

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Jul '06

Nº 378



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## GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

### PART VI

**Questions About Social Problems**

## 65. THE EQUALITY OF MEN

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*The Declaration of Independence says all men are created equal. Now, how could the supposedly wise authors of this document have written such obvious nonsense? Just look around you! Are the Aga Khan and a Southern Negro tenant farmer created equal? Are Marilyn Monroe and the average woman equally endowed by their Creator? Were our forefathers just putting out political propaganda, or were they trying to say something sensible?*

*H. F.*

*Dear H. F.,*

Let us first try to see what our forefathers meant by this odd statement about human equality. Most of them were men of affairs with a lot of worldly experience. They were well aware that people do not have identical physiques, minds, or possessions. They had only to look around them as you say. They knew that talents and virtues are very unevenly divided in this world.

They held, however, that we are all men together, all human beings. All of us belong to the same species of animal. Each of us shares, at least potentially, in the special characteristics of that species. We have personality, rationality, free will, and responsibility. As a result of these things we have individual dignity or worth. We share in a common inheritance and a common destiny. Yet each of us has a personal way to make in the world, an individual destiny. According to this view, men cannot rightfully be treated as if they were things, not persons. Because they are persons, it is wrong to use them merely as means.

The authors of the Declaration did not mean that there are no differences between human beings. They did mean that all persons share equally, because they are all human beings, in certain rights that cannot rightfully be taken away by any government. They believed these rights to be natural and unalienable. Let us look again at what they said:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

This passage does not mean that Judy O'Grady and the Colonel's Lady were endowed with the same setup, got the same breaks, and have the same amount of money in the bank. But they are sisters under the skin and have the same rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The application of this lovely phrase is spelled out in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution, in the Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, and in other documents.

Now, of course, you could press me further and say this is all a bunch of hypocrisy. Where in our world do all men have equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? Negroes are sometimes strung up in the South by white men who escape just punishment. Arabs clamor for equality in French North Africa and Israel. The Soviet Constitution has a bill of rights, too. So what? It seems as if those who have the power decide how much "equality" there shall be. Or, as the late George Orwell said in *Animal Farm*, his grim satire on the Soviet regime: "All pigs are equal, but some pigs are more equal than others."

You might have gone further and noted that many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were slaveholders and that the Constitution in its original form counts a slave as three-fifths of a man. Slavery was a respectable social institution in those times. Probably most of the signers of the Declaration saw no contradiction between the equality they proclaimed between Englishmen and Americans and the slavery that prevailed for Negroes under whites. However, Thomas Jefferson and a few other leaders opposed Negro slavery. And note that the Declaration did not say: "All white men are created equal." The proclamation was universal; it opened the door to freedom and equality for all men.

If you pay close attention to the way men argue for such inequities and injustices, you will notice that they plead practical exigencies rather than ultimate right. In recent times no one except Nazis and Fascists has actually argued for inequality among men as a matter of right.

The writers of the Declaration drew largely on the English philosopher John Locke for their theory of natural rights and their views on liberty and equality. You may, therefore, be interested in the following passage from Locke's essay, "On Civil Government":

Though I have said above "That all men by nature are equal," I cannot be supposed to understand all sorts of "equality." Age or virtue may give men a just precedency. Excellence of parts and merit may place others above the common level . . . yet all

this consists with the equality which all men have in respect of jurisdiction or dominion one over another.

## 66. THE REALITY OF PROGRESS

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*The recent advances in the conquest of space have led many of us to remark on the wonderful age we are living in and to look forward to greater and greater progress. But have we really progressed mentally, morally, and spiritually over the great civilizations of the past? Is there really such a thing as progress, or is it just a modern myth?*

*A. F. P.*

*Dear A. F. P.,*

Would you regard the discovery and development of a new idea as a sign of progress? The reason I ask is that the idea of progress is just an idea. It was first clearly stated by the Abbé Saint-Pierre in the eighteenth century. It has been developed mostly in the last two hundred years.

The basic notion of progress is that change for the better occurs inevitably in the ongoing course of time. It implies that there is real change in human history and that events do not repeat themselves. It also implies that this change is directed toward improvement or perfection in human affairs. Progress may have a definite goal, such as the classless society or perpetual peace, or it may be an endless process.

The ancients take what is called a “cyclical” view of history. As they see things, everything that goes up must come down—in human affairs as well as in the world of bodies. History, as well as nature, has its seasons and its cycle of birth and decay. Cities rise and fall. Civilization advances for a while, and then it begins to decline. Aristotle even supposes that the knowledge which men have accumulated in the arts and sciences can be lost and will have to be regained again.

From this point of view, which a modern writer such as Spengler shares, progress is an illusion. There appears to be some progress in human affairs if we look only at the upward side of the cycle of rise and decline. But that is only half the story. The other half is the very reverse of progress.

But those who believe in progress can point to the advances which men have made since the beginning of history in the development of useful tools and instruments, in the improvement of all the material conditions of life, and in the accumulation of knowledge. We have made tremendous advances in the past three hundred years in scientific knowledge and technology, in the useful arts, and in the production of wealth. Not only have we made great progress, but we seem to be making it faster and faster.

Will such progress ever come to an end? Not unless we destroy the conditions for making further progress by using the new weapons of destruction which progress has given us. This brings us to the really difficult question about progress in morals and politics. Will men ever become wise enough to devise and adopt institutions that will eliminate war together with all other forms of destructiveness?

There is some evidence, however slight, that the human conscience has slowly improved over the ages. We have witnessed in this century treatment of men by men which was as inhumane and cruel as the worst brutalities recorded in ancient history. Nevertheless, there are more human beings today who are deeply shocked by such treatment than ever existed before. We are more conscious of human rights. We have a profounder sense of the dignity of the individual man than our ancestors did.

Some writers, such as Hegel and Karl Marx, hold that moral and political progress is inevitable. As they see it, the most fundamental law that governs history is the law of necessary progress. Opposed to them are writers like Kant and J. S. Mill, who think that progress is achieved only by human effort. There is nothing necessary or inevitable about progress, they say. Whether human society improves or civilization advances depends entirely upon the choices men make.

The deepest issue about progress concerns human nature itself. Is all the progress that is possible restricted to improvements in human institutions, in the arts and sciences, and in the externals of life? Or is human nature itself capable of progress or, as we might say, evolution from a lower to a higher form?

The German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche prophesies a superman—a new type of creature, beyond man as he is presently constituted. Marxists and utopian socialists look forward to a superior human being as a result of achieving the perfect society. Religious thinkers also hope for the development of a new type of man through a spiritual renaissance.

I take the opposite view. I regard human nature as a constant and unchanging factor which sets limits to the progress man can make. But, while limited, much progress remains to be made—much more than we have seen so far. And with every step forward man realizes his potentialities more fully.

I think it unlikely that man was closer in the past to the full realization of his potentialities than he is now or will be in the future.

## 67. THE POPULATION EXPLOSION

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*There has been a lot of publicity about the world's "population explosion," and considerable controversy about how and whether it should be checked. What are the main positions of thinkers in the past on the problem of overpopulation? How do their views compare with those held at the present time?*

F. B. C.

*Dear F. B. C.,*

Thomas R. Malthus, an English clergyman and economist, started the modern discussion of the population problem in 1798 with his *Essay on the Principle of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society*. Malthus asserts that the increase in population always tends to exceed the increase in the means of subsistence. He believes that a proper balance between population and subsistence is attained through the decimating effects of war, famine, and pestilence, and the debilitating effects of misery and vice among the poorer classes. Malthus later modified this grim picture to suggest that late marriage preceded by strict continence might check population growth, but he had little hope that many people would exercise such restraint.

Malthus wrote his essay to prove that it is impossible to perfect society so that all men may live free from want or anxiety about their subsistence. Nature, he says, cannot provide for all, so only the fittest survive or live free from misery and want. When Charles Darwin wrote his famous work, *The Origin of Species* (1859), he applied Malthus' idea of "the struggle for existence" to the whole organic world, but did not deal with the problem of human population growth in society.

However, economists such as William Graham Sumner used Darwin's theory of natural selection to justify the competitive economic system of the nineteenth century, with its attendant want and misery. Like Malthus, they hold that there are only so many places at nature's table, and the extra persons—who are competitively less fit—have no moral right to subsist.

The most vigorous and bitter opposition to Malthus and the “social Darwinists” comes from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the founders of modern communist theory. They hold Malthus' theory to be a vicious and inhumane defense of the iniquities of capitalism. Marx calls it “this repulsive blasphemy against man and nature.” They also consider Malthus' “eternal” law of nature—which says that population always outruns subsistence—to be utterly unfounded and unproved.

Marx and Engels ascribe the misery and want of their time to an ineffective and outmoded economic system, not to overpopulation. Men, unlike animals, are producers as well as consumers, they say. More mouths also mean more hands. Marx and Engels seek the remedy for human want and misery in a better system of production and distribution, not in restricting population growth. In a primitive economy, even one person to the square mile may be too much, while in a modern industrial economy the same area may support 1,000 persons without strain.

The principles stated by Malthus and Marx-Engels still dominate the discussion of the population problem today. A decreasing death rate accompanied by an intensive birth rate in countries like India and China, and a merely moderate increase in food production, has given new life to the Malthusian fears. Social and biological scientists have again raised the specter of too little food for too many mouths. Unlike Malthus, however, they look to a decreased birth rate, not to an increased death rate, for the solution. Unlike Malthus, they do not seek to make life harder and shorter for the poor; but they seek to make it healthier and more dignified.

Present day anti-Malthusians still look for the solution in better organization of production, more equitable distribution, and intensive utilization of natural resources. But they are usually not Marxists, oppose communism, and want to work within the existing system of ownership. They include people who for religious reasons oppose the artificial restriction of births. Some anti-Malthusians agree with Malthus' suggestion of delayed marriages preceded by strict continence, especially for countries like India.

Many persons now advocate a middle position between the extreme Malthusian and anti-Malthusian arguments. They want to combine more efficient production and distribution with limitations on birth, but they differ among themselves on the proper method of birth limitation.

## 68 WHAT ABOUT CONFORMITY?

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*Everybody is supposed to conform nowadays, even the kids. And the people striving self-consciously to be nonconformists have their own uniforms and stereotyped talk. Anyone who deviates from the social or group pattern is regarded as a subversive or a "square." Is this appalling situation unique, or has it existed in other ages? Have the great thinkers ever faced this problem?*

T. J. M.

*Dear T. J. M.,*

Conformity to the moods, tastes, and opinions of the general public is a strictly modern phenomenon. The uprooting of the old social order after the French Revolution, the development of mass communications, and the preponderant power of "public opinion" provided the conditions under which conformity became a problem and a menace. This is by no means the same as the old problem of the tension between individual freedom and social authority, embodied in the state or the church.

The modern "public," as Kierkegaard pointed out more than a century ago, is not a real community made up of real persons. It is an abstract collection of individuals, "at the moments when they are nothing," that is, when they are being like everyone else. This is the public, the mass, the crowd, the "they," to whose will and opinion we are all supposed to conform.

In the past century many perceptive writers have dealt with the problem of conformity to this phantom public. One of the most masterly treatments of conformity comes to us from the pen of John Stuart Mill. It appears in his famous work "On Liberty." It was written a century ago, but it sounds as if it had been written today.

Mill agrees with Kierkegaard that the individual is lost in the crowd. Uniformity is the ideal. Everyone is supposed to think and



feel and act like everyone else. Collective mediocrity rules. Most people, says Mill, “read the same things, see the same things, go to the same places, have their hopes and fears directed to the same objects.” (This was before television!)

According to Mill, there is no one to lead the masses or to resist their will. The thinking of the masses “is done for them by men much like themselves,” who speak to them and for them through the daily press. No class or institution can withstand the new government by mediocrity—what the late Georges Bernanos calls “mediocracy.” Nonconformity is left without an ally, even in high places.

In the new order practically everyone conforms, whether his social position is high or low. What “others” think is suitable prevails, not one’s own personal preference. Mill says that conformity affects not only our keeping up—or down—with the Joneses, but even the presumable sanctuary of intimate pleasures and feelings. “Even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done; peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct, are shunned equally with crimes.”

Because “they like in crowds,” says Mill, people cease to have any truly personal opinions or feelings. They cease to have any real personality or character, because the springs of individuality and spontaneity have dried up. Personality and character are built by the exercise of discrimination, evaluation, and choice. If these personal faculties are not used, they grow blunt and dull and finally wither away. When this happens, a man becomes depersonalized, a human automaton.

Mill maintains that individuality and spontaneity are essential for human well-being—both for the individual and for society. A society in which people merely copied one another or conformed to prevailing custom would not be human. A real community consists of real individuals, not of carbon copies. The more real life there is in individuals, says Mill, the more there is in the society which they constitute.

Mill calls for an extreme remedy in the present crisis, where we feel like moral lepers if we do “what nobody does” or do not do “what everybody does.” He says that it is our duty to be eccentric. “In this age, the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. That so few dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time.”

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**WELCOME NEW MEMBERS**

**Robert Newton**

**Brandon Ragle**

**Ben Tackett**

**Taz Tally**

**Nathan Williams**

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

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**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

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

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.