



THE GOOD LIFE AND THE GOOD SOCIETY

MORTIMER ADLER

(I)

Politics is sometimes regarded as the sovereign or controlling discipline in the practical order—the order of action. It was called the architectonic discipline by Aristotle many centuries ago, and it was so called by Robert Hutchins in the recent essay I quoted earlier.

Mr. Hutchins explained why he regarded politics as architectonic. Politics, he said, aims at the common good. The common good is the end to be served by political action and political institutions. The common good—the good that is somehow shared or participated in by a number of individuals—would seem to be a greater good than the good of any one individual. John Stuart Mill and the utilitarians have argued in a similar manner. The general happiness, sometimes referred to as “the greatest good for the greatest number,” takes precedence over the happiness of any one individual.

Hence if ethics is the discipline that is concerned with the good life for the single individual and politics the discipline that is concerned with the common good, the general happiness, or the general welfare, politics would seem to be architectonic, by virtue of having a superior end in view.

Though the argument appears to be clear and cogent as thus stated, it needs further clarification with regard to its basic terms. The truth of the matter is more complicated. Without denying the sense in which politics is architectonic, I will try to show that ethics is architectonic in another and more fundamental sense.

We have already observed that ethics and politics are related branches of practical or moral philosophy—both are practical in that they are concerned with action; and both are moral or normative in that they deal prescriptively with ends and means: with what ends ought to be sought or aimed at, and with what means should be devised or chosen to achieve those ends. To distinguish them as related branches of moral philosophy, I would like to repeat an earlier statement that I made about the end or ultimate good with which each is concerned.

The sphere of ethics is the good human life. Its primary and controlling question is: *What ought a man do in order to make his life really good?* And its primary normative principle is that every man ought to try to make a really good life for himself. The sphere of politics is the good society. Its primary question is: *What institutions should be devised and how should they be organized and operated in order to produce a good society?* But what is the primary normative principle of politics? Is there one comparable to the first principle of ethics—that one ought to seek everything that is really good for oneself and nothing but that which is really good?

When one understands the distinction between real and appar-

ent goods, it is immediately evident that real goods ought to be desired; and hence that a good life, consisting in the possession of all real goods, ought to be sought. That principle is self-evident; it is the one and only self-evident principle in ethics. The comparable first principle of politics would appear to be that a good society ought to be aimed at. But here we can give a reason for the *ought*; and since we can, that principle is not self-evident as is the first principle of ethics. [1]

The reason, which will become clearer as we proceed, is that the good society is itself an indispensable or necessary means to the achievement of a really good life by the human beings who comprise it. Thus we see that the ultimate end at which politics aims, the good society, is itself a means to the ultimate end with which ethics is concerned, the good human life. This being so, politics is subordinate to ethics. The ordering of the good society to the good life, as means to end, makes ethics architectonic.

Now let me return to the other way of looking at the same picture, in which it still remains true that politics is architectonic. When it stays strictly within its own sphere, ethics considers only the means that the individual—a single human being—ought to employ in order to achieve the really good life that he ought to make for himself. Politics enters the picture, even with regard to the good life for a single individual, because there are certain goods involved that are not within the individual's power. He depends upon the existence, institutions, and actions of organized society for certain of the things that he needs in order to make a good life for himself.

However, in providing the individual with the conditions or means that are not wholly within his own power or mastery, organized society does not restrict itself to any one single individual. The institutions and operations of organized society always affect a number of individuals—in fact, *all* the individuals who comprise it. In saying this, I do not mean that society always provides the conditions of a good life for *all* its members. On the contrary, it never has done so in the course of history so far. Up to the present, organized society, at its best, has always favored some and disfavored others. The numbers of those whom it has benefited, by helping them to lead good lives for themselves, has varied from the few to the many, but it has never been *all*.

Nevertheless, it remains true that insofar as organized society has been good to any degree whatsoever, its goodness has consisted in its promoting the pursuit of happiness (i.e., the effort to make a really good life) for some number of individuals: whether the *few* or the *many*, but always *more than one*, even if never *all*. Hence politics, in being concerned with the good society, which is a means to the good life of its members (few, many, or all), has as its ultimate concern the good life or happiness of a number of individuals. Since the ultimate good of a number of individuals is

greater than the ultimate good of a single individual, politics aims at a greater good, and is in this sense architectonic. The truth that politics is architectonic in this sense remains quite compatible with the truth that ethics is architectonic in the sense that the good society, at which politics aims, is itself a means to the good life, with which ethics is concerned.

Let me restate the point another way. The good life provides the standard or measure for judging the goodness of organized society; in this respect, politics presupposes ethics, and ethics is architectonic or primary. The good society is indispensable as a means to the good life, and in providing the conditions that the individual cannot provide for himself, it serves the general happiness rather than the happiness of a single individual. In this sense, and only in this sense, is politics architectonic. [2]

(2)

The term “common good” has played a critical role in the preceding discussion. It has a number of meanings that we must distinguish and keep clear.

One of its meanings derives from that sense of “common” that refers to what is the same in a number of individuals. Thus, all real goods, which satisfy the natural needs of man, are common goods. Human nature being the same in all individual members of the human species, natural needs are the same in all individuals. Real goods being the goods that satisfy natural needs, they, too, are the same for all individuals. Consisting in the possession of all real goods, a really good life or happiness is the same for all men. Happiness or the good life is, therefore, a common good in this sense of the word “common.”

But there is another sense in which something can be common to a number of individuals, not through their being the same in this or that respect, but through their participating or sharing in that one thing. Thus, for example, a tract of land is called a “common” when it is not exclusively owned by anyone and is shared by a number of individuals. In this sense, the good of an organized community is a common good, in which some (few, many, or all) of its members share. When we speak of the good society, the good we are referring to is the goodness of the organized community as such, and this goodness is a common good, one that is shared by or participated in by its members.

Two Latin phrases may help us to remember this distinction of senses. *Bonum commune hominis* signifies the good that is common to a number of men simply because as men they are all the same; *bonum commune communitatis* signifies the good that is common to a number of individuals because they are members of one and the same organized community. It should now be clear that the common good enters into the considerations of politics in

both senses of the term. Since it aims at the good society, politics is concerned directly with the *bonum commune communitatis*, the good or goods of the organized community in which its members share—some at least, if not all. And since the good society is itself a means to the good life, politics is concerned indirectly with the *bonum commune hominis*—the ultimate good or happiness that is the same for all men because they are men.

(3)

Because ethics and politics are related in the ways that have been indicated, it is almost impossible for an exposition of either subject to avoid crossing the line that separates them. But the reason why a treatise on ethics as a branch of moral philosophy must deal with certain matters that belong to politics is not the same as the reason why a treatise on politics—again as a branch of moral philosophy—must advert to ethical considerations.

If all the conditions requisite for or all the means involved in making a really good life were wholly within the individual's control, it would not be at all necessary for a treatise on ethics to discuss the institutions of society, for they would play no significant role in the pursuit of happiness. But this is not the case. On the contrary, such things as war, slavery, poverty, unhealthy conditions of life, lack of educational opportunity, deprivation of liberty, lack of free time, and so on, clearly affect the pursuit of happiness; and it is equally clear that whether such conditions or their opposites exist lies beyond the power of the single individual to control. Whether or not these adverse conditions or their opposites prevail lies within the power of the organized community, to whatever extent they are subject to human control at a given time in history.

Hence in expounding the truths of ethics, the moral philosopher cannot avoid discussing the role that the institutions of organized society play in the pursuit of happiness. But his incursion into politics need go no further than the making of the following three points.

- (1) That men have natural rights, among which the primary right is the right to the pursuit of happiness, all subsidiary rights being rights to whatever means are indispensable for the pursuit of happiness. [3]
- (2) That the goodness of an organized society is measured by the degree to which it secures the natural rights of its members, the best society being one that secures *all* natural rights for *all* its members. [4]
- (3) That so far as, at any time, it succeeds in doing this, the good society does it in two ways: *negatively*, by preventing

one individual or one group of individuals from injuring others by violating their natural rights; *positively*, by promoting the general welfare—that is, by aiding and abetting the individual’s pursuit of happiness with regard to those conditions of its pursuit that he cannot provide for himself.
[5]

A treatise on ethics need not deal with political matters, beyond these few simple points. To go beyond this is the task of political philosophy, which it discharges when it defines and delineates the institutional means by which organized society serves the pursuit of happiness on the part of more and more men.

(4)

While it is the main business of political philosophy to deal in detail with matters that need only be mentioned in ethics for their bearing on the good life, politics in thus going beyond ethics cannot leave ethics behind. Since the good life for the individual (one, some, or all) constitutes the normative standard by which we judge the relative goodness of one set of social institutions as compared with another, the formulations of the political philosopher must at all critical points be controlled by his understanding of the good life and of its necessary conditions. It is for this reason that a treatise on politics cannot avoid an exposition of matters that belong properly to ethics.

A few ethical principles have been mentioned in the preceding pages. The remainder that are of relevance to politics can be briefly summarized, for no more is needed than the bare statement—without analysis or argument—of truths that constitute the ethical presuppositions of the political philosopher. [6] The summary follows.

As the ultimate good to be sought by the individual, the good life consists in the possession and enjoyment of all the real goods that satisfy a man’s natural needs. I will from time to time use the word “happiness” as a strict synonym for “a whole life that is really good.” And I will use the phrase “the pursuit of happiness” as equivalent in meaning to “the effort to make one’s life really good.” This usage of the word “happiness” is strictly ethical and excludes all the psychological and hedonic connotations of the word in ordinary speech, in which it refers to an experienced pleasurable state of contentment or satisfaction. In its ethical as opposed to its psychological connotation, happiness as a whole life that is really good cannot be experienced or enjoyed at any moment or period of one’s life. To understand this is to understand that happiness or a good life is strictly a normative, not a terminal end. It is not something that can be achieved, possessed, and enjoyed at a given moment in time. Happiness thus conceived is not

the *summum bonum* or highest good, but the *totum bonum*, the whole of goods. The happy or good life is one in which all real goods are present—one that suffers no deprivation of any of the real goods that a man needs. [7]

The real goods that constitute the *totum bonum* or whole of goods can be exhaustively enumerated under the following seven headings.

- (1) *Goods of the body*, such as health, vigor, and the pleasures of sense.
- (2) *Goods of the mind*, such as knowledge, understanding, 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 peace, both civil and external, and political liberty, 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, the pleasures of play, and aesthetic pleasures; opportunities for access to the goods of the mind through educational facilities in youth and 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. Whether or not he acquires and accumulates them in the course of his life depends mainly on him. With regard to these goods, the actions of government can do no more than abet the pursuit of happiness *indirectly*, by the actions 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. It is with respect to these three types of goods that the institutions of society and the actions of government exert a *direct* effect, favorable or adverse, on the individual's pursuit of happiness. [8]

The fact that all men have the same natural rights stems from the fact that all men have the same natural needs. Therefore, what is really good for any man is really good for all men. Let me spend a moment more on the significance of this. My natural needs make certain things really good for me. The things that are really good for me impose moral obligations on me in the conduct of my private life. These, in turn, give me certain moral or natural rights, and my having such rights imposes moral obligations on other individuals and on the organized community with respect to me. Hence, as my primary moral obligation is to make a really good life for myself, so my primary natural right is my right to the pursuit of happiness.

All of my subsidiary natural rights—rights to life, security and life and limb, a decent livelihood, freedom from coercion, political liberty, educational opportunities, medical care, sufficient free time for the pursuits of leisure, and so on—derive from my right to the pursuit of happiness and from my obligation to make a good life for myself. They are rights to the things that I need in order to achieve that end and to discharge that obligation. If I did not have that one basic natural right, I would not have any subsidiary natural rights, because all other natural rights relate to the elements of individual happiness or to the parts of a good life—the diverse real goods that, taken together, constitute the whole that is the sum of all these parts. [9]

An individual's obligations toward his fellow men derive from the natural rights that are theirs as well as his. His *direct* obligations in justice to other individuals are all *negative*. They require him, as far as that is possible, to do nothing that inflicts injury on them by depriving them of the things they need in order to make good lives for themselves. Hence these obligations are based on the rights involved in their making good lives for themselves. They are all duties not to *prevent* others from doing so.

The individual's one *positive* obligation in justice to his fellow-men is *indirect* in the sense that it is an obligation to act for rather than against the good of the community (the *bonum communitatis*) and for rather than against all institutional changes that favor the pursuit of happiness by more and more individual members of the community in which he lives. Since the *bonum communitatis* is itself one of the real goods and a good that each individual needs in making a good life for himself, acting for the good of the community indirectly helps others in their pursuit of happiness. Since the institutions of society can either help or hinder an individual with regard to certain goods that he cannot obtain wholly by his own

efforts, acting for institutional changes that help rather than hinder his acquirement of such goods indirectly aids others in their pursuit of happiness. [10]

Not all the things that a man desires are really good for him in the sense of satisfying natural needs. Some are merely apparent goods—things that he consciously wants without needing them. Seeking such apparent goods may or may not interfere with the individual's acquirement of all the real goods that he needs. If they do not interfere with or impair his possession of real goods, these apparent goods are innocuous rather than detrimental.

In contrast to real goods, which are all common goods—the same for all men because they are the objects of natural desire, apparent goods are individual, not common goods, for they answer to the idiosyncratic desires or conscious wants of this or that individual. Since the good of the community (*bonum commune communitatis*) is a real good and an element in the total common good of the individual (*totum bonum commune*), no disorder results when the state requires the individual to sacrifice or give up individual goods (*bonum individuale*) that come into conflict with the good of the community. On the contrary, the state is then only requiring the individual to give up individual goods that are detrimental to his own ultimate good. Since the good of the community (*bonum commune communitatis*) is good only as a means to the happiness of its individual members (*bonum commune hominis*), society is never justified in subordinating to its own good the ultimate good of its human members. [11]

(5)


It is necessary to add one critical qualification that must be placed upon the obligations of justice. No one—neither the individual nor society—can be expected to do what, at the time, is impossible; failure to do the impossible is not morally culpable.

Men are morally responsible only for what it is within their power to do or not to do; similarly, societies and governments are morally accountable only within the limits of the possible. This, of course, raises a crucial question of fact about what is possible or impossible at a given time in history, under the circumstances that exist at that time. The familiar saying that politics is the art of the possible epigrammatically expresses the point that the application of moral criteria—especially the criteria of justice and injustice—to political action is limited by the consideration of what is feasible at a given time and under given circumstances. This limitation is removed only by *ideal conditions*—conditions under which doing complete justice is possible, when no injustice can be condoned on the grounds that it is unavoidable.

Herein lies the crucial difference between practicable and utopian ideals in the sphere of politics. The good society as a practi-

cable ideal is one that is intrinsically possible, even though it has not yet existed so far under any set of historic circumstances. In contrast, a utopian ideal not only is one that has no historic reality so far, but also one that, in the very nature of the case, lies beyond the bounds of possibility.

We will look more closely, in Chapter 4, at the relation of politics to history. We shall see that history has a bearing on political thought, and especially on the growth of political wisdom, that it does not have on ethics. This, as we shall see, arises from the fact that politics is the art of the possible, as ethics is not; and that the political philosopher depends upon historical developments for his changing demarcation of the possible from the impossible. The three great revolutions with which we shall be concerned in Chapter 5 have opened our eyes to realizable possibilities that were not imaginable to our ancestors—to those who lived long before these revolutions occurred.

With these preliminaries covered, I will then, in Parts Two and Three, attempt to set forth the basic principles of political wisdom, so far as such wisdom is available to us *at this time in history*. The exposition of these universal principles will, in effect, delineate the shape of the good society as a practicable, not a utopian ideal—one not yet achieved, but genuinely achievable. Finally, in Part Four, I will consider the steps that remain to be taken in order to bring into existence the best society that is now seen to be practically possible. And I will there deal with the question whether there can and must be an end to political progress and a cessation of political revolution—in a future which lies beyond that point in time when the best society that we can now conceive of is fully realized in the institutions that men have devised and perfected. 

ENDNOTES

1. See *The Time of Our Lives*, Ch. 19, esp. pp. 94—95.
2. See *ibid.*, pp. 5—6, 258—261, Note 2 on p. 333; and Note 17 on pp. 301—302. Since the end with which politics is concerned is the good society, and since the good society is not an ultimate end but only an indispensable means to the good human life, which is the ultimate end of human action and the end with which ethics is concerned, politics is subordinate to ethics in the order of means and ends. But since the end with which ethics is concerned is the good life for the individual, whereas politics, in aiming at the good society, is concerned with the good life of a number of individuals, politics has a greater good in view, though it aims at this greater good indirectly through the ordination of the good society, which is its direct and immediate objective, to the good life for man, which is its remote

and ultimate objective.

3. See *ibid.*, pp. 140—143.
4. See *ibid.*, pp. 122—123, 203—205, and Notes 17 and 18 on p. 293.
5. See *ibid.*, pp. 183—184.
6. See *The Time of Our Lives*, esp. Ch. 9—11, 13—16, for argument in support of the ethical principles presupposed by the political philosopher.
7. See *ibid.*, pp. 104—109.
8. See *ibid.*, pp. 207—209.
9. See *ibid.*, pp. 140—147.
10. See *ibid.*, pp. 182—184.
11. See *ibid.*, pp. 180—182, and Note 7 on pp. 315—316.

Chapter 2 from his book, *The Common Sense of Politics*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hi Max,

Crichton's lecture is excellent. Great choice.

Michael Miller

Hello Max:

I certainly enjoyed the subject article and also found it hilarious. It was a timely speech by Crichton who is well qualified to make his assessment. Having worked in the environmental area for 30+ years, I have actively resisted the global warming hypothesis being called a fact for years by activists and news media. I worked in the American Petroleum Institute through Shell Oil and voiced my opposition loudly, as my concerns for the climate models left me cold. Having modeled emissions from stacks and exhausts in my job, I know the calculations are based upon extrapolated past climate data and the assumptions are truly questionable. However in

air pollution estimates, we did the best we could with air and climate models but always knew they were just poor estimates and no more. We felt our estimates for pollutant dispersion were probably within a range of 2-10 and in most cases were designed to be very conservative so as to protect public health. Global warming being estimated out to 100 years is absurd.

Thanks for the article. I have sent to many of my industry and scientist friends. Crichton tells it like it is and I agree with him totally. Hard science and public policy need to be evaluated by the Bush Administration to shut down politically correct science. If this is not done, we are in deep trouble as to finding out the truth about anything.

Your friend,

Bill Freeman

Max,

Very politically incorrect of you to publish this [Crichton]. Keep up the good work!

Jim Reardon

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