

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Oct '06

Nº 390



GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

PART VI

Questions About Social Problems

73. THE PROBLEM OF DIVORCE

Dear Dr. Adler,

I read recently about a rather active lady in California who was obtaining her fourteenth divorce. I feel that such divorces and re-marriages make a mockery of marriage. Have great writers of the past faced this issue? What do they have to say about divorce?

F. D. N.

Dear F. D. N.,

The great writers of the past disagree on this subject. Biblical patriarchs, Roman lawyers, Christian saints, and modern individualists hardly see eye to eye on marriage and divorce. But since they express the main viewpoints that have prevailed in our tradition, they may help us to consider this question with more understanding.

Speaking simply, there have been two essentially different views about marriage in the past. The first view is that marriage is a permanent bond or commitment, sealed by a religious or legal act. The second is that marriage is a civil contract or personal arrangement between the two persons involved. Writers differ in their views of divorce as they hold to one or the other of these ideas about marriage.

Writers who consider marriage a permanent bond reject divorce entirely or would allow it only in certain extreme cases. The Spanish novelist Cervantes has his hero Don Quixote say that a wife's companionship is not a purchased article to be returned to the store if a man changes his mind: "It is an inseparable accident that lasts as long as life lasts." Many such writers think that husband and wife are not the only parties to a marriage. The noted English literary critic Samuel Johnson says:

To the contract of marriage there is a third party—Society; and if it be considered as a vow—God; and therefore, it cannot be dissolved by their consent alone.

Writers who view marriage as a civil contract rather than a religious sacrament believe it may be dissolved by mutual consent or when one party has broken the terms of the contract. Marriage, so viewed, is an arrangement between two individuals for their enjoyment and convenience. The arrangement may be discontinued when these ends are no longer served. Some of the greatest modern

philosophers hold the civil-contract view of marriage, among them John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Hegel. Such thinkers, however, hold that divorce is undesirable because it deprives growing children of proper care.

There are also different views about what the grounds of divorce should be. In the past it has usually been agreed that adultery on the wife's part is a good ground for divorce. John Milton, the great English poet, says that a marriage may be dissolved when there is no longer affection between husband and wife. He is one of the few writers in our tradition who personally experienced the anguish of divorce. Montesquieu, an eighteenth-century French philosopher, approves of divorce when both parties find the marriage "inconvenient" and (very radical for his time) asserted that women should have the same rights in the matter as men.

In our day the grounds of divorce have ranged from adultery, to a vaguely defined "incompatibility," to eating crackers in bed. The civil-contract notion of marriage has triumphed, and the ideas of dead philosophers are now an everyday fact. However, we need not jump to the conclusion that thinkers who hold this view would approve of the present situation, where par for movie stars is five or six marriages and wealthy scions may run their score up to ten or twelve.

Even writers least bound by religious tradition warn against easy divorces. The English historian Edward Gibbon paints a shocking picture of easy divorce in ancient Rome. Marriages were dissolved because of momentary moods or petty disputes, and "the most tender of human connections was degraded to a transient society of profit or pleasure." He doubts that happiness and virtue could result from such laxness, and questions the sense of chastity of "the matron who in five years can submit to the embraces of eight husbands." So you see that the present situation, your California lady, and your anxiety are not without precedent.

The word of wisdom with which I would like to close comes from the English philosopher Francis Bacon, who notes that those who do not find happiness in marriage do not find it in divorce, either:

In domestical separations and breaches men do promise to themselves quieting of their minds and contentment; but still they are deceived of their expectation, and it turneth to wind.

74. THE REARING OF CHILDREN

Dear Dr. Adler,

We parents have had so much contradictory advice on the rearing of children that we are quite confused. First, we're told to be "permissive" and not "authoritarian," so as not to cramp the little child's ego development. Then we're told we've been too permissive and made the child insecure by not setting up firm discipline. We're damned if we do, and we're damned if we don't. What do the thinkers of the past have to say about how to bring up children? Are they authoritarian or permissive? Maybe they can clear things up for us.

L. W. D.

Dear L. W. D.,

The great thinkers of the past have a lot to say about how a family should be governed. Most of them approve the Biblical commandment to honor parents and repeat the warning not to spare the rod and spoil the child. There is little dissent from this teaching until very recent times. Practically all the great writers insist that parents should govern children firmly until they reach maturity.

This may seem undemocratic, as compared with our arrangements in adult society. Indeed, Aristotle, in his *Politics*, tells us that the father is the king of the family, ruling absolutely over his children; but he does not regard such absolute rule by the father as tyrannical, since it aims at the good of the child.

You may say that so far we have referred only to ancient writings which are weighted in favor of authoritarian views. What about the liberal thinkers? Well, let's see what John Locke has to say. Locke was the philosophic inspiration of liberal government in the English-speaking world. The phrases in our Declaration about equality and human rights derive from him. What does he have to say about the government of the family?

Locke does not appeal to the similarity between a father and a king, because he is against kings who *try* to govern grown men as a father *should* govern his children. But he does favor strong parental control. Unlike Aristotle, he believes that both father and mother should rule; only in case of disagreement, should the father alone decide.

Locke thinks that children are not equal to adults. They have to be “brought up” to such equality through their parents’ care and discipline.

To inform the mind, and govern the actions of their yet ignorant nonage, till reason shall take its place and ease them of that trouble, is what the children want, and the parents are bound to. . . . [The child] has no understanding of his own to direct his will.... He that understands for him must will for him too; he must prescribe to his will and regulate his actions, but when he comes to the estate that made his father a free man, the son is a free man too.

It would appear that Locke, like many present-day Americans, believes in “giving the kids what they want.” But for him “want” means what they lack or need, not what *they* think they should have. Children lack experience and understanding. It is the parents’ duty to supply these needs.

Rousseau, another opponent of absolute monarchy and spokesman for human equality, is in basic agreement with Locke. The whole point for these thinkers is that the parents rule the child in order to fit him for adult freedom. Parental rule is tyrannical and unjust only when the parents are concerned with their own power and ease, or extend their rule beyond adolescence.

Well and good, you may say, but this is still before the flood of revelations bestowed on us by modern psychology. Doesn’t Sigmund Freud say that parental rule causes all kinds of emotional ills in children? Yes and no. Freud is probably more aware than any other of the great writers of the tensions and conflicts that stem from the relations between parents and children. However, he recognizes that leniency and indulgence may have just as bad emotional effects as harshness and strictness. He does not approve of the cult of “His Majesty the Baby”; indeed, he sees it as an expression of the parents’ emotional immaturity and insecurity, which may have very unwholesome effects on the child when he grows up. Freud also recognizes that human culture, ideals and values, notions of right and wrong, are transmitted through parents to children.

The main problem in child care for Freud is to afford the child proper nurture and guidance without placing insuperable blocks on his road to adult freedom and independence. The child’s “great task” is to free himself from his parents.

Only after this detachment is accomplished can he cease to be a

child and so become a member of the social community. . . . These tasks are laid down for every man. ... In neurotics this detachment from the parents is not accomplished at all.

Where the home and parents have failed, the psycho-therapist must step in to guide the neurotic from childhood to maturity.

75. THE TREATMENT OF THE AGED

Dear Dr. Adler,

The problem of the aged citizens of our society is of urgent concern. It has been commented on by social workers, political leaders, and other interested persons. Did societies in the past have this problem? What was the position of the aged in former times? Do the great writers of the past have anything illuminating to offer us on this vital matter?

F. W. B.

Dear F. W. B.,

The attitude toward the elderly has varied in different times and cultures. In general, the aged have been held in great respect and even veneration in primitive and ancient societies. Old age was regarded as the time of wisdom and spiritual power. Rule by "the elders" in both the political and the religious community was a common practice.

The present problem of what to do about our "senior citizens" is unique. It arises from the technological and social changes of the past hundred years. Man's life span has been lengthened, but his services to the economy have been rendered unnecessary in the extra years he has gained. The aged have become supernumeraries in our society. We have substituted "gerontology" (the study of the aged and their problems) for "gerontocracy" (rule by the aged).

The writers of the past have no advice to offer us on our special problem, for they never faced it, not even as a possibility. Montaigne, in the sixteenth century, notes that most men do not live beyond forty. The aged, as a numerous class, were no problem.

However, we do find passages from the ancient poets which resemble our own sense of the plight of the aged. In one of Sophocles' plays, the chorus of elders calls old age "dispraised, infirm, unsociable, unfriended." Another chorus, in a play by Aristot-

phanes, laments: “We who have lost our music, feeble nothings, dull, forlorn.”

Jonathan Swift, in *Gulliver’s Travels*, also paints a grim picture of old age. On the mythical island of Luggnagg, a few people in each generation live on to an everlasting old age. In addition to being “opinionative, peevish, covetous, morose, vain, talkative, incapable of friendship and dead to all natural affection,” they can remember only what they learned in their earlier years, and even that incorrectly. At the age of eighty, they are held legally dead, given a small pension, and regarded as incapable of employment or business transactions.

Some philosophers of antiquity, such as Plato and Cicero, take a brighter view of old age. They see it as the period when intellectual activity and wisdom are at the highest and replace the waning physical powers and enjoyments. They also regard old age as the time when practical judgment is at its best and men are most qualified to direct public affairs. The study of philosophy, according to Plato, should not begin until after fifty.

Montaigne, on the other hand, maintains that we are fully formed by the time we are twenty, do our best work before we are thirty, and decay thereafter in everything, including our mind. He is skeptical of the traditional view that we increase in understanding and wisdom as we get older, and believes, rather, that we get duller. He proposes, however, various psychological stratagems for overcoming the stupefaction of old age, and holds out the hope that our sensual tastes and appreciation can be developed as we grow older.

Many writers insist that the lapses in memory, acuteness, and interest which are supposed to afflict the aged can be avoided or overcome. Samuel Johnson contends vehemently that the loss of mental acuteness is the result of weak will and laziness, not of old age. W. B. Yeats wrote some of his best poetry in his old age, and William Carlos Williams is still writing vigorously and well. And even in this time of disrespect for old age, the peoples of the United States, Germany, France, and England have chosen elderly gentlemen to lead them.

PART VI: *Questions About Social Problems*

RECOMMENDED READINGS

In Great Books of the Western World

- Plato: *Protagoras*; *Republic*, Books III-V, X; *Laws*, Books H, VII, IX, XI
- Aristotle: *Ethics*, Book V; *Politics*, Books I-II, VII-VIII; *Rhetoric*, Book II, Ch. 13
- Augustine: *The City of God*, Book XII, Chs. 13, 17, 20
- Hobbes: *Leviathan*, Part II, Chs. 20, 27-28
- Montaigne: *Essays*, “Of Age,” “Of the Affection of Fathers to Their Children,” “Of Cruelty”
- Milton: *Areopagitica*
- Locke: *Concerning Civil Government*, Second Essay
- Montesquieu: *The Spirit of Laws*, Books VI, VII, XVI, XIX, XXIII
- Rousseau: *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*; *The Social Contract*, Book I, Book II, Ch. 5, Book N, Ch. 7
- Kant: *The Science of Right*, “The Rights of the Family as a Domestic Society,” “The Right of Punishing and Pardoning”
- American State Papers: The Declaration of Independence*
- Mill: *On Liberty*, Ch. 3, “Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being”; *Utilitarianism*, Ch. 5, “On the Connection Between Justice and Utility”
- Hegel: *The Philosophy of Right*, Part I, Section IIIc, “Coercion and Crime,” Part III, Section I, “The Family”; *The Philosophy of History*, Introduction
- Darwin: *The Origin of Species*, Ch. III, “The Struggle for Existence”
- Marx: *Capital*, Ch. X, “The Working Day,” Ch. XIV, Section 3, Ch. XV, Sections 8-9
- Marx and Engels: *The Communist Manifesto*
- Freud: “The Sexual Enlightenment of Children”; “On Narcissism”; *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Lectures 8, 13, 20, 21; *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Sections VII, X, XII; *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Lectures 33-34

Other Works

- Aquinas, Thomas: *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book III, Chs. 122-126, 139-145; *Summa Theologica*, Part II-II, QQ. 151-154, Part III, Suppl., QQ. 41-68
- Bacon, Francis: *Essays*, “Of Parents and Children,” “Of Marriage and Single Life,” “Of Youth and Age”
- Beccaria, Cesare B.: *Crimes and Punishments*
- Bentham, Jeremy: *The Rationale of Punishment*
- Buber, Martin: *Between Man and Man*, II. “The Question to the Single One”
- Bury, John B.: *The Idea of Progress*
- Chesterfield, Fourth Earl of: *Letters to His Son*
- Darwin, Charles: *Problems of World Population*

- Engels, Friedrich: *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*
- Ewing, Alfred C.: *The Morality of Punishment*
- Freud, Sigmund: *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*
- Gardiner, Harold C.: *The Catholic Viewpoint on Censorship Gerontological Congress: Old Age in the Modern World*
- Hauser, Philip M., and Duncan, Otis D.: *Study of Population*
- Kallen, Horac M.: *Indecency and the Seven Arts*
- Kierkegaard, Sören: *The Present Age; The Point of View; The Attack upon "Christendom"*
- Lawrence, David H.: *Pornography and Obscenity*
- Lowith, Karl: *Meaning in History*, IV. "Progress Versus Providence"
- Malthus, Thomas R.: *An Essay on Population*
- Meek, Ronald L., ed.: *Marx and Engels on Malthus*
- Milton, John: *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*
- Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Thus Spake Zarathustra*
- Playfair, Giles, and Singleton, Derrick: *Offenders: The Case Against Legal Vengeance*
- Richardson, Bessie E.: *Old Age Among the Ancient Greeks*
- Simmons, L. W.: *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society*
- Tawney, Richard H.: *Equality*
- Zilboorg, Gregory: *Psychology of the Criminal Act and Punishment*

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Tirsa Mendez

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

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

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.