



THE TIME OF OUR LIVES

**A Lecture by Mortimer J. Adler
at The Aspen Institute**

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Part 2 of 3

The problem of making a whole human life that is really good—good in each of its parts, and good in a way that results from each part contributing what it ought to contribute to the whole—exists for us precisely because, at every stage of our lives, in every day of our existence, we are faced with the basic moral alternative:—A good time today versus a good life as a whole, what is useful, expedient or pleasant in the short run (and so what is apparently good) versus what is good for us in the long run—the

run of our whole life, the use of its whole time (and so what is really good).

The great misfortune of the human race, in every generation, is that its young or immature members—at the time of their lives when it would be most important to understand this—find it extremely *difficult* to understand. That is the essence of youth or immaturity: not understanding the long run versus the short run. By this standard, many who are chronologically adult are morally immature; and some few, who are chronologically young, are morally mature. And if it is *merely very difficult, not impossible*, for the chronologically young to understand, then you can see the importance of sound moral instruction and training to bring them to maturity at the earliest possible date in their lives. The mature man who understands it only too well is often too late to make the best use of this wisdom. Here is our most dismal failure—the failure of our schools, our teachers, our parents, our era.

The problem being understood, what in the most general terms is its solution? The briefest way in which I can begin to indicate the outlines of the solution is by an enumeration of all the real goods that satisfy man's natural needs and by naming the human activities that we must engage in, using up the time of our lives, to procure them. Health and vigor of the body—biologically necessary activities, such as sleeping, eating, cleansing, and sometimes playing, when playing is therapeutic or recreational. *Sleep*. Wealth or the means of subsistence, the comforts and conveniences of life - economically necessary activities, such as working for a living, or managing one's estate. *Subsistence-Work*. Pleasure in all its experienceable forms, both sensual and aesthetic—all forms of activity engaged in wholly for their own sake, with no result beyond themselves. *Play* (pure play, not therapeutic play). Friendships: love and companionships; A good society: external peace, and security with regard to the goods of fortune; knowledge: skills, understanding, wisdom—all forms of activity by which the individual improves himself and contributes to the improvement of his society: *Leisure-Work*.

Of these six basic types or classes of real goods, the first three represent limited goods—goods that are good only in some limited quantity. Only the last three are unlimited goods—goods of which you can never have enough.

Of the four basic types of human activity, only one—the one that corresponds to the three unlimited goods—calls for the maximum investment of our time, and that is leisure-work: the kind of activ-

ity by which the individual grows or develops as a human being. The biologically necessary activities are common to men and all other animals. The economically necessary activities, since they provide the conditions of bodily health and vigor, are for the most part on the same level. While purely playful activities are good in themselves, providing us with immediately enjoyable pleasures, they do not increase our human stature one cubit, and so while they are good, they are good only in a limited quantity. Only leisure activities—activities that are creative in the primary sense of being self-creative, not productive of other things—contribute first of all, to the growth of a human being as specifically human; and secondly, to the improvement of human society and the advancement of human culture.

Hence, in the moral choices that we make from day to day in the use of our time, we ought to subordinate all other activities to engagement in leisure-work. We ought to engage in the others only to an extent that is based on real needs—our natural needs—or that is limited by the consideration that nothing that we do should cut into the time that is left free for leisuring.

Since the temptations of a good time, of pleasure in the passing moment, are great; since it is so easy to want more wealth than we need; since it is so easy to shirk or wish to avoid the pains and efforts involved in doing leisure-work, what is required to make the moral choices that we ought to make in order to work for the end that we ought to seek—a whole life that is really good because it involves all the things that are really good for a man, all of them in the right order and proportion? The only answer to this question is *MORAL VIRTUE*, which is nothing but a habitual disposition to prefer a good life to a good time, to choose what is really good in the long run over what is apparently good here and now. This is the meaning of such moral virtues as temperance and fortitude. This is the meaning of “strength of character.” Along with them go another indispensable virtue: prudence—sound judgment in choosing among particular means, here and now, under all the complicated circumstances of each particular case in which we have to choose.

Unlike all the other means to a good life—the real goods that I have enumerated as constituting it—the virtues are primarily operative or functional, not constitutive means. (A difficult point here: they are good not as satisfying natural needs, but as rationally recognized to be necessary for the satisfaction of all natural needs.)

In naming the virtues, I have mentioned all the principal ones except justice. This alone of all the virtues concerns the good of other

men. I have so far been considering only each man's moral obligation to make a good life for himself. I will come to justice in a moment, when I consider the individual's obligations with respect to other human beings and the good life for each of them.

One point remains to complete this extremely brief sketch of the solution of the moral problem. Some of the real goods we need are wholly or partly in the hands of fortune—are wholly or partly beyond our own control. For example, the kind of parents we have, the kind of homes that surround our early years, the kind of early schooling we receive, are wholly beyond our own control, yet seriously affect our lives and the choices we are confronted with in later years. Other goods, such as our health, are favorably or adversely affected by the environment, which may be controlled to some extent by the organized community, but not very much by the individual. The state of technology and the organization of the economy affect the character and the amount of subsistence-work we are compelled to do, and the amount of free time we have left over from sleep, play, and such subsistence work. The political organization of society and its institutions, along with its basic economy, gives to or withholds from individuals the basic freedoms they need in order to make a good life for themselves. Chattel slaves or the subjects of a despotic government are deprived of essential freedoms.

In short, when I speak of the goods of fortune, I have in mind all these things that enter into an individual's life but over which he does not have complete control, as he does have complete control over the use of such part of his time as is left free from all compulsory activities, biological or economic.

One little story helps to make the point clear. Plutarch tells us that someone once asked Plato in what respects he considered himself blessed by good fortune. His answer was: that I was born a Greek rather than a barbarian, a free man rather than a slave, and in the time of Socrates rather than in some other time. But Plato would have added—though Plutarch does not—that these were blessings only for a man who knew how to use such good fortune in making a really good life for himself.

I must stress this point. It is of great importance in the rest of this lecture. Good fortune only provides the opportunities a man needs; whether he makes a good use of them is entirely a matter of his own choice. Other Athenians shared the same blessings that Plato was grateful for, and many—perhaps most of them—did not use them as he did. Why? Because making a good life for one's self—

fulfilling this moral obligation—is the hardest, not the easiest, thing for a man to do. As Spinoza said, whatever is excellent or noble is as difficult as it is rare.

With the basic analysis clear—or as clear as it can be made in a short time—I now want to extend it to two further points that we must consider before I bring this lecture to its conclusion.

The first point has to do with the good of others, and with our moral obligations toward them. The primary moral obligation of each man is to make a really good life for himself. Unless we understand and discharge this obligation, we are only sentimentalists or thoughtless do-gooders when we concern ourselves with the good of others.

The basic proposition here is that what is really good for me is right for everyone else. Unless I know what is really good for me, I cannot know what is really good for any other man, and unless I know this, I cannot know that he has the same right—the same *natural right*—that I have to the things that are really good for a human being, each of whom is under the same moral obligation to make a really good life for himself.

The natural rights of other men, based on the things that they need to make good lives for themselves, impose a moral obligation on *me, so far as it is possible, but only so far as it is possible*, not to injure them. I injure them when what I seek for myself deprives them of what they need. *Under ideal conditions*, this can happen only when I seek either what I do not really need at all (such as power or domination over other men) or what I really need, but not to so great an extent (such as superfluous wealth).

Under ideal conditions, the pursuit of happiness is cooperative, not competitive: one man's good life or happiness need not be achieved at the expense of the misery of others, or the ruin of their lives. *Insight*: If this were not so, the pursuit of happiness could not be the basic natural right that a just government ought to facilitate for every human being.

I have reiterated “under ideal conditions”—but ideal conditions have never existed on earth, not yet, nor ever in the past. *One example*: In the state of technology in Plato's and Aristotle's day, it may not have been possible for some few men to make good lives for themselves, except by the use of slaves—and the misery of many. What is true of ancient Greece, is true of all historic civilizations from the very beginning down to the present day, *in varying*

degrees. I shall come back to this point in a moment. .

One more question here: the natural rights of other *men* impose moral obligation on me, *but why should I discharge them?* Since my primary moral obligation is to make a really good life for myself, why should I be just to others, *even if I can be?* (No one has a moral obligation to do that which, under the circumstances of a particular time, it is impossible to do at that time.)

Put another way: What's in it for me? How does my being just to others (not injuring them) become part of my moral obligation to make a good life for myself? It is easy to see how it contributes to the good life of others; but how does it contribute to my own good life? This is one of the most difficult of all moral questions to answer, as the members of the Executive Seminar now in session know. I can do no more than indicate the outlines of an answer, as it is developed by Plato and Aristotle.

Justice is the bond of men in states. It is prerequisite to our living together peacefully—without civil disturbance or violence. Without justice for the most part—if most men were criminals—the state would disintegrate. But each of us needs the state as a means to make a good life for ourselves. Hence, in the long run, the man who injures others injures himself. It is only in the short run that injustice to others can ever appear to be expedient. In the long run, the just is always the expedient—not only right but useful.

Justice to others has its root in the virtues of temperance and courage, concerned with making the right moral choices for the sake of one's own good life. Justice is nothing but these same virtues, socially directed. Hence, if a man is habitually unjust to others, he cannot be a man who is habitually temperate and courageous. In short, the man whose virtues dispose him to make his private choices always with an eye on what is really good for himself and his life as a whole is one in whom the same virtues will dispose him to make public choices that do not injure others. If he makes the wrong choices with respect to the good of others, he will also make the wrong choices with respect to his own good.

The second point has to do with the evaluation of societies or cultures. *Are they all equally good? Are some better than others? Or is it impossible,* as the relativists and anthropologists tell us, *to judge societies or cultures without falling into the ethnocentric predicament?*

The ethnocentric predicament? We would be in it if there were no

way of judging a culture or society *except* in terms of the value-system that actually obtains in our own society or culture, and may not obtain in any other. Note: If this is true, if we are always in an ethnocentric predicament, then we cannot even judge our own society and culture, for when we do so, we beg the question. Yet paradoxically, the same professors in our colleges who appeal to the ethnocentric predicament, seldom hesitate to pass harsh moral judgments on our own society and culture. Their intellectual schizophrenia allows them to think one way as scientists and as amateur philosophers, and quite another way as dissident or disaffected liberals.

Of course, there is no way out of the ethnocentric predicament unless there are real goods that correspond to natural needs, things that are good for every human being because he is human, without regard to the social or cultural circumstances under which he lives. Only then is there an absolute or transcendent value-system, by which all the relative value-systems—the value-systems that obtain in various societies and cultures—can be judged. And this is precisely what we have in our solution of the basic moral problem, that tells us what any and every man must do in order to make a really good life for himself—the same in its general outlines for all men because each is specifically the same as a man.

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