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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 3 of 3

**ADLER:** Dr. Lewis.

**LEWIS:** Well, I think it's important. I think you've outlined...

**ADLER:** Okay, okay, okay.

**LEWIS:** ...a series of problems that if we really face up to every day and say we not only have to work through our government, we have to make our own personal decisions—by God, sometime during the day I'm going to want to play.

**ADLER:** The play you're talking about is sheer enjoyment for its

own sake.

**LEWIS:** Right.

**ADLER:** I would say such play comes as near in human life to what religious people call contemplation. It really is—abstracted from all practical purpose, intrinsically enjoyable, with reference to nothing beyond itself, it comes as near to what the religious mean by rest.

**WHELDON:** Even activity has got a playful side. I personally would much prefer to be in the hands of a politician who regarded himself as being in the great game. I mean, Churchill and Truman, LG (Lloyd George) and FDR, all these people, they knew that they were doing. And when you look at Stafford Cripps—with all due respect to a great man—but in our country all you got was earnestness. I mean, not a laugh.

**ADLER:** Dull, very dull.

**WHELDON:** But I think we're coming back to...

**ADLER:** Ms. Anderson?

**DARLENE ANDERSON,** Graduate Student in Architecture: How do you describe leisure, then?

**ADLER:** Leisure is like work. In fact, I never use the word leisure except to say leisure work, because leisure is not play, it's the very opposite of play. It's the most serious of all human activities, intensely difficult, fatiguing. It's the opposite of the American conception of leisure, which is having a good...

**HYMAN:** "Leisure" and "school" mean the same thing in Greek.

**ADLER:** The Greek word for leisure is the same word for learning, you see. Leisure is the two kinds of work, serious activity for an end beyond itself, a leisure work; and subsistence work. By the way, this Aristotle, the amazing thing is that he had all these distinctions toward the end of the *Politics* and the *Ethics*. And the difference between leisure work and subsistence work are the kind of goods they aim at: subsistence work the production of economic goods, wealth; leisure work the goods of civilization, the arts and sciences. Mr. Gardner.

**RICHARD GARDNER,** U.S. Ambassador to Italy: This book is

called *Aristotle for Everybody*. Its subtitle is *Difficult Thought Made Easy*. Now, these are rather controversial assumptions. Most—many scholars, many educators in this country, and particularly in Europe, in Italy, the country in which I'm currently living, would say Aristotle isn't for everybody, difficult thought should not be made easy. In fact, aren't you and your twin at odds on this?

**ADLER:** I have to say, if I may, that I don't think the subtitle is correct. The thought, Aristotle's thought, is not difficult. What I made easy was the writing. It should have been, thought written in a difficult manner, rewritten to make it easy. It's the writing I've done.

**WHELDON:** When you say it's for everybody, it perhaps should be difficult for everybody. When I was a boy, I learned a Chopin nocturne. I can't remember—in G minor. (*Hums melody*)

**ADLER:** You sing well, Sir Huw.

**WHELDON:** I remember it very well, fourteen, twelve years old, I learned this thing, and I remember vividly being in somebody's house and hearing somebody, not at a concert at all, play this thing and I realized that what I'd been playing was a simplified version. And I was deeply shocked; and I was shocked on behalf of two people, me and Chopin.

(*Laughter from group*)

**WHELDON:** I had been doing him down, and I'd done myself down, because I thought that I'd taken it in. Now, Chopin is supposed to be difficult; and although the language may be part of the thing, Aristotle is supposed to be difficult, too. I speak as one of Mr. Gardner's Europeans.

(*Laughter*)

**ADLER:** I think, curiously enough, if I compare Aristotle with either his own ancient Greek colleague, Plato, or with any modern philosopher—let's say Kant or Hegel—he is very much easier to understand.

**GARDNER:** Would 215 million Americans, really would their lives be enriched, would they be more virtuous, would they approach excellence if they read this, and if so, what does this mean for our educational system? Should there be more philosophy? Is the implication of all this that we should build into the primary and secondary school system speculative philosophy?



**ADLER:** Not the primary schools. I think that philosophy thus expounded—not philosophy as now taught in our colleges, which is as highly specialized and technical a subject as logic and mathematics are—philosophy thus expounded as an extension of common-sense wisdom should be taught in the upper years of high school, junior and senior year of high school. I think children of that age are ripe for it. So I think I'd answer your question by saying this belongs in the high school curriculum. Mr. Ablon.

**ABLON:** I think the point lies elsewhere. The most impressive thing in the book to me was the inference—and I think I have it correctly—that thinking is a skill.

**ADLER:** Yes.

**ABLON:** And that thinking as a skill ought to be developed. I am less impressed, frankly, by whether the various theories of Aristotle are right or wrong than I am impressed by the enormity of his ability to think, to think clearly, to think accurately, and to arrive at conclusions that in a sense prove themselves. Now, somewhere it said that philosophy won't build bridges or make soup, but let me ask you whether you think somebody who has not been taught philosophy but has become a philosopher by being taught to think will make better soup or build a better bridge.

**ADLER:** No. I don't—I think the...I think...let me say...

(Laughter)

**ABLON:** I do!

**ADLER:** Let me say why I do not.

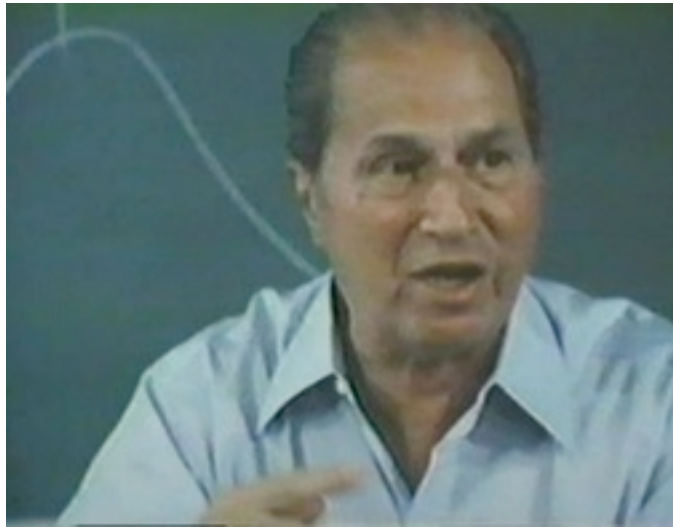
**ABLON:** I disagree with both of you.

**ADLER:** I think the difference between the application of science and the application of philosophy is profound, a profound point. Science—scientific knowledge, applied science—is productive, makes better things, builds bridges and makes soup. Philosophy is not productive but directive. It gives us directions for leading our lives and conducting our society. It doesn't produce things.

**ALLEN:** But when you describe what the good life is, you and Aristotle, you list the good life as consisting of the satisfaction of all these natural goods.

**ADLER:** Natural needs.

**ALLEN:** Is it not true, though, that the intellectual need is the most important, and that the emotional needs are, in your opinion and Aristotle's, less important for the fulfilled life?



**ADLER:** I don't think so, though I think Aristotle would say that the intellect is man's highest power and therefore the thing most to be perfected. I would say that he regarded love and friendship, which are on the level of the emotions, as a good of equal importance to knowledge and understanding. I think it would be difficult, in terms of the amount of time consumed, to have a large number of very close friends, because I think friendship is a very taxing and arduous form of leisure work. I really think friendship—cultivating friends and being friends—is not easy. You can't have

a lot of very close friends, but I think he would never say you can have too many friends. For real friends, you can't have too many of them.

**ALLEN:** Are philosophers then the happiest of all men because they can use their minds principally rather than having to divert their energies and time on other things?

**WHELDON:** You can't tell until they're dead.

(Laughter from group)

**ADLER:** I want to take the Fifth at this point. (Laughter)

**MOYERS:** (Walking in meadow with Adler): Is happiness the same thing as contentment?



**ADLER:** Well, as most people in the modern—especially in the contemporary world—use the word happiness it's a synonym for contentment; but as Aristotle uses the term happiness, having the meaning whole, good human life, it is the very opposite of contentment, for contentment is a psychological term. A man is contented today if he has what he wants, his desires, his particular desires are satisfied. Tomorrow he may be discontented for lacking something that he wants and so one can shift from time to time from being contented or discontented.

**MOYERS:** But if he's happy?

**ADLER:** You see, contentment and discontentment are experienced, but a whole good life—happiness now in the sense of a whole, good life—is never experienced because you never experience it at

any one moment in your life. Contentment and discontent are psychological terms.

**MOYERS:** But do I have...

**ADLER:** Happiness is an ethical, purely ethical term.

**MOYERS:** Say that again?

**ADLER:** Happiness is a purely ethical term; it has no psychological connotations at all, as contentment and discontent have. You can experience the one, you can't experience the other. And that's contrary to what most people mean by happiness.

**MOYERS:** Wait a minute, you can't experience happiness?

**ADLER:** No. The point is that in the course of a good life there are many moments of real contentment and 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. He's not going to have a happy life.

**MOYERS:** In other words, you can have good times and bad times and still have...



**ADLER:** A good life. Precisely. In fact, I would say that on this earth, human beings being as they are, there is no one who has a good life that isn't also a life filled with good times and bad times.

**MOYERS:** Whose obligation is it to provide the real goods all of us need?

**ADLER:** The individual has the obligation to do everything he can to acquire them for himself. That's his job in pursuing happiness. But when he's hindered, hampered, impeded by the accidents of misfortune, then organized society must step in and help him do what he can't do for himself. Abraham Lincoln said, and I think it sums the thing up, "Society, government should do for the people what they can't do for themselves."

**MOYERS:** For all of us, for society to organize to help those who aren't able to help themselves assumes a certain virtue that appears often to be lacking.

**ADLER:** No question about that. The good society is probably as rare as the good life. In most cases, the most we have are approximations to it. I would say, by the way, that America, the United States in the twentieth century, is a closer approximation to a good society, with all its faults, than any society that ever existed before.

**MOYERS:** Why?

**ADLER:** Because I think it's making an effort to do what it can to provide a very large number of people—if not all, a very large proportion of the population—with the external conditions they need to lead good lives.

**MOYERS:** I find, Mortimer, that I need—I think I need—beauty for happiness. I need these mountains and this blue sky...

**ADLER:** Yes.

**MOYERS:** ...and these trees. What is the role of beauty in Aristotle's and Adler's view of life?

**ADLER:** Well, beauty is the highest form of intellectual pleasure. Aristotle makes pleasure one of the real goods, the pleasure of the senses. But the pleasure of the mind, the pleasure we get from apprehending beauty, is the highest form of pleasure. Aristotle's greatest disciple, St. Thomas Aquinas, defines beauty—his Latin phrase—as *id quod visum placet*, that which pleases us upon being seen.

(Indicating river, water running over stones, grassy banks): As we



look around us, aren't you pleased to see this? Doesn't it please you? Not just your eye, but you're seeing something which is more pleasant than the mere surface colors and shapes. If I may jump from Aquinas to the Old Testament, at the end of the first chapter of the book of Genesis, God, having finished creating the world, rests and on the seventh day says it is good, very good. It is good to behold and that's what beauty is, that which is good to behold.

**MOYERS:** (*sitting by river*): You bring in the Old Testament and God. What did Aristotle believe about God?

**ADLER:** Before I answer that question, Bill, let me tell you Aristotle's views about infinity and eternity, because they have a bearing on his conception of God. He thought there could be no actually infinite anything, there could be an actually infinite number of atoms, or an actually infinite physical world, or an actually infinite space, because for him the actual had to be definite and the infinite is indefinite; but he did not deny potential infinities: the infinity of addition, such as the endless series of numbers...

**MOYERS:** One forever.



**ADLER:** Forever, or the infinity of division, to continue to divide infinitely divisible things; and he thought that time was endless, potentially infinite. Go back to anything you call the first instant, there was an instant earlier than that. Come to any instant you think is the last instant of time, and there's an instant after that. And that's why he thought time was everlasting and the world was everlastingly in existence and everlastingly in motion. And his conception of God as the prime mover is as the everlasting cause of the everlasting motion of the universe.

That is quite different from the Christian conception of God. I

don't know what Aristotle would have said to the first sentence in Genesis, "In the beginning..." because Aristotle would have been startled by that word "beginning." "In the beginning God created Heaven and Earth." He'd be startled by the word "created," because the notion of beginning, the world's beginning or the world's being created, was foreign to him.

The Christians—the Christian conception of God corresponds to the Aristotelian in this sense. Where Aristotle thought the everlasting existence of the world needed an everlasting cause of its existence in motion—of its motion particularly, not its existence—the Christian conception of God as creator is as a cause of the being of the world. And the Christian conception is quite compatible with the view that the world always existed because the creator is required to keep the world in existence at this very moment to sustain its existence. At any moment of its existence the creative cause is required for its continued existence.

**MOYERS:** What God do you believe in?

**ADLER:** (Pauses) You use the word "believe," and that's a difficult word, because it means both an act of natural belief and an act of supernatural faith. So that I'm going to have to say first that I think the conception of God as the creative cause of the world is a valid conception, and although I do not—I'm not sure yet that I will be able by purely rational steps to prove God's existence, though I'm going to try to do that—I think the reasoning for the existence of a creative God is so strong that I'm willing to make the leap of faith—of natural faith, not supernatural faith—the leap of belief beyond the evidence...

**MOYERS:** What do you mean?

**ADLER:** Well, if I could prove God's existence, there'd be no need to say I believe in God, because what you prove you don't have to believe. Belief and proof are incompatible. You only say you believe what you can't prove or know on rational grounds. So my statement here is a little more complicated than that. I think the evidence, the reasons I have for thinking that God—the creative God that the Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in—exists are very strong, but not final and conclusive; and so I need an act of belief to go beyond what I know by reason. So, to answer your question with no further quibbling, I do believe in God.

**MOYERS:** You were born of Jewish parents. You taught Aquinas at the University of Chicago so efficiently that many of your stu-

dents—Jewish, Protestants, agnostics, atheists—were converted to Catholicism. Your wife is Episcopalian. Your children have been baptized into the Episcopalian faith.

**ADLER:** One of them has been confirmed recently.

**MOYERS:** Where do you come out personally?



**ADLER:** Well, it's a very difficult and probing question, Bill. In my recently published autobiography I reported the fact that many of my friends, good friends, in the Episcopal and Roman Catholic Church have been puzzled by my not becoming a convert to one or another form of Christianity in view of my deep interest in Aquinas, and my only answer is that when one voluntarily accepts a religion one must be prepared to live the life that that religion recommends. For example, to become a Christian one must be resolutely determined to walk in the path of Jesus Christ. I just don't know that I have that will. And, short of having that firm will to be a good Christian, I don't want to become a Christian at all. That may be wrong. I'm troubled by that, but that's my only explanation for not—shall I say—entering the religious communion whose intellectual structure I understand so well.

**MOYERS:** Are you afraid of the price you might pay? Are you afraid of having to give up what you enjoy?

**ADLER:** I think that may be the case. I think that may be the case. Though I don't want to probe that too far, for I may discover in myself things I don't like very much. I think what I'm saying is that all my reasoning, all my understanding leads me almost up to the conclusion that it's demonstrated, but not quite; and that gap between the reasoning that is insufficient, and the final conclusion I must make by a leap of faith, a leap of—by an act of my own


will. So when I say I believe in God, I'm going beyond my reasoning to a conclusion that I can't prove. Now, I hope—the next episode in my life is to write a book about God's existence, and I may a year from now have reached the point where I think I have proved God's existence and I won't say I believe God exists any longer.

**MOYERS:** You can be an infuriating man, you can be a provocative man. You can also be a man of charm and a man of warmth. And I'm wondering if Mortimer Adler, the man, is satisfied without a warm heart, or a heart that is warmed, by belief, by faith, as a commitment instead of just an intellectual exercise.

**ADLER:** It is warmed by a variety of things, such as good friends, loved ones, loved wife and loved children. It's warmed by those things. It's warmed by the beauty that we have around us here. It's warmed by the intellectual excitement of discovery and thought. Beyond that warmth you're talking about lies the warmth of the peace of mind that comes with deep religious commitment.

You know, let me put it another way. We talked about the seventh day of the creation of the world, the day on which God rested. I think, I really firmly believe, that what I lack is not warmth but rest, that rest is religious. I think the heavenly—you know the phrase, heavenly rest? My understanding of heavenly rest is the joy that the saints, the blessed have, in the vision of God. That's heavenly rest. On earth, the remote, inchoate approximation to heavenly rest is, I think, the religious experience, so what my life lacks is not warmth but rest. Now, whether I shall achieve rest in my life I don't know.



**MOYERS:** (over still shot of Adler): From Aspen, Colorado, this is Bill Moyers. 

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WELCOME NEW MEMBER

**Terrence Keenan**

*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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