

A CONVERSATION WITH MORTIMER ADLER

An interview by Bill Moyers

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(Part 2 of 2)

ADLER: I now come to the economies that exist in the rest of the advanced world—all of Western Europe, the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand. These are all still ... notice, free enterprise unrestricted here. Free enterprise negative entirely here. Free enterprise circumscribed here, limited, regulated freedom, not unrestricted. Regulated here. This...the best name for this is socialized Capitalism. The we ... when American, we don't like the word So-

cialism we don't call it socialized here. We call it the mixed economy. But it's the same thing. We have a private sector and a public sector. It is an economy in which there are eroded, beginning the New Deal...beginning with Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, right down in our country...definitely eroded property rights. But still with a high...I would still say that we have in this country if not one-tenth, the private ownership of the means of production is in the hands of the top fifteen percent. It's probably one-tenth of the population still. Look at the actual ownership in the stock of our great corporations.

But those property rights, even if they are more widely diffused than that are highly eroded. But now you get, if you look at all these socialized capitalisms, or mixed economies—Sweden—there's a spectrum of them. Some of them are less socialized, some are more socialized in varying degrees, but they all are welfare economies, which the economic welfare of the people is the aim of the economy to achieve in varying degrees, and they are all in varying degree democracies. Democracy becomes viable here as it is not viable here and viable here.

Now, I come last to the prescription that comes out of Marx, and out of, by the way, Horace Mann. I'm going to read you one sentence in Horace Mann. This is 1853. Remember that word, property means capital, not just the ordinary shirt of someone's back. He says, talking about the antagonism that has existed between Capital and Labor: "Property and labor in different classes are essentially antagonistic. But property and labor in the same class...", listen to that, "Property and labor in the same class are essentially fraternal." That's page 75. What does that mean? It means, what this D means over here, and it means what I read you in Marx about if the trouble is the concentrated ownership of the means of production, the cure is the diffusion of the ownership of the means of production. This I'm going to call Universal Capitalism, meaning every man a citizen, every man a capitalist. Every family with two incomes, the income of working, the income of equities on capital. Every man, every family, with some ownership of capital, some contribution ... two factors in production. Earnings from two factors. Earnings from the earnings of capital; earnings from the earnings of labor. Welfare economy ... this will produce an even greater diffusion of wealth than this does and democracy.

This, by the way, the diffused private ownership of the means of

production and restored property rights. Those eroded property rights here would be restored because ... of the change from concentrated private ownership to diffused private ownership.

Now one more comment. These three are all ... if you ... one of the most important things in the world is to get over the horror of words. Americans still have a horror of the word, socialism. They should not. It's as good a word, it's as fine a word, shall I say, of describing what should take place as democracy is.

The word, communism, is a different kind of word and I want to separate it. All three of these economies are socialist in the sense their aim is the participation by all human beings in the economic welfare of the community, in the general economic welfare. That's the socialism defined in terms of ends. Communism is socialism in terms of means. The means here are the abolition of private property, the state ownership. The means here are the mixed economy, the public and the private sector. The means here are the diffusion of capital. Three different means.

This is the only one that's called socialism of means that we use the word communism when the means are the socialist, historically, beginning socialist, means abolishing the private ownership of the means of production. But all three of these if viewed in terms of what their ends are, are socialisms. And socialism is the great revolution of the 20th century. Just as...in something you may or may not have read, there's no retrograde motion back from democracy. Once suffrage gets extended, there's no motion back from it, I think, unless you have authority and revolution from the right. So, I think there's no retrograde motion back from socialism. We'll never have any advanced economy that is not a welfare economy from now on.

MAN: You've mentioned that in capital intensive societies so far, the predictions of Communism have not come true. But I wonder if you could write a scenario that would cause the inflationary pressures or in any other way, cause us to get to Communism from where we are today. What kind of scenario would that be like?

ADLER: Well, the increasing amounts of government control of the economy to the regulation of prices, wages; the excessive control of the economy. Now the other thing I have to add at once. And certainly, there is the other portion and I didn't put it down

because it isn't part of the economic picture, but there is in the world today, both among the rich nations and among the poor, and between the poor and the rich within those nations, the strongest drive is toward equality. And it's easier to handle the problems of political equality; but when you get to economic equality, you are faced with the most difficult question. Do you mean by economic equality everyone with the same amount of goods? No differences in income? No differences in possessions...the material possessions of the goods that are called economic?

If you do, then I think...and that's what a large number of the people who are talking about equality are egalitarian in that sense. I use the word egalitarian as a term of derogation, not of praise. And that meaning of equality, I think, is not only unattainable, but in the effort to attain it, will just necessarily require authoritarian means. It can't be done by free processes and by ordinary legislation. Hence, unless we can reconceive equality so that we can understand what deToqueville means. And he's the man that created the phrase for us, an equality of conditions, which is the ideal democracy, and I subscribe to that ideal. Judge?

JUDGE MARVIN FRANKEL: It seems to me, with all respect, that the worry about egalitarianism, which is being widely expressed these days, is a little bit—I don't know how to say this respectfully—commercial. I don't know any country that's been done in by equality.

ADLER: Not yet.

JUDGE: Not yet. And I don't know any that's threatened with it. The inequalities in this country are so gross that to worry about absolute leveling, I suggest, is at least premature.

ADLER: I couldn't agree with you more. And I'm glad you made the point because I'm not saying by any means that we have achieved an equality of conditions in my sense of the term equality of conditions. But it is terribly important to know what you mean by equality of conditions short of that leveling egalitarianism. Now, I would say that the extreme left wing in Great Britain at the moment, the United Kingdom, the real Marxist leaders of the strong TUC union, the TUC groups, do have in mind at least not the achievement, but a tendency toward equality in the wrong sense. They really want to redistribute the ... wealth tax, a whole series of

measures that they've proposed—I don't think they'll go through ... if they do, they'll ruin Britain, I think—are pushes for the wrong notion of equality. Now my point is not that we should give up. If you think what I've said is any kind of counter-policy against trying to equalize conditions, that's not the case. Democracy calls for the greatest equalizing of conditions in human life. But equalizing the conditions of human life in my qualitative sense of equality is not the same as leveling in amounts, which is the egalitarian notion. And that's the difference. One should not in recoiling from one give up the other.

MOYERS: For most of his life Mortimer Adler has dwelled on the weighty ideas of Western Civilization, cosmic thoughts for the common man, someone said. But it's true. He has had a passion to bring closer to the street, at least to the local library, an organized inventory of those animating concepts like truth, freedom and justice.

As Chairman of the Board of the Encyclopedia Britannica, he is still at it. And recently he completed the most audacious project of an audacious life—the fifteenth edition of the Britannica, an outline of the whole of human knowledge in forty-three million words.

If Mortimer Adler is a man of enormous ego, and there's no doubt that he is he also is a man of extraordinary endeavors, which only unusual pride in self can often inspire. Now Adler has turned from the universe to a more parochial arena, the basic ideas of the American Republic.

With an old friend, William Gorman, he has just published a book called "The American Testament", an effort to see if the great ideas that forged the nation still mean what they once did.

Are those principles that were based in the founding era of this Republic still relevant today?

ADLER: They are capable of being understood more deeply and broadly today, and as a result of 200 years of experience, than when they were written. Not that they are in the minds of the people, no. I would say one of the most regrettable things is that most Americans either recite the Declaration of Independence or remember some of its words exactly the way a large number of church-going Christians recite the Lord's Prayer without hearing a

word or understanding a word. It is really, I think, a most important thing that could happen in this Bicentennial era, next year particularly, is for Americans to read the Declaration of Independence out loud slowly and ponder each word as they read it.



MOYERS: The beguiling terms in that second paragraph of the Declaration that you mentioned a minute ago, to me today, are “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Now, you’ve written a great deal about the pursuit of happiness and the good life. What do you mean in 1975 and six by the term “the Pursuit of Happiness”?

ADLER: Of all the phrases this seems to me simply the most inspired. First, because he did not say that among men’s inalienable rights, which a just government should secure, the attainment of happiness. If he had said that, it would have been nonsense. No government could guarantee to all men the attainment of happiness since the attainment of happiness depends in some part upon their free will, upon how they exercise their choices, what they do with their own lives given the opportunities, you see. So the attainment is not within the power of government.

Now the pursuit ... he chose the word pursuit, which is a remarkable choice on his part, meaning a government should attempt to secure for every man the external conditions within its powers to control, to facilitate the pursuit by the individual of happiness.

Second point ... equally important. Since the challenge here to a government that is going to be just, is that it should secure this right to pursue happiness for every man. The pursuit of happiness has to be cooperative, not competitive. If what I did in pursuing my happiness competed with you so that if I got it, you didn't get it ... if what we were doing came into conflict, no government could resolve that conflict.

MOYERS: But that's what we have today, isn't it?

ADLER: We have conflicts; but not in the pursuit of happiness. Because most people...I would guess that...I would really guess that 99 percent of Americans, educated or uneducated, I don't care who they are, don't understand what the word happiness means.

Let me give you an example. I'll come back to what the pursuit involves in a moment. Most Americans ...I suppose most Europeans, think that happiness consists in getting what you as an individual want for yourself. You have certain interests, certain desires, if you get it...you get what you want ...I use the word want very carefully...want for yourself, then you'd be contented and you feel happy. Most people use the word happy as something they feel. As if it were a psychological state. Today I felt happy; tomorrow I might not feel happy. Last summer I was very happy. That's all wrong. If that's what the word happiness meant, then the phrase in the Declaration of Independence is meaningless and misleading.

Happiness consists in that quality of a whole human life, being a whole successive in time, minute after minute, you never experience happiness any moment when you're alive. The only time that anyone can really say that anyone's happy is after he's dead because you look at the life as a whole and say, "Well, he's done it; he's achieved it." But until he's dead, you have nothing to judge since the happiness is a quality of that whole life.

Now what is that whole quality? I can answer that three ways and I can come back to the Declaration in a moment. A human life is a happy life, in other words a good life, a good human life, a decent human life, if in the course of all its days from birth to death the individual living that life manages to acquire and possess and use all the things that are really good for a man to have. And the crucial word there is really good. Now what is really good for a man to

have? The things that satisfy his basic human needs, which are the same for all men.

MOYERS: Basic human needs?

ADLER: Well, now let me give you an example. A great many men, a great many men want power, arbitrary power over other men. No one needs arbitrary power over anyone else in order to lead a good human life. What everyone needs is not power, but liberty. And liberty is largely, as Locke pointed out, consists in being free from the arbitrary power of other men. If the Declaration ... if Jefferson in writing that phrase had not really known the difference between needs and wants, and supposed the pursuit of happiness was by each individual the pursuit of what he wanted and included...allowed that to include the wanting of arbitrary power of one man over another, it would be impossible. No government could secure that. I want power over you. You want power over me. If the government secures my desire for power over you, it would frustrate yours over me. And it can't secure our right to pursue happiness. Hence, if you see that, you see that the pursuit of happiness must be the pursuit of those things that everyone needs and needs alike because they're human.

Now, you say what do I mean by human needs? And I ought to answer that question concretely because it seems to me that if I don't do it ... and I brought along with me because it's connected with the ... let me read you a list of real goods. May I?

MOYERS: The things that you believe every human being needs to be ... to pursue happiness.

ADLER: That's right. Because unless we get concrete about this, we'll leave everybody in the dark. I've formed seven categories. Now these are things that are really good for every man to have, because every man needs them because these needs are inbuilt capacities. And every need is a capacity and therefore, the satisfaction of the need is the fulfillment of the capacity or the perfection of the human being. And that's what happiness is: the perfection of the human being in the course of a lifetime.

Now, here they are. First, the goods of the body. Simple ones like health, vigor and the pleasures of sense. Everyone needs health, a certain amount of vigor, and a modicum of sensual pleasure.

The goods of the mind. You've got a mind, able to know. Hence, it needs knowledge, understanding, a modicum of wisdom. Together with such goods of the mind's activity as skills of inquiry and the critical judgment and the arts of creative work.

Goods of character. By the way, the first three are very difficult for a government to provide though they can provide the conditions of health, they can't provide health in fact. You have to take care of your own body.

Goods of character. Such aspects of moral virtue as temperance and fortitude together with justice in relation to the rights of others and the goods of the community.

The good of personal association; such as family relationships, friendships, and loves.

The first four are largely within your power and can only be indirectly facilitated by what a government or society does. The next three are the ones that a government is obliged to do very specifically to facilitate your pursuit of happiness.

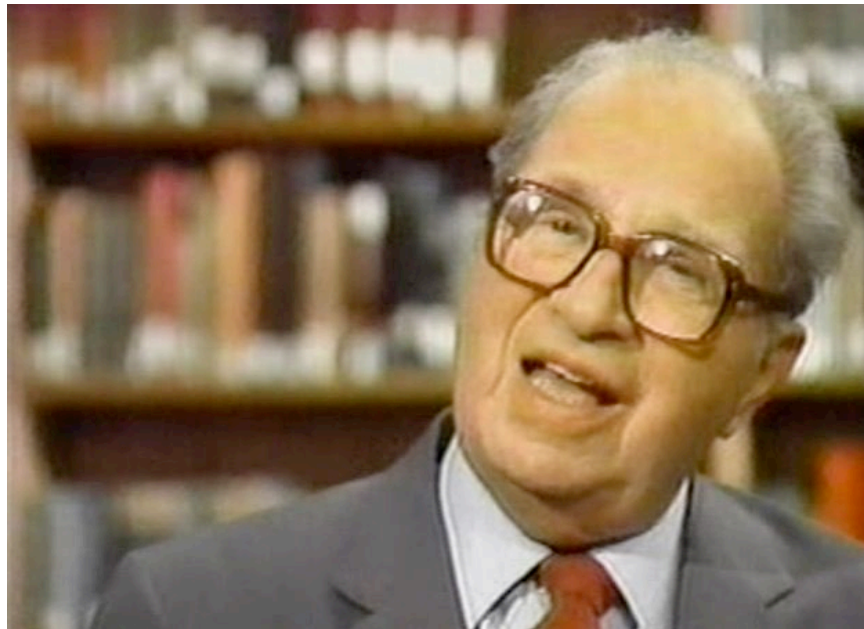
Political goods; such as peace, both civil and external, and political liberty, together with the protection of individual freedom by the prevention of violence, aggression, coercion, or intimidation.

Economic goods; such as a decent supply of the means of subsistence, living and working conditions conducive to health, medical care, opportunities for access to the pleasures of sense, the pleasures of play and aesthetic pleasures, opportunities for access to the goods of the mind through educational facilities in youth and adult life, and enough free time from subsistence work, both in youth and adult life, to take full advantage of these opportunities.

Finally, social goods; such as the quality of status and opportunity of treatment in all matters affecting the dignity of the human person.

Now, I say, if every human being after childhood, infants, had all these goods, he is given ... if he in fact has all these goods in the course of his lifetime, he has led a good life.

MOYERS: You're a Utopian, Mortimer Adler. How can an individual expect to achieve these even with government security?



ADLER: I have most of these. I hesitate to say this since it involves a little bit of hubris and pride, but as I look at my life, now 72 years old...if the next 10 years ... 12 years ... 15 years before I die ... or before ... whatever it is, go along as approximately the last 30 or 40 have gone along, I think when you look at my life in terms of these goods, you give my funeral oration, Bill, and say, "There was a happy man."

MOYERS: But a very significant exception to the rule of humanity.

ADLER: No.

MOYERS: A 17 year old ... 19 year old black kid in the ghetto in Harlem. How can he expect to expect these things?

ADLER: That's why our society is unjust. A good system ... I didn't say our society was just. Did I? You're saying it's Utopian; I'm saying it's quite practical. But our society hasn't begun to achieve it yet ... for a large number ... nevertheless, let me put it to you this way. You take American society in 1875, you take American society in 1775. You take England in 1675. Let's go back 100 years at a time. And I say as you go back and let's say within

the Anglo-American tradition just by itself for the moment because I take others it's even worse.

Every hundred years back fewer and fewer human beings had even an approximate chance to lead the good life. Fewer of the population. In Elizabethan society a very small number would have had the conditions of life conducive to making good lives for themselves.

In America today, in 1975, a larger percentage of our total population have available to them the conditions conducive to the possession of these goods. I didn't say they possessed them.

MOYERS: You're not saying that these would guarantee a good life. You're only saying they're the conditions for them.

ADLER: That's right.

MOYERS: Are you saying ...

ADLER: Moral virtue ... I mean, if a person ... let's suppose that a person had all the opportunities and decides to make ... simply spends his life making a grotesquely large fortune for himself, and succeeds. That success is the ruination of his life. He's ruined his life. He's over-exaggerated one good entirely at the expense of all or many of the others.

MOYERS: You've just listed a number of aspirations that you say we all have in common.

ADLER: Because they are basically rooted in the potentialities or capacities of our common human nature.

MOYERS: Is it even just to talk of them, however, in the full list while there are many people, not only in our society, but around the world, who don't even have the very basic needs of the physical life?

ADLER: Surely, because it is absolutely necessary to hold before yourself at all times the full recognition of the ideal, the ideal not being Utopian, but practicably and fully realizable. Now, I do believe and will not give up for an instant the belief that it is possible, that it is within the bounds of possibility for society to exist in

which every human being has what every human being needs to lead a decent human life. There's nothing impossible about it all.

Now you understand what I'm saying here now is, when I'm saying about a human being, I'm talking about those external conditions which a society can provide to facilitate.

If you said, "But doesn't a human being need moral virtue?" to lead a decent human life, I would say absolutely, because moral virtue consists in making the right choice among alternatives any time. And now if you said, "Do you envision a time on earth when every human being will attain happiness because every human being will have the moral virtue he needs?", my answer is no. I don't believe that sin, vice, crime will ever disappear from the world.

MOYERS: But you do think that a government constituted to secure these rights, has an obligation to provide conditions for the basic human needs, including food, air...

ADLER: All those within his power to provide. He can't provide, for example, let's say, he can't provide moral virtue in the individual.

MOYERS: Holding out this image, as you said, of the ideal, haven't we done that throughout our 200 year history. And hasn't that created the most intense and anguished conflict and expectation on the part of people for whom those things are not available?

ADLER: Yes, but just think a moment now. The oppressed...let me step back a moment. I think I can point out to you what I call the great watershed or the great divide in history.

Prior to this century, in every society there were oppressed majorities and privileged minorities. It was the larger part of the population that were in one way or another deprived of what human beings need to lead a human life. And a very small part of the population, the aristocrats, the landed gentry, the privileged class, always a minority, had ... not that they used it well, not that they used it well always...but they had what human beings needed.

Now at some point in the 20th century, in the more advanced countries in the world that have become our welfare societies, are societies with a conscience, where some satisfactory recognition of

these basic human rights has occurred. Suddenly, it has been reversed. We now have privileged, or shall I say, satisfied majorities. Majorities whose needs are being taken care of and underprivileged and oppressed minorities. Now that's extraordinary. An advance from an oppressed majority to an oppressed minority is a real advance. Not enough. You want to remove all oppressed groups.

But the point of progress is to come from an oppressed majority to an oppressed minority, don't you think?

MOYERS: That would be an accomplishment ... is an accomplishment.

ADLER: I think we've done it. We've done it.

MOYERS: But if you talk to working men on the Boeing assembly lines; you talk to mothers on welfare in a dozen slums of this country...?

ADLER: I'm still talking about an oppressed minority. You're right.

MOYERS: And you think that we have the capacity in modern society...?

ADLER: For removing that oppressed minority. I don't think there's any question about it.

MOYERS: In this country or globally?

ADLER: In this country and globally.

MOYERS: That everyone who's living can have the basic needs of life?

ADLER: Yes. It would require the elimination of war. I don't think we can produce enough wealth to both provide the goods of consumption and the goods of destruction. You understand that. That would be too much. But when you think that half of the American budget; half of our budget goes to the goods of destruction, not the goods of consumption.

Let's suppose for a moment, right now, America was in an isolated

chamber so that it had no need for any foreign policy or any military establishment, remove that entirely from our budget. Had the welfare to be used. Could we provide it or could we not provide every human being in our society with the things we need? The answer is yes without a question.

MOYERS: The question arises as to whether or not, if all of the resources were available for providing everyone with the good life...

ADLER: No, I'm sorry. With the conditions they need.

MOYERS: With the conditions they need for the good life, in order to do that, in order to distribute resources on the basis of need as opposed to power, governments wouldn't have to become so authoritarian, so decisive, and so intervening in the life of everyone, that the liberty that would be lost as a consequence of the gaining of the conditions of the good life would be too great a price to pay. Is that possible?

ADLER: Yes, it is. If, for example, it may very well be that the Soviet system, which is in my judgment a totalitarian system in which you don't have, except nominally, democratic processes at work, in which a highly centralized government, authoritarian in its operations does make an effort to see that every human being in that society is not deprived of the essentials, no matter how they succeed. China is trying to do the same thing. Those are both authoritarian governments that have tried to do this and to some extent have succeeded.

I don't think the authoritarian method, or the authoritarian regime is necessary for that purpose. I think it can be done in our kind of system by popular majorities, particularly if those popular majorities understand that the equality, the equality of conditions which de Toqueville talked about is not, shall I say, reductive in the sense that everybody will have the same amount of everything. That, I think, is impossible.

MOYERS: Two questions arise. One, how do you define enough and two, if I have more than you, what's to keep you from wanting what I have and therefore, creating new tension?

ADLER: You're absolutely right. If human beings are not morally sensitive, not morally educated, there'll be a conflict between ...

there now is a conflict between the haves and the have-nots. That's the conflict that divides the world and our society. Correct?

MOYERS: What do you mean moral? What do you mean by moral?



ADLER: I'm talking about the good life. I never mean anything by moral except the conditions for leading a good life. A person who has much more than he needs is likely to be misdirected in the pursuit of happiness.

MOYERS: But if the pursuit of more were my definition of happiness...

ADLER: I'm sorry, I'm going to stop you. You can't say your definition of happiness. You haven't got any right to have a definition of happiness. Happiness is as objective as gravity.

MOYERS: You mean, I have to accept your definition of objective happiness?

ADLER: I'm saying unless you approach the problem of happiness with the same objectivity you approach the problem of gravity, there's no point even in discussing it. If you think happiness is what you define it to be, then we have nothing to discuss at all. It's only if happiness is objective in the sense it's the same for every-

body and you look at it, and find out what it is, by looking at human nature and seeing what goods a human being needs.

MOYERS: But the man on the hill in that big expensive quarter-of-a-million dollar house...

ADLER: Probably totally ... subject to all kinds of illusions.

MOYERS: You're making judgments about him and you don't even know him.

ADLER: Absolutely. Well, now wait a minute now. I'll tell you how I make the judgment. And I'll make you make the same judgment. Let's take a miser, the old-fashioned, classical miser, sitting in that dark, damp cellar. He says to himself, and he has a right to say, "All I want is gold. And look, here in this cellar of mine, I've got piles of gold. I see it glitter. I can touch it." What he doesn't want are friends. What he doesn't want is political participation. What he doesn't want is health. What he doesn't want is knowledge. All the things he needs to be a decent human being. I say he's...and I'm playing on words...that miser is miserable. I don't care what he thinks about himself. He may say, "I've got everything I want. I'm the happiest man alive." He's a fool. He's an incredibly misled fool because he doesn't know what happiness is.

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