



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 2 of 3

ADLER: The answer to that question I've already given, and I'm going to repeat it again. If human nature is as Aristotle describes it—I said if—if we do have in our nature a certain set of potentialities common to the species, and these create tendencies or natural desires, then there can only be one plan for fulfilling one's nature, living according to nature.

MOYERS: You say then that happiness is the ultimate or final end of all our doing in this life.

ADLER: Yes.

MOYERS: Do you mean that I'm on this earth to find happiness?

ADLER: To answer that question I have to step back a moment and say that is a pagan or naturalist answer to the question. The Christian, a devout Christian, would not say that. A devout Christian would say you're on this earth in order to achieve eternal salvation. The kind of happiness that Aristotle's talking about is temporal, earthly happiness. He is not talking about an afterlife. If man has an immortal soul and there is an afterlife, then you're not on this earth solely to achieve happiness here and now. I said if.

MOYERS: If. And temporal happiness is a life that achieves these...

ADLER: Real goods.

MOYERS: Real goods. The goods of the body?

ADLER: Goods of the soul, goods of the spirit, goods of the mind.

MOYERS: Aristotle says moral virtue is essential to a good life. What is moral virtue?

ADLER: Moral virtue consists of habits of good choice. Virtue aims at happiness as the end of life and is the habit of choosing the right means to it, choosing real goods and avoiding apparent goods.

MOYERS: Make that more specific for us.

ADLER: Let me take the most obvious virtue, temperance. Temperance consists in the habit, the settled frame, disposition of forsaking, avoiding, giving up certain very seductive pleasures that tempt you here and now—more food, more drink, more play, more sleep, all things that human beings tend to—in order to achieve remote and difficult goods that would be interfered with if you played too much, slept too much, drank too much, ate too much. Temperance is a habit of modifying your bodily desires. Perfectly good desires—you should have a certain amount—but modifying them, moderating them for the sake of the total life.

MOYERS: So to be virtuous I have to be temperate...

ADLER: Yes, you do.

MOYERS: ...in the choices before me.

ADLER: That's right. You have to be courageous and just. The three cardinal virtues are temperance, fortitude or courage, and justice.

MOYERS: What is courage?

ADLER: Well, courage is the very opposite of temperance. Temperance is resisting seductive pleasures for the sake of a greater good, and courage is taking, willingly undergoing, suffering pains and hardships for the sake of a greater good.

MOYERS: Give me an example of this.

ADLER: Soldier on the battlefield is the most obvious example, but I prefer the example of a good student. The good student—studying is hard, studying is very hard, it's painful, and the person who lacks courage shirks the hard work of study; but the good student has the virtue of courage or fortitude, bears up under the pain of long hours of study.

MOYERS: So he has courage.

ADLER: That's right. Without temperance and courage, one doesn't pursue one's studies well.

MOYERS: What is justice?

ADLER: Oh, that's a virtue in a totally different direction. Temperance and courage are self-regarding virtues. They are virtues that order my life with respect to my own happiness. Justice is the virtue which orders my life with respect to the good of everybody else in a society. And in fact the most difficult question raised is, I can see why I should be temperate and why I should be courageous because if I'm not I may not lead a good life myself; I may not achieve my own happiness. But why should I be just, when justice is concerned with your good and the good of society? That's a hard question.

MOYERS: What's the answer? You're making difficult thought easy.

ADLER: The answer is that justice, temperance and courage are not three distinct virtues. They are all aspects of Virtue. Virtue is one. Hence, you've got to say that a man cannot be a good man, a virtuous man in his own private life without at the same time being virtuous in his public life, and the reason for that is, virtue aims at the end. If you're aiming at the right end—if you're aiming at the right end, which courage and temperance says you are doing—you can't aim at the wrong end but by injustice. There's only one end; 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.

MOYERS: Doesn't the fact that we all fall so far short of what Aristotle says is a good or virtuous life, doesn't that make him largely irrelevant?



ADLER: No, because—if I may now use the closing line of Spinoza's *Ethics*—"All things noble are as difficult as they are rare."

MOYERS: (over shot of Aspen Institute at foot of mountains): At the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, Mortimer Adler has found a compatible forum for his conviction that adults ought never to stop learning. He's become as much a fixture at the Institute as the mountains around it. The Institute's technique is to bring together a variety of people to challenge and confront their ideas in an intellectual free-for-all. At Adler's discussion of Aristotle, the participants include America's current ambassador to Italy, the chairman of a large corporation, the president of the Aspen Institute itself, a writer, and a poet, a professor of history, a professor of criminal justice, a journalist from South America, a doctor, a graduate student in architecture, a scholar of law and an emeritus executive of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

(At Institute)

ADLER: Slater?



JOSEPH SLATER, President, Aspen Institute: In many people's judgment, one of the breakdowns of contemporary morals in politics is the attempt to get in the short run at the expense of the long run, whether it's an elected official who's thinking only of the next election or a businessman who's only thinking of the bottom line in the next period, or—the people who would ignore the environment or things for the future. Could you elaborate a little bit on what you and/or Aristotle would think about the question of notions of the future, the long term, who speaks for the conscience of the future?

ADLER: I think—by the way, you can treat Aristotle and me for the purposes of this discussion as Siamese twins.

(Laughter from group)

ADLER: Aristotle's concern is that the person who is trying to lead a good life, trying to achieve a good life for himself, must think about his life as a whole and not about immediate pleasures and pains today, tomorrow and the next day. In fact, I think the essence of moral virtue, as Aristotle conceives it, is always sacrificing the immediate, apparent goods for the long-term real goods. In that sense, the long-term point of view is the fundamental moral point of view and the short-term point of view is not. Now...

SIR HUW WHELDON, Emeritus Executive, BBC: Does it really go as far as that? I mean, it's going very far, isn't it, to think of your life as a whole. There's another great precept that says, sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. It's not Aristotle's, God knows, but nevertheless the notion of having a total plan of operation does

seem a bit thick on behalf of your Siamese twin.

ADLER: No, I don't think so, Sir Huw, because when you are making a film, you've got to think about—before you start, you've got to think about the film as a whole. Now, in any of the performing arts, whether it be a concert, a great symphony concert, or a ballet or the making of a film or the writing of a book, in any art that takes time—and life takes time—you have to think about the whole, though the whole is never achieved at any time. I think the hardest message here is that for Aristotle the end is not a terminal end—this is very hard for people to understand—but a normative end.

WHELDON: But you don't think of the end all the time, you think of the part frequently...

ADLER: Most people, I agree with you...

WHELDON: ...and if you're an actor, you're speaking your lines in Act Two. You're not concerned with Act three.



ADLER: But the director has to think of the whole. I do think the long-term point of view is required if you take Aristotle seriously as meaning that the end that one should be aiming at is a good life as a whole.

WHELDON: I know that Aristotle isn't saying that to be cheerful, to be contented and to be tranquil and to be satisfied in your wants is a perfect situation. On the other hand, there must be something between that and talking about a man when he's dead as having been blessed. There is a condition of life that I have personally seen in people which I regard and profoundly enviable to which I'm prepared to give some name...

ADLER: May I—may I...

WHELDON: Yes.

ADLER: St. Augustine, in a little treatise on happiness, I think not only sums up the Aristotelian insight but adds a very good point to it. He says, “Happy”—the phrase is exactly this — “Happy is the man who has everything he desires provided he desired nothing amiss. Virtue is the habit of not desiring anything amiss or desiring awry.” So Aristotle would say that in the course—if a man in mid-stream has the moral virtues—I have to add one more point—he is likely when he’s finished living to have lived a good life, if he is also blessed by good fortune. Sir Huw, the most extraordinary thing about Aristotle is that he’s the only moral philosopher in the whole of Western thought who recognized that a life can be ruined by bad fortune.

WHELDON: ...like that.

ADLER: Virtue Is not enough. Virtue is an indispensable but not a sufficient condition.

WHELDON: That’s right.

ADLER: The most virtuous man can lead a miserable life because he’s beset by all kinds of bad fortune, and that double insight explains the relation of society to happiness. Without that, you wouldn’t understand, I think, any of the reasons why we ought to have a good society.

JAMES SLOAN ALLEN, Writer: Were Aristotle here, would he find this to be a good or a bad society?

ADLER: I don’t know that—could I ask you—you asked the question, you probably had an answer in mind. What answer would you give?

ALLEN: You mean if...

ADLER: Yes. If you were Aristotle. Anyone can be Aristotle today. You be Aristotle now.

ALLEN: I suspect that Aristotle wouldn’t know what’s wrong, you see. I tend to disagree with you in your claim that he is as pertinent to our day as you are. I think that he probably wouldn’t understand what the hell is going on. I think you probably have an idea when

in the history of culture people lost the way and ceased to be able to find the road to happiness or something of this sort, but I doubt that Aristotle would understand.

ADLER: May I say, I take a different view of that, Mr. Allen. In no society is the majority of human beings virtuous. By and large, most men are morally—shall I say—of weak fiber. This is not new. The Christian doctrine of original sin may explain this, or there may be other explanations, so that I don't think, by and large, the number of good men, the number of men who are virtuous enough to do what is necessary, the hard things necessary to lead a good life, varies from time to time.

SIDNEY HYMAN, Professor of Criminal Justice: I think he would recognize at least one part of this world and one of the problems of it, what you don't have occasion to mention in your book, but there in the original *Politics* there's a whole section on revolution, the study of the causes of revolution. As I can remember, he ascribes to one of the central causes of revolution this lust or desire for equality, and I think that the idea of equality is a very difficult idea to get hold of, but so many of the contemporary revolutions somehow or other are addressed or have their roots in or...

ADLER: There isn't any question about that. That motion in the world today, not only in the United States, among our people, but among all the people we're talking about, is, I think, the dominant factor in our lives, and society must satisfy this desire that men have for equality of conditions. Now, there is here a distinction that I make in my own thinking which I can't find a basis for in Aristotle. The egalitarian, whom I think is wrong, wants flat equality, uniformity, equality in degree. I think that—I now speak in Aristotelian terms even if Aristotle himself does not speak to this point—that the only equality we can achieve is an equality in kind rather than equality in degree. That is, put it this way, a society should create the equality of conditions that justice requires, no more equality than justice requires. Now, how much equality does justice require? My answer to that one is the answer of the Declaration, "securing to all men equally their natural rights." There are two Marxist statements that I think, curiously enough, both in Karl Marx, that state the whole truth there. I'm going to change Marx a little bit, because I think he misstated the first one.

He shouldn't have said, "to each according to his needs," because needs are—common to all of us and the same. He should have said "all according to their common human needs, and to each according to his contribution;" because our contributions are differ-

ent, our needs are the same. Those two principles of justice, with the first one first, because until you've given all what they need you have no right to make the differential distribution in terms of contribution. If all have what they need, then you can have mores and lesses in terms of differential contribution. Yes.

MANNING MARABLE, Professor of Southern History: You're excluding the issue of revolution that was originally...

ADLER: Of revolution?

MARABLE: Yes, let me get back to this.

ADLER: Please.



MARABLE: Let me read something, Martin Luther King's letter from a Birmingham jail, a quotation. "We have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that the privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up an unjust posture, but as Reinhold Niebuhr has permitted us to say, that groups are more immoral than individuals."

Two questions: in the pursuit of the good life, when the majority violates the will of the minority, does not the minority have the natural right to revolution, either nonviolent or violent? How would Aristotle respond?

ADLER: He thinks that revolutions arise. In fact, he says, as Plato said before him, there is always a war between the rich and the poor, between the oligarchs and the democrats, and he thinks that revolutions happen through those natural causes. I would go further and say that when men have serious grievances, suffering in-

justices, they are justified, if they cannot—if *they cannot* redress their grievances by peaceful, nonviolent legal means, in taking up arms to do so.

CARLOS CABALLERO ARGÁEZ, South American Journalist: If the satisfaction of the natural needs of human beings leads to the happiness of everybody, are we not compelled by a moral imperative to redistribute wealth in the world to assure that the biological needs of the people are satisfied, at least to a minimal extent, as you said in the book, independently of any ideological considerations?



ADLER: Yes. If I understand Aristotle's notion of the good society, it is one which tries to provide all its human beings with the conditions—the external conditions—prerequisite to their pursuit of happiness. Poverty, destitution, ill health, lack of education—and I think of all the goods that the welfare state tries to provide its people—are parts of the conditions of the pursuit of happiness, and a good society is one which will distribute wealth and handle the distribution of wealth to assure that every human being has those conditions. So if that's socialism—if that's socialism—then how remarkable it is Aristotle's a socialist.

RALPH E. ABLON, Chairman of the Board, Ogden Corporation: Is it not possible in an imperfect society to set out on a journey and never get there? You start to redistribute wealth in the direction of the people who are entitled to it, and they never see it.

ADLER: That's the failure. That's the weak point in socialism. You can't say, we will give you the conditions of leading a good life only if you promise and prove that you can use those conditions well. You can't get that assurance from the person you...

ABLON: I wasn't looking for that. Just, how do you get the condi-

tions to—in terms of redistributing wealth, which is not changing conditions except temporarily.

ADLER: You know, Mr. Ablon, as well as I do, what the provisions and measures of a welfare society are. All Western societies in varying degrees are now welfare states. They're all socialist not in means but in end. They're concerned with seeing that the whole population or a very large part of it participate in the general economic welfare, have some minimal share at least of the economic goods required for a good life. We're all agreed upon that. We disagree when the communists say they will do that by the abolition of private property and we will say we will do it by a free enterprise society which mixes the public and the private sector. We're differing about the means, not the end. I don't think there is a modern society in the West that is not socialist in this sense.

ROBERT McKAY, Scholar of Law: I'd like to get back to the equality issue. I think there's still an ambiguity when you talk about guarantee of natural rights. That's hard to define; and when you talk about equality of condition, that really breaks down into two parts that we often call now equality of opportunity, in which I guess everybody believes, and equality of result. And that's where the revolution comes.

ADLER: By equality of condition, I really mean what you mean by the phrase equality of result.

McKAY: Equality of result.

ADLER: And that's the hard one.

McKAY: That's the hard one. And the way it comes now in our present context, in the inequality that exists—the discrimination, the racism, as you've said, that continues in the United States as elsewhere—the obligation, or at least so believed, of government to take some action to redress that imbalance—and that's affirmative action, and that's special admissions, it's the Bakke Case and it's all those questions—in which there is—somebody pays a price for that, somebody who is himself or herself innocent and does not get the advantage that might otherwise have accrued to that individual. Now, would Aristotle have an opinion about that kind of redressing of the balance to help those who've been disadvantaged at the expense of those who are in a sense innocent?

ADLER: I do not think so.

McKAY: It's an issue he didn't face.

ADLER: I don't think he faced it, no.

McKAY: How would his twin face that issue?

ADLER: The hard choices are where there's good and evil on both sides. And either choice is really an undesirable choice, but you are compelled by the circumstances to make a choice. So in society we often have to redress a grievance—in jobs, the Bakke case is one case in point.

McKAY: And that is not injustice.

ADLER: No. Not injustice.

JOHN L. LEWIS, Jr., M.D.: You've chosen the analogy of a Siamese twin. I would like to know where you're joined. Are you joined...

ADLER: I hope in the head, not the hip. (Laughter from group.)

LEWIS: But see, this is very important, because in your book we get the cerebral cortex. We don't get anything else of Aristotle, and the question is—it's easy to know how he thinks—it's difficult to know who he was.

ADLER: What would you like to know? I'd be curious to know what you'd like to know about him.

LEWIS: Well, it's interesting. Earlier you said that he wasn't interested in the subconscious or the unconscious.

ADLER: That notion, I have to say, the notion of the unconscious, does not appear anywhere in human thought until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

WHELDON: With the greatest respect, you did add that although you were clear that Aristotle had no knowledge of the unconscious, you also said that you didn't think much of it yourself, either.

ADLER: I didn't say...

WHELDON: I wrote it down.

(Laughter from group)

ADLER: I said I didn't think much of unconscious thinking about means and ends. Let me say, now as myself, not as Aristotle, I am making a very definite effort to leave a certain amount of time every day idle; awake, but purposeless and doing nothing, in order to let my unconscious pop out. I've found it very fruitful indeed to sit idly staring at the wall at the end of a day of work, sitting down and intentionally doing nothing, intentionally being at rest and idle, and then suddenly, because the unconscious is there, all kinds of things I hadn't thought about before pop into my mind, particularly a day in which I've done a lot of work. If the whole days' been idle, it isn't purposeful to be idle at the end of it. If you've worked hard all day, lots of little things drop into the unconscious that you don't notice, and then you sit back and sort of—I'm usually idle with a pad next to me, because...



WHELDON: Of course!

(Laughter from group)

ADLER: Because things that pop into my mind I have not searched for by thought, by any deliberate effort. All I'm doing, Sir Huw, is indicating that I have some respect for the unconscious.

(Laughter)

LEWIS: On page seventy-seven you say, "As we get older we become more and more purposeful. We also become more serious and less playful." I think the most recent modern nonphilosopher writing on philosophy is George Sheehan, who's best known as a runner and physician, and he has made a very large point in relation to the importance of play if one is going to work in a dedicated manner over a long period of time.

ADLER: So does Aristotle make the same point.

LEWIS: I missed it.

ADLER: Aristotle—I didn't make it in the book, because I was not concerned with the parts of life—but Aristotle names four main parts of life: sleep, which is all the biological activities...

LEWIS: Which is also the very active use of the subconscious.

ADLER: Play, which is the activity which is inherently pleasant, is purposeless, and he says its end is in itself, it doesn't have an end itself; work for subsistence, what we call toil or labor; and leisure, by which he doesn't mean free time, but learning, all the creative acts. And he says play is for the sake of work as work is for the sake of leisure. In other words, play, the recreational, the reviving effects of play, are indispensable and children, to my observation, are essentially playful. I mean, they play a great deal, they make games of everything and play. As we get older, I think we still play but we take many more things seriously than children do. And the unfortunate thing is, in my way of looking at it, I think it would be better if children were serious and their elders were playful.

(Laughter)

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.