

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Sep '07

Nº 437



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## GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

### **PART X**

**Questions About Man and His World**

### 103. THE NATURE OF A PROFESSION

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*In the past the term “profession” has usually been restricted to fields like law, medicine, and the ministry. But currently careers in journalism, advertising, real estate, and many other occupations are called professions. Isn’t there some clear distinction between a profession and an ordinary occupation? Does it lie in educational preparation, an ethical code, or something else?*

*R. W. H.*

*Dear R. W. H.,*

In common usage the word “professional” is applied to anyone who shows tested competence in performing a given task. In this sense the word is merely a synonym for “skilled.” But in the original and deeper meaning of the term, a professional man is one who does skilled work to achieve a useful social goal.

The famous English economist R. H. Tawney gives a very comprehensive definition of a profession when he says, “It is a body of men who carry on their work in accordance with rules designed to enforce certain standards both for the better protection of its members and for the better service of the public.”

It has long been recognized that certain activities necessary for the preservation of society require an organized or concerted effort on the part of men with special knowledge or skill. To meet this need, the traditional professions developed. The oldest of these is, perhaps, the military profession. Other professions which have a long history are the traditionally recognized professions of theology, law, medicine, and teaching.

In each of these professions, some fundamental good is served by the work of its members. The controlling objective of the military profession is the defense of the state. The legal profession serves the government of society. The medical profession aims at the preservation of health; the teaching profession, at the dissemination of knowledge. There are, of course, other professions of more recent origin, but the same principle applies. Each is defined by the socially valuable goal it serves.

Professional activities are distinguished from other forms of work not only by the goals they serve but also by the way in which pro-

fessional men are related in their work. In commerce, industry, or business, one man often works for another. But in an army engaged in war, for example, the private does not work for the captain, or the captain for the general. Instead, all work together for victory. Similarly, in a hospital, the nurse and the laboratory technician do not work for the surgeon. All work together for the health of the patient.

Members of a profession usually subscribe to a code of ethics which regulates how their work is to be done in society. This code of conduct sets the standard by which its members are judged. It is, for example, more than common-sense courtesy which requires a physician not to discuss the treatment of his patient with others. It is a principle of medical practice. It was first set forth in the famous Oath of Hippocrates:

Whatever in connection with my professional practice, or not in connection with it, I see and hear, in the life of men, which ought not to be spoken of abroad, I will not divulge, as reckoning that all such should be kept secret. While I continue to keep this Oath unviolated, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and the practice of the art, respected by all men, in all times! But should I trespass and violate this Oath, may the reverse be my lot!

Though professional men, like other men, usually have to earn their living, the value of their work is not measured by the money they earn. The compensation that comes to them is incidental to the performance of their professional services. That is why their compensation is usually referred to as a “fee” or an “honorarium,” rather than as “wages” or a “salary.” That is also why doctors and lawyers often take cases free of charge.

Tawney is quite emphatic on this point. For him the essence of a profession

...is that, though men enter into it for the sake of their livelihood, the measure of their success is the service which they perform, not the gains which they amass. They may, as in the case of a successful doctor, grow rich; but the meaning of their profession, both for themselves and for the public, is not that they make money but that they make health, or safety, or knowledge, or good law. They depend on it for their income, but they do not consider that any conduct which increases their income is on that account good.

In other words, the essential characteristic of a profession is the dedication of its members to the service they perform.

## 104. THE EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*Foreigners, and some Americans, too, deplore the independence and equal status of the American woman. Ho-ever, women in many other countries are struggling to attain the American woman's position. Women have advanced here to key positions in business, government, and the professions. I wonder what the writers of the past thought about this. Did they all believe that the male is born to dominate and rule over the female, or did some of them think that woman is fully equal to man?*

*I.T.R.*

*Dear I. T. R.,*

The writers of the past differ greatly in their attitude toward the status of woman. Some of them consider woman naturally inferior to man, who embodies the perfection of the human species. Others regard woman as in every way the equal of man, save for the *petite difference*. And a few even consider the female superior in some respects.

Undoubtedly, those who hold that the proper place of woman is in the home have dominated the discussion. The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, puts woman in a subordinate position, and most of the great philosophers are little kinder to her. Even in Eden, woman is a mere helpmate to man, and she is expressly placed under man's dominion at the time of the expulsion from the Garden. St. Paul enjoins women to be submissive to their husbands, and imposes silence and passivity on them in matters of church government and doctrine.

Plato's advocacy of social and political equality for women is the most famous break in the solid front of the ancients against feminine equality. In the *Republic*, Socrates says:

There is no special faculty of administration in a state which a woman has because she is a woman, or which a man has by virtue of his sex, but the gifts of nature are alike diffused in both; all the pursuits of men are the pursuits of women also

[with allowances made for differences in physical strength].

Socrates admits that in some respects women are inferior to men, but he is more interested in the individual differences which distinguish one woman from another than he is in the differences between sexes.

Aristotle, who represents the typical ancient view, rejects Plato's doctrine. He considers the male naturally superior to the female; for him, the female is a kind of mutilated male, suffering from a natural deficiency.

Among modern writers, John Stuart Mill agrees with Plato on the right of woman to political equality. Rousseau, however, thinks that her proper sphere of influence is in the home, where she may impel recalcitrant males through sweet persuasiveness to follow the paths of duty and virtue. Milton, of course, holds to the Biblical doctrine of male superiority and dominance.

Many modern writers emphasize the particular qualities in which a woman excels. Darwin, for example, extols her special capacities for tenderness, devotion, and generosity, as compared with the competitive and self-centered nature of the male. He also thinks she may have keener intuition and perception. William James thinks she comes to maturity at an earlier age than men. At twenty, he says, a woman is completely formed mentally, and well advanced over her comparatively formless male contemporary.

Perhaps the most gallant, and to feminists the most infuriating, example of the gentleman-of-the-old-school approach is that of Cervantes' Don Quixote. The gentle knight pictures woman as an imperfect creature whose path to virtue, which is her glory, is to be made as easy as possible:

She must be treated as relics are: adored, not touched. She must be protected and prized as one protects and prizes a fair garden full of roses and flowers, the owner of which allows no one to trespass or pluck a blossom; enough for others that from afar and through the iron grating they may enjoy its fragrance and its beauty.

Such chivalry on the part of men toward women does not go with equality between the sexes, as women have learned, sometimes with regret. It is not quite possible for them to have the best of both worlds.

## 105. THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*The modern woman, especially the American woman, has achieved independence and full equality with men. There have been complaints—usually from males—that this is a bad thing and goes against the natural role of woman. What do the great thinkers of the past think about this? Did they all think that woman is man’s natural inferior, or did any of them hold more “enlightened” views?*

*J. L.*

*Dear J. L.,*

Western culture originated in a patriarchal type of society, based on the principle of male dominance in the family and the community. The discussion of the role of women in ancient writings usually reflects this patriarchal setting, but there are notable exceptions. Even in ancient times some thinkers came to conclusions about the status of women that clashed with the prevailing order.

The most famous break with the ancient patriarchal view of woman’s status is Plato’s proposal in the *Republic* that woman should be man’s equal in the political community. Plato insists that there is nothing that a man can do in public affairs that a woman cannot do equally well. He admits certain respects in which a woman, simply by being a woman, is inferior in political activity to a man. But he thinks that the differences between individuals—men or women—are more important than the difference between the sexes. In his view an intelligent and competent woman is superior to a man who lacks these qualities, and it is a waste of human capacities not to use her in the administration of the state.

More than two thousand years after Plato, the English philosopher John Stuart Mill again takes up the cudgels for women. His pamphlet “The Subjection of Women” cogently states the case for complete social, economic, and political equality between men and women. In his book *Representative Government*, in which he deals with the question of votes for women, he holds that it is a natural right which belongs to women as well as men to have a voice in their own government.

Nevertheless, over the centuries and until the present day, the Nays have prevailed in this controversy. Plato and Mill voice the opinion of a very small minority. Aristotle, Plato's great student, is a typical exponent of the negative view. For him, man embodies the human ideal, and woman is a kind of inferior version of the human being. Aristotle would be horrified by the activities of women in modern American society. For him, as for St. Paul, silence is a woman's glory, and she should be submissive to her husband in all things.

Quite apart from questions of social and political equality, there arose in the days of chivalry an idealized notion of woman as a creature possessing ethereal and transcendent qualities. This romantic notion of woman probably has something to do with the figure of Beatrice in Dante's works, in which woman reaches perhaps the highest point of idealization in Western literature. In the *Divine Comedy*, Beatrice, who was probably the object of Dante's unfulfilled love in real life, becomes the symbol for supernatural wisdom, superior even to philosophy. The romantic notion of woman, of course, is strongly emphasized in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, in which she is regarded as a tender flower, to be prized and protected and shielded from contact with the world.

In modern writing, negative reactions to feminine equality generally stress the loss of some essential charm, mystery, and sweetness through woman's entry into activities and functions formerly reserved for men. However, few writers call for a return to the state of things that existed just before the days when John Stuart Mill wrote his plea for equality and woman suffrage.

"No one," he wrote, "now holds that women should be in personal servitude; that they should have no thought, wish, or occupation, but to be the domestic drudges of husbands, fathers, or brothers." No one, he said, would want to go back to the day when women could not "hold property, and have pecuniary and business interests in the same manner as men." Since Mill's time, no one—or hardly anyone—advocates returning to those good old days.

## 106. THE MEANING OF FREEDOM

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*We are taught from an early age about the blessings of living in "a free country." But the communist countries claim to provide "freedom" for their peoples, too. They must mean something different*

*from what we do. Are there different kinds of freedom? And doesn't freedom have a more basic meaning than the political one? What are the main ideas about the nature and kinds of freedom?*

*J. L. C.*

*Dear J. L. C.,*

Before I try to say what gives the idea of freedom its deep meaning in human life, let me try to convey some impression of the scope of the idea. In the history of Western thought, freedom has a number of distinct meanings. I shall try to state these for you as briefly as possible.

(1) A man is said to be free when external circumstances permit him to act as he wishes for his own good. In this sense of the term, a prisoner in chains or behind bars has very little freedom, for he is prevented from doing most of the things he would like to do. In this sense also, a man who is compelled to do what he doesn't want to do, either by physical coercion or by intimidation, is not free. In a free society such as ours most people have a great deal of freedom in this sense of the term.

(2) A man is said to be free when he has acquired enough virtue or wisdom to be able willingly to do as he ought, to comply with the moral law, or to live in accordance with an ideal befitting human nature. In this meaning of freedom, prison bars or chains cannot remove the liberty a good man possesses in himself. It is acquired by personal effort, and it resides in a man's state of mind or character. It is, therefore, quite independent of all external circumstances.

It is in this sense that philosophers, such as Epictetus and Spinoza, speak of the vicious man as unfree—a slave to his own passions. It is also in this sense that St. Paul says, "Know the truth and it shall make you free."

(3) All men are said to be free because they are endowed by nature with the power of free choice—the power to decide for themselves what they shall do or become. This is what is traditionally called the freedom of the will—a freedom inherent in human nature and so possessed by all men to the same degree. Most of the philosophers who attribute such freedom to man deny that it is possessed by other animals.



In addition to these three main conceptions of freedom, there are two others which are much more special.

One is the conception of the political liberty possessed by the citizen of a republic who, through the exercise of his suffrage, has a voice in making the laws under which he lives. Political liberty, thus understood, exists only under the institutions of free government, particularly the franchise.

The other special conception is the one developed by Marx, Engels, and Lenin. It is the communist ideal of collective freedom, which the human race will enjoy only in the distant future, under certain utopian conditions that preclude the restraints of human law or government.

Your question about the significance of the idea of freedom can best be answered by reference to the three main conceptions of it. These three kinds of freedom are closely connected with what we mean by the dignity of man. For men to be enslaved or in chains violates their essential dignity. Their dignity is also impaired when they are governed by their passions instead of by their reason. Furthermore, unlike animals, which live instinctively and which have a certain fixed pattern of life within the same species, each man has, through free will, the power to *make* his own individual life—to *create* his own character.

These three kinds of freedom are also connected with morality and with moral responsibility. The second kind identifies the free man with the morally good man. And each of the other two is thought to be the basis of moral responsibility. We do not think it is just to punish men for actions they are compelled to perform or for actions which do not flow from deliberate and free choice on their part.

It should be obvious why men everywhere and at all times have placed a high value on freedom. The free man—in any sense of the term—is master of himself and not subject to the will of others.

## 107. CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*There is supposed to be something precious about culture and civilization. We are called upon daily by political orators to defend Western culture and civilization. But what is "culture" and what is*

*“civilization”? Are they the same thing? And is culture or civilization a matter of technological and economic advancement, or is it essentially a mental or spiritual process?*

R. O.

*Dear R. O.,*

In its basic meaning, the term “culture” signifies the improvement or perfection of nature. Agriculture improves the soil, and physical culture develops the body. Human culture, then, is the development of all the aspects of human nature—moral, intellectual, and social.

Culture in the widest sense is the sum total of spiritual, material, and social improvements of a human community. For some thinkers, culture is primarily a state of mind, secured through education in the liberal arts, and embodied in philosophy, pure science, and the fine arts. For others, it is a pattern of social institutions, traditional beliefs and customs, and material techniques and objects. In present-day terms, these are respectively the “humanistic” and “anthropological views of human culture.

Both of these views are intermingled in ancient writings. The old Greek myth of Prometheus portrays him as the bearer of culture to mankind. This includes the mechanical as well as the liberal arts, and social institutions, too. Herodotus, the great Greek historian, compares a variety of cultures, and in doing so describes the customs, techniques, social institutions, and religions of different societies. In his analysis of the political community, Aristotle stresses the importance of economic and social development as providing the material basis for the pursuit of spiritual culture.

Aristotle’s idea that culture, in the refined sense, comes at a late stage in social development resembles the modern notion that civilization is a late and complex stage of culture. Our term “civilization” comes from the same Latin word as “civil” and “city,” and it is associated with a developed state of social and political organization. We talk of “primitive culture,” but we usually use the term “civilization” only for an advanced stage of culture.

Not all thinkers, however, agree that civilization is an advanced stage of culture. Some of them regard the earlier stages of culture as more vital and creative, resting on “natural” intuition, tradition, and organic community rather than on “artificial” organization, rational principles, and abstract relations. They regard civilization

as the fall and decline of a culture, occurring just before its extinction.

The modern view of civilization as the degeneration rather than the culmination of human existence goes back to the romantic thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Jean Jacques Rousseau contrasts the healthiness of a life close to nature with the corruption of civilized society. Far from seeing culture as the perfection of nature, many modern thinkers see culture and nature in constant conflict in the life of man.

Sigmund Freud gives us one of the most influential expositions of this view. His work *Civilization and Its Discontents* is based on the assumption that man's biological and emotional impulses are thwarted by the restrictions imposed on him by civilized society. Culture is achieved at the price of the suffering and unhappiness caused by this frustration.

However, unlike Rousseau, and other romantic thinkers, Freud does not advocate a rejection of culture and civilization for a "return to nature." He looks to psychoanalysis for the insights that will enable man to cope with his frustration, and to the arts and sciences to help him to orient himself in the world. All this provided, he says prophetically, that man's inherent impulse to aggression and self-destruction does not get the upper hand, so that he uses his technical mastery to destroy himself and his culture.

## **PART X: *Questions About Man and His World***

### RECOMMENDED READINGS

#### **In *Great Books of the Western World***

Aristophanes: *The Ecclesiazusae*

Plato: *Phaedo*; *Republic*, Books IV—V

Aristotle: *Metaphysics*, Book I, Ch. 1; *Topics*, Book V, Chs. 1—5;  
*On the Soul*, Book I, Chs. 3, 10; *History of Animals*, Book VIII,  
 Ch. 1; *Ethics*, Book I, Chs. 7, 13; *Politics*, Book I

Lucretius: *On the Nature of Things*

Epictetus: *The Discourses*

Marcus Aurelius: *Meditations*

Plotinus: *The Enneads*

Augustine: *The Confessions*; *The City of God*, Books V, XII


Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, Part I, QQ. 75—119, Parts I—II,  
 QQ. 1—21

Machiavelli: *The Prince*, Ch. XVIII

Hobbes: *Leviathan*, Book I  
 Rabelais: *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Book I, Chs. 52—57  
 Montaigne: *Essays*, “That a Man Is Soberly to Judge of the Divine Ordinances,” “That Fortune Is Oftentimes Observed to Act by the Rules of Reason,” “Of the Inconstancy of Our Actions,” “Apology for Raimond de Sébonde,” “Of Experience”  
 Descartes: *Discourse on the Method*, Part V; *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations U, VI  
 Spinoza: *Ethics*  
 Milton: *Areopagitica*  
 Pascal: *Pensees*  
 Locke: *Concerning Civil Government*, Second Essay, Chs. I-V; *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Ch. XXI  
 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*  
 Swift: *Gulliver’s Travels*  
 Montesquieu: *The Spirit of Laws*, Books I, VII, XI, XXIII  
 Rousseau: *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality; The Social Contract*, Book I  
 Smith: *The Wealth of Nations*, Book I, Ch. 2  
 Kant: *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals; The Critique of Practical Reason*  
 Mill: *On Liberty; Utilitarianism*  
 Hegel: *The Philosophy of Right*, Introduction, Part III, Section I; *The Philosophy of History*, Introduction, Part IV  
 Darwin: *The Descent of Man*, Parts I, II  
 Marx and Engels: *The Communist Manifesto*  
 James: *The Principles of Psychology*, Chs. VI, XXII, XXIV, XXVI  
 Freud: *Civilization and Its Discontents*, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death”

### **Other Works**

Ashley Montagu, M. F.: *Man: His First Million Years; The Natural Superiority of Women*  
 Augustine: *On Free Will*  
 Bell, Clive: *Civilization*  
 Berdyaev, Nicolas: *The Destiny of Man; Freedom and the Spirit; Slavery and Freedom*  
 Buber, Martin: *Between Man and Man*, “What is Man?”  
 Cassirer, Ernst: *An Essay on Man*  
 Chardin, Pierre Teilhard de: *The Phenomenon of Man*  
 Childs, Gordon V.: *Man Makes Himself*  
 Dewey, John: *Human Nature and Conduct; Freedom and Culture*  
 Dobzhansky, Theodosius: *The Biological Basis of Human Freedom*  
 Fichte, Johann G.: *The Vocation of Man*

Frank, Lawrence K.: *Nature and Human Nature*  
 James, William: *Essays on Faith and Morals, I.* “Is Life Worth Living?” X. “What Makes a Life Significant”  
 Kahler, Erich: *Man the Measure*  
 Keynes, John M.: *A Treatise on Probability*  
 Linton, Ralph: *The Tree of Culture*  
 Marcel, Gabriel: *Homo Victor*  
 Maritain, Jacques: *True Humanism*  
 Mead, Margaret: *Male and Female*  
 Mill, John Stuart: *The Subjection of Women*  
 Niebuhr, Reinhold: *The Nature and Destiny of Man*  
 Peirce, Charles S.: *Chance, Love and Logic; Values in a Universe of Chance*  
 Riezler, Kurt: *Man: Mutable and Immutable*  
 Schopenhauer, Arthur: *On Human Nature; Studies in Pessimism, “On Women”*  
 Sherrington, Charles S.: *Man on His Nature*  
 Spengler, Oswald: *The Decline of the West*  
 Toynbee, Arnold J.: *A Study of History* (two-volume Abridgment)  
 Unamuno, Miguel de: *The Tragic Sense of Life*  
 Venn, John: *The Logic of Chance*  
 Weiss, Paul: *Nature and Man*  
 Wingren, Gustav: *Luther on Vocation* 

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## EDITOR’S NOTE

This issue concludes our serialization of this wonderful book. You may obtain a digital copy of this book for a \$10 donation. The great aspect of a digital book, is that you can search and find words or phrases very quickly.

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Tracy-Lee Kus**

**Amine Tourki**

**Fatima-Zahra Tourki**

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

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## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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.