

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

MORTIMER J. ADLER

**PART III** (Continued)

**Questions About Moral Problems**

### 30. THE RELATIVITY OF VALUES

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*History and anthropology reveal great variation in moral standards and beliefs among various peoples and cultures. Are there any absolute distinctions between what is right and what is wrong? Or are such judgments merely an expression of a particular culture or of personal opinion? Wasn't it Shakespeare who said, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so"?*

*W. D.*

*Dear W. D.,*

Shakespeare borrowed that line from Montaigne, the sixteenth-century French essayist. There is no doubt that Montaigne was a moral relativist. Indeed, he is the great granddaddy of our social scientists today, who insist that our moral judgments simply reflect the "mores" or customs of the society to which we belong. They tell us that a system of morality merely expresses the values in vogue at a given time and place. What is thought right in some societies or cultures is thought wrong in others. They conclude from this that there is no objective right or wrong, and no way to determine what is good or bad for all men.

An even more radical moral relativism is espoused by those who regard all moral judgments as nothing more than expressions of individual preference or personal taste. They think that calling an action or attitude good or bad is just like saying "I like chocolate" or "I loathe milk." It is simply a matter of taste, and that is all there is to it.

In dealing with the problem of judging works of art, I hold the view that there are objective standards of artistic excellence which make it possible for us to render sound critical judgments about works of art (see Chapter 82). Such critical judgments are objective, not subjective. Beauty is not simply a matter of personal taste, about which there can be no dispute.

What holds for beauty holds for good and evil, for right and wrong. Just as we can tell whether a person has good taste in a particular art by seeing whether he likes objects that have real artistic excellence, so we can tell whether a person's opinions about moral matters are sound by seeing whether he approves things that are really good or actions that are objectively right.

To understand this, it is necessary to distinguish between what is *really* good and what only *appears* to be so. If I say that whatever I desire or like is good, then I fail to make this critical distinction. But if I say that I should desire some things because they are good, then I recognize the difference between the real and the apparent good.

Let us take the extreme example of the miser who desires nothing but money. To accumulate it and keep it, he starves himself, goes around in rags, suffers ill health, deprives himself of the company of other human beings, cuts himself off from learning and culture. This man is living as he likes, but is he living well? Is this the way that he, or any other human being, should live?

Nearly all of us would say that the miser is a fool and that his life is utterly miserable. Our agreement here is based on our recognition of the fact that man has certain natural needs or wants. These should be satisfied. The things which satisfy these natural needs are really good for men. For example, knowledge is one of the real goods because all men by nature desire to know. Friendship is another real good because man is social by nature and craves love. Food, clothing, and shelter are real goods because of our biological needs.

These things are good and necessary for all men, whether they consciously desire them or not. A man may say that he has everything he wants, when he has wealth or power or fame, but that does not change the objective facts about what he really needs in order to lead a good human life. He is like a man who is suffering from hidden malnutrition while indulging himself in a diet he likes.

It is our human nature that determines what is good for us. Things may *appear* good to us because we happen to desire them, rightly or wrongly. But what is *really* good for us is that which, to fulfill our nature, we should desire, whether we do or not. Social customs or private preferences cannot change that.

### 31. THE MEANING OF THE NATURAL LAW

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*I am confused by the use of the term "natural law." I understand what the laws of nature are—we learn these when we study the natural sciences. But some writers use the term "natural law" in*

*the singular as if it had something to do with matters of right and wrong, almost as if it were the voice of conscience. It is hard for me to understand how a natural law has anything to do with moral matters. Will you please clarify this for me?*

*T. Q.*

*Dear T. Q.,*

Let us first be clear that by “natural law” we mean principles of human conduct, not the laws of nature discovered by the physical sciences. Many thinkers who espouse natural law see it at work in both the human and nonhuman realms, but their main interest is in its special application to man. According to these thinkers, the natural law as applied to physical things or animals is inviolable; stars and atoms never disobey the laws of their nature. But man often violates the moral rules which constitute the law of his specifically human nature.

The idea of a natural right order to which all things, including human beings, should conform is one of the most ancient and universal notions. It is a major principle in the religious and philosophic systems of ancient India and China, as well as in classical Greek philosophy. Plato calls it “justice” and applies it to the human soul and human conduct.

In Western society, especially from the Roman jurists and the theologians of the Middle Age on, we find the doctrine of the natural moral law for man. It is the source of moral standards, the basis of moral judgments, and the measure of justice in the man-made laws of the state. If the law of the state runs counter to the precepts of the natural law, it is held to be unjust.

The first precept of natural law is to seek the good and avoid evil. It is often put as follows: “Do good unto others, injure no one, render to every man his own.” Now, of course, such a general principle is useless for organized society unless we can use it to specify various types of rights and wrongs. That is precisely what man-made, or positive, law tries to do.

Thus, the natural law tells us only that stealing is wrong because it inflicts injury, but the positive law of larceny defines the various kinds and degrees of theft and prescribes the punishments therefore.

Such particular determinations may differ in various times and places without affecting the principles of natural law. Neither Aquinas nor Aristotle thinks that particular rules of laws should be the same in different times, places, and conditions.

You may ask how the natural law is known. Through human reason and conscience, answer the natural-law thinkers. The natural-law doctrine usually assumes that man has a specific nature which involves certain natural needs, and the power of reason to recognize what is really good for man in terms of these needs.

Christian thinkers, such as Aquinas and John Locke, think the natural law is of divine origin. God, in creating each thing, implanted in it the law of its nature. The phrase about “the laws of nature and of nature’s God” in our Declaration of Independence derives from this type of natural-law doctrine. However, this particular theological viewpoint is not always found in writers who uphold the natural law, for these include such pre-Christian thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, and such modern secular philosophers as Kant and Hegel.

There has been much opposition to natural-law philosophy from the very beginning. Indeed, one might say the opposition came first, for the idea of natural right or justice was developed in ancient Greece to counter the views of the Sophists, who were “conventionalists.” These men believe that law and justice are simply man-made conventions. No action is right or wrong unless a particular community, through its positive laws or customs, decrees that it is right or wrong. Then it is right or wrong in that particular place and time—not universally. By nature, the Sophists say, fire burns in Greece as it does in Persia, but the laws of Persia and of Greece, being matters of convention, are not the same. The “conventionalist” or “positivist” doctrine of law has come down all the way from the ancient Sophists to many of our modern law-school professors.

You ask whether natural law is relevant to modern conditions. My answer is that if justice is still relevant, then natural law is. Indeed, interest in natural law has increased especially during the past quarter century, with its experience of the kind of positive laws which have been imposed by totalitarian regimes. On what grounds could a decent German citizen in Nazi times justify his opposition to the laws of the land? On private sentiments or merely personal opinion? Even purely inner resistance to iniquity must be rooted in firmer grounds.

What about our own integration controversy? Technically, this is a Constitutional question, but natural-law doctrine is involved. The expression “life, liberty, and property” in the Fourteenth Amendment reflects the influence of natural-law theory. The Bill of Rights assumes a doctrine of natural and unalienable rights. What the Supreme Court had to *determine* specifically was whether the natural rights guaranteed by the Constitution are violated by segregated schools. If they are, then defenders of the Court may claim that the Southern states have made laws that are not laws, since they are unjust. “A law which is not just is a law in name only,” says Augustine. And Aquinas adds:

“Every human law has just so much of the nature of law as it is derived from the law of nature. But if in any point it departs from the law of nature, it is no longer a law but a perversion of the law.”

## 32. OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*Good citizens are supposed to obey the laws whether they approve of them or not. We are not supposed to take the law in our own hands, but to work for changes in laws we think are wrong. Yet reformers and preachers constantly point to a higher moral law which they claim supersedes the laws of the land. How do we decide which to obey when the moral and the written law conflict?*

*M. L.*

*Dear M. L.,*

May I put your question thus: Is a man justified in disobeying the civil law when it conflicts with the moral law? This is a hard question which confronts us under circumstances that are as rare as they are trying. Normally, we expect the law of the state to conform to the principles of the moral law—the principles of natural justice and of reason. We expect the civil law to aim at what is just as well as what is expedient, and on the whole we are not disappointed. The civil law usually prohibits rather than commands the violation of life, liberty, property, and other human rights.

The philosophers and theologians who think that the civil law should conform to the moral law also realize that a rule of civil law may, in a particular instance, be unjust. Then, in their view, it is

not, strictly speaking, really a law. Augustine puts the point clearly: “A law which is not just is a law in name only.” It may have the *power of the state* behind it, but it lacks *moral authority*. It does not command our conscience and our will.

What, then, is the virtuous man to do in such a situation? Two main alternatives confront him—to disobey the law or to get it changed. The first alternative, civil disobedience, is advocated by Henry David Thoreau. As he sees it, the just man cannot concur for a moment with an unjust law. He cannot wait patiently until he and like-minded citizens have managed to get the law repealed or reformed. The just man, in Thoreau’s view, must make a point of disobeying an unjust law and taking whatever punishment the state metes out to him. He should act alone and at once against iniquity.

Like Augustine, Aquinas thinks that a civil law which violates the moral law is a law in name only, binding us by its force but not in conscience. However, he counsels against disobeying such a law too readily or quickly. As he sees it, the purpose of the civil law is to preserve society in peace and harmony. When the state promulgates an unjust law which violates natural right, we must decide, therefore, whether disobedience will do more harm than good to society.

Locke thinks that men have a right to rebel against unjust laws, but, like Aquinas, he also advocates caution. As long as the state provides legal means to change unjust laws, there is no justification for violent rebellion. If individuals were to disobey laws which they regarded as unjust, without recourse to legal redress when available, civil government would not long endure, and we would be reduced to anarchy.

Rebellion, according to Locke, should be resorted to only when a majority of the people are sorely oppressed by the violation of their natural rights. Then and only then should an armed uprising—and not the futile dissent of separate individuals—appeal to the judgment of heaven as between the people and the tyrants who misrule them.

All the writers mentioned above agree that an unjust law is not binding on conscience. But they differ about the type of action to be taken against it. For Thoreau, immediate disobedience is the only right and practical action that a moral man can take. Only in this way is the evil actively and concretely resisted. But Aquinas and Locke want to weigh the consequences of disobedience and estimate the importance of the particular injustice to the whole

structure of civil society. Locke is less apprehensive about the consequences of disobedience than Aquinas, but more prudent than Thoreau.

These three typical attitudes have played a role in history and are still evident in the world today. The American colonists who debated what they should do about oppressive English legislation adopted Locke's point of view. Indeed, we can find Locke's very language, justifying rebellion, in the opening paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence. In the later American debate over slavery and such legislation as the Fugitive Slave Law, all three attitudes were to be found among those who considered the institution of slavery unjust and the laws enforcing it iniquitous. In South Africa today, men who believe in human rights are examining their conscience to decide what action to take against the restrictive racial legislation decreed by their government.

Immediate disobedience, gradual change, or change only, as a last resort—these are still the main ways advocated to cope with unjust laws. Each of us must decide for himself which is the greater good in the particular situation: the expression of conscientious objection or the maintenance of civil order.

### 33. THE DEMANDS OF LOYALTY

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*This is a time when loyalty is publicly questioned and affirmed. We require loyalty oaths of teachers and even of students in some cases. Is there some essential connection between loyalty and a formal oath? Is loyalty solely a matter of being for or against a certain system of government, or does it cover a broader area? What about loyalty to principles or to persons?*

*G. M.*

*Dear G. M.,*

Loyalty is faithful adherence to a personal commitment or pledge. It involves a bond between persons or allegiance to some cause or principle. A loyal person is faithful to this bond, and he demonstrates this in action, service, and sacrifice. Loyalty is not mere sentiment or opinion, but is embodied in actual life.



But service is not servility, and loyalty is not mechanical obedience. It is willingly given, with a person's whole heart and soul. A person adheres freely and firmly to what he values as good and true—not to what is imposed on him by public opinion.

Loyalty may be sealed by an explicit promise. Instances of this are the medieval pledge of fealty, the marriage vow, and the oath of allegiance to one's country. The primary meaning of loyalty is faithful adherence to one's word. But the promise need not be explicit or verbal, and one's word may be all the more binding when it is not uttered. The signs of loyalty, like those of love, need not be worn on one's sleeve.

Loyalty usually concerns some kind of human community. It binds friends, members of a family, citizens of a political community, and adherents of a religious faith. We have become so concerned with political loyalties that we have forgotten about the other types of human fidelity. We forget that loyalty once meant conjugal fidelity, faithfulness to one's pledged troth. Desdemona rightly tells Othello that she is his "true and loyal wife."

Loyalty becomes a serious problem when there is a conflict of loyalties. The conflict between religious loyalty and political loyalty has been frequently dramatized in literature and history. The early Christians put adherence to their faith higher than obedience to the emperor's decrees. American abolitionists put loyalty to the moral law higher than obedience to the Constitution. Anti-Nazi Germans plotted against their government and aided enemy countries in World War II, on the ground of a higher loyalty. The Christians, the abolitionists, and the anti-Nazis were, of course, considered subversive and disloyal by the civil authorities.

The American philosopher Josiah Royce deals with this problem in his book on loyalty. He considers loyalty the supreme moral virtue, the fulfillment of the moral law. Without it, says Royce, a man is nothing, for he lacks a moral center for his life. Loyalty is a universal good which binds men to the moral order and to one another. Hence, a conflict of loyalties is disastrous. It is like a civil war in the moral order.

True loyalty, according to Royce, never requires the destruction or frustration of another person's loyalty. He advises respect for loyalty wherever it appears, even when it is directed to a cause that we oppose. Royce advocates a "loyalty to loyalty" and envisions an ideal moral community where all loyalties harmonize.

Let us apply Royce's concept to present-day problems of loyalty. A state which requires its citizens to violate their deepest religious and moral convictions is guilty of a disloyalty to loyalty. That is why we respect the right of conscientious objection to military service or to saluting the flag.

Our system of government does not require citizens to accept any particular social or economic doctrines. The late Wendell Wilkie pointed out that we abolished chattel slavery—a traditional form of private property—within our Constitutional framework. And the Supreme Court has proclaimed that no official is empowered to prescribe what we should believe or to punish us if we do not accept the dominant beliefs. Loyalty is not conformity.

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

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