are quite false.

The unfinishable sentence

No one says, “I want to be happy because . . .” No one can finish that sentence. If you could possibly finish it and give a reason for wanting to be happy, then happiness would not be the ultimate end but mean something beyond itself.

When you recognize that, you can’t say, “I want to be happy because . . .” you recognize that happiness is not a means to anything else, not something that leaves anything more to be desired. It is, when you have it, the fulfillment of all your desires.

It is the ultimate end, however, only when it is conceived as a

whole that includes all the things that are really good for us. Saint Augustine said, “Happy is the man who has everything he desires providing he desires nothing amiss.” The proviso was important!

Most people—in fact, most modern philosophers—carry a psychological rather than an ethical conception of happiness. That psychological conception is one that you possess if you say, “Yesterday I wasn’t feeling so good, but today I’m quite happy,” as if you can *feel* happy.

Most people think they can *feel* happy and, when they say such things as “Have a happy time” or “Have a Happy New Year”, they are talking about a state of feeling or mind, a state of momentary satisfaction, as if you can be happy one day and not happy the next.

The ethical or moral conception of happiness has nothing to do with feelings or emotions. It refers to the goodness of the whole human life. The happy life is a life well lived.

We certainly don’t aim as an ultimate goal to be happy today and unhappy tomorrow. When we say happiness is our aim, we are talking about the goodness of a whole life and clearly nobody can experience a whole life at any moment.

I suppose it’s possible to say in the course of living. “I am becoming happy”, but you can’t say at any moment in your life, “I am happy”, for your life is not yet done.

A happy life, a good life, is one enriched by the possession of all real goods. These real goods correspond to, and satisfy, our natural needs and, since our natural needs as human beings are the same, happiness properly conceived is the same for all of us.

Let me confirm what I have said by a few examples. Consider with me the miser, the classical picture of the successful miser. Now this fellow regards his glittering gold as the only good he wants.

If happiness were the satisfaction of individual wants, the miser would be entitled to say he has what he wants. But you and I know that he is the most miserable of creatures, that his life is stulted, his health is bad, he’s deprived of friends and other activities. Would anyone call him happy, even though he calls himself happy?

You have to be prepared to accept that when men say they are happy, they are mistaken in their views because they have a wrong conception of happiness. Clearly, the miser’s conception of happiness is wrong and I could apply the same thing to the successful playboy who puts all his eggs in the one basket of sensual pleas-

ures or the power-hungry man who wants nothing but power over others. Let them succeed. Let them have all they want. They're miserable, not happy. They have stunted, stultified lives.

The second way in which you can see the truth in what I am trying to say is in the terms of that remarkable clause in the Declaration of Independence of the United States. The greatest inspiration that Jefferson ever had—was to take an earlier statement of the basic inalienable human rights as “life, liberty and property” and change it to, “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”.

If happiness in that phrase meant the satisfaction of individual wants, how could a government secure each of its citizens the right to pursue happiness if their right to pursue happiness brought them into sharp conflict with one another? If the pursuit of happiness were competitive, not co-operative, no government could secure the natural inalienable right, the right to pursue happiness.

Two means of happiness

Jefferson understood happiness as something that was the same for all men because it did not satisfy their individual, variant wants but satisfied their basic, human, common natural needs.

The means of happiness are of two kinds. There are the constitutive means, which are the real goods that correspond to our natural needs. They are goods of the body, such as health and pleasure; goods of the mind, such as knowledge; goods of character, such as virtue; goods of association, such as friendship and love; political goods, such as political liberty; economic goods, such as a modicum of wealth and the means of subsistence; social goods, such as freedom of movement and education.

And, of these goods—which are real goods, because they correspond to natural needs—the first four are goods which are wholly or partly within the power of the individual to achieve.

But the three last—political goods, economic goods and social goods—are not wholly, sometimes not even partly, within the power of the individual because they depend upon external conditions that require the action of organized society. This is of great importance because, in the pursuit of happiness, the individual, unaided, by himself, is not competent. He requires the beneficent action of the society in which he lives.

There is one particular means I must mention separately. It is not a constitutive means, it is an operational or functional means: the means whereby we manage to achieve happiness to whatever extent we do. That one means is moral virtue.

In principle, virtue consists in the habitual disposition to prefer real over apparent goods. The virtuous man is one who is habitually disposed to seek a good life and not a good time.

The choice between a good life as a whole and a good time right now is probably the most recurrent daily moral choice we make and the virtuous man has his eye on a good life and not on a good time.

The virtuous man is the fellow who has the habit of mind and character and will to choose what is really good in the long run as against what is only apparently good here and now. And that choice between the long run and the short run tests virtue every moment.

With this understanding of virtue, I want to go from the individual to the society, because the social aspect of virtue is what we call justice, which leads us to consider the good of others and the good of society as a whole.

Man's basic moral obligation

But, before this, let me repeat one thing: the basic moral obligation of each of us is not to others but to ourselves. One of the great mistakes in moral philosophy is the mistake of the do-gooder who thinks only of the good of others and not of the good of himself; and therefore really doesn't think of the good of others very critically or competently.

The basic moral obligation of each of us is to seek his own happiness. We are obliged to seek what is really good for us; we are obliged to try to make a good life for ourselves.

But when I know what is really good for me, I also know what every other man has a right to, for he has the same moral obligations as I have. He is obliged to make a good life for himself if I am—because we are both men—and if we both have the same moral obligation, we both have the same rights to the means we need to fulfill that obligation.

It is preposterous to have a moral obligation and be deprived of the means for fulfilling it. So each of us has the moral obligation to make a good life for himself. We each have a right to the means needed in the pursuit of that end. When I know what is really good for me, I know what is right for everyone else. I know what your rights are when I know what is good for me.

And this leads to the consideration of justice, both individually and

socially. As an individual, I am obliged by justice not to injure others, not to invade or violate their rights, not to take from them what is really good for them or prevent them from attaining what is really good for them.

But individual justice is not enough. In addition, you have to have social justice. Social justice requires a society that in all its arrangements facilitates and promotes the pursuit of happiness and does for the individual what he cannot do for himself and what other individuals cannot do for him.

In the field of human action, there are two ultimate ends. For the individual, the ultimate end is his own happiness, rightly conceived as all the things that are really good for a man, a life well-lived, enriched by such goods. That is the goal we ought to seek.

But for the State, for organized society, the end is the happiness of all its people, an end that the State must serve by promoting the general welfare and providing the conditions the individual needs to make a good human life for himself.

Comparisons of societies

I think I am giving you the only objective standard for saying that one society's morality or justice is better than another's: one society is better than another if its social, political, economic and technological conditions are such that it provides more of its people with the conditions for leading decent human lives than does another.

The measurement is the number of human beings who are provided with the conditions. I am not saying the number of individuals who succeed in being happy, because happiness is an individual pursuit and men can fail even when the conditions are clearly given. But the duty of a society is to provide all of its people with the conditions they need to lead good human lives and let them make the choice to use these conditions well or not.

Those countries which clearly satisfy my principle include Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Holland, Belgium, Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand.


These societies—there may be a few others—are clearly better than any societies which existed before. No society earlier than 1900 compares with these in meeting the requirements to promote the general welfare in such a way that more and more people have the conditions for leading decent human lives.

They are hardly perfect societies—they are simply better societies,

clearly better than others which today deprive the citizens of freedom or leave them in poverty and inhuman conditions of health and ignorance

There is one clear confirmation for what I have just said. If you take 1900 as a dividing line in history, I think I can say it is the line which was crossed when there was a transition from societies in which there were oppressed majorities to societies in which there are relatively small oppressed minorities.

Can this line of progress be extrapolated? Can we hope for a society in the future which will provide the external conditions for the good human life for all its human beings, without exception?

I hope you will be tempted to answer this question as I would answer it: in the affirmative. 

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max,

How are you? I just wanted to let you know how things are going. I finally received my degree and am teaching history at a private high school. Every week I have my students read an excerpt from The Great Ideas book you put together. Dr. Adler has become a popular name among the students. We discuss the great ideas as often as possible. I am a new teacher, but Dr. Adler's Paideia Program has given me wisdom that most teachers are lacking. Thought you might want to know. Thank you for keeping Dr. Adler's dream alive.

P.S. In the future I will be asking for pedagogical advice and resources. Thanks

Nick Trosclair

Dear Max,

I just wanted to let you know that I took your advice: not only did I *join* a Great Books Discussion Group, but I co-founded one! One of the local rabbis in my community is an avid Adler admirer, and utilizes the method of the Great Books discussion in teaching his high school students. We spoke last week and decided to start a Great Books Discussion Group in our community in Far Rocka-

way, NY. We'll be following the reading list printed in The Great Ideas Program. Today we had our first discussion about Plato's Apology. Rabbi Rapoport even started a blog to record our ideas and to allow us to keep up our conversation throughout the week. We've decided to keep a small group (currently seven), and the future looks promising.

I wanted to thank you for making the suggestion to join a Great Books Discussion Group. Without your recommendation, I probably would have just sat here reading the Great Books alone, and not nearly gained as much. I have no doubt that this is the beginning of an adventure which will greatly enhance my learning and my life.

Sincerely,

Matt Schneeweiss

Sean Ross asks:

Are good and evil real? What does it mean to say a categorical descriptor like "evil" is or is not real? Come weigh in on the thread: "The ontology of good and evil" on the Ethics Forum.

<http://www.thegreatideas.org/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=61>

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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