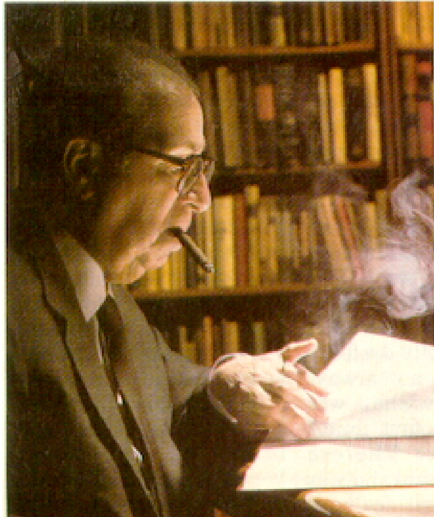
THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Nov '03 Nº 249



"Such value-agnosticism in the academic enterprise," President Lamm went on to say, "is self-destructive... An educational system that is amoral in the name of 'scientific objectivity,' thus devours its own young . . . Permitting a generation of students to grow up as ethical illiterates and moral idiots, unprepared to cope with ordinary life experiences, is a declaration of education bankruptcy."

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ETHICS: FOURTH CENTURY B.C. AND TWENTIETH CENTURY A.D.

MORTIMER J. ADLER

[Part I of 2]

In 1986, on the 100th anniversary of Yeshiva College in New York City, the president of the college, Norman Lamm, gave a convocation address that was later published in the New York Times. He said that "until about fifty years ago, it was commonly accepted that the university was responsible for offering its students moral guidance." Since then moral skepticism, the view that value judgments, judgments about what is good and evil, right and wrong, cannot have objective validity, has been regnant in our colleges. It did not begin in the 1960s, as one might suppose by reading Allan Bloom's book *The Closing of the American Mind* (see George Anastaplo's commentary on the book elsewhere in this volume). In 1940 I wrote an article for Harper's Magazine, entitled "This Pre-War Generation," which described the inroads then of

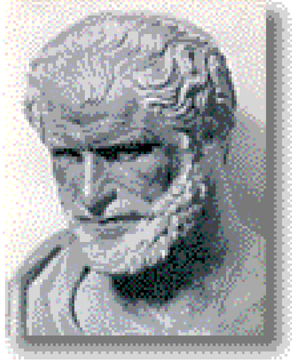
moral skepticism at the University of Chicago, Mr. Bloom's university.

"Such value-agnosticism in the academic enterprise," President Lamm went on to say, "is self-destructive.... An educational system that is amoral in the name of 'scientific objectivity,' thus devours its own young . . . Permitting a generation of students to grow up as ethical illiterates and moral idiots, unprepared to cope with ordinary life experiences, is a declaration of education bankruptcy."

"Moral idiots" is strong talk, but it does express the repugnance that is evoked by those who deny objective validity to all moral judgments. In doing so they take the view expressed by the sophist Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* that might is right—that those who have the power to tyrannize over others, whether that be an absolute despot or a democratic majority, cannot be rationally condemned as unjust or as violating human rights. Those who are oppressed by such tyranny may not like it, but they cannot, in the court of reason, contend that it is wrong, assuming that one view or another must prevail.

Lest readers suppose that I am conjuring up an amoral monster, let me quote some statements by Judge Robert Bork, who when I wrote this was President Reagan's nominee for a seat on the Supreme Court. Bork has been quoted as saying that no "system of ethical or moral values" has "objective or intrinsic validity of its own." He has written that "every clash between a majority and a minority claiming power to regulate involves a choice between gratifications"; and that "there is no principled way to decide that one man's gratifications are more deserving of respect than another's." The majority's gratifications should prevail because might is right.

Where did judge Bork learn to think and talk this way? At the University of Chicago in the 1940s. From whom did he learn it? From his professors in the social sciences who think and talk that way, and also from Professor Rudolf Carnap and other logical positivists in the philosophy department who regard ethics as a noncognitive discipline, concerned only with what feelings, desires, or impulses are expressed in talk about good and evil, right and wrong. All judgments about such matters are entirely subjective, relative to the individual and the circumstances of the time and place.



I have been aware of this academic rejection of moral philosophy as genuine knowledge—as a body of valid truths—since the 1930s. In various ways, in articles and lectures, I have attempted to combat it. Finally, in 1970, I published *The Time of Our Lives: The Ethics of Common Sense*, in which I reformulated the fundamental truths of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in twentieth-century terms and exposed the modern errors in ethics perpetuated by Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, John Stuart Mill and other utilitarians; and in a lengthy postscript (partly reprinted elsewhere in this issue under the title "A Commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*") I demon-strated why it can be said that Aristotle's *Ethics* contains the only sound, totally undogmatic, and thoroughly pragmatic moral phi-losophy that we have in the whole twenty-five centuries of West-ern thought.

Its soundness rests on the fact that only one self-evident prescriptive truth is required as a basis for all its prescriptive conclusions; its undogmatic character stems from the fact that it sets forth no ad hoc rules of conduct but instead attributes leading a good life to the effects of moral virtue and the benefits of good fortune; its pragmatic appeal is that it offers us an attainable goal in response to the question everyone must ask, "How should I live?" or "What is the right conduct of life?"

Since 1970 I have written other books that carried forward the main message of *The Time of Our Lives*: in 1978, the chapters in Part III of a book entitled *Aristotle for Everybody*; in 1981, chapters 10-13 in *Six Great Ideas*; and in 1985, chapters 5, 6, 8 in *Ten Philosophical Mistakes.*

It is against this background that I now comment on two recently published books by professors of philosophy—*After Virtue*, by Alasdair Maclntyre (1981), and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, by Bernard Williams (1985), especially the latter.

I was delighted by the critique of all post-seventeenth-century attempts to provide a sound moral philosophy that I found in the books by Maclntyre and Williams, which more than amply confirmed the criticism I myself had leveled at Hume, Kant, and J. S. Mill and other utilitarians in *The Time of Our Lives*. I was further

delighted by the praise that both authors lavished on Aristotle's *Ethics* as a great contribution to moral philosophy that we have inherited from antiquity.

At the same time, I was sorely puzzled and disturbed by the fact that both authors, each in his own way, found Aristotle's contribution flawed by its antiquity, so that it no longer remained as sound for us today as it once was for Greeks in the fourth century B.C.

Here I part company from them. In my view, Aristotle's moral philosophy is just as objectively true, just as pragmatically sound, just as practically wise today as it was then. In my view, human nature is exactly the same today as it was in Greek antiquity. In my view, all the manifold changes in our social, political, and economic institutions that have occurred since then, combined with all the extraordinary technological innovations that condition our lives today, are totally irrelevant to the problem we all face when we ask ourselves the primary ethical question: "How should I conduct my life?"

I reviewed Professor Maclntyre's book in *The Great Ideas Today* 1982, summarizing it by saying that, according to Professor Maclntyre, modern thought (lacking as it does the Aristotelian conception of moral virtue as a well-established habit of the will that directs it to the right final end and confers on it an habitual right choice of means to that end) is bankrupt when it tries to answer the question: *How should I conduct my life*? [1]

I went on to say that the bankruptcy of moral philosophy in modern times does not stem solely from the loss of the concept of moral virtue, but also from the loss of other elements in Aristotle's *Ethics* that are inextricably connected with its concept of moral virtue. Central to this is a nonhedonistic and nonpsychological conception of happiness as a normative, not a terminal, final end, re-

quiring nothing less for its realization than a whole life well-lived in accordance with virtue, and accompanied by a moderate possession of those external goods that are not entirely within the power of the individual to obtain, but which become ingredients in his or her life partly through the blessings of good fortune.

Apart from certain other defects in Maclntyre's understanding of Aristotle's *Ethics*, which I pointed out in my 1982 review of his book, my main objection to it was the fact that Professor Maclntyre tried to salvage the truth in Aristotle's ethical doctrine by abandoning Aristotle's conception of human nature, which is the rock on which his whole ethical edifice is built, while defending the un-Aristotelian view that everyone should he free to conceive happiness in his or her own way.

Professor Maclntyre's abandonment of Aristotle's conception of human nature came about, he tells us, in obedience to the scientific prejudice against Aristotle's "metaphysical biology" as well as to the existentialist dogma that there is no such thing as a common and constant human nature. [2] Maclntyre's rejection of the view that the lineaments of a morally good life as a whole are the same for all human beings was his attempt, he tells us, to placate a twentieth-century individualistic "liberalism" that insists upon allowing each individual to decide for himself how to live well.

After Virtue was Professor Maclntyre's faulty attempt to retain some currency for such truth as there is in Aristotle's *Ethics* by deflating it to accommodate these two contemporary prejudices, neither of which is defensible. I concluded my review of Mac-lntyre's book by saying that neither prejudice can be regarded as a good reason for replacing Aristotle's *Ethics* with a moral philosophy that is less sound, and that is especially deficient because it cannot combine a principle of unconditional moral obligation with a teleological consideration of means and ends.

Bernard Williams, the author of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, also reviewed Maclntyre's earlier book, and he gave it unstinting praise. However, in his own book, he did not follow Maclntyre by trying to resurrect Aristotle's *Ethics* in contemporary, if also somewhat deflated, terms. Professor Williams does believe that modern thought is completely bankrupt in moral philosophy, especially the dogmatic rationalism of Kant, and the hedonistic utilitarianism of J. S. Mill; he also thinks that in Greek antiquity Aristotle's *Ethics* was a remarkably sound solution of the problem of how to live well. But unlike Professor Maclntyre, Wil-

liams does not think that what was sound about Aristotle's ethical doctrine can be resuscitated in the contemporary world.

If that is really the case, then philosophy, so far as ethics is concerned, is today completely bankrupt. It may have achieved certain successes in other fields in the twentieth century, but it is now barred from attaining any truth with regard to morals. For us and our descendants, there is no valid philosophical solution to such questions as: How should I conduct my life? What should I do to live well? How can I succeed in the lifelong pursuit of happiness?

But are we in fact at this pass? I do not believe it. To someone like myself, who thinks that Aristotle's *Ethics* (as considered in my commentary to be found elsewhere in this issue, on pp. 290-311) is just as true objectively and just as sound practically in the twentieth century as it was in the fourth century B.C., the question that must be asked of Professor Williams is: What has changed in the world to cause him to change his view of Aristotle's *Ethics*—in his view, philosophically tenable and relevant for ancient Greeks, but, in his view, philosophically untenable and irrelevant for us today?

Before I try to answer this question, let me say at once that if Professor Williams were correct in his two main contentions—(1) that modern thought is bankrupt with regard to moral philosophy and (2) that Aristotle's moral philosophy, while practically sound and objectively true in Greek antiquity, is no longer tenable in the twentieth century or relevant to the conditions of life today—then we might have to concede that moral skepticism or Nietzschean nihilism cannot be condemned; that there are no objectively valid moral judgments about what is good or evil, right or wrong; and that Thrasymachus was correct in arguing against the Socratic view of justice and in asserting that might makes right.

But I do not think both of these contentions are right. Rather, as readers of books (cited earlier in this essay) I have published since 1970 already know, I heartily subscribe to the first of them and just as wholeheartedly reject the second. Hence I have never felt obliged to concede that moral skepticism is the only position we

can adopt. On the contrary, at least fifteen years before Professor Williams stated his objections to accepting any longer the moral wisdom contained in Aristotle's *Ethics* as a guide to living well, I wrote *The Time of Our Lives*, in which many of his objections were anticipated and, in my judgment, satisfactorily answered. Those that were not then anticipated can be answered now, I believe, as well.

Professor Williams attributes to Socrates in Plato's *Republic* the question that is the right starting point for moral inquiry and reflection. The question is, how should one live? "It is no ordinary matter that we are discussing," says Socrates, "but the right conduct of life" (*Republic* [cf. *GBWW*, Vol. 7, p. 309b]). Professor Williams comments on this by adding that the Greeks were impressed by the idea that "such a question must, consequently, be about a whole life and that a good way of living had to issue in what, at its end, would be seen to have been a good life. Impressed by the power of fortune to wreck what looked like the best-shaped life, some of them, Socrates, one of the first, sought a rational design of life which ... would be to the greatest possible extent luck-free" (pp. 4-5). [3]

With such help as he obtained from Plato, sifting the truths that he found in his teachings from the errors he also detected there, Aristotle formulated the rational design for living well that, according to Professor Williams, Socrates originally sought. This rational design belonged to practical philosophy in that it guided or directed us in our freely chosen actions, but it had its theoretical foundation in Aristotle's philosophical psychology—his conception of human nature and its species-specific potentialities.

If Aristotle's theory of human nature has been shown by modern science to be incorrect, it was incorrect in the fourth century B.C. as well as today; and it follows that Aristotle's moral philosophy, which had its basis in his view of human nature, was without foundation in antiquity as well as today.

If Professor Williams is right in claiming that Aristotle's moral philosophy is no longer valid for us because we can no longer accept his philosophical psychology as true, then Professor Williams must be wrong in thinking, as he appears to think, that it was a sound moral philosophy in antiquity.

Against Professor Williams, I contend that since the beginning of human life on earth some forty-five million years ago with the ap-

pearance of the species *homo sapiens sapiens*, specific human nature has not changed in any essential respect. The potentialities that constitute specific human nature are constant from generation to generation, and they will remain constant as long as the human species endures on earth. [4]

Aristotle's philosophical psychology is an analysis of those potentialities, from which is derived his account of man's inherent, natural needs and what is required for their fulfillment or actualization. This in turn leads to his insight about the distinction between real and apparent goods in relation to the distinction between natural and acquired desires—needs and wants.

It is a short step from this to the one underlying self-evident principle of moral philosophy—that we ought to want what we need, which is to say that we ought to desire everything that is really good for us, and that a good human life as a whole consists in the cumulative attainment of all the things that are really good for every human being, through moral virtue and good luck, together with getting such innocuous apparent goods as one or another individual may want for himself or herself.

Notes

1 The most striking difference between ethics and politics is that the development of political wisdom is dependent on history, as ethics is not.

I pointed out in *The Time of Our Lives* that the ethics of common sense is as old as the Greeks; Aristotle first expounded it. We may be able to improve on his exposition a little, by adding philosophical refinements here and there, but its essential outlines remain unaltered 2,500 years later. The extraordinary changes in the human environment that have taken place in that time—the myriad changes in the social institutions and in the technological conditions of human life—do not affect the answer that common sense, based on common experience, gives to the question, How can I make a good life for myself? In other words, what is really good for a man is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, because man is the same. Only a basic change in the nature of man, amounting to emergence of another species, would call for fundamentally different answers to the question about the good life.

In contrast to ethics, political thought is conditioned by the shape of existing institutions at a given historic moment and by the lim-

ited vision that such institutions give us of the possibility for further changes in the future. Revolution and progress operate in the sphere of politics as they do not operate in the sphere of ethics. What I have just said includes technological as well as institutional changes. Because it is so relevant here, let me recall my fundamental thesis that all progress which has so far been made in the social life of man has been accomplished by cumulative improvements in technology and in social institutions, without any improvement in the nature of mail."

The foregoing passage is quoted from *The Common Sense of Politics*, which I published in 1971.

2 The French existentialist Maurice Merleau-Ponty declared that "it is the nature of man not to have a nature." In a recent interview with Saul Bellow, the Nobel prizewinning novelist is quoted as saying "Some of us old curmudgeons grew up believing there was such a thing as human nature. All the evidence lately says no." What evidence? The extraordinary variety of human behavior that anthropologists, sociologists, and historians have found in different ethnic and racial groups of human beings? But, as I pointed out in chapter 8 of *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, this behavioral variety is entirely the result of nurtural and cultural differences, all of them superficial as compared with the common and constant species-specific properties of the human nature. These consist of all the behavioral potentialities that are the same everywhere at all times and places in the life of mankind on earth. These potentialities are what Aristotle thought human nature to be.

3 Socrates was wrong. A truly rational design for living well, if it also took account empirically of the tricks that fate and fortune play in our lives, would acknowledge that the conduct of our lives cannot be "luck-free" See an extraordinary book on this subject, recently published by Martha Nussbaum, entitled *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy.* What distinguishes Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and also his *Eudemian Ethics*, from the moral philosophy to be found in Plato's dialogues, and especially the thought he attributed to Socrates, is Aristotle's insistence upon the blessings of good fortune and the avoidance of serious misfortunes as necessary, if not sufficient, factors in the pursuit of happiness. That is why he called Priam, King of Troy, a morally good man because he was virtuous, but one who did not complete a good life because of his misfortunes.

4 See note 2 above.

From the 1988 edition of *The Great Ideas Today*.

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Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

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E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com

Homepage: http://www.thegreatideas.org/

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