

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## BILL MOYERS' JOURNAL MIND AT LARGE: ADLER ON ARISTOTLE

Discussion and seminar on Adler's book,  
*Aristotle for Everyone* at The Aspen Institute

Nationally broadcast on March 19, 1979

Part 1 of 3

(Tease)

**MORTIMER ADLER:** (various clips of walking with Bill Moyers in meadow): The point is that in the course of a good life there are many moments of real contentment, there's no exclusion of good times and pleasure and joy. Those are essential parts of happiness. But parts of it, not the whole. The great error is the people who confuse having a good time with leading a good life.

A good life contains many moments of good time, but the playboy who is out to have a good time all the time is a fellow on the wrong road. You're either aiming at the right end, in which case you have all virtue, or you're aiming at the wrong end, in which case you

have no virtue. That was the most difficult lesson for me to learn from Aristotle. I used to think, oh, well, I was temperate but not courageous, or I was courageous but not just; you had some virtues and some vices. Aristotle says no. You either have all virtue or no virtue. That's why there are probably so few people who are virtuous.

**(Interior scene):** By the way, you can treat Aristotle and me, for the purposes of this discussion, as Siamese twins.

**(Laughter from discussion group)**

**BILL MOYERS:** **(over Adler's discussion group):** Viewer beware. You are about to meet a man fiercely determined to assault your prejudices with his own. His name is Mortimer Adler. Like his twin, Aristotle, he's a disturber of the peace.

**(BMJ opening)**

**ADLER:** **(in discussion group):** You can have too much wealth. You can have too much pleasure. You can have too much food. You can have too much drink. You can't have too much knowledge. You can't have too much moral virtue.

**MOYERS:** **(over discussion group):** Mortimer Adler is seventy-six years old, one of America's most prolific and controversial thinkers. Years ago, he was a founding father of the Great Books programs, and he is still passionately committed to making people think.



**ADLER:** I'm not derogating passion. I'm only saying that passion is an indispensable motive power that must be controlled. I mean, imagine having a motor that's out of control. The glory of man is his intellect; the perfection of the intellect is the highest thing you

can achieve. But the moral virtue is indispensable in doing that.

**MOYERS:** (over group scene): Adler's first love is adult education, and for twenty-five years he has been leading seminars at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, provoking the people who come here to wrestle with ideas of philosophy, education, economics and ethics, all subjects he has written about.

**ADLER:** (in group): This bag is a list of all the authors contained in the *Great Treasury of Western Thought*.

**MOYERS:** (over group scene): His most recent book is called *Aristotle For Everybody*, or, *Difficult Thought Made Easy*. I came to Aspen to ask him about this audacious assumption. Let's start with, as you friend Aristotle would say, first things.

**ADLER:** Indeed.

**MOYERS:** Why philosophy? By your own admission, philosophy bakes no cakes and builds no bridges. Why philosophy?

**ADLER:** Because philosophy is concerned with the basic ideas that everyone must use to understand the world in which we live, nature and man and society. Philosophy, as properly conceived, is the study of ideas and the kind of understanding one gains through applying those ideas to the world about us.

**MOYERS:** The real world, the ordinary world?

**ADLER:** The ordinary world, the world of ordinary experience, the world that all of us experience.

**MOYERS:** Why philosophy, then, for everybody?

**ADLER:** Because everybody, I think, has a moral obligation to make the best use of his mind, and simply knowing is not enough. Aristotle—you do want an Aristotelian answer to the question, don't you?

**MOYERS:** I'm not sure where Aristotle ends and Adler begins.



**ADLER:** Treat them as continuous for the time being.

**MOYERS:** (Laughs)

**ADLER:** Aristotle made the point that the mind has three basic goods, just as the body has the goods of food, shelter and clothing. And so the mind has three goods: one is knowledge, another is understanding, and the third is wisdom. Now, the sciences give us knowledge of the world, but not understanding of it, and certainly no wisdom about it or wisdom about our lives. Philosophy's importance, and why I think it's superior to science, is not that it provides or gives us more knowledge of the world, but without it we wouldn't understand the things we know.

**MOYERS:** Pragmatism would ask, how do I make money? Philosophy would ask...?

**ADLER:** Why should you? Not—let me see if the question can be put another way. Philosophy would ask, what do you make money for? Is money, is wealth—not necessarily money, but economic goods, wealth—is wealth an end or a means? The greatest mistake a man can make, I think, the greatest distortion and misdirection of a life is a life directed toward making, acquiring wealth—endless acquirement of wealth as an end in itself. Wealth is a real good. One can't lead a good life without wealth, but wealth is a means to that end, not an end in itself, and a means that must be moderated, it must be limited. The excessive accumulation of wealth can often be a heavy moral burden.

**MOYERS:** But is it fair to ask people who are caught up in the mere

business of living and of making a living to think beyond the daily criterion of life to the large question of, okay, what's the end of all this?

**ADLER:** Well, I—you know, that's why I think the Greeks, the Athenians, gave Socrates the hemlock. Philosophers ask those difficult questions that most men don't ask themselves and that many men don't want to have asked because it's disturbing. Philosophers are disturbers of the peace, the peace of mind that people like to have by not asking themselves questions about their lives, questions about the world in which they live; and all these questions are questions that require the mind to enlighten itself, to gain understanding of the world, and most of us in the modern world are—curious; I don't understand this, really, myself—are content with knowledge, with information, and with not trying to understand what we know. And that's philosophy's main contribution.

**MOYERS:** For everyone.

**ADLER:** For everyone.

**MOYERS:** Well, why Aristotle, then?

**ADLER:** Aristotle, of all the philosophers in the whole Western tradition from the fifth century B.C. down to the present day, is the eminently common-sense philosopher, a man whose wisdom is based upon the common experience that we all share and have. There is no other philosopher in the whole history of Western thought that I would recommend as a guide to wisdom and understanding other than Aristotle.

**MOYERS:** Did he have a corner on the truth?

**ADLER:** Aristotle? I think so.

**MOYERS:** He did?

**ADLER:** I think so.

**MOYERS:** Wait a minute...

**ADLER:** By a corner, I mean in his day his philosophical works contained, I think, the largest mass of philosophical truth so far accumulated. That was the fourth century B.C. I think in basic human wisdom and basic human understanding we've added very little to the ancient wisdom of Aristotle. Now, I know that's an ex-

traordinary statement, but I'm willing to back that one up.

**MOYERS:** How?

**ADLER:** By—well, what I try to do in the book that I wrote about Aristotle is to show all the wisdom that is to be found in his works on which there's no—I think no improvement to be made.

**MOYERS:** If I'm a farmer in Iowa or a shoemaker in New York, what does Aristotle have to say to me?

**ADLER:** Well, he'd tell you both, for example, I think the first thing he would say to both of you is that you're artists, which might surprise you; you think you're craftsmen. But he'd call each of you an artist because the artist is distinguished by the skill he has, and I think the one kind of labor that Aristotle thought was menial and degrading was unskilled labor; unskilled labor he looks down upon.

**MOYERS:** But there are a lot of unskilled laborers in our society.

**ADLER:** Unfortunately. And I would say that wherever there are unskilled laborers machinery should take over. The great advance in automation is removing the need for unskilled labor.

**MOYERS:** But then what happens to the unskilled laborer?

**ADLER:** Then we must give them the kind of education that would provide them the skills to do a better sort of work. They're doing the wrong—an inferior—anything a machine can do a human being should not do.

**MOYERS:** Doesn't that get to the heart of the criticism of Aristotle for a modern world, that he really is irrelevant to people caught in circumstances they cannot control?

**ADLER:** No. It seems to me he's saying to modern society, do whatever you can to remove the need for unskilled labor, and we're going a great—we've made many advances in this direction. He's making a moral point that's quite relevant. He hasn't solved the economic problem, I admit that, of how to employ the people that are disemployed by technology. But he is saying there's a hierarchy of occupations, the highest of those that use the mind at its fullest. Those which use the body only, as in the case where men are doing what animals might do or machines might do, is degrading for human beings to engage in. Coal mining should be, for the

most part, done by machinery.

**MOYERS:** What do you do with the coal miners, though?

**ADLER:** Find other walks of life for them, better walks of life. We are talking now about the improvement of human life.

**MOYERS:** But did he say anything or write anything bearing on this modern point?

**ADLER:** Yes, there's an extraordinary passage, Bill, in the *Politics*, the first book of the *Politics*, in which Aristotle expresses a vision of the almost completely automated industry. The words are as follows—the words referring to a Greek situation are as follows: “If the shuttle could weave by itself, or the plectrum pluck the lyre without a hand to guide it, then chief workmen would not need assistants nor masters slaves.” And if you understand that passage, it's saying if you had automation, machinery that produced things, you wouldn't have any form of menial labor at all.



You do understand, of course, Bill, that I think Aristotle has to be restated in contemporary terms. The Aristotelian texts, if you read them themselves, would, I think, defeat you. They're very difficult, they're very difficult writing and they're written in a language and with imagery that is not contemporary. It's the basic, essential truth that is there that can be restated, without any loss of wisdom, in contemporary terms.

**MOYERS:** Do you think philosophy is taught this way in colleges today?

**ADLER:** No, unfortunately. Philosophy has become a highly technical form of scholarship, highly specialized, almost as specialized and technical as logic and mathematics. It is not taught as an understanding of the great ideas, it is not taught as the pursuit of wisdom. And as a matter of fact, the clearest example of what I'm saying is that most professors of philosophy today write their articles and books only for the eyes of other professional philosophers. I think I'm almost alone of my generation who tries to write books, philosophical books, intended for the general public, because I think that's what philosophy's intended for.

**MOYERS:** Is that why you're criticized by professional philosophers?

**ADLER:** I think in large part it is because I have not been, in their mold, a writer of books that they would read.

**MOYERS:** (*sitting with Adler on terrace overlooking valley*): You wrote a lot in here about Aristotle's uncommon common sense. How can common sense be uncommon and still be common? What do you mean?

**ADLER:** I simply mean that Aristotle's philosophy begins with the same kind of common sense that all of us have, based upon our common experience. But because he thought more deeply and more penetratingly about our common experience he elevates common sense to a higher—deepens it, broadens it and elevates it, and in that respect his common sense is uncommon.

**MOYERS:** But do you think most of us can swim that deep or fly that high?

**ADLER:** Yes, I do.

**MOYERS:** You do?

**ADLER:** With instruction, not by ourselves. I mean, Aristotle is a master thinker, but he's also a master teacher, and so since he starts where we start, with common sense, we can, shall I say, with his help raise our own common sense to that higher level.

**MOYERS:** In Aristotle's view, what is the most important question a human being has to ask?

**ADLER:** In the practical order, which is the order of action, the



most important question a human being has to ask is, what is the goal of my living, what should I aim at in life, how should I live in order to live well as a human being? That, I think—and second to that, what are the conditions under which society fulfills its mission? What is a good society? In other words, the questions about a good life and a good society are in the order of action the most important questions.

**MOYERS:** Does Aristotle believe there is one answer to that question, A good life is:\_\_\_\_\_?

**ADLER:** He believes that though each man, different from another individually in a variety of ways, in inclination and temperament, may follow a somewhat different path, nevertheless he thinks the end they should all aim at is the same. The content of a good life is the same for all.

**MOYERS:** The same?

**ADLER:** It's the same; and the factors involved in achieving a good life are the same for all. Let me now support those three statements. First, for him, happiness, which is another name for a good life as a whole, consists in a whole life, from birth to death, so lived that a person accumulates successively in time all the goods, the real goods that a human being should have; not all the things he wants, which are only apparent goods, but all the things he needs, all the things that satisfy his natural desires.



**MOYERS:** Wouldn't we have to all desire the same thing for there to be one good life?

**ADLER:** But that is precisely what the doctrine of natural desires says, not that we consciously desire the same thing. All our wants—your wants, Bill, and my wants—are different; the wants of every human being differ from those of others. It's our natural desires, our needs that are the same. Let me talk about the biological needs. We all need food, clothing, shelter, rest, play, and sensuous pleasure on the biological level. On the human level, spiritually and intellectually, we all need friendship and love, we all need a good society to live in, we all need knowledge and wisdom. These are the things our nature seeks, and our nature being the same in all of us, what we seek not consciously but naturally. And the good man is one who desires what he ought to desire, or desires what conforms to his natural desires.

**MOYERS:** What if you desire some but not all of those? What if you do not desire knowledge?

**ADLER:** Then you're deficient. You're deficient in that respect.

**MOYERS:** That's very arbitrary.

**ADLER:** No, because the good life is defined, properly defined, as seeking all the things that are really good for you. Now, you're not going to tell me that knowledge is not really good for you.

**MOYERS:** I'm saying to you that if I don't desire it...

**ADLER:** You're bad. Knowledge is good and you're bad.

**MOYERS:** (Laughing)

**ADLER:** You're failing yourself. You're stunting your own growth. Your mind, your intellect, Bill, seeks knowledge as much as your stomach seeks food. And for you to deny that knowledge is good for yourself would be as silly as to deny that food is good for your body.

**MOYERS:** Is this what you mean when you say there are lots of wrong plans for living well, and only one right plan?

**ADLER:** Precisely.

**MOYERS:** Isn't that dogmatic?

**ADLER:** I don't know why you use the word "dogmatic."

**MOYERS:** I mean, what possibly can make one plan for living the right plan and all others wrong?

*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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