



GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

MORTIMER J. ADLER

The above title is from a book published in 1961, consisting of 107 questions from readers and Dr. Adler's answers from his syndicated newspaper column. This is and has been one of the most sought after and hard to find of his out of print books.

We have recently finished scanning this book and will serialize it in upcoming issues of The Great Ideas Online. For those of you who would like to have a digital copy of the entire book, we will send you either a PDF or MSWord version for a \$10 donation.

To give you some background on the origin of this unique book, here is an excerpt from Senator William Benton's Introduction:

"... Marshall Field, Jr., publisher of the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Chicago Daily News* and a member of the "Fat Man's Class" decided on the next gamble: a weekly column to be distributed by his newspaper syndicate in which Adler would choose a question submitted by a reader and reply to it not with the pat answer, but with an analysis of the greatest thinking about it. The sole objective was to present the problem—not the solution—to the intelligent reader in terms set forth by the leading minds of all time. Within a year, twenty-eight newspapers (including the *Tokyo Kenkyu Sha*) were carrying the column—a remarkable figure for such a feature. And the number increases.

Mounting requests for a collection of selected columns—one of them from the Librarian of San Quentin Prison—led to the publication of this book."

Each of the 107 chapters of this book falls into one of a number of groups, according to the general character of the subject with which it deals. The book is divided into ten parts; each part relates to some main field of interest that can be roughly defined by a particular constellation of great ideas:

PART I Questions About Philosophy, Science and Religion

PART II Questions About Politics: Man and the State

PART III Questions About Moral Problems

PART IV Questions About Liberal Education and the Great Books

PART V Questions About Theology and Metaphysics

PART VI Questions About Social Problems

PART VII Questions About Economic Institutions

PART VIII Questions About Art and Beauty

PART IX Questions About Love and Friendship

PART X Questions About Man and His World

At the end of each part, there is a list of Recommended Readings. This list refers first to selections from *Great Books of the Western World*. The authors and books recommended are set down in the chronological order in which they appear in the volumes of that set of books. In addition, Dr. Adler has a recommended reading list of other works—works not included in the set, but of great relevance to the problems being considered in the particular section.

PART I

Questions About Philosophy, Science, and Religion

1. WHAT IS TRUTH?

Dear Dr. Adler,

I find it hard to define what truth is. Some of my friends say that truth is what most people think is so. But that does not make sense to me, because sometimes the majority is wrong. Even what everyone thinks is so may not be the truth. There must be some better definition of truth. What is it?

A. N.

Dear A. N.,

You are quite right to feel dissatisfied. Your friends did not arrive at a definition of truth, but at one of the signs of truth. In certain cases the fact that the majority holds something to be true is an indication that it is *probably* true. But this is only *one* of the signs of truth, and by no means the best one. And it does not answer your question or Pilate's—"What is truth?"

It may help us to understand the nature of truth to consider what is involved in telling a lie. If a man tells a woman "I love you" when he does not, he is telling a lie. When a child who has raided the cookie jar tells his mother "I didn't," he is lying. Lying consists in saying the opposite of what you know, think, or feel. It is distinct from honest error, such as that of the umpire who calls a man "out" when he is "safe," or vice versa.

Josiah Royce, a great American philosopher at the beginning of this century, defined a liar as a man who willfully misplaces his

ontological predicates; that is, a man who says “is” when he means “is not,” or “is not” when he means “is.” Royce’s definition of a liar leads us quickly to the most famous of all philosophical definitions of truth. It was given by Plato and Aristotle almost twenty-five centuries ago; it has been repeated in various ways ever since, and seldom been improved upon.

Plato and Aristotle say that the opinions we hold are true when they assert that that which is, *is*, or that that which is not, *is not*; and that our opinions are false when they assert that that which is, *is not*, or that that which is not, *is*. When the “is” in a statement we make agrees with the way things are, then our statement is true, and its truth consists in its corresponding to the existent facts of nature or reality. When we think that something exists or has happened which does not exist or did not happen, then we are mistaken and what we think is false.

So, as you see, truth is very easy to define, and the definition is not very hard to understand. Perhaps impatient Pilate would have waited for the answer if he had known that it could be given so briefly. But maybe he was thinking of another question, “How can we tell whether a statement is true or false?” This, by the way, is the question you and your friends ended up answering.

To this question there are three main types of answer. The first insists that some statements are self-evidently true, such as, “The whole is greater than the part.” Such statements reveal their truth to us directly by the fact that we find it impossible to think the opposite of them. When we understand what a whole is and what a part is, we *cannot* think that a part is greater than the whole to which it belongs. That is how we know immediately the truth of the statement that the whole is greater than any of its parts.

Another type of answer says that the truth of statements can be tested by our experience or observations. If a man says that it did not rain in Chicago a single day last month, we can check the truth of his statement by looking up the official weather records. Or we can stick a foot into a swimming pool to see if the water is as warm as a friend says it is. Similarly, a scientific generalization is considered true only as long as no contrary facts are observed.

The third type of answer has to do with statements that are neither self-evidently true nor capable of being checked by direct appeal to observed facts. It may be a question of a person’s character, what type of product is most desirable for certain purposes, or whether the favorite will win the next race. Here it is permissible to count

noses and to find the consensus of a group of people or of the experts. That an opinion is held by a majority can be taken as a sign that it has some probability of being true.

This third answer was the one your friend arrived at. But the fact that it expressed the consensus of the group does not make it the right answer to the question, "What is truth?" Nor does it give the full answer to the question, "How can we tell whether a statement is true?"

Defining truth is easy; knowing whether a particular statement is true is much harder; and pursuing the truth is most difficult of all.

2. KNOWLEDGE AND OPINION

Dear Dr. Adler,

Is there such a thing as knowledge, or is everything a matter of opinion? Our picture of the world and our way of life has changed so much in the last fifty years that I wonder whether we can have certain knowledge about anything. Isn't most of our so-called knowledge really opinion?

F. S.

Dear F. S.,

Most of us know what an opinion is. We recognize that our opinions are beliefs that others need not share. We are used to having those who disagree with us say, "Well, that is only *your opinion*" (or "*your opinion*"). Even when we advance an opinion on very good grounds, we usually feel some doubt about it. "I have good reason to believe so," we say, "but I wouldn't swear to it."

Here, then, are three characteristics of opinions: (1) they express probabilities rather than certainties; (2) they are subject to doubt; and (3) reasonable men can differ about which of two conflicting opinions is sounder.

There is a perennial skepticism which holds that *everything* is a matter of opinion. The extreme skeptic reduces even such things as mathematics and science to opinion. He points out, for example, that a system of geometry rests on arbitrary assumptions. Other assumptions can be made and other systems of geometry devel-

oped. Experimental science at its best, the skeptic maintains, consists of highly probable generalizations, not indubitable certainties.


In contrast with such skepticism is the view of the ancient Greek philosophers. Plato and Aristotle think that there are some matters about which men can have genuine knowledge. In the very nature of things, some things are necessary and cannot be otherwise. For example, by the very nature of wholes and parts, it is necessary that the whole should always be greater than any of its parts. This is something we know for certain. On the other hand, there is nothing in the natures of gentlemen and blondes that makes it necessary for gentlemen always to prefer blondes, and so this is only a matter of opinion.

The difference between knowledge and opinion can also be expressed in psychological terms. When we are asked, “Do gentlemen prefer blondes?” or “Will the Republicans win the 1964 election?” we must make up our own mind. Nothing about the matter in question compels us to answer Yes or No. But when we are asked whether the whole is greater than any of its parts, we have no choice about the answer. If we put our mind to thinking about the relation of whole and part, we can think about that relation in only one way. The object we are thinking about makes up our mind for us.

This gives us a very clear criterion for telling whether what we assert is knowledge or opinion. It is knowledge when the object that we are thinking about compels us to think of it in a certain way. What we think then is not our personal opinion. But when the object of our thought leaves us free to make up our mind about it, one way or the other, then what we think is only an opinion—our *personal opinion, voluntarily formed*. Here other rational persons can differ with us.

On this understanding of the difference between knowledge and opinion, we must admit that most of our assertions are opinions. But we should also realize that opinions differ in their soundness. Some are based on considerable evidence or reasons which, while not conclusive, make them highly probable. Others are ill-founded, and others have no foundation at all but are simply willful prejudices on our part.

This leaves open the question whether history, mathematics, experimental science, and speculative philosophy should be classified as knowledge or opinion. As we have seen, the extreme skeptic would say that they are all opinion, though he might recognize that

they have much more weight than mere personal opinions or private prejudices. The opposite view, which I would defend, is that we can have knowledge in the fields of mathematics and philosophy, and highly probable opinion in the fields of experimental science and history. 

EDITOR'S NOTE

We have published a few of these letters some years ago and the entire Preface and Introduction can be found in Issue 179, of this journal.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hello Max.

I have comments about Dolhenty's article today. Following is a quote from his article in the solution to repair a society:

"Knowledge is the beginning and that means teaching the difference between right and wrong, or good and bad, behavior. This teaching can only be based on objective moral principles, universally valid."

I agree with his article whole heartily, but in regard to his recommendation about objective moral principles that are universally valid, he does not include an example of how to determine which moral principles he is identifying. I assume he is referencing the Natural Moral Law. I find most people even in my Church do not know what the Natural Moral Law is. This is the only Law that is universal with the exception of the laws provided in Judeo/ Christianity spelled out through Divine Revelation. Personally I believe the Natural Moral Law is reached by inclination of the first principles and that inclination comes through Divine reason. Dr. Jacques Maritain believes this as well. Humans cannot through reason derive the first principles, since they are self-evident truths. Where do self-evident truths come from? Some say they "just are" in reality and no proofs can be provided. Actually, humans through inclination receive moral self-evident truths. Lastly, Maritain states: "In reality, if God does not exist, the Natural Law lacks obligatory power. If the Natural Law does not involve the Divine reason, it is not a law, and if it is not a law, it does not oblige". In other words, the Natural Moral Law comes via Divine reason through inclina-

tion to humans or it is not valid. This is not just an answer it is the only answer. Universal morals cannot be reached any other way.

Dolhenty's article is correct, but it falls short of defining how a person knows when an objective moral principle is universally valid. It is a good article, but he did not go far enough to make it understandable to many.

Incidentally, Dr. Adler appeared to have great respect for Dr. Maritain.

Best wishes,

Bill Freeman

Dear Great Ideas:

I found the essay Moral Miseducation and the Decline of the American Culture by Jonathan Dolhenty, Ph.D. to be quite interesting. I particularly appreciated how well organized and concise it was, dealing essentially with a very difficult but single topic. Congratulations on clarity!

I only wish that Dr. Dolhenty's solution carried with it recommendations for an approach or path to implementation. He makes it clear that "social/economic engineering" (my term) is not the solution, and asserts that education alone is not the solution. The essay ends with the statement, with which I agree, "It is a problem of proper moral education and practice; and it requires a moral solution."

The problem remains; what is a "moral solution?" But first we need to reiterate the fundamental cause of this cultural decline -- in a word -- moral relativism. So now we seek the solution in Dr. Dolhenty's text itself. He states, The "feel-good" concept of moral action has taken over and is widely promoted by government programs, educational curricula, and the psychological industry." So presumably the solution would be to get these cultural institutions to stop promoting moral relativism, and in fact promote moral education. Unfortunately, in the above list the main culprit is missing; namely, commercialism. In fact, commercialism and the dominance of consumerism are the greatest forces behind the "feel-good" concept allegedly promoted by government, education, and psychology.

The impact of commercialism is a whole essay in itself. So here are several key observations:

- ◆ The fundamental identification of our people as citizens, empowered for self-governance, has been co-opted by identification as consumers, empowered to respond mainly to advertisements and "shop till we drop." Commercialism works against a sense of objective moral principles and individual conscience which should be their result.
- ◆ A "person" has been redefined by the courts in the last 150 years. Now corporations are "people" under the Constitution with the Bill of Rights, designed to protect citizens from their government, also granting corporations "rights." For example, corporations now have "free speech" to virtually buy the political process with obscene flows of money. Further, they have rights like "privacy" to not be subject to surprise inspections by the people to assure compliance with anti-pollutions laws.
- ◆ Corporations are not really responsible to any fundamental sector of society; the responsibility to stockholders is an illusion because stockholders are more like absentee landlords than active owners. If they don't like corporate behavior they just sell the stock.
- ◆ Corporations claim they are supposed to be "amoral" entities, functioning for their own good. But that is not how they were founded; they were founded with a responsibility to the people as a whole. In any case, when they become the dominant social institution as they have in our culture, then they are free to externalize costs to the commons and always put profits before people. Moral principles are not on their agendas.

So to close, I believe the solution path lies in the direction of removal of undue corporate power over the institutions mentioned above; namely, government, education, and psychology. The first step of the solution is to identify this truth.

Yours truly, Richard Hawley

Dear Messrs. Freeman and Hawley,

Here is my short answer:

The basic, fundamental, objective, universal principle in realistic moral philosophy is this: Human beings ought to seek everything that is really good for them and enables them to live a "rational" life (since human beings are, in fact, rational beings). This principle is self-evident because the opposite is unthinkable, and the principle is based on our empirical observation and analysis of human nature. The criterion involved here is "right desire." It is "conformity" with right desire (a "prescriptive" or "normative" truth) that provides the foundation for the truth-claim in this case, just as conformity with the "facts out there in the world" provides the foundation for the truth-claims of "descriptive" truth. The criterion of "right desire" requires a distinction between "real" goods and "apparent" goods." We can refer to these also as "needs" and "wants." It is the "needs" that give rise to what we "ought" to seek and also provides a foundation for what we call "natural" or "human" rights. All of this, I would argue, is a matter of common sense to anyone who critically examines the matter.

For a fuller answer, go to: <http://radicalacademy.com/test.htm>

Also see my essay entitled The Myth of Moral Relativism, #233 of this journal: <http://www.thegreatideas.org/501w/>

Best regards, Jon Dolhenty

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Eduardo Estay, Chile

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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