



*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.* —Mortimer Adler

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## ARE THERE CRITERIA BY WHICH WE CAN JUDGE OUR CENTURY AND OUR SOCIETY?

**Mortimer J. Adler**

(I)

WE can have objective criteria for judging our century and our society only if value judgments have validity—only if we know what is really good for man as man. The objective truth of moral philosophy thus enables us to transcend what the anthropologists and social scientists like to call the “ethnocentric predicament.” We could not extricate ourselves from that predicament if there were no way of judging the value-system of another culture or the institutions of another society without assuming the validity of our own. But if that were the case, we could not even assess our society or culture without begging the question. (Let me again say in passing that some of the professors in our universities who appeal to the ethnocentric predicament seldom hesitate to pass harsh moral judgments—often in a tone of high certitude—about our own society and culture.) However, since there are real goods that correspond to natural needs, things that are good for every human being because he is human, without regard to the social or cultural circumstances under which he lives, we are in a position to judge the value-systems and institutions of particular cultures and societies—our own as well as others—by using the scale of values that

our teleological ethics sets up as a measure of their goodness or badness.

We have already done precisely that when, at an earlier point, we considered the external factors or circumstances that affect the individual's pursuit of happiness in its relation to the good of others and the good of the community. In this connection, I distinguished between ideal or pathological conditions of society. I explained that I meant by pathological conditions the social or economic circumstances of civil strife or external war, of poverty and destitution, of chattel slavery or back-breaking toil. I pointed out that the conditions of social life may be so poor and so primitive that no man can make a good life for himself and that when the social conditions are still far from ideal but the pathology is less extreme, the opportunity of making a good life may be open only to the few. To recognize, as we must, that in the whole of human history the social conditions of human life have been, in varying degrees, defective from the point of view of human happiness is to judge all historic societies by reference to the real goods that constitute a good human life as a whole. To do this is to transcend the ethno-centric predicament by reference to a scale of values relative only to the nature of man, and not to any historic culture.

One other earlier point is relevant here. Man's basic natural right is his right to the pursuit of happiness; all subsidiary natural rights are rights to the partial goods that are means to the end of a good life. We have in these natural rights the objective and trans-cultural standard for measuring the justice of governments, and the justice of economic and social institutions as well. A just government is one that secures to every man his natural rights and protects him from injury by other men. In addition, in order to be fully just, a government, by shaping the economic and social arrangements of society to this end, must promote the general welfare in which all men participate equally, thus helping each and every one of them to attain real goods that they need but that are not wholly within their power to get for themselves.

We are now in a position to formulate in summary fashion the standard by which we can judge the relative merits of different societies and cultures. One society and culture is better than another in proportion as its technological conditions, its political, economic, and social institutions, and its actual value-system promotes or facilitates a really good life for a *larger percentage* of its human beings. One society and culture is worse than another in proportion as its various components (those just mentioned) work in the opposite way—to deprive a *larger percentage* of its mem-

bers of the external conditions they need in order to make good lives for themselves, or to impede, interfere with, or even discourage their efforts in this direction. The ideal, of course, is a society and culture that provides *all* its members—all *without exception*—with the external conditions they need, and at the same time encourages them in their pursuit of the good life.

In these summary statements, I have not separated political, economic, and social conditions, on the one hand, from cultural conditions, on the other. Since these two sets of conditions do not operate in the same fashion—since, in fact, there may be a large gap between the promise held out by the one and the degree of performance promoted by the other—it is necessary to deal more fully with each set of conditions by itself.

( 2 )

What should government do, in shaping the political, economic, and social institutions of a society, to safeguard, facilitate, and advance the pursuit of happiness by all its people?

On the conceptual plane, there can hardly be a better statement of the objectives of government than the one made in the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States. These objectives are:

To establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty.

Taken together with the proposition in the Declaration of Independence, that all men, being by nature equal, are equal in all their natural rights, rights that a just government must attempt to secure equally for all, the objectives set forth in the Preamble provide a standard for measuring the goodness of any government, including our own at various stages in its history from the beginning to the present day.

Let us now consider these objectives in relation to the parts of a good life—the constitutive and instrumental means that the individual must employ in his effort to make a whole good life for himself. For the present purpose, I am going to set forth these elements or factors in a fashion somewhat different from earlier enumerations of them. There are, in this enumeration, seven classes of goods.

(1) *Goods of the body*, such as health, vigor, and the pleasures of sense.

(2) *Goods of the mind*, such as knowledge, understanding, prudence, and even a modicum of wisdom, together with such goods of the mind's activity as skills of inquiry and of critical judgment, and the arts of creative production.

(3) *Goods of character*, such aspects of moral virtue as temperance and fortitude, together with justice in relation to the rights of others and the goods of the community.

(4) *Goods of personal association*, such as family relationships, friendships, and loves.

(5) *Political goods*, such as domestic tranquility—both civil and external peace—and political liberty under constitutional government, together with the protection of individual freedom by the prevention of violence, aggression, coercion, or intimidation.

(6) *Economic goods*, such as a decent supply of the means of subsistence; living and working conditions conducive to health; medical care; opportunities for access to the pleasures of sense, as well as to the pleasures of play and aesthetic pleasures; opportunities for access to the goods of the mind through educational facilities in youth and in adult life; and enough free time from subsistence-work, both in youth and in adult life, to take full advantage of these opportunities.

(7) *Social goods*, such as equality of status, of opportunity, and of treatment in all matters affecting the dignity of the human person.

Of these seven classes or categories of goods, the first four belong to the inner or private life of the individual. They are acquired and preserved by him as a result of the way in which he conducts himself, employs his faculties, and husbands his personal resources. Whether or not he acquires and accumulates these goods in the course of his life depends mainly on him. This is particularly true of the goods of character and of personal association; these are the least dependent on the good fortune of beneficent external circumstances. With regard to his acquirement of the goods of the body and the goods of the mind, the individual is more dependent on favorable external conditions—on conditions conducive to health and provisions for medical care, in the case of bodily goods; on opportunities for schooling, learning, and creative work, and on having enough free time to take advantage of these opportunities. in the

case of the goods of the mind. So with regard to all the goods subsumed under the first four categories, the actions of government can do no more than abet the pursuit of happiness *indirectly* by the action it takes in the sphere of political, economic, and social goods.

The last three classes of goods are environmental or external in the sense that the individual's possession of them is mainly dependent on the outer or public conditions of his life. Thus, unless he is fortunate enough to live in a republic—under constitutional government or a government of laws—and unless he is among those who are enfranchised as citizens with suffrage under that constitution, he will be deprived of political liberty. Unless he has either income—producing property or what I am going to call the “economic equivalents of property,” he will not have, through forms of wealth and the things wealth can provide, the economic goods he needs for the pursuit of happiness—things that are good not only because they maintain his life and health, but because they facilitate his acquirement of other goods, especially the goods of the mind or the goods of leisure. Unless he enjoys equality of status, opportunity, and treatment, he will, in varying degrees, be deprived of access to the goods he needs for his personal development and for the enhancement of his dignity as a person.

Therefore, insofar as government can shape and control the political, economic, and social institutions of the community, it secures the individual's right to make a good life for himself largely through measures that directly affect his possession of political, economic, and social goods and, indirectly, through them, other goods that are not wholly within the power of the individual. It cannot do anything about the acquirement and possession of the goods that are wholly within the individual's own power, such as the goods of character. And with respect to the goods of the body, the goods of the mind, and even the goods of personal relationships, it can contribute only indirectly through the external or environmental goods that minister to them.

Thus, it may be practicable now, though it was not always practicable in the past, for a government to see that no individual starves or is under-nourished; but no government, now or ever, can see to it that he is temperate and does not ruin his health by gluttony. Similarly, it may be practicable now for a government to provide adequate educational facilities for every child and even for every adult; but no government can prevent an individual from neglecting these opportunities, or compel him to acquire and use the goods of the mind. A government can give every man suffrage and, therewith, political liberty, but it cannot give him the civic virtue

whereby he uses that freedom well, just as it cannot make him just in his use of other forms of freedom that it grants him and safeguards.

In the light of the foregoing, let us look once more at the objectives of government, set forth in the Preamble, in relation to the individual's right to the pursuit of happiness, and his right to the life and liberty he needs to pursue it.

We can now see that security of life and limb, political liberty, and freedom from coercion and intimidation are themselves among the environmental goods that contribute to the individual's making a good life for himself. We can see, furthermore, that with respect to these political goods, the individual's pursuit of happiness can be directly promoted by government. This also applies to the political good that is peace, both domestic and foreign. All these goods are covered by the clauses in the Preamble that mention domestic tranquility, the common defense, and the blessings of liberty as fundamental objectives of government. But security of life and limb does not exhaust the meaning of the right to life, for that involves economic as well as political conditions. Nor do political liberty and freedom from coercion or intimidation exhaust the meaning of the right to liberty. That also involves economic factors, conditions that provide the freedom of a man's time from subsistence-work and a certain degree of independence from other men with regard to his hold on the means of subsistence. These economic aspects of the right to life and liberty, together with all the other economic goods that are elements of human happiness and are involved in its pursuit, are covered in the Preamble in the clause concerning the promotion of the general welfare—both economic and social welfare.

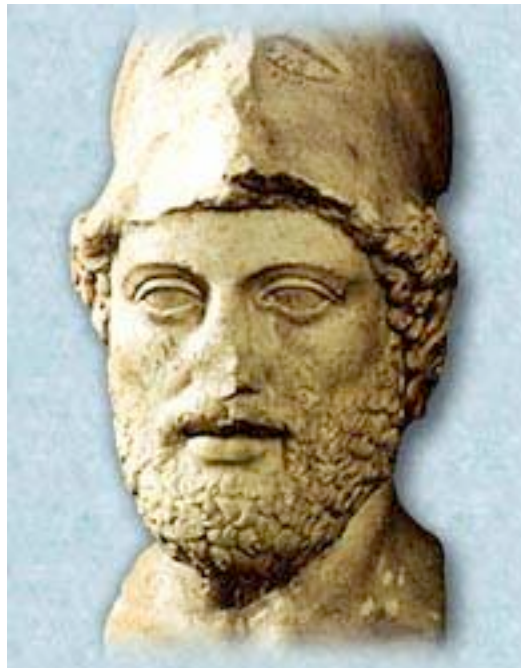
Add to this the clause calling for the establishment of justice, and the picture is completed. Justice is concerned with the distribution of economic and social as well as political goods. If justice requires a government to treat equals (that is, all human beings, equal in their specific nature) equally, and to render to each what is due him by natural right, then to establish justice a government must establish social and economic as well as political democracy. It establishes political democracy by the institution of universal suffrage, whereby it grants to every man the equal status of enfranchised citizenship and, with that, the political liberty and a share in the sovereignty to which all are equally entitled. It establishes economic democracy by whatever measures or institutions promote the general economic welfare in such a way that every man has at least the indispensable minimum of economic goods he needs for a

good life. It establishes social democracy by its efforts to remove all forms of ethnic and racial discrimination, and by eliminating whatever residual class distinctions may remain after the division of society into political and economic classes has been overcome. By all these institutions, measures, and efforts, a just government moves toward the ideal of the classless society, in which alone an equality of conditions is fully achieved for all men.

( 3 )

So much for the obligations of government to safeguard and promote the attainment of human happiness. In what ways does the culture of a society—especially the value-system that underlies its mores—encourage the individual's efforts to make a good life for himself, or impede and frustrate those efforts?

Earlier I quoted Plato's remark that what is honored in a society is likely to be cultivated there. Few individuals can be expected to have the heroic virtue to be such complete nonconformists that they will seek what they ought to seek in their own lives, against the over-bearing pressure of social disapproval or even social disinterest. It is extremely difficult for the individual to seek for himself the things that are not honored or valued in a society, or completely to turn his back on the things that are honored there, though wrongly so.



Another quotation relevant here is the passage from Pericles' *Funeral Oration*, in which he praises the culture of Athens as one that honors the things that should be cultivated in a society whose scale of values accords with the order of the real goods. Let us ignore his rhetorical purpose to bolster the morale of the Athenians at a dark moment of the Peloponnesian war, when they had suffered

defeats in the field. What he tells his fellow-citizens may not have been true of Athenian society in his day; it nonetheless de-

dicts what should be true of a society if its culture is to promote the pursuit of human happiness.

Pericles says first:

Our constitution . . . favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way . . . The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends to our ordinary life . . . But all this ease in our private relations does not make us lawless as citizens.

Then he goes on to make the following observations about Athenian culture:

We provide plenty of means for the mind to refresh itself from business. We celebrate games . . . all the year around, and the elegance of our private establishments forms a source of daily pleasure . . .

We cultivate refinement without extravagance and knowledge without effeminacy; wealth we employ more for use than for show, and place the real disgrace of poverty not in owning to the fact, but in declining to struggle against it . . .

In short, I say that as a city we are the school of Hellas.

Partly by paraphrasing the words of Pericles and partly by extending his remarks, let me now briefly summarize the criteria for judging one culture as better than another by reference to its favorable or adverse effects on the pursuit of happiness. One culture is better than another (1) if it regards wealth always as a means to an end, and so does not look upon the continual expansion of the economy, beyond the production of useful wealth, as an end in itself, to which everything else should be sacrificed or subordinated; (2) if it subordinates business to the pursuits of leisure, the production and consumption of wealth to the goods of the mind; (3) if it provides ample means for the mind to refresh itself from business, through the pleasures of play, through the enjoyment of the arts, through the advancement of the sciences, and through all forms of learning and of creative work; (4) if it subordinates the goods of the body to the goods of the mind, and places its disapproval upon unlimited indulgence in sensual pleasures or even upon excessive preoccupation with amusements and recreations that do not contribute to the growth of the mind or the improvement of the individual as a person; (5) if it cultivates the refinements of life and



even a modest degree of elegance, but at the same time censures extravagance and the lust for luxuries, or even creature comforts and conveniences beyond all reasonable needs; (6) if it honors the man of private and civic virtue above the man who succeeds, by foul means or fair, in the rat-race for power, fame, or wealth; (7) if, in short, it esteems intrinsic human excellence above any and every form of merely external or worldly success.

How does a society honor the things that should be cultivated if its members are to be aided and abetted in their pursuit of happiness? One part of the answer lies in the cultural institutions that it creates, maintains, and develops at the public expense—its libraries, its museums of art and of science, its theaters, its public parks, and so on. But the heart of the answer lies in that one of its cultural institutions that most directly affects every individual—its educational system, not only its schools, colleges, and universities, but also the educational facilities it provides for continued learning in adult life.

I am not concerned here with equality of educational opportunity, but rather with the quality of the schooling and other educational opportunities afforded both young and old, if, for example, all children were given an equal number of years of schooling from kindergarten through college or university and if, in addition, they enjoyed equal educational facilities during those years, but the schooling they received was directed mainly toward technological and economic advances rather than to the pursuits of leisure and the development of human excellence, the educational system would operate against rather than for the individual's making a good life for himself.

To know whether the culture of a society is favorable to the pursuit of happiness, one need look no further than the scale of values embodied in its educational system—the objectives it is designed to serve. Only if an educational system subordinates every mode of specialized, technical, professional, or vocational training to discipline in the liberal arts and to all forms of humanistic learning for their own sake—only if it places truly liberal education first, and relegates all merely utilitarian programs of education to second place—does it reflect a scale of values that accords with the order of real goods in the pursuit of happiness. Then and only then do we have a persuasive sign that the culture of a society is beneficent because it honors the things that should be cultivated there for the sake of a good human life.



From his book *The Time of Our Lives: The Ethics of Common Sense*.

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