THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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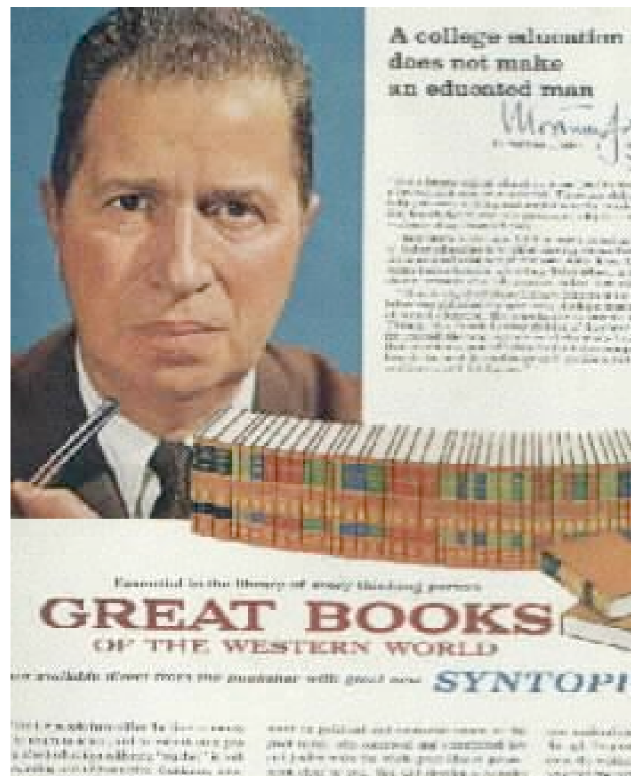
The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a moral crisis maintain their neutrality.

--Dante Alighieri



GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

MORTIMER J. ADLER

PART III (Continued)

Questions About Moral Problems

34. THE NATURE OF MORAL OBLIGATION

Dear Dr. Adler,

We praise people for being responsible and blame them for being irresponsible. A sense of responsibility is supposed to be a sign of good character. What is the nature of moral responsibility, and what is the source of its claim upon us? Is a man responsible only for what he does to other persons, or is he also responsible for what he does to himself?

G.W.

Dear G. W.,

Responsibility involves personal obligation to others. To be "responsible" means literally to be "answerable" for the things we do or fail to do. This basic notion of responsibility lies at the heart of our ethical codes and legal systems. We are confronted with responsibilities in every phase of our daily life—in the family, in our work or business, and in the political community.

The major disagreements about moral responsibility center in its source and scope—the question of to whom and for what we are accountable. Some thinkers place the source of moral obligation in the command of a superior power—the law of God or the state. Others contend that it is the inner voice of conscience, not merely superior power, which obliges us to obey the law laid down for us. Still others maintain that responsibility derives simply from rules of conduct dictated by our own reason.

For example, a man's obligation to support his family, to care for his wife and children, is usually commanded by the law of the state. He is held accountable under the law, and may be punished if he fails to discharge this responsibility. But most men obey this law not because they are afraid of being punished, but because they feel an inner sense of duty to support their families. Even where there is no explicit law, the moral person fulfills his responsibilities.

So far we have talked about our obligations to other persons. Does our moral responsibility also extend to ourselves? Aristotle holds that it relates *only* to others; for, in his opinion, all our obligations flow from the principle of justice, which "concerns the relation of a man to his neighbor." At first sight this seems a matter of plain common sense, for our promises and contracts always relate to other persons.

But Plato points out that to do injustice to others is to render oneself unjust, and thus corrupt and undermine the very core of moral personality. Other thinkers assert that we a morally responsible to seek the truth as well as to tell it to others. Nietzsche says that lying to oneself, not to others, is the greatest dishonesty of all.

The sphere of moral responsibility may be broadened to in elude the use and abuse of a man's own mind and body. He is responsible for what he does to himself. What is the basis of responsibility when it is thus broadly conceived?

Kant answers that our duties to ourselves and to others are equally under the jurisdiction of the moral law. He holds that we are obliged in conscience to do whatever reason declares to be right, whether or not others are involved. We stand in the same relation to ourselves and to others under the universal moral law. Hence, Kant advocates that we should never do anything that we would not want to become a universal law for all persons, places, and times.

In actual life, of course, conflicts arise between our responsibilities to ourselves and our responsibilities to others. In the classic case of two men lost at sea with a one-man raft between them, the conflict between duty to others and duty to self reaches the tragic extreme. It poses the question of whether a man is required to save his own life at the cost of another's, or to save another's life at the loss of his own. We have less dramatic examples every day in which we must decide between our obligation to others and to ourselves. of all the moral problems a man faces, none is more difficult than that raised by a conflict of duties.

35. THE DIGNITY OF MAN

Dear Dr. Adler,

Political and social reformers often speak of certain conditions as being an affront to human dignity. What do they mean by "human

dignity"? Is human dignity a matter of political rights and decent living conditions, or is it something more than this? Does man have more or less human dignity in modern times than in the past?

K. M.

Dear K. M.,

To answer your question it is necessary to recall the classical distinction between merely living and living well. No one should ever make the mistake of supposing that equal dignity attaches to all human activity. Human life has its distinctive worth only insofar as it achieves stature through activities that are distinctively human. Primarily, these are the liberal and liberating pursuits which are productive of the goods of the spirit and of civilization.

of course, subsistence and physical well-being have their importance; in one sense they are the most necessary goals of our efforts, since without them we could do nothing else. Yet, while being the most necessary, they are still the least human of our goals. Animals as well as men struggle to sustain life. Man's special dignity lies in goods which no other animal shares with him, as other animals share with him the goods of food, shelter, and even those of sleep and play.

In all pre-industrial societies of the past, human beings were divided into two classes corresponding to the kind of work they did. The privileged few, the members of the propertied class, were the only ones who had enough free time to engage in liberal pursuits—the cultivation of the arts and sciences, and the development of the institutions of the state and of religion. The rest, the vast majority, spent their whole lives in unrelieved and grinding toil. This was true of the chattel slaves and servile artisans of ancient Greece and Rome, of the serfs of the agrarian economies of feudal Europe, and of the "wage slaves" who formed the industrial proletariat in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Arnold Toynbee describes this situation very well:

> During these last five or six thousand years, the masters of civilization have robbed their slaves of their share in the fruits of society's corporate labours as cold-bloodedly as we rob our bees of their honey. The moral ugliness of the unjust act mars the aesthetic beauty of the artistic result; yet, up till now, the few favoured beneficiaries of civilization have had one obvious common-sense plea to put forward in their own defense.

> It has been a choice, they have been able to plead, between fruits of civilization for the few and no fruits at all . . . This plea was a plausible one, even in our technically go-ahead Western world, down to the eighteenth century inclusive, but our unprecedented technological progress in the last hundred and fifty years has made the same plea invalid today.

These amazing technological advances have already made it possible for more and more men to have more and more of their waking hours free from toil. It is now possible for them to engage in liberal and creative pursuits. By enjoying a considerable degree of economic security and independence, more and more men now have the opportunity of achieving a full measure of human dignity.

A complementary pillar of human dignity is the enjoyment of the status of a free man through the exercise of political liberty. Such liberty was restricted to the few in the past because only the few had the economic independence and security without which political liberty cannot be effectively employed. The extension of the franchise was the political expression of the gradual extension of some measure of economic independence to more and more men. These men in turn used their new power to safeguard and extend the rights and privileges of their political status. They thus exercised some control over their own destiny, which is essential to any conception of human dignity.

Even with economic freedom and political liberty, a man can still fail to achieve dignity. If he does not take advantage of these opportunities by engaging in the intrinsically virtuous activities by which men pursue happiness and serve the common good of their society, he is no better off than he was before. A man cannot be forced to lead a free life or to engage in liberal pursuits. He may squander all his time and energy in indolence or in pastimes which corrupt him. Achieving human dignity requires his moving to a much higher plane of interests.

36. THE GOODS OF THIS WORLD

Dear Dr. Adler,

In our society we place a great value on attaining material goods. We tend to judge people by their material success. But the moralists and the saints are always preaching against materialism and

the pleasure of the senses. What is materialism, and why is it supposed to be bad?

T. H.

Dear T. H.,

Men have adopted three basic attitudes toward material goods and satisfactions.

The first is asceticism—the total rejection of material goods and sensual satisfactions. Some ethical and religious thinkers hold that the material world is of no importance or, worse, a vicious hindrance to the attainment of spiritual perfection. This is a pervasive and perennial attitude. It has been the dominant ideal of Hindu religion and ethics. While it is not central in the Western religions, it has played an important part there, too.

The second attitude is materialism or sensualism—the avid pursuit of worldly possessions and physical pleasures as the basic human goods. This is also a pervasive and perennial attitude. In its crudest form, it makes money the be-all and end-all of life. We find expressions of it in the flip cynicism of the popular song "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" and in the familiar adage "Eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow we die." It is interesting to observe that no great book and no great moral philosopher ever taught this doctrine. The people who preach and practice it probably do not have the time or inclination to write books.

The third attitude affirms the value of both physical and spiritual goods. According to this view such physical goods as wealth, health, food, and sexual pleasure are genuinely good and should not be denied. But, it is maintained, they should be subordinated to spiritual goods knowledge, justice, love—for the total well-being of the person and the welfare of the community. of all three attitudes, this middle one is the most difficult to practice.

The ascetic way is hard at first, but, once mastery of the will has been attained, it becomes comparatively easy. The ascetic simply says No to the world and the flesh, and in time unsatisfied desires wither away. The materialist or sensualist simply says Yes to whatever gratifies his senses or fills his pocketbook. Like the ascetic, he is a specialist and does not have the problem of welding the physical and spiritual goods into a unified harmony. The man who follows the middle way has this problem all the time. It is his

constant care and concern to keep the two kinds of goods in the proper order and proportion.

Nevertheless, there is some reason to believe that most of us, if we thought about it, would choose the middle way. But most of us are unable or unwilling to exercise the attention and care that it requires. We tend to forget the proper use and end of the material goods we pursue.

First, we buy a car for simple transportation purposes. Then it becomes an item of prestige and conspicuous consumption. Next, one car is not enough—we must have at least two or three. Finally, we become devoted to the automobile almost as if it were an end in itself. We have become possessed by our possession. It is using us, instead of we it.

The realization that evil lies in the attachment to material goods, not in the goods themselves, is expressed in our philosophic and religious tradition. Aristotle distinguishes between legitimate wealth-getting, which provides us with the means we need in order to lead a good human life, and the piling up of wealth for wealth's sake. The Bible asserts the goodness of the material world, as created by God for man. It inveighs against the corruption of soul that often accompanies great wealth, but not against wealth itself. The rich young man in the Gospels is at fault not because he is rich, but because he is such a slave to his wealth and comfort that he cannot give it up to follow after the spirit and the truth.

37. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN REASON AND EMOTION

Dear Dr. Adler,

We are advised to be governed by reason and not to let our emotions run away with us. At the same time we are told not to suppress our emotions, lest we become mentally ill. Which is it to be? Are we to give our emotions free play or hold them in check? How do we coordinate reason and emotion?

D. S.

Dear D. S.,

Emotion, as the term indicates, moves us. Fear, anger, love, and joy stir us inwardly and usually move us to act outwardly. This in-

tensity, excitement, and drive to action contrast sharply with the detachment, balance, and calmness associated with reason.

The great writers in our tradition discuss this contrast and advance different theories of the proper roles in human life to be played by reason and emotion. They express three main views: (1) reason should govern emotion; (2) reason should get rid of emotion; and (3) emotion should rule over reason.

Aristotle and Plato hold the first view. For them, reason is the specifically human faculty which judges rightly what is good and directs man to the right goals. They hold that emotion, too, is a part of man's nature and a necessary component of moral virtue and action. Emotion is good, in this view, when it is properly subordinated to reason and employed by it in the service of good ends. Indeed, for Aristotle, such cardinal moral virtues as temperance and courage are habitual emotional attitudes or responses which carry out the commands of reason.

The second view, held mainly by Stoic philosophers like Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, is that we should try to suppress our emotions and eventually be rid of them. The ideal is a state of complete detachment or indifference—literally apathy—toward whatever might excite and disturb us. Nothing must be allowed to shake the even tenor of our judgment or our inner calm. We should be "stoical" even when faced with the death of loved ones, our own sufferings, the attitude of the world toward us, public or private catastrophes. The Stoics aim at freedom from the passions, not their control and inclusion with the moral life.

In modern times, Immanuel Kant voices a somewhat similar view. He holds that the truly good will must be utterly unaffected by the passions. Duty alone is the rationally justifiable motive of moral action. Inclination and delight are irrelevant in the moral sphere.

The third view, that emotion should be supreme, is mainly a modern position. The German Romantic philosophers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—writers such as Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Novalis—stress the primacy of emotion, imagination, and intuition in the attainment of knowledge and the fulfillment of life. They hold that analytical reason is inadequate and misleading in man's quest to attain the depths of existence.

The English poet William Blake expresses a similar view as a prophetic protest against the mutilation of integral human life by rationalistic thought and by modern science and technology. He

contrasts the glowing radiance of gratified desire with the withering effect of abstinence, and the eternal tents of Israel with Newton's particles of light. He says, "Damn braces, bless relaxes," and "Exuberance is beauty."

Sigmund Freud's view does not fit any of the three basic positions. Like the Greeks, he holds that the emotions should be controlled in order to achieve the goals of life. But his thinking is essentially biological rather than moral. Adjustment of emotional demands to the actual conditions of life, he says, "promises greater security and success" than unbridled indulgence. The suppression of emotion, on the other hand, results in abnormal mental states or neuroses. Freud counsels us to try to make the best possible adjustment of instinctive emotional impulses to the realities of nature and society. We must avoid both emotional indulgence and suppression. Freud's ideal is a wholeness and balance that withstands emotional storms within and social pressures without.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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