

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Oct '05

Nº 344

It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world, and moral courage so rare.

--Mark Twain



GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

MORTIMER J. ADLER

PART III (Continued)

Questions About Moral Problems

38. THE QUALITY OF GREATNESS IN MEN

Dear Dr. Adler,

What is a great man? Does his greatness lie in his intellect, his character, or his deeds? Or is it in some mysterious general quality of personality? Why do we call a great man "great"?

N. B.

Dear N. B.,

The word "great" originally meant large, as in the terms "Great Dipper" and "Great Divide." Greatness here is simply a matter of size. It is then natural to associate bigness with importance, for what is large stands out. This applies to the Great Pyramid of Cheops, the Colossus of Rhodes, or a man seven feet tall.

The association of largeness and pre-eminence applies to human qualities and actions as well as to physical dimensions. A "great man," in this primary sense, is a man who stands out, who towers above his fellows in some obvious way. The great men of history are usually men of action, whose deeds are known to many men. Such men are, therefore, famous, in the original meaning of the term "fame." (It originally meant a saying or report.) To be famous or renowned meant to be widely spoken of.

What human greatness consists in can be best indicated by contrasting it with the religious conception of the holy man. Isaiah speaks of the man especially singled out by God but whom God keeps hidden in obscurity, like an arrow in the quiver. An old Jewish legend tells of the thirty-six saints, utterly unknown to men, who hold up the universe through their righteousness. Contemporary pagan writings make no mention of the Jewish prophets and the Christian apostles, because they were not men of worldly importance.

The ancient pagan writers, however, insist that human greatness involves something more than mere physical or social pre-eminence. For Aristotle, the magnanimous, or "great-souled," man is worthy of the honor he seeks and obtains. In this view, a great

human being is pre-eminent in virtue, in human excellence. The “hero” is a man bigger *in virtue* and, therefore, better than the ordinary man.

But men may be pre-eminent without being honorable. Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* offers concrete evidence that outstanding men may not stand out in virtue. The *Lives* includes that brilliant and dissolute scoundrel Alcibiades, and such cruel and unscrupulous power-seekers as Marius and Sulla. It demonstrates the weaknesses and vices of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and the Gracchi brothers. Yet these are “illustrious” and “noble” men, for they stood out in their times.

In the modern era, the discussion of greatness has centered in the role of the great man in history. Thomas Carlyle, in his *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, asserts that great men shape history and direct the destiny of the human race. Among the great men, he includes poets and religious leaders as well as statesmen and military leaders—Dante and Luther as well as Cromwell and Napoleon. All of these men are the makers of the human world, and those of us who cannot be great, says Carlyle, must choose a great man, a “hero,” as our leader. A people or a time that does not look up to heroes is doomed to mediocrity.

Tolstoy is the most eloquent modern opponent of this “great man” theory of history. One of the purposes of his magnificent novel *War and Peace* is to demonstrate that individual wishes and actions count for little in determining what happens in history. Tolstoy compares historical events to the movement of a herd of cattle, which is determined by the available pasturage, not by the lead animal or the herdsman. Great men are only illustrious puppets, moved around by historical forces beyond their ken. Far from being extraordinary or heroic, they are small, ordinary men who happen to occupy the center of the stage in an immense drama. Tolstoy takes Carlyle’s hero, Napoleon, as his prime example of the fake hero—a small, vain, ordinary little man, who is dwarfed by the mass movement of history.

39. THE USE OF FREE TIME

Dear Dr. Adler,

The increased leisure time that is a result of the shorter work week presents modern Americans with a difficult problem: How are they to fill the workless hours? Didn’t the ruling classes of ancient so-

cieties become weak and degenerate through too much leisure time? I wonder if leisure is a good or a bad thing for most people. Isn't a man's work more important than his leisure in building his character?

F. F.

Dear F. F.,

Before I answer your question, let me clear up one point about the use of words. Like so many people today, you speak of leisure time" when what you really mean is *free* time—time *free from* the work you have to do to earn a living.

Free for what? Leisure is one answer to that question, but most Americans today who give that answer mean play, amusement, recreation, even sleep. My old friend Aristotle means the very opposite of all these things. of all the great writers of the past, he is the one who can give us the best advice about the problem of leisure in our society today. And there is no question that it is a serious problem now and will become an even more serious problem in the years ahead as the work week approaches thirty and twenty-five hours.

Leaving play or amusements aside for the moment, Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of serious activity in which men can engage. One is labor, toil, or business—the kind of work which produces wealth and earns a man's subsistence. The other he refers to as leisure activities"—the kind of work which produces not the goods of the body, not the comforts and conveniences of life, but the goods of the spirit or of civilization. These include all the liberal arts and sciences, and all the institutions of the state and of religion.

Like labor, toil, or business, leisure is hard work, in the sense of a tiring activity. Men need play or recreation to remove the fatigues of leisure as much as they do to refresh them from toil. In order to avoid today's widespread confusion of leisure with play, I recommend speaking of leisure work" and "subsistence work" to indicate that both are serious activities, and that the one is as far removed from play as the other.

Aristotle, in considering these three parts of a human life, places them in a certain order. Since he feels that earning a living is for the sake of being able to live well or lead a good life, he says that business or toil is for the sake of leisure. Business or toil is merely

utilitarian. It is necessary but, in and of itself, it does not enrich or ennoble a human life. Leisure, in contrast, consists in all those virtuous activities by which a man grows morally, intellectually, and spiritually. It is that which makes a life worth living.

From Aristotle's point of view, those who have enough property so that they do not have to work for a living are the most fortunate of men. All their waking time is free. How should they spend it? Aristotle's answer: "Those who are in a position which places them above toil have stewards who attend to their households while they occupy themselves with philosophy or politics." In other words, a virtuous man who has plenty of free time devotes himself to the arts and sciences and to public affairs.

As for play or amusement, Aristotle acknowledges that, like sleep, it has some biological utility: it provides relaxation and refreshment; it washes away the fatigues and tensions caused by work—subsistence work *or* leisure work. Hence, just as toil is for the sake of leisure, so play is for the sake of both toil and leisure. Aristotle writes:

We should introduce amusements only at suitable times, and they should be our medicines, for the emotion they create in the soul is relaxation, and from the pleasure we obtain rest.... To exert oneself and work for the sake of amusement seems silly and utterly childish. But to amuse oneself in order that one may exert oneself seems right.

Now let me rephrase the question you asked, as follows: "Is it good for a society to have much free time?" The answer is that it depends entirely on how men who have ample free time use it. If they use it, as so many Americans do today, in aimless play, passive forms of amusement, and desperate measures to kill the time that hangs heavy on their hands, then it obviously is not good for them or for society. It can only lead to degeneracy and corruption. But if people use their free time to develop their faculties, to grow mentally, and to participate in society and culture, then the more free time they have, the better.

of course, there is a great difference between the problem of leisure in Aristotle's day and in ours. In his day only a small segment of society formed the "leisure class," that is, men with enough property to have free time for leisure. The rest were slaves or toilers. But in our society all of us who work for a living also belong to the leisure class." We all have plenty of time free for leisure, if we would only use it for that purpose.

Will we? That's the most serious problem our society has to face. In my opinion, we can successfully check the trend toward mindless and passive time-killing indulgences only if genuinely liberal schooling prepares the young for the liberal pursuits of leisure in adult life. In addition, such things as the great-books classes for adults may help them to use their free time in the right way, for continued learning in adult life is one of the best examples of leisure activity.

PART III: *Questions About Moral Problems*

RECOMMENDED READINGS

In *Great Books of the Western World*

Plato: *Republic; Gorgias; Meno; Protagoras; Euthyphro; Apology; Crito; Lathes; Laws*
 Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*
 Epictetus: *The Discourses*
 Marcus Aurelius: *The Meditations*
 Plutarch: *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* Plotinus:
The Six Enneads, Ennead I
 Augustine: *The Confessions*
 Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, Parts I—II, QQ. 1—108
 Hobbes: *Leviathan*, Part I
 Montaigne: *Essays*
 Spinoza: *Ethics*
 Kant: *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals; Preface and Introduction to the Metaphysical Elements of Ethics; General Introduction to the Metaphysic of Morals; The Science of Right*, Introduction
 Hegel: *The Philosophy of Right*, Part II
 Freud: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle; The Ego and the Id; Civilization and Its Discontents*

Other Works

Bentham, Jeremy: *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*
 Berdyaev, Nicolas: *The Destiny of Man*
 Bradley, F. H.: *Ethical Studies*
 Broad, Charles D.: *Five Types of Ethical Theory*
 Buber, Martin: *Good and Evil*
 Burckhardt, Jacob: *Force and Freedom, V. "The Great Men of History"*

Dewey, John: *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*
 Fromm, Erich: *Man for Himself*
 Hume, David: *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*
 James, William: *Essays on Faith and Morals*
 Lippmann, Walter: *Preface to Morals*
 Maritain, Jacques: *The Rights of Man and the Natural Law; The Person and the Common Good; True Humanism*
 Moore, George E.: *Ethics*
 Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Beyond Good and Evil; The Genealogy of Morals*
 Nowell-Smith, Patrick: *Ethics*
 Otto, Max: *Science and the Moral Life*
 Ross, William D.: *The Right and the Good*
 Royce, Josiah: *Studies of Good and Evil; The Philosophy of Loyalty*
 Taylor, A. E.: *The Faith of a Moralist*
 Vivas, Eliseo: *The Moral Life and the Ethical Life*
 Wild, John: *Plato's Modern Enemies and the Theory of Natural Law*

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Dr. (Rev.) Gregory Telepneff

Ronald Zelaya

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

Homepage: <http://www.thegreatideas.org/>

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.