

WHAT WE HAVE A RIGHT TO EXPECT FROM OTHERS AND FROM THE STATE

Mortimer Adler

Love thy neighbor as thyself!

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!

Both of these familiar maxims relate yourself to others. Both appear to make yourself the pivot of your action toward others. Love yourself and love your neighbor in the same way and even, perhaps, in the same measure as you love yourself. Think of how you wish others to behave toward you and behave in the same way toward them.

We seem to have reversed that order by considering first, in the preceding chapter, what others have a right to expect from us and now, in this chapter, what we have a right to expect from others. It would be more accurate to say that we have risen above an order that puts us first and others second.

Rights are rights. If any one human being has them, based upon needs that he or she shares in common with all other human beings, then all the others have the same rights, too. It makes no difference whether you think first of your own rights or first of the rights of others.

However, there is a sense in which you do come first. First in the order of thinking about what you should do. The ultimate goal that should control all your practical thinking, your choices, and your action is a good life for yourself. You are under an obligation to live as well as it is humanly possible to do—to obtain and possess, in the course of a lifetime, all the things that are really good for you.

Justice, as we have seen, does not require you to promote, by positive action on your part, the happiness of others, as you are required to pursue your own by the love you bear yourself. Justice only requires you not to impede or frustrate others in their pursuit of happiness. If you go beyond that to help them in their pursuit, you do so because you love them as you love yourself.

Your rights and the rights of others, with which justice is concerned, are based on the things that are really good for any human being because they fulfill needs inherent in human nature. Thinking about what is good, and especially about what is really good, must precede thinking about rights. For example, if you did not think that having a certain amount of wealth, having a satisfactory degree of health, and having freedom are really good for you, you would not be led to say that everyone has a right to these things, not only as means to living but also as means to living well.

What you have a right to expect from others is, therefore, the same as what they have a right to expect from you. Rights are the same because everyone's rights are the same and because what is really good for you is really good for every other human being. And that is so because all of us are human, all of us have the same human nature, inherent in which are the same fundamental needs calling for fulfillment.

Among those needs is the need to live in association with other human beings. We are not the kind of animal that can go it alone. As we have seen, human societies—families, tribes, and states—have arisen to fulfill this need. But they also help us to fulfill other needs—our need for goods on which the preservation of life itself depends and our need for higher goods on which living a good life depends.

Although society is itself good because we need to live in association with other human beings, a particular society may not be good if the way it is organized or the way it operates either fails to help or positively hinders individuals who are members of it in their efforts to acquire and possess things that are really good for them.

For example, a family is not a good family if it does not give the children in it the freedom they have a right to, if it does not care for their health, if it does not help them to grow up as they should. This does not mean that the family itself is a bad thing, for young children cannot preserve their own lives and grow up without families. It means only that a particular family is not good because it does not do for its children what they have a right to expect from it.

In his concern with what is good and bad, Aristotle is concerned with good and bad societies as well as with good and bad human beings and with their good and bad lives. What has already been said about society itself being good is, for him, a simple common-sense observation. We cannot get along at all without living in society.

Beginning there, Aristotle then goes on to consider what makes a particular society good or one society better than another. And just as his ultimate question about human life is about the best life that each of us can live, so his ultimate question about society is about the best society in which we can live and pursue happiness.

Since Aristotle thinks that, of all human societies, the state, or political society, is the one that most enables us to live the good or civilized life, let us concentrate on his answers to questions about the good state and the best state.

It seems obvious to him that a good state is one that is governed well. That, for Aristotle, is as obvious as it is to say that a good life is one that is lived well. For him, a state cannot exist without government. Human beings cannot live together peacefully and harmoniously in the absence of government.

That might not be true if all human beings were friends and loved one another. It might not even be true if all humans were perfectly just, so that there was no need for the enforcement of just laws to prevent one individual from injuring another. But Aristotle knew from common experience that all human beings are not bound together by love or friendship, that most human beings are not perfectly just, and that some are quite unjust in their selfishness.

That is why his common-sense conclusion was that government is necessary for the existence of a state or a political society.

Being necessary, government itself is good, just as society itself, being necessary, is good. However, as we have seen, a particular society may be bad or not as good as it should be. So, too, a particular form of government may be bad or not as good as it should be.

It has been said, by some who lack Aristotle's common sense, that government is not necessary at all. They fail to see that human beings—being as they are, not as one might wish they were—cannot live together peacefully and act together for a common purpose without living under a government having the power to enforce laws and to make decisions. It is not only that criminals must be restrained. In order that a number of individuals may act together for a common purpose, there must also be some machinery for making the decisions that their concerted actions require.

It has also been said that, although government may be necessary, it is a necessary evil because it involves the use of coercive force (the force used in the enforcement of laws) and because it involves limitations on the freedom of the individual. Those who say this fail to understand very important points that Aristotle makes about the enforcement of laws and about the limitations on the liberty of individuals in a society.

According to Aristotle, the good man—the virtuous man who is just—obeys just laws because he is virtuous, not because he fears the punishment that may follow from his breaking the law or disturbing the peace. He obeys laws and keeps the peace voluntarily, not under the coercion of law enforcement. He is not coerced by government, and so for him government is not an evil as it is for the bad man.

Nor does the good man feel that his freedom is limited by government. He does not want more freedom than he can use without injuring others. Only the bad man wants more freedom than that, and

so only he feels that his freedom to do as he pleases, without regard for others, is limited by government.

The fact that government itself is necessary and good does not make all forms of government good, or as good as they should be. For Aristotle, the line that divides good from bad forms of government is determined by the answers to the following questions.

First, does the government serve the common good of the people who are governed, or does it serve the selfish interests of those who wield the power of government? Government that serves the self-interest of the rulers is tyrannical. Only government that promotes the good life of the ruled is good.

Second, does the government rest merely on the power at the disposal of the rulers, or does it rest on laws that have been made in a way to which the ruled have agreed and in the making of which they have had a part? Government that rests solely on might or force, whether it be in the hands of one man or more than one, is despotic, even when it is benevolent or well-disposed rather than tyrannical. To be good, government must have authority that those who are ruled acknowledge and accept, not merely power or force that they fear and submit to from fear.

Government that is good in this way Aristotle called constitutional government or political government. By calling such government political, he meant to suggest that it is the only form of government that is proper for states or political societies.

This brings us to a third question. It applies to government that is neither tyrannical nor despotic, but constitutional—a government based on laws, in which even those who govern are ruled by laws. About such government we have to ask: Is the constitution—the fundamental law on which government itself is based—a just constitution? And are the laws made by that government just laws?

Any government that is *not* tyrannical is to *that extent* good. Among nontyrannical governments, a constitutional government is better than a despotic one. And, among constitutional governments, the best is the one with a just constitution and with just laws.

In praising constitutional government, Aristotle speaks of it as the government of free men and equals. He also speaks of it as that form of government in which the citizens rule and are ruled in turn.

Those who are ruled by a despot are subjects, not citizens with some voice in their own government. Those who are ruled by a tyrant are no better off than slaves. In both cases, they are ruled as inferiors, not equals. Only those who, being citizens, are ruled by other citizens whom they have chosen to hold public office for a time are ruled as equals, and as free men should be ruled.

At this point in his thinking, Aristotle made a serious mistake. Living at a time and in a society in which some human beings were born into slavery and treated as slaves, as well as a society in which women were treated as inferiors, he made the mistake of thinking that many human beings had inferior natures. He did not realize that those who appeared to be inferior appeared to be so as the result of the way in which they were treated, not as a result of inadequate native endowments.

Making this mistake, he divided human beings into two groups. On the one hand, he placed those who were fit to be ruled as citizens—as free and equal and with a voice in their own government. On the other hand, he placed those who were fit only to be ruled despotically, either as subjects or slaves—without a voice in their own government and so as neither free nor equal.

We live at a time and in a society in which no one can be excused for making Aristotle's mistake. Correcting his mistake, we are led to the conclusion that all human beings should be governed as citizens with a voice in their own government and thus be ruled as free and equal. The only exceptions to that all-inclusive *all* are those who are still in their infancy or those who are mentally disabled.

Reaching this conclusion just stated, we also see that constitutional government is just only if its constitution gives all human beings the equal status of citizenship without regard to sex, race, creed, color, or wealth. In doing so, it also gives them the freedom they have a right to, the freedom of being ruled as citizens, not as slaves or subjects.

One human being is neither more nor less human than another, even though one may be superior or inferior to another in many other respects as a result of differences in native endowments or acquired traits. These inequalities should certainly be considered in the selection of some human beings rather than others to hold public office, but they should be totally disregarded in considering the qualifications for citizenship.

All human beings are equal as humans. Being equal as humans, they are equal in the rights that arise from needs inherent in their common human nature. A constitution is not just if it does not treat equals equally. Nor is it just if it does not recognize the equal right of all to freedom—to be ruled as human beings should be ruled, as citizens, not as slaves or subjects.

We now have reached one answer to the question about what we have a right to expect from the state in which we live and the government under which we live. We have a right to be ruled as citizens under a government to which we have given our consent and which allows us to have a voice in that government.


Is that all we have a right to expect? Even though he made the mistake of thinking that only some human beings had the right to be ruled as citizens, Aristotle thought that those human beings had a right to expect more from the state in which they lived. The best state, in his opinion, was one that did everything it could do to promote the pursuit of happiness by its citizens. That remains true whether only some human beings or all should be citizens.

What can a state do to promote the pursuit of happiness by its citizens? It can help them to obtain and possess all the real goods that they need and have a right to. To understand this, we must remember one point made in the preceding chapter.

Of all the real goods we must have in order to live well, some are more and some are less within our individual power to acquire and possess. Some, like moral virtue and knowledge, depend largely on the choices we ourselves make. Some, like wealth and health, depend to a considerable extent on our having good luck or on our being blessed by good fortune.

The main ways in which a good state and a good government can help its individuals in their pursuit of happiness is to do what it can to overcome deprivations they suffer as a result of bad luck or misfortune, not as a result of fault on their part. It should do for them what they cannot, by choice and effort, do for themselves. The best state and the best government are those that do the most in this direction.

The one thing that no state or government can do, no matter how good it is, is to make its citizens morally virtuous. Whether or not they acquire moral virtue depends almost entirely upon the choices each of them makes. The best state and the best government can,

therefore, only give its citizens external conditions that enable and encourage them to try to live well. It cannot guarantee that, given these conditions, they will all succeed. Their success or failure ultimately depends on the use they make of the good conditions under which they live their lives. 

We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Is 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.