



MORAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: THE GOOD LIFE AND THE GOOD SOCIETY

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PART 2 OF 2

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Let me begin here, by explaining the scope of political philosophy, its dependence on ethics, and its difference from ethics. The opening paragraph of Aristotle's *Politics* provides a brief summary of these points. He writes:

Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at a good in the greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.

As we have seen in our survey of moral philosophy, the highest good, which is self-sufficing because it is the ultimate or final good

that leaves nothing more to be rightly desired, is happiness, ethically understood as a whole life that is well lived in accordance with moral virtue and one that is blessed by good fortune. Hence, if the state serves the greatest good, which is also the complete good, the state is the association that comes into existence for the sake of a good human life. Man is by nature a political animal who can live well only in the state—that is, in a civil and civilized society.

Man, being a social as well as a political animal, lived in families and tribes or villages before states came into existence. The state served better the purposes also served by families or tribes and villages (i.e., the perpetuation of the species and the needs of subsistence). But beyond that, the state or civil society enabled man not just to live, but to live well.

Human nature is the foundation of political and moral philosophy, and the same ultimate good is the controlling end in both. Ethics is thus the architectonic discipline in the practical order, and a sound political philosophy is both founded on ethical truths as well as guided by them.

What in our universities is called political science is a descriptive discipline and value-free, but political philosophy is concerned with prescriptive truths and so is not value-free. Another way of saying this is that it sets before us the ideals we ought to seek in framing and operating our political and economic institutions. Liberty, equality, and justice (with justice limiting liberty and equality) are the chief values that enter into the political ideal, which calls for the maximization of these values.

The difference between moral and political philosophy is that the latter does not remain the same in all centuries, but changes with alterations in the political and economic institutions that human beings innovatively establish. There is progress in political philosophy, whereas there is little or none in ethics. Errors and inadequacies of political philosophy occurred in antiquity and the Middle Ages. They were corrected by advances made in modern times, advances occasioned by the institutional changes that occurred.

This is not to say that some of the basic prescriptive truths in political philosophy are not to be found in Plato and Aristotle; nor that errors in political philosophy (such as the notion of the social contract and the error of thinking that the good of the state is superior to the human good) have not occurred in modern times. But for the most part, progress in political philosophy lies in correcting

ancient errors and remedying the inadequacies that could not have been avoided in earlier centuries.

In fact, it may be said that political philosophy is the only dimension of philosophy in which great progress has been made and is still to be made in the future.

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In terms of what values can such progress be measured or estimated?

Since human nature is the same at all times and places, even when it is obscured by nurturing under cultural diversities, it can be said that everyone ought to seek what all persons need—the real goods of being treated justly, of having political liberty, as much individual freedom of action as justice allows, and as much equality as justice requires, together with as much inequality as justice also requires. (I will explain this presently.)

In addition, the just treatment that should befall all individuals is not only the equal treatment of equals, and the unequal treatment of unequals in proportion to their inequality, but also the justice of securing for all the goods to which they have a natural right, goods that are beyond their power to obtain for themselves, and so goods that a just government must help them attain. Living under a just government is one of the greatest blessings of good fortune.

For the sake of human happiness, to the pursuit of which all individuals have a moral obligation, the political ideal that ought to be the goal of progress in all civil societies is constitutional government, with universal suffrage and the securing of all natural rights including the right to a decent livelihood.

In terms of this ideal, all human beings will be self-governing citizens, governed with their own consent and, with suffrage, with a voice in their government.

It is extraordinary that so much of the progress toward the realization of this ideal has been as recent as the twentieth century. In all earlier times, inequalities prevailed. Political liberty, when it first came into existence in the Greek republics, was enjoyed by the very few—not by women, not by slaves, and not by artisans, who formed the majority of the population.

In all the centuries from antiquity to the end of the nineteenth cen-

ture, the oppressed were the majority in all civil societies, and the privileged—those who enjoyed liberty and equality—were the few. Now, in this century for the first time, the industrially and technologically advanced nations have seen these proportions reversed. The majority is privileged, enjoying the liberty and equality all human beings ought to possess. There are still oppressed minorities, but the future holds out the promise that, in the next century or two, the ideal toward which we are moving, with no oppressed minorities remaining, will be realized fully.

I have written a number of books on political philosophy that prescribe such progress.¹ This is not the place to summarize their content. I mention them only to clarify certain terms that I must use in stating the political ideal we ought to realize.

Liberty is part of that ideal, but not liberty without equality: all should have it. Equality as part of that ideal must be understood in a way that makes it prescriptively true that it should prevail. Superficially, equality consists in two things having the same attributes in the same degree. In that sense, it is not prescriptively true that all human beings ought to be treated equally.

But two things are, in a more profound sense, equal when both have the same attributes, and they are unequal when one possesses an attribute of which the other is totally deprived.

Thus, with regard to enfranchised citizenship, two human beings are unequal if one has suffrage and the other is deprived of it. Any society in which the population does not have universal suffrage, with a few justifiable exceptions, such as infancy or hospitalized mental incompetence, is a society divided into *haves* and *have-nots*.

Only if all are *haves* is there political equality. That equality is not egalitarian, since citizens in public office ought to have more political power than citizens who are not office-holders because officeholders have more civic responsibilities to discharge than citizens not in office.

When this is understood, the error of saying that Athens under Pericles was a constitutional democracy must be corrected. In a

¹ See *The Common Sense of Politics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), *We Hold These Truths: Understanding the Ideas and Ideals of the Constitution* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), and *Haves Without Have-Nots*. In the last, the principal essays that I recommend are “The End of the Conflict Between Capitalism and Communism,” “A Disputation on the Future of Democracy,” and “Lincoln’s Declaration.”

population of 120,000, only 30,000 had the political liberty of citizenship. The rest—women, slaves, and artisans—were disfranchised *have-nots*.

This clarifies the meaning of the term “democracy” so that it can be truly said that the United States, for example, finally approached becoming a democracy with an amended constitution that gave suffrage to blacks, women, and the poor, who could not afford to pay a poll tax.

These are all steps of progress made in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Still one more step needs to be made. In terms of a decent livelihood, to which everyone has a natural right, we still have a population in which a large minority are *have-nots*. When that natural right is acknowledged and secured, and all are not only citizens with suffrage but also with a decent livelihood, constitutional democracy will be fulfilled by socialism.

Democracy and socialism are the twin, inseparable faces of the same ideal, one in the realm of political institutions, the other in the realm of economic arrangements. Socialist democracy or democratic socialism is a civil society in which all are *haves*, politically and economically, and there are no *have-nots*.

Marx and Lenin held up the classless society as the ideal, but it is not egalitarian, for among the *haves*, some *haves* will have more and some will have less according to their just deserts. This will not be understood by readers who use the words “socialism” and “communism” as if they were interchangeable synonyms. Marx and Engels, who were socialists in the ideal at which they aimed, made the mistake of being communists in their choice of the means for achieving this ideal: they abolished private ownership of all productive property, the means of production. As a result their writings led to a totalitarian government with state capitalism, instead of to a private-property capitalism and a market economy that is the indispensable economic underpinning of political democracy.

A sound political philosophy should be able to demonstrate the prescriptive truth that the ideal we ought to strive for is socialist democracy. The indispensable premise in the demonstration is that all human beings are by nature equal. The only respect in which all are by nature equal is that no human being is more or less human than another. All have the same species-specific attributes or properties.

Human beings are unequal with one another by virtue of the fact that the common specific properties that all have, they may have in different degrees. But this does not make them unequal in the sense that some are *haves* and some *have-nots* with respect to their being human.

In all the prior centuries in which human inequality was falsely stressed the population was divided, not by the degree of the human traits they all possess, but rather by the fact that some were thought to have human powers that others lacked—women, slaves, peons or peasants, factory workers, and so on.

It is only in the twentieth century that fundamental human equality has come to be recognized, and all forms of racism and sexism have been decried. But that has not happened everywhere—only in the more advanced nations. We have plenty of room for further progress in the centuries that lie ahead.

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How can the extraordinary progress in political philosophy, much of it so very recent, be explained? Human nature, especially natural needs that are at its foundation, has not undergone change. The needs inherent in human nature are the same today as they were in the time of Plato and Aristotle. The answer, or at least a part of it, must lie in the change in human institutions.

There certainly has been progress from antiquity to the present day in our political institutions, and in the economic arrangements that provide their underpinnings. In addition, there have been even more remarkable advances in technology, especially in the last century and in this, changes that have greatly increased our power to produce distributable wealth and to dispense with slave labor—chattel slavery and what Marx called “exploited wage-slavery.”

Human love of liberty can be more readily and universally satisfied in the twentieth century than ever before; and it is only in this century that the desire for equality, on the part of women, blacks, and other racial minorities, has lit the fires of revolutionary movements.

Alexis de Tocqueville perceived these changes during his visit to America in 1831-32. His book *Democracy in America* was written at a time when the Constitution of the United States was as far from being democratic as the Constitution of Athens in the fourth century B.C. But what Tocqueville perceived were the springs and

tendencies toward liberty and equality that led him to prophesize the realization of the ideal, one that would not only be realized in America, but would eventually sweep over the whole world.

These are the conditions and the factors that may go a long way toward explaining the progress made in political philosophy. Philosophy's recognition of the ideal that ought to be realized in our political and economic affairs is not the motive power of the revolutionary advances that have been made, but it is rather their actual occurrence which made possible a political philosophy that would be sounder than anything formulated by philosophers in the past.

A word more about the part played by technology and the industrial production of wealth. Consider the statement of natural rights made by John Locke and by the Declaration of Independence. Both preceded the industrial revolution that technological advances fueled. Both preceded the production of enough wealth by free labor and by industrial capital to enable the war on poverty and destitution to begin, to hasten the abolition of slave labor, to emancipate women from the domestic economy in which they served, and to lead to the organization of labor and the power of labor unions as well as to the formation of business corporations.

If chattel slavery and what Marx called the "exploited wage-slavery" of the factory workers was a violation of natural rights, if the inferior status and disfranchisement of the female half of the population was a violation of natural rights, if human beings living in the degrading poverty or destitution of economic deprivation was a violation of natural rights, these truths did not suddenly come into existence in the second half of the nineteenth century and in our own day. Natural, inalienable human rights do not change from century to century, but the recognition of them does.

For example, John Stuart Mill called for the enfranchisement of women in the middle of the nineteenth century, but it took until the first decades of the twentieth century for his recommendation to be heeded. Marx and Engels called for the emancipation of the industrial proletariat from bare subsistence wages in the middle of the nineteenth century, but it took almost a hundred years or more for that revolutionary ideal to be realized fully as far as it is now.

What helped these revolutionary insights to become popularly implemented movements? What sensitized the conscience of the multitudes to acknowledge natural rights that were always in existence but that were not recognized as recently as the end of the eighteenth century anywhere in the world? My answer, which may be

inadequate, is technological advance.

Let me use advances in cosmology to explain this answer. The physical laws that govern the movements of the celestial bodies have not changed in the succession of centuries. What has changed are the instruments of observation, the more and more powerful telescopes and other instruments of observation, which enable us to improve our scientific knowledge in cosmology. Without advances in technology, some of them very recent, that improvement could not have occurred.

The natural moral law and, with it, natural rights have not changed. They are as immutable and constant as the laws that govern celestial and cosmological events. But technology operates with respect to natural rights as it does with respect to physical laws, which are natural but not moral laws. It causes a change in us, not in them. It somehow helps to open our eyes to rights that were always there to be recognized, but that we did not see because of the limitations on our eyes, limitations impossible to overcome under the conditions of human life in the preceding ages.

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Technological advances are also responsible for one more step in the progress of political philosophy, calling for its ideal to be more fully realized. Changes in travel time and communication time have turned the globe into a community as small as a village. All the nations of the world are now so politically and economically interdependent that a United Nations can come into existence and operate effectively in matters that the old League of Nations could not handle.

The next step needed is toward the unification of all the nations on earth in a world cultural community with regard to transcultural truths, retaining the pluralism of cultural diversity in all matters of taste; and along with that advance, the step toward world federal government.

World government is an ideal that was recognized by a few long before the twentieth century—by Dante in the thirteenth century, by Rousseau, Saint-Pierre, William Penn, and others in the eighteenth century. In the twentieth century, the century of two world wars and the threat of a third of even more global extent, the vision of one world at peace under world government has begun to appear more and more fulfillable.

One of the chief obstacles to the realization of this political ideal has at last been overcome—the heterogeneity that existed between the democratic capitalist nations and the totalitarian communist dictatorships. Such heterogeneity makes federation impossible; the units entering into a federal union must be politically and economically homogeneous. That homogeneity now exists or is coming into existence in Europe and the Americas, and it will soon come into existence in the Far East.

But two serious obstacles still remain: nationalism and, even worse, tribalism. In many parts of the world, the hatred of foreigners is more and more virulent. Xenophobia is rampant. It is difficult to say what it will take to cure these political illnesses, for that is what they are.

The two political imperatives that must win the allegiance of everyone are the abolition of nationalism and the abolition of tribalism. But even before that actually occurs, the final step of progress in political philosophy is to incorporate in it the thesis that world peace through world federal government is an indispensable part of the ideal that ought to be sought.² 

Excerpted from his book, *The Four Dimensions of Philosophy*. (1993)

EDITOR'S NOTE

If you ask ten people to define socialism, I dare say you will get ten different answers. Those of you who are familiar with Dr. Adler's other writings, will understand his meaning, when he uses that term. Those of you who are not familiar with his meaning and/or find the term to be dyslogistic, are welcome to ask where to find his explanations.

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Sandra Astle

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

² See my essay "The New World of the Twenty-first Century: USDR," in *Haves Without Have-Nots*.

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