

GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

MORTIMER J. ADLER

PART II (Continued)

Questions About Politics: Man and the State

20. CAN WAR BE ABOLISHED?

Dear Dr. Adler,

The prophet Isaiah had a vision of a time when “there shall be war no more.” Is this a faraway ideal to be achieved when the King-

dom of God comes in, or can we achieve permanent peace now? Will we have to give up our national sovereignty in order to accomplish this? Wouldn't there have to be a complete change in human nature to do away with war?

E. M.

Dear E. M.,

The great thinkers of the past do have some ideas to offer us on the prevention of war. Some of them believe that war can be abolished by world government, which would require giving up part of our national sovereignty. In their view, new institutions are needed, not the widespread moral conversion of men.

Of course, many writers consider the abolition of war neither feasible nor desirable. Machiavelli and Hegel regard war as the most serious business of sovereign states, something that can no more be abolished than national sovereignty can be curtailed. Hegel looks upon war as morally good for nations.

On the other hand, Dante in the thirteenth century and Kant in the eighteenth argue that world peace is a goal toward which mankind is morally obligated to work. Both think that goal can be achieved only through uniting the nations of the world under a single government based on law and justice. "The morally practical reason," Kant declares, "utters within us its irrevocable veto: *There shall be no war.*" This imperative calls upon all nations to "advance out of lawless state of savages and [enter] into a Federation of Nations."

If it goes no further than the old League of Nations or the present United Nations, a federation of nations does not go far enough. As our own Federalist writers recognized, we must go beyond a loose confederacy to "a more perfect union" if we wish to establish peace among neighboring peoples.

But, you may ask, why is world government the only way to secure world peace? For one thing, because war is the natural state of independent nations. The ancient Greek historian Thucydides and the seventeenth-century English philosopher Hobbes point out that sovereign states are not really at peace with one another when they are not actually fighting.

So-called "peace treaties" do not make peace, Thucydides observes; they only set up armed truces. Sovereign nations, Hobbes remarks, are always at war with one another, either waging the

cold war of intrigue and diplomacy or the hot war of steel and shell. “War,” says Hobbes, “consists not in battle only or in the act of fighting.” It exists wherever men cannot settle their differences without recourse to violence in the last resort.

Peace does not mean the absence of serious conflicts among men. It does not require men to become angels or saints, and live together in perfect brotherly love. Such things will never come to pass on earth. Peace is simply that state of affairs in which men can settle all their differences by talk instead of by force.

This brings us to another reason why world government is the only way to world peace. To substitute talk for force, government is needed. That this holds true within each nation is clear to the ancient Roman Cicero and the modern Englishman John Locke. Locke says:

There are two sorts of contests among men, the one managed by law, and the other by force; and these are of such a nature that where the one ends, the other begins.

But to settle human conflicts by law rather than by force, you need a government with the power to make, apply, and enforce laws.

We know that civil peace depends upon civil government—in Chicago, in Illinois, in the United States. Why not the world, then? If local government is necessary for local peace, does it not follow that world government is necessary for world peace?

You may admit that it is necessary, and even theoretically possible; but, you wonder, is it practicable and probable in the near future?

The great thinkers of the past do not give us the answer to that question. They provide us with the principles of clear thinking about the problem, but whether we solve it or not depends on our willingness to think things through and on our resolution to act more wisely in the future than we have in the past. As to whether we will or we won't, your prophecy is as good as mine.

21. UTOPIA AND THE UTOPIANS

Dear Dr. Adler,

Frequently I hear the term “utopia” or “utopian” used in a derogatory sense about some proposal for political or social reform.

But I recall that many writers have written glowingly favorable descriptions of an imaginary perfect society of the future. What exactly is a utopia? Was Plato a utopian? How about Karl Marx? Are there any utopian societies today?

H. L.

Dear H. L.,

Utopia literally means “no place.” A utopia is an ideal state of affairs, nowhere in existence. In the *Republic*, Plato puts his ideal society thousands of years in the future. In the *Timaeus*, he puts it long ago, on the mythical island of Atlantis. In both cases he makes the ideal remote but perceivable.

Many other illustrious writers have created literary utopias in order to make the ideal perceivable. Among them are Thomas More (who invented the term “utopia”), Francis Bacon, Samuel Butler (whose *Erewhon* is a phonetic reversal of “nowhere”), Edward Bellamy, William Morris, and H. G. Wells. These writers all feel that man is destined to live a more perfect and harmonious existence. Their stories are intended to picture concretely what such a life might be like.

According to the ideals they favor, the utopian writers tell us that man can live in justice, freedom, equality, plenty, peace, wisdom, and beauty. There have been both reactionary and revolutionary utopias. For the most part, however, utopians tend to be “radicals,” interested in getting at the root of things rather than in maintaining social continuity. They tear man out of the web of tradition and custom in which we always see him, in order to afford us a fresh vision of man’s nature and destiny.


Many literary utopias provide vague inspiration or diverting speculation, with little concern for practical reforms. Writers such as Plato, however, are motivated by an intense zeal to embody the ideal in actual life. The nineteenth century utopian Socialists—Saint-Simon, Fourier, Proudhon, and Robert Owen—wrote serious, thoughtful works intended to prepare the way for the construction of a new society. They envision a free and equal social order, in which the full development of human individuality would be fostered by voluntary communal societies, in place of the political state.

Marx and Engels consider such theories sentimental and visionary and plume themselves on being “scientific” rather than “utopian”

socialists. Yet the Marxist notion of the “withering away of the State,” leading to a perfectly free and equal society, is certainly utopian. The utopian socialists say that it is the Marxists, not they, who are visionary and unrealistic, because the Marxists think that a perfectly free and equal society can be reached by way of revolution, dictatorship, and state socialism.

Actual utopian communities once existed in the United States; for instance, at Oneida, New York, and New Harmony, Indiana. But modern industrial development has obliterated utopian communities in most countries. The communal settlements in Israel are the only significant present-day examples of utopianism in practice.

Criticism of utopianism is both satirical and philosophical. In the past, Aristophanes, Mandeville, and Swift poked fun at perfectionist notions about man and society. In our own day Aldous Huxley and George Orwell have painted grim pictures of technological and socialist utopias.

The typical philosophical criticism is that of Aristotle in his comments on Plato’s *Republic*. Aristotle holds that utopian speculation assumes an impossible perfectibility for man and the state. It does not serve the attainment of *practicable ideals*. He believes that we should strive to reach the best possible order under the conditions fixed by the nature of man and the world. Plato, on the other hand, holds that utopias point the way to the ideal—to a right order that can and should be established on earth no matter what experience and tradition may say to the contrary. 

PART II: *Questions About Politics: Man and the State*

RECOMMENDED READINGS

In *Great Books of the Western World*

Plato: *Apology; Crito; Gorgias; Laws; Republic; Statesman*

Aristotle: *Politics; Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V

Augustine: *The City of God*, Book XIX

Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, Parts I—II, QQ. 90—108

Machiavelli: *The Prince*

Hobbes: *Leviathan*, Part II

Bacon: *The New Atlantis*

Locke: *Essay on Civil Government*

Montesquieu: *The Spirit of Laws*

Rousseau: *The Social Contract; A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality; A Discourse on Political Economy*

Kant: *The Science of Right*, Part II
American State Papers
 Hamilton, Madison, and Jay: *The Federalist*
 Mill: *Liberty; Representative Government; Utilitarianism*
 Hegel: *The Philosophy of Right*, Part III
 Marx and Engels: *Manifesto of the Communist Party*
 Tolstoy: *War and Peace*, Epilogue II
 Freud: *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego; Thoughts
 for the Time on War and Death; Civilization and Its Discon-
 tents*

Other Works

Acton, John E. E. D.: *Essays on Freedom and Power*
 Bakunin, Mikhail A.: *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*
 Bentham, Jeremy: *Fragment on Government*
 Buber, Martin: *Paths in Utopia*
 Burckhardt, Jacob: *Force and Freedom*
 Calhoun, John C.: *A Disquisition on Government*
 Cardozo, Benjamin N.: *The Nature of the Judicial Process; The
 Growth of the Law*
 Cassirer, Ernst: *The Myth of the State*
 Clausewitz, Karl von: *On War*
 Dante Alighieri: *On World Government or De Monarchia*
 Engels, Friedrich: *Socialism, Scientific and Utopian*
 Hayek, Friedrich A. von: *The Constitution of Liberty*
 Holmes, Oliver W., Jr.: *The Common Law*
 James, William: "The Moral Equivalent of War" (No. XI in *Essays
 on Faith and Morals*)
 Kant, Immanuel: *Perpetual Peace, A Philosophical Essay*
 Kropotkin, Peter A.: *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal; Mutual
 Aid*
 Laski, Harold J.: *The Grammar of Politics; Liberty in the Modern
 State*
 Lenin, Nicolai: *The State and Revolution*
 Lippmann, Walter: *The Good Society; The Public Philosophy*
 Maritain, Jacques: *Scholasticism and Politics; Man and the State*
 More, Thomas: *Utopia*
 Pound, Roscoe: *The Spirit of the Common Law*
 Russell, Bertrand: *Proposed Roads to Freedom: Socialism, Anar-
 chism, Syndicalism; Power, A New Social Analysis*
 Thoreau, Henry D.: *Civil Disobedience*
 Viereck, Peter: *Conservatism: From John Adams to Churchill*
 Wallas, Graham: *The Great Society*

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William Dustin

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