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## GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

MORTIMER J. ADLER

**PART I** (Continued)

**Questions About Philosophy, Science, and Religion**

### **9. THE MEANING OF HISTORY**

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*Some wit once remarked that all that we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history. Can we derive any knowledge or guidance from the study of history? Do the great thinkers discern*

*any meaning in the flow of historical events? What are the basic views about the meaning of history?*

*E. D.*

*Dear E. D.,*

We seek various kinds of significance in the study of history. In the first place, we find meaning and value in historical knowledge for its own sake. Having an ordered and accurate picture of the past satisfies our desire for objective knowledge and our need for solidarity and contact with former generations. It is good not to be restricted to the present moment; our lives are enriched by having a sense of the past.

The great historians have been motivated by this desire to record or recover the past. Thucydides tells the story of a war in which he himself had participated, and Gibbon recreates the fall and decline of an ancient empire. They and other fine historians try to put into a meaningful pattern the material they relate. They do not give us a mess of unrelated particular facts. Through their thoughtful selection and significant arrangement of past events, they enable us to find some meaning on the level of mere historical description.

But historians and their readers have sought another and more practical type of meaning in history. Herodotus seeks to commemorate glorious deeds; Tacitus wants to perpetuate conspicuous instances of virtue and vice; Polybius points to the alternation of triumph and disaster as a warning against pride. Many people seek moral edification from history, and claim to find moral lessons in the annals of the past. Plutarch's biographies of illustrious Greeks and Romans belong to this type of historical edification.

Still another type of meaning is sought in the basic pattern of the historical process as a whole. There are two different answers to this quest for historical meaning.

According to the first answer, history moves in recurrent cycles. States and societies move through stages of birth, growth, decline, and death, and then the cycle starts all over again. This cyclical view was dominant in ancient Greek and Roman thought about history. The ancient historians were sure we could profit from the study of history because history repeats itself. Certain modern philosophers of history, such as Vico, Spengler, and Toynbee, have resuscitated this ancient notion as an essential element in their theories.

According to the second answer, history moves continuously toward a goal or fulfillment. The pattern of historical change is progressive, not cyclical. This is the Biblical, or Christian, conception of history, and it was first propounded in systematic form by St. Augustine in *The City of God*. In his view, human history proceeds under the guidance of divine providence toward the Kingdom of God at the end of time and beyond history.

Some religious leaders and groups have interpreted the Bible as saying that the Kingdom of God would come in time and on earth. In modern times this religious view has been translated into secular terms. The German philosopher Hegel sees history as progressively achieving its ultimate goal, epoch after epoch, culminating in the German-Christian world of his own day. His student Karl Marx sees the goal and terminus of human history in a classless society of perfect freedom and equality, to be attained after a series of class struggles, imperialist wars, and bloody revolutions.

Most professional historians and philosophers would agree that the meaning of history cannot be fully discovered in history itself—in the objective record of past events. What we think about history depends on our basic view of the nature and destiny of man, and on our conception of man's relation to God, and of the causes at work in the human world as a whole.

## **PART I: *Questions About Philosophy, Science, and Religion***

### **RECOMMENDED READINGS**

#### **In *Great Books of the Western World***

Thucydides: *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book I

Plato: *Meno*; *Sophist*; *Republic*, Book VI; *Laws*, Book X

Aristotle: *Metaphysics*, Books I—IV

Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, Part I, QQ. 1, 13—14

Hobbes: *Leviathan*, Part I

Montaigne: *Essays*, “That to Study Philosophy Is to Learn to Die,”

“That It Is Folly to Measure Truth and Error by Our Own Capacity”

Bacon: *Advancement of Learning*

Descartes: *Discourse on the Method*

Pascal: *On Geometrical Demonstration*

Locke: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV

Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Kant; *The Critique of Pure Reason*  
 Hegel: *The Philosophy of History*, Introduction  
 Tolstoy: *War and Peace*, Epilogue II  
 James: *The Principles of Psychology*  
 Freud: *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Lecture 35

### Other Works

Ayer, A. J., ed.: *Logical Positivism*  
 Berdyaev, Nicolas: *The Meaning of History; Solitude and Society*  
 Buber, Martin: *I and Thou*  
 Cassirer, Ernst: *The Problem of Knowledge; The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*  
 Cohen, Morris R.: *The Meaning of History*  
 Comte, Auguste: *The Positive Philosophy*  
 Dewey, John: *Reconstruction in Philosophy; The Quest for Certainty*  
 Ewing, A. C.: *Idealism: A Critical Survey*  
 Frank, Erich: *Philosophical Understanding and Religious Truth*  
 Gilson, Etienne: *Unity of Philosophical Experience; The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*  
 James, William: *Pragmatism; Meaning of Truth*  
 Jaspers, Karl: *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy; The Origin and Goal of History; The Way to Wisdom*  
 Jourdain: *The Nature of Mathematics*  
 Kierkegaard, Sören: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*  
 Lowith, Karl: *Meaning in History*  
 Maritain, Jacques: *Degrees of Knowledge; Science and Wisdom; Philosophy of History*  
 Myerhoff, Hans, ed.: *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*  
 Poincaré, Henri: *The Foundations of Science*  
 Reichenbach, Hans: *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy*  
 Royce, Josiah: *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*  
 Russell, Bertrand: *Human Knowledge, Its Scope and Limits; An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*  
 Toynbee, Arnold J.: *Civilization on Trial*  
 White, Andrew D.: *The History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*  
 Whitehead, Alfred N.: *Science and the Modern World; An Introduction to Mathematics*

## PART II

### Questions About Politics: Man and the State

#### 10. THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*We are told to be public-spirited, to be good citizens, and to devote ourselves to the good of the community. But we are also advised to develop ourselves as individuals, to foster our peculiar personal qualities, and to promote our individual welfare. Isn't there a conflict here between the good of the community and the good of the individual? Which should come first—the individual or the state?*

*A. B.*

*Dear A. B.,*

Two extreme views dominate the debate on the relation of the individual and the state—collectivism and individualism.

According to the collectivist, or totalitarian, view, individuals are members of the state, just as limbs and organs are members of the body or as cogs and bolts are parts of a machine. They no more have wills of their own than do the organs of the body or machine parts. The parts work for the good of the whole. When a conflict arises between the individual and the state, the good of the state must always

According to the individualist view, it is the fulfillment of the individual that comes first. The state is merely an instrument to serve the individual good. The individualist would restrict the state to a very limited sphere—the less government the better. The collectivist, on the other hand, wants the state to take over the direction of practically all human activities. For the individualist the state is a traffic cop or tax collector; for the collectivist the state is God on earth.

A third theory holds that the collectivist and individualist views set up a false opposition between the good of the individual and the good of the state. The proponents of this middle view assert that the state serves not merely political ends—peace, order, law—but the highest human end, happiness. A well-constituted and justly ordered state contributes to the happiness of the individuals it comprises. And a civic-minded and conscientious individual con-

tributes to the happiness of others by fulfilling his duties as a citizen.

All three views raise a basic question about the nature of man—whether he achieves his perfection in isolation or community. Some thinkers hold that man's perfection lies in his being part of a whole; ideally, of the whole human race. Others hold that the individual should raise himself above the crowd, the mass, the race. Still others hold that man becomes an individual person only in a genuine community with his fellows.

The three views also raise a question about what form of human community assists men to live well. The philosophy of anarchism, for instance, recommends that men work together to attain their individual and common good. But it opposes the state, with its laws, officials, courts, and police, as the way to achieve this. Philosophical anarchists wish to substitute a society of voluntary, spontaneous associations in which individuals participate directly, as opposed to the coercive organization which is the political state.

The great political philosophies of the West, however, hold that the state is the proper form of human community. They think that the voluntary associations which the anarchists take as their model belong to an early stage of human culture.

Most present-day political thinkers hold that the complete self-government which anarchists look for is impossible, man and society being what they are.

## 11. THE ROLE OF THE CITIZEN

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

People all over the world today are clamoring for the rights of citizenship—to vote and to govern themselves. Is this a modern idea, or does it go back to ancient times? What do the great thinkers of our tradition have to say to us about citizenship, its rights and duties?

*K. A.*

*Dear K. A.,*

Citizenship is a revolutionary idea. It was new when it was originated in ancient Greece, and it is still novel in many parts of the

world. Our very notions of political liberty and equality are bound up with this radical idea. Nowadays in the Western world we are inclined to take the rights of citizenship for granted, but it was not always so.

The ancient Greeks were proud of being free and equal citizens. They contrasted their status with that of the neighboring Persians and Egyptians, who were the subjects of absolute despots. This basic contrast between the status of citizens and that of subjects is linked with the distinction between constitutional and absolute governments. In an absolute government, the ruler alone exercises political power. The people are his subjects and must submit to his commands. This is true whether he governs for their good, as a benevolent despot, or governs for his own selfish interest, as a tyrant.


In a constitutional government, the ruler governs according to basic law or custom. The people are his equals. They have a voice in making the law and choosing the governors, and they, too, have the right to hold office. A constitutional state is a community of equal citizens. The head of the state is only the first among equals.

Aristotle compares tyranny with the rule of a master over slaves, benevolent despotism with that of a father over children, and constitutional government with that of a husband over a wife. The last analogy is, of course, imperfect, since Aristotle does not advocate that the wife should rule her husband. But his homely comparison illuminates the dignity and liberty of the citizen as compared with the subject.

of course, not all the persons who live under a constitutional government are full citizens, with the right to vote and hold office. Even under our system of universal suffrage, aliens, the mentally disabled, minors, and felons do not have these rights. And many nations have denied full citizenship to slaves, women, and the working classes. Such persons are mere residents of the state, not citizens.

The movement to obtain full rights of citizenship for all native and naturalized adults of sound mind and law-abiding character has been under way only during the last hundred years. Men like John Stuart Mill felt that there was something morally wrong in treating any human being as a "political pariah." They held that constitutional government, with its principles of political liberty and equality, require that no one should be excluded from full citizenship merely because of sex, class, or color. They considered citizenship a basic human right.

Citizens have duties as well as rights. They have to be able to exercise their freedom properly. Hence philosophers through the ages have discussed the virtues of the good citizen and how they should be inculcated. Aristotle says that a good citizen must be able both to rule and to be ruled as a freeman. Hence he must acquire the temperance and the justice of the ruler and of the subject. Mill advocates a “school of public spirit.” In his view, this is provided by the general atmosphere of a democracy, which influences the individual to think of the good of the whole community—not of his own special interests—and to be guided by men with sound knowledge and understanding of public affairs.

Freedom through self-government requires moral character and critical intelligence. The family, church, and other social institutions help to develop the moral virtues. The development of the intellectual virtues is the task of liberal education, both inside and outside our schools. 

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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