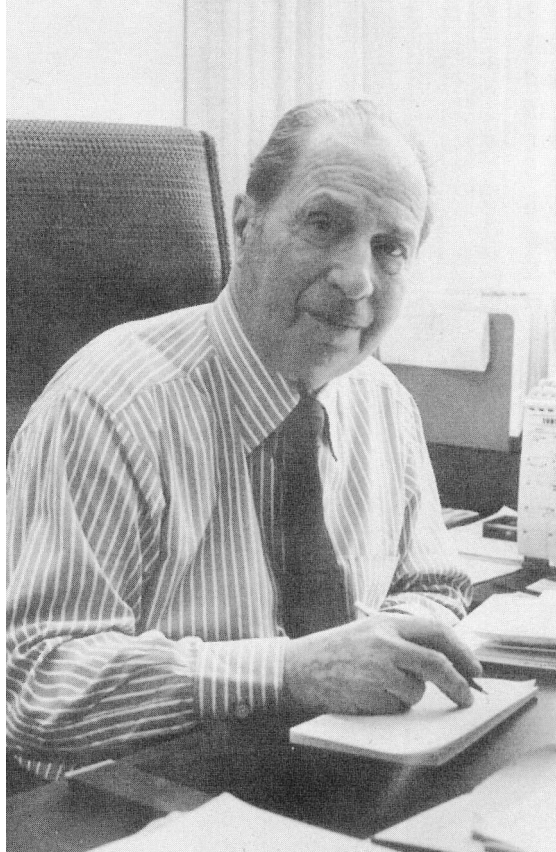


THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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A VISION OF THE FUTURE: TWELVE IDEAS FOR A BETTER LIFE AND A BETTER SOCIETY

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The Contents, the Prologue and the Epilogue of this book,
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CONTENTS

PART ONE: A BETTER LIFE

Chapter 2. Work and Leisure

The Six Parts of Life
 Categorizing Human Activities
 Is a Particular Activity Sleep, Toil, Leisure, Play, or Some Mixture of These?
 The Spectrum of Work, Compensated and Uncompensated
 Idling and Rest
 The Options Open to Us for the Use of Our Free Time

Chapter 3. Wealth and Property

The Forms of Wealth and Other External Goods
 How Is Wealth Produced?
 Property: Its Rightful Possession
 The Wealth of Societies: Different Economies Compared

Chapter 4. Virtue and Happiness

Habits, Good and Bad
 Habits of Mind and of Character
 Virtue and the Virtues: One or Many?
 Virtue as an End and as a Means
 How Can One Individual Help Another to Become Morally Virtuous?
 Is Anyone Ever Perfectly Virtuous or Completely Happy?

PART TWO: A BETTER SOCIETY

Chapter 5. State and Society

When States Exist, Are They Identical With Society?
 Man, the Only Politically Social Animal
 Is the State Natural, Conventional, or Both?
 What Must Be Included in the Definition of the State?
 The Goodness of the State

Chapter 6. Government and Constitution

What Is Government and When Is Anyone Governed?
 The Necessity of Government
 War and Peace
 The Modes and Forms of Government
 The Mixed Regime
 Resistance to Government
 The Idea of Civil Police

Chapter 7. Democracy and Citizenship

Why Did It Take So Long?

The Only Perfectly Just Form of Government

The Conflict Between Justice and Expediency

Will Democracy Survive, Spread, and Prosper?

Chapter 8. Epilogue: Ideas with a Future

Chapter 1.

Prologue: More Down to Earth

FOR MOST OF US, work occupies a considerable portion of our time. All of us who work for a living contrast that with our free time for leisure. Work, in our minds, has a close, but not inseparable, connection with the wealth we come to have and the property we come to own.

Living a good life—becoming happy—is one goal to which everyone aspires. In this connection, we may, and perhaps should, give thought to our virtues and vices. To be able to live in a good society and in a well-governed state is something we all wish for ourselves and our children. When we think of good government, most of us think of constitutional government. We praise our own constitution as one that establishes a political democracy and that secures our human rights. Most of us take pride in the fact that we are citizens of the United States.

In the foregoing sentences, I have named the twelve ideas that are the subjects of this book. They come in pairs: Work and Leisure; Wealth and Property; Virtue and Happiness; State and Society; Government and Constitution; Democracy and Citizenship.

The pairs fall into two distinct, but related, groups. The first six—from Work to Happiness—belong together because, in our consideration of them, we are concerned (as the title of Part One indicates) with what goes into making good lives for ourselves.

In dealing with the second six—from State to Citizenship—we are confronted (in Part Two) with all the problems to be solved in making progress toward a good society for ourselves, our children, and grandchildren.

If you were called upon to discuss the ideas just mentioned, you would probably not regard doing so as being highbrow. You might be much more hesitant, or beg off getting into a discussion, about Truth and Beauty, or Liberty and Justice. You might regard them as being way up there in the blue sky. Most of us would not feel that way about Work and Wealth, Government and Democracy.

All the ideas I have named are great ideas, but all great ideas are not equally great. Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are transcendental ideas, applicable to everything we think about. Liberty, Equality, and justice are less high-flown, but they, too, have a far-reaching scope that involves them in our thinking about all our practical affairs.

While ideas such as Work, Wealth, and Virtue, or State, Government, and Democracy are not as great, they are more down to earth. They are more concrete, less abstract. We can give concrete examples of one or another of the meanings we attach to these terms. The illustrations we use to exemplify them fall within the range of our ordinary perceptual experience.

Anyone who has played the game of twenty questions, using the categories of animal, vegetable, and mineral, knows that what the person who is being interrogated has in mind can be discovered by questioning *only if* the object of his thought is a particular instance of a concrete idea. If the object of his thought were truth or goodness, liberty or equality, the method of this game would have little chance of detecting it. The chances would be somewhat greater if the person being interrogated had taken government or democracy, work or wealth, as the object; and greater still if the choice had been a particular instance of one of these ideas.

With the exception of Virtue and Happiness, all the other ideas in Part One can be treated for the most part without reference to the ideas reserved for Part Two. But when we come to the last two ideas in Part Two (Democracy and Citizenship), economic and moral considerations drawn from Part One necessarily come into play.

While we must use words in order to discuss ideas, our concern is with ideas, not words. Sometimes one and the same idea finds expression in two words that are strictly synonymous; for example, the words "liberty" and "freedom" can be used interchangeably for the same idea.

Sometimes, a set of words, such as “work,” “labor,” and “toil” are loosely used as synonyms for one and the same idea and it becomes necessary to distinguish their nuances in order to clarify our understanding of an idea that involves two different kinds of work.

Sometimes, one and the same word is used with meanings that are quite distinct and even opposed. When the word “state,” for example, is used for any society that is larger than the family and the tribal community or village, the imprecision of that usage beclouds our understanding of the idea under consideration.

Sometimes, as in the case of the word “democracy,” the word has been used in one sense for many centuries, going back to Greek antiquity, and in a completely different sense since the middle of the nineteenth century.

Of all the ideas treated in this book, only Democracy can be regarded as a brand-new idea. Calling attention to this fact leads me to make another point that is essential to understanding what follows.

We are here primarily concerned with these ideas in their significance for us today, not with their history, or with the history of the words used to express them. It may be necessary to comment on historical conditions and developments, but only to provide background. The center of the stage is occupied by the idea itself and with the light it throws on the world in which we live.

I have reserved for the final chapter a consideration of the contemporary conditions under which these ideas are influentially operative, together with a consideration of past conditions, under which they were not adequately understood. Most important of all is our vision of future conditions under which we may come to a better, because fuller, understanding than the one we have today.

This concern with conditions past, present, and future as affecting our understanding of these ideas indicates one further difference between them and ideas such as Truth, Goodness, and Beauty and Liberty, Equality, and Justice.

Our understanding of those ideas was much less affected by historical conditions, if at all. The contributions made to our understanding of them by the thought of the last two hundred years, with the possible exception of Equality, do not add up to very much as compared with the accumulated wisdom of the centuries prior.

That is why we have so little reason to expect any substantial additions in the future.

It will soon enough become apparent to the reader that our understanding of the ideas treated in this book is affected by historical conditions. The view we take of them today, with the possible exception of Virtue and Happiness, differs remarkably from the view taken in antiquity, in the Middle Ages, and even in the centuries of the modern era preceding our own.

Projecting our minds into a future that will differ in so many important respects from the present (in its scientific conclusions, in its technological advances, in its economic arrangements, in its global affairs), we have every reason to anticipate an enlarged and enhanced understanding of these ideas in the centuries ahead; and, with that, the vision of a better future.

Precisely because the ideas discussed here are more down to earth, they are, like all earthly things, more subject to change and development with the passage of time. They are ideas that look forward to a better world in which the inseparable ideals of a good life and a good society will be more fully realized for the human race as a whole.

Chapter 8. Epilogue: Ideas with a Future

REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE PAST and present have a crucial bearing on the way we view the future. This plainly applies to the ideas treated in this book.

Readers, I trust, will find that what was promised at the beginning has now been fulfilled. The degree to which these ideas have greater concreteness and are more down to earth than the ideas in an earlier book has been manifest in the numerous references I have made to concrete examples of points under consideration. It was difficult to make things clear without reference to such examples.

Also evident throughout has been the historical background of these ideas, their present vitality, and the light they throw on so many aspects of contemporary life and society. But life and society on this planet, we all devoutly hope, will not end with us or our century. Our eyes, therefore, cannot help turning toward the future-

a future that will take its shape, in part, from the future of these ideas in both thought and practice.

The thinking I have done about democracy over a period of fifty years suggested the title of this book. It was many years ago that I first understood that the word “democracy” names an idea that had its inception in the last hundred and fifty years, the first applications of which in human affairs came more than a half century later. I realized then that, with so little past to speak of and with so slight a hold on the present, this must be an idea that has a future.

In this respect, the idea of democracy does not stand alone. With two exceptions, all the other ideas treated in this book are ideas with a future. Most of them have deeper roots in the past than democracy. But all of them, including the two exceptions, have intimate connections with the future of democracy, both in thought and in practice.

The two exceptions are, of course, virtue and happiness. Little of importance can be, or has been, added to the wisdom of antiquity on these two subjects.

The fundamental principles and insights of moral philosophy, magnificently formulated by Plato and Aristotle, have not been affected by historical change. What is involved in leading a good human life is essentially the same today as it was twenty-five centuries ago.

All the alterations in the external conditions of life in the twentieth century, and all the improvements in those conditions which technological advances have bestowed upon us, do not affect in the least our understanding of intellectual and moral virtues and the role they play, along with external circumstances, in our pursuit of happiness. Nor do they make it any more difficult-or easier-for an individual to acquire virtue and to succeed in the effort to lead a decent human life.

When we turn from ethical to political thought, the situation is otherwise. The manifold changes that differentiate the external conditions of human life in antiquity, in the Middle Ages, and even in recent times, from those that affect us in the contemporary world, have occasioned improvements in our understanding of work and leisure, wealth and property, state and society, governments and constitutions. These improvements, in turn, have enabled us to conceive democracy and citizenship in ways that are distinctive of the twentieth century.

In many respects, the twentieth century is a turning point in history. It marks a great divide between the past and the future. What Sidney Carton, the hero of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, said of the eighteenth century, we are inclined to say, even more emphatically, of the century in which we live. He said: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." Both remarks are much more applicable to the twentieth century than to any of its predecessors.

We bemoan its being the worst of times when we contemplate, with fear and trembling, the threat of thermonuclear devastation and, with it, the uninhabitability of this planet and the end of life on earth.

We suffer the same dread and agony when we face the threat of environmental pollution, so extreme that it, too, renders the earth uninhabitable by us.

Less extreme, but no less serious, are the consequences of increased population and decreased food supply, of exhausting the available energy for our advanced technology, and of the massive unemployment that may be an unalterable consequence of technological advances.

All these things weigh heavily upon the conscience and consciousness of mankind for the first time in this century, and for the first time globally, not just locally. To remain an optimist in the face of these dire threats of doom requires us to believe that none of these problems is insoluble.

Human intelligence and rationality is capable of solving all of them, but *only on condition* that intelligence and reason are used for the good of the human race as a whole—for the salvation of mankind and for carrying forward into the future the extraordinary progress that makes the twentieth century a turning point in history.

Before I call attention to the distinctive steps of progress that enable us to say that our century is the best of times as well as the worst of times, let me qualify my optimistic hopes for the future.

If reason and intelligence are blocked or diverted from beneficent use by unenlightened self-interest; by blind passions; by the hatred of foreigners; by irrational prejudices or discriminations against other races and other ethnic groups; by the lust for naked might,

uncontrolled by considerations of right; and by the short-term seeking of profits and gains at the cost of long-term losses, then whatever optimism about the future any of us may still harbor and cherish must be abandoned.

All the grave problems that confront us can be solved, as William Graham Sumner said at the end of the nineteenth century, “if it were not for folly and vice.” The problems we face today are more difficult to solve than the ones he contemplated then, but the qualifying condition of an optimistic hope for their solution remains exactly the same.

What makes the twentieth century the best of times? What distinguishes it, in that respect, from all previous centuries? In treating all the ideas with a future that are the subjects of this book, I have already called attention to the distinctive advances made in this century. They are as follows.

1. The extraordinary technological progress that has eliminated or alleviated much of the drudgery and backbreaking toil, which in the past barred a large part of the human race from even thinking about human happiness, not to mention engaging in its pursuit.
2. The same extraordinary technological progress that has made it possible to produce enough wealth to eliminate dire poverty and to distribute widely the ownership of productive property in capital-intensive economies.
3. The advent of the welfare state, which aims at the socialist ideal of enabling all its inhabitants to participate, at least to a sufficient, minimal degree, in the general economic welfare.
4. The occurrence of the first world wars, which are harbingers of world peace and indications of its possibility as well as its necessity. For the first time in history, human thinking about war and peace has ceased to be parochial and has become global. For the first time in history, our use of the word “world” as an adjective modifying such other terms as state, society, government, and citizenship, has drastically altered our understanding of all the ideas expressed by these words.
5. The first stumbling steps toward the realization in fact and in practice of the political ideal implicit in our understanding of the innovative idea of democracy. We have at last come to conceive democracy as an idea that is radically different from what was meant by the use of the word “democracy” to name a form of gov-

ernment in political theory prior to the middle of the nineteenth century. But it is only in the twentieth century that we have taken the first steps toward making that ideal a reality. This alone would suffice to mark the twentieth century as a turning point in history.

6. Our recognition of the inadequacy of the steps we have so far taken, which may move us to take the further steps needed to fulfill the promise of universal justice for mankind, with liberty and equality for all.

As we look back at the centuries preceding our own, we cannot avoid seeing that, in all of them, the human inhabitants of every country were divided into a privileged minority and an oppressed majority-into the relatively few who were political and economic *haves* and the remaining multitude who were political and economic *have-nots*.

For the first time, in the twentieth century this has been reversed. In all technologically advanced, democratic societies today, we find privileged majorities and oppressed minorities. It remains for these advantaged countries to take the next steps-the further reduction and, ultimately, the total elimination of oppressed minorities.

Taking the world as a whole and thinking of the whole human race, we are compelled to say that the greater part of the earth's human inhabitants are still political and economic *have-nots*. Nevertheless, the fact that this is no longer the case in the technologically advanced, democratic societies holds out some hope that what has become the best of times for a majority of the population in the industrial democracies may before too long become the best of times for all human beings everywhere.

In everything I have so far said about the distinctive progress made in this century and the further progress to which it can lead, I have paid attention only to the external conditions of human life. While it is true that improvement in external circumstances, social and economic as well as political, is a necessary factor in moving toward a good life and a good society, it is also true that by itself it is not sufficient. The other factor, equally necessary but not by itself sufficient, is human virtue, both intellectual and moral, especially the latter.

I firmly believe that the educational reforms that must be accomplished to provide all with the kind of schooling needed to inculcate the intellectual virtues requisite for a good life and a good society can be achieved-not immediately, but in the foreseeable future. I wish I could say the same for the formation of moral vir-

tue. Here I have many doubts about the likelihood that a sufficiently large portion of mankind can be aided, by any means with which we are now acquainted, to become adult men and women of good moral character.

If we ever discover how to solve the problem of directing the free choices individuals make so that right choices predominate over wrong choices and some measure of moral virtue results there from, the future of political democracy, where it now has come into feeble and fragile existence, would look much brighter.

For the same reason we might become more optimistic about world peace, about the survival of mankind, about the extension of the privileges and opportunities now enjoyed by the haves in the advantaged parts of the world to the *have-nots* that still remain there, and beyond that to the *have-nots* everywhere else.

In any case, whatever degree of optimism about the future we may still tenaciously retain depends upon our judgment about what is humanly possible and our estimate of the probability that what is genuinely possible can become actual.

Our vision today of what is possible in the future is controlled by our knowledge of past and present realities. In the light of what we have been able actually to accomplish so far, we tend to place limitations on what can possibly be accomplished in the future.

Our ancestors in remote centuries, and even in the recent past, drew a boundary line around the possible that fenced it in much more stringently than we are inclined to do. Our twentieth-century experience, the knowledge of what has been already accomplished in this century, much of it for the first time, has enlarged our vision of the possible. Much more now appears possible to us than could ever have been contemplated by our ancestors.

In an uprising of students of the Sorbonne in Paris at the end of the sixties, one student chalked up on a wall the following graffito: *Be realistic, attempt the impossible!*

On the face of it, considered soberly and strictly, the statement is, of course, outlandish. The impossible is that which cannot be done and, therefore, should not be attempted. To make the attempt is unrealistic. Nevertheless, the statement was a witty way of expressing the truth that the dividing line between the possible and impossible is extremely difficult to determine.

Drawing it correctly depends on our knowledge of past and present realities. The extent to which we know all relevant facts helps us to judge correctly what possibilities the future holds. The extent of such knowledge changes from time to time.


Our judgment about the limits of the possible is consequently better than that of our ancestors. Must we not, therefore, concede that succeeding generations will be able to make even more accurate judgments about future possibilities? Will they not have an enlarged vision of the possible?

The student who chalked that injunction on a university wall was trying to tell the world that anyone imbued with the spirit of progress should challenge those who seek to preserve the status quo by claiming that the changes called for by justice lie beyond the bounds of the possible. Our present view of the limits of the possible may be as woefully inaccurate as that held by our ancestors.

Plato and Aristotle in the fifth and fourth centuries before Christ discussed most of the ideas treated in this book. But they could not imagine, much less predict, the changes in our understanding of these ideas that came to pass in the centuries that lay ahead. If some seer had prophesied the occurrence of these changes and the consequent improvement in human affairs and institutions, they would have dismissed him as a dreamer. They would have been quite right to do so in terms of their very limited vision of the possible.

What I have just said about Plato and Aristotle in antiquity applies in the same way and for the same reason to the wisest thinkers of the Middle Ages and of modern times up to the end of the nineteenth century.

All of them were compelled by the facts they knew to entertain a much more limited vision of the possible than is entertainable by us who are alive today. None of them could have imagined or would have predicted what has become actual for us in the twentieth century.

It is in the light of such actualities that we are disposed to extend the boundaries of what may be possible in the future. This being the case, we dare not impute to our successors in the centuries that lie ahead the still too limited vision of the possible that we hold today. 

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