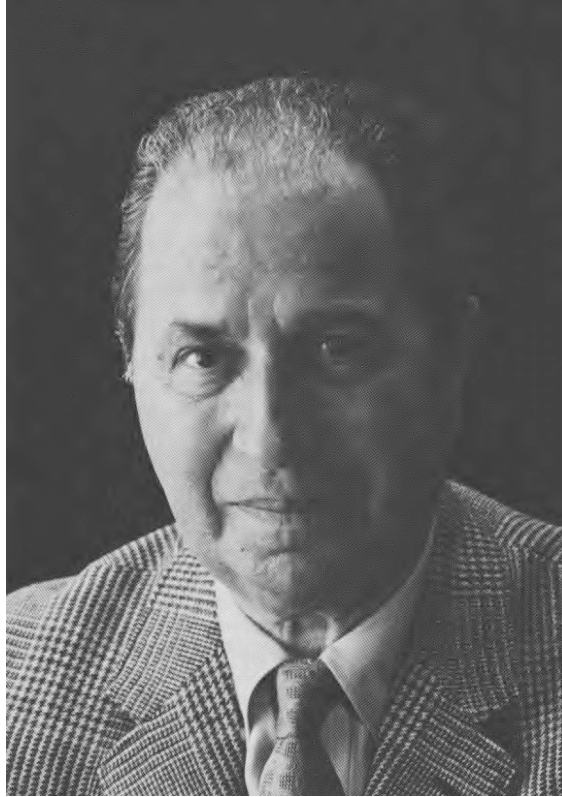


# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## THE TIME OF OUR LIVES

**A Lecture by Mortimer J. Adler  
at The Aspen Institute  
(August, 1968)**

Part 1 of 3

**T**he title of this lecture involves a triple play on words. It means first of all, the span of time allotted to each of us, the time we use up as we live from day to day, month to month, year to year. And then secondly it has this meaning, when we return from a trip—either geographical or psychedelic—we say we had the time of our lives, meaning a good time, a fun time. And then the other

meaning, the third meaning is the time in which our lives are now being lived this century. And this triple play on words is intended. First, because, the basic moral choice that I am going to deal with, is the choice between having a good time and leading a good life. And secondly, from the point of view of leading a good life, not having a good time, this is the best century so far to be alive in. You may doubt that but I am going to try to prove that to you.

This lecture is a condensation of six lectures I have been writing in Aspen that I will deliver at the University of Chicago next November and that will then be turned into a book. There are risks in doing this because when you turn six lectures or boil down six lectures into one the short cuts, the abbreviations, the things left unclear and the arguments that are not as persuasive as they might be are regrettable. I ask you to do me the courtesy of believing that in the longer version there are no short cuts. In the longer version the argument is seen clear through to the last bitter drop.

Let me give you a little background on the book itself. The secret of the book is that I will keep from my Chicago audiences at the University and that with the exception of a rare individual here and there, no one will guess that all I am doing is rewriting Aristotle's *Ethics*.

For 45 years now, and in the light of my knowledge of the whole history of Western thought, I can say with no exaggeration, first that the *Ethics*, written in the 4th century BCE, is the only sound, practical solution to that problem. Second, that since the 15th century, it has not been carefully studied and even where it has been read by modern philosophers, such as John Locke, Kant, J. S. Mill, or John Dewey, it has not been understood by them, in fact, badly misunderstood. Third, that in our century, it is almost totally neglected by philosophers—and almost totally neglected in our universities.

And this leads me to call your attention to what I find a startling fact and you may find so too. That the highest development of human wisdom in the West, especially moral or practical wisdom, occurred in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It was preserved and extended a little in subsequent centuries, especially in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in the great mediaeval universities. But it has been lost in modern times—progressively from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century—and especially in our universities and among our men of learning. Our great gains in science and technology have been accompanied by an almost complete loss of wisdom, though this need not have been the case. The accidents that brought it about,

and are still responsible for it today are the accidents of bad schooling and bad education—together with a juvenile attitude on the part of modern men toward the past. The same kind of juvenile attitude that the young today exhibit toward their elders.

As a result, moral philosophy in modern times is a barren waste born of errors and of ignorances that could have been avoided. In place of moral wisdom, we have moral skepticism and moral relativism or, worse, the existentialist despair about the meaninglessness of life. This is a product not only of errors in philosophy, but also of erroneous conclusions drawn from the social sciences, especially comparative and cultural anthropology. Conclusions let us assert there is nothing to measure human conduct with the *mores* of the tribe but all value-systems are relative to time and place and above all the ethnocentric predicament which prevents us from having any moral judgment either on our own culture or a culture different from our own.

I mention all this to call your attention to an astounding paradox. The dissident and rebellious young, under the influence of their college professors, together with the leaders of the New Left and others who are full of complaints about our century and our society, do not hesitate to make moral pronouncements about the evils they think must be done away with—and they make these pronouncements with a certitude that sounds as if they could defend them on clear moral principles and by the most cogent reasoning.

I would like to read you a brief statement by George Kennan, whom I regard as one of the sanest and most judicious minds in this country, which appeared in the New York Times, January 21, 1968. The title of this article in the Sunday Times is “Rebels Without A Program”. Mr. Kennan says “What strikes one first about the angry militancy is the extraordinary degree of certainty of one’s own rectitude, certainty of the correctness of one’s own answers, certainty of the accuracy and profundity of one’s own analysis of the problems of contemporary society, certainty as to the iniquity of those who disagree.” And then he goes on to say “One is struck to see such massive certainties already present in the minds of people who not only have not studied very much but presumably are not studying a great deal, because it is hard to imagine that the activities to which this aroused portion of our student population gives itself are ones readily compatible with quiet and successful study.”

At the same time, it is perfectly clear that those who pass these high moral judgments full of certitude do not know or understand

the principles on which their criticisms might be based, and have not engaged in the reasoning which might defend them. On the contrary, they have repudiated these principles and such reasoning. For exactly the same principles that might support, I said that *might* support, criticism of the war in Vietnam, or of racism, or of poverty, or of a society that tends toward over-indulgence in play or the over-production of superfluous commodities—exactly the same principles and reasoning would also help them to understand what is wrong with being a beatnik or a hippie—wrong in a way that can ruin a human life; or what is wrong with over-indulgence in sex; what is wrong with psychedelic escapism, with the expansion of the sensual life and the contraction of the mind; with the rejection of reason; and so on. Exactly the same moral principles would be involved but they are certain about one and have no moral judgment about the other. I will return to this paradox at the end of this lecture.

But let me say at once: The fault in the case of the young is not theirs. It is ours. We have failed them educationally. Their minds have not been opened to any wisdom at all, nor trained to seek it. The fault is ours, it is the fault of modern times. We, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are reaping the fruits—I mean the weeds—whose seeds have been sown from the beginning of the 17th century. The weeds are at last running rampant, threatening to cover the landscape.

One final introductory remark: Last year in Aspen I had the pleasant opportunity and occasion to engage with Dr. Wing-Tsit Chan, a noted Chinese scholar, in a joint East-West seminar. And the assignment for both of us was a lovely one. He would tell what Confucius' views on the good life of men were and I would report briefly Aristotle's views on the good life of men. With few exceptions, really quite remarkable because we had not planned this or prepared it, the same fundamental moral wisdom about what is involved in making a good life appeared in this brief statement of Confucius and the statement of Aristotle. The only difference is that in China the wisdom of Confucius has been preserved and the wisdom of Aristotle has been lost in the West.

I will begin with a brief summary of the moral problem which is the basic one and then the solution to it. I am going to begin with an initial and imperfect statement of the problem with the question: How can I make a good life for myself? This is not really the problem, it is an imperfect statement of it, but I have got to do it imperfectly first to correct it. We start out with the fact that we are given a span of time, everyone is given a span of time whatever it is; fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty years. How shall I best use it? A whole

life is a succession of days, months, and years filled by activities, or inactivities, of one sort or another. We make that life by our choices from day to day; by how we choose to use or consume our time.

Consider the analogy of making a life with making a building. The insight is very simply from the analogy. Since what happens at the end in the process of building is effected by what happens at the beginning and all along the way it would be much better, would it not, if one is erecting a building to have a plan of some sort? Perfectly obvious in the case of a building, why isn't it equally obvious that if you are building a life, making a life, a plan of some sort would help it to turn out right since it is something you keep on adding to. There is a defect in the analogy, however, because the building is a spatial, not a temporal whole, hence after you build it you can have it, live in it, enjoy it, look at it, it is there. But a life is not a spatial whole, a life is a temporal whole and you cannot have a whole good life at any moment of time. There is no moment in your life's time when you can enjoy your whole life.

Hence, there is a confusion in everybody's mind about the meaning of the word happiness, for most people use the word happiness for a good time, but I want to use the word happiness not for a good time but for a whole good life. And then if I say that happiness like a whole good life is totally unexperienceable, unenjoyable completely, because you never have the temporal whole present.

Let me take another analogy. The analogy which all of us in Aspen are acquainted with. The analogy of the performing arts. And here the same fundamental insight. If you are a performing artist you have been in a plan, you don't just take up the violin or the piano and start off. Your music is part of the plan but your own handling of the music is part of the plan. This analogy is better because a performance of a symphony, or sonata, or a concerto, is a whole, temporal whole, that goes through time, you never have it at one moment. Yet this analogy is defective because performing artists can engage in one or more rehearsals before he plays but there is no rehearsal in life. You have to start from scratch.

Nevertheless, with this defect acknowledged, the analogy is instructive because a good performance is good as a whole through being good in its parts and through their order to one another. It cannot be called good—as a whole—until it is finished. In the process, all we can see, if we are precise, is that it is *becoming* good. If you were to stop a performance in the middle and ask "Is

it good?” the answer should be “No, it is not good yet, it is becoming good.” It is only good when you can somehow have seen it all. The same is true of a whole human life.

These analogies are helpful, but in one profound respect they are misleading. And this point, if correct, is the first formulation of the question. We are under no moral obligation to make any particular work of art. No categorical moral obligation—unconditional, absolute. If an artist wishes to produce a certain work, he may be under a certain obligation to do as good a job as possible—but only on the condition that he wishes to do so. This is a hypothetical or conditional obligation, not a categorical or moral obligation. And there is no morality, believe me, there is no morality at all without categorical or unconditional moral obligations. And, furthermore, there is no morality unless these categorical obligations are the same for all men at all times and places. Moral principles are not valid as moral principles unless they are universalizable, applicable to all men as men. Hence, the moral problem of making a good life differs fundamentally from the artistic problem of making a good work, or any similar technological problem of producing a good result.

This leads us at once to a transformation of the initial question. It is not: How can I make a good life for myself if I wish to? That question might be answered by artistically pragmatic know-how. Rather the question is: What must I do in order to make for myself the good life that I *ought* to make, that I am under a categorical moral obligation to make?

Now let me clarify the problem now restated. Let me begin by rephrasing an earlier insight: If a temporal whole, like a light, is an ultimate goal, it must be a normative, not a terminal end. I use the word goal, objective or end as synonyms. A good life is something you aim at but as an end it controls the means normatively, not terminally because you never get to it. A terminal end is like going to Chicago and getting off at 89—you’ve reached it. Or death is a terminal end of life. You have reached it and you stop right there. A good life, a whole good life, is not a terminal end. It cannot be. Yet normatively, that conception of your whole life is operating at every moment of your life to control what you do. That control with the conception of your whole life operates at every moment means it is a normative end. That it is a good life is also an ultimate end as well as normative is also clear from the fact that there is nothing beyond it to which it can possibly serve as a means.

No one can complete either one of the following two sentences: “I

want to be happy because I want . . .” or “I want a whole good life for the sake of . . .” The sentences are impossible because happiness cannot be a means to anything and a whole good life cannot be a means to anything. They are ultimately ends or objectives. To say that happiness or a whole good life is both an ultimate and normative end is to say: It is the standard or measure for judging the goodness of all the means we employ; the parts we put together to make that whole; the choices we make about the ordering of the parts; the other factors that enter into the whole process of seeking the goal we are morally obligated to seek.

And since it is a whole constituted of parts, this ultimate and normative end should not be called, as it so often is, the *summum bonum*, but the *totum bonum*. It is not the highest partial good in a scale of partial goods which is what the word *summum bonum* means, but the one and only whole of goods, including all partial goods as its parts which is what the word *totum bonum* means. A Roman stoic and statesman by the name of Boethius says all this in one sentence. He says “Happiness consists in a whole life made perfect by the possession in aggregate of all good things, possession successively in the course of time, not simultaneously, or at one moment” Contrast that with the promise that the devil made to Faust if Faust would sell his soul to the devil in Goethe’s play. Faust wants happiness, he wants affection and the words that Faust and the devil use in that little bargain is “I will give you my soul if any moment of my life is so perfect that I say ‘Stay, thou art so fair!’” Because that moment never occurs, there is no moment in life for anybody that can say “Stay, thou art so fair!”

But that conception is the wrong one. It is the whole of goods achieved successively that makes a life good. Happiness, or the good life, as I said a moment ago, cannot be the ultimate normative end that we are categorically obligated to seek unless it is the same for all men. This is the hardest things for most people today to understand. Let me explain it by taking two steps carefully. First, the equality of men as men is true only if all members of the human species have a sameness of specific nature—the same properties; I am talking about biological properties; the same potentialities that constitutes their common humanity. That is the only meaning that can be attached to the self-evident truth of the Declaration: all men are born equal; equal genetically as men, in spite of all their individual differences and inequalities; an equality that overrides all such inequalities. But if this is true, then the basic human needs and potentialities are the same for all men at all times and places, regardless of the accidental historic circumstances surrounding individual human lives.

Let me offer you another analogy: If you understand the specific nature of flowers or dogs, you understand the standards by which, at flower shows or dog shows, the judges award the blue ribbon to the specimen that is entitled to be called not just best of breed but best in show, though the particular flower may be a rose and the particular dog may be a Schnauzer. The same kind of standard can be applied to men, seen in terms of the lives they lead and how their lives bring their natures to bloom or perfection.

The second step may be a little difficult for you to follow, but it is absolutely indispensable, miss this point and nothing else follows. This point also is the stumbling block of all modern philosophers. It is the distinction between the real and the apparent good. Spinoza asked the following question: Do we call something good simply because we do in fact desire it, or should we, ought we, desire some things because in fact it is good for us? Spinoza's answer is the answer of individuals; hence, what is called good is as various as individuals and their actual desires. Applied to happiness, this means: the good life for each man is just what he himself conceives it to be, in terms of the things he wants for himself. Hence, the miser is happy, not miserable. He gets what he wants when he has that pile of gold. There is no objective standard by which we can say to the miser, who is content with his pile of gold, that he is a miserable creature, one who has ruined his own life. And this fine theory now goes by the name of "the emotive theory of values".

Let me go back to Socrates for a moment. "Granted," says Socrates "What no one can deny that all men seek what they deem advantageous or beneficial to themselves (all men desire what they deem good and seek to avoid the opposite, which they deem evil) Granted this, can men not make mistakes about what is beneficial and made an error? Socrates' answer is "Yes, men often make mistakes. They often overeat or over drink and ruin their health; or they waste their time getting more wealth than they need or can use to their profit, and so on." If Socrates is right, as I think he is, and Spinoza is wrong, then not all things that a man actually desires are really good for him even when they appear to be so, because he has mistakenly deemed them to be to his advantage. And contrariwise, a given individual may mistakenly deem to be evil, or actually not desire things that are really good for him; the lack of which can prevent his life from being a good human life.

For example, the miser, or the power-hungry man, or the man who devotes all his time and efforts to sensual indulgences of one sort



or another, that man has excluded from his life things that are really good for him though he has everything he really gets. He can pursue and succeed in getting everything he actually wants, though most of the things he wants are not good for him in the quantity in which he wants them and gets them.

The basic vocabulary I want you to use with me to hold this distinction in mind is the vocabulary of natural needs, which may or may not be conscious, and conscious wants; the wants we are conscious of; the desires we form elicited by our experience and by the environment. Our conscious wants may or may not represent our natural needs. Our natural needs are the same for all men because of our common human nature but our conscious wants differ from individual to individual. The good, the basic self-evident truth here is that the good is the desirable, the desirable is the good.

But there are two types of desirables. The desirable that is naturally needed and the desirable that is consciously wanted whether or not it is naturally needed. Now the desirable that is naturally needed is that which is really good, and really good for each and every man; whereas the desirable that is consciously wanted, differing from man to man, is the apparent good; the thing a man *calls* good because he actually desires it. We are under no obligation to seek apparent goods: they are simply the things we call good because we actually want them. Only with respect to real goods—the things that are good because we need them, whether we want them or not—can it be said that we *ought* to desire them, even when we do not in fact desire them.

In short, the categorical moral obligation “Seek the good” applies only to real goods; it makes no sense in the case of goods that are merely apparent. Hence, the categorical moral obligation to make a good life for one’s self must be understood as meaning “a really good life”; one that is the same for all men, because the real goods that constitute it are the same for all men, not a good life as it appears to me, and may not appear to you in the same light.

One more point must be made to assure understanding of the moral problems. And this is getting the problem clear, not the solution yet: If life were a day-to-day affair, we would either have no moral problem at all, or it would be so simple as to deserve almost no thought. If at the end of day, we closed the books, if there were no carry-over accounts from one day to the next, if what happened to us in the days of our childhood, or if what we did when we were young, had little or no effect on the rest of our lives, then our choices would all be momentary and passing ones—a jug of wine,

a loaf of bread—and this might be enough wisdom for life on a day-to-day basis. In fact, this is the way that animals do live—on a day-to-day basis, without a thought for the morrow, except in the case of certain hoarding instincts which involve no thought on the animal's part.

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