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If we did not know or could not know what is really good or bad for the individual, we would not and could not know what is right and wrong in the conduct of one individual toward others; nor could we know what is right and wrong in the individual's conduct of his own life.

—Mortimer J. Adler



Natural Needs = Natural Rights *

by Mortimer Adler

Resting on the distinction between the real and the apparent good, a basic tenet of the commonsense view is that what is really good for any single individual is good in exactly the same sense for every other human being, precisely because that which is really good is that which satisfies desires or needs inherent in human nature—the makeup that is common to all men because they are members of the same biological species. The *totum bonum*—happiness or the good life—is the same for all men, and each man is under the same basic moral obligation as every other—to make a good life for himself.

Two things follow from this controlling insight. Every real good is a common good, not an individual good, not one that corresponds to the idiosyncratic desires or inclinations of this or that individual. The same, of course, holds true of the *totum bonum* as the sum total of all real goods. The pursuit of happiness by individuals of every shade of individual difference and under every variety of outward circumstance is the pursuit of the same objective.

In addition, when I know the things that are really good for me and what my happiness consists in, and when I understand that each real good and the *totum bonum* as the sum of all of them are common goods, the same for all men, I can then discern the natural rights each individual has—rights that others have which impose moral obligations upon me, and rights that I have which impose moral obligations upon others. By an individual's rights, we understand the things he has a right to demand of other men or of organized society as a whole. His rights are legal rights when they are

granted to him by organized society through the institutions of positive law, including the constitution of the state in which he lives. Conferred upon him by society, they can also be revoked, but while they are in force, each man's legal rights impose legal obligations upon his fellowmen. Where there is no legal right, there is no legal obligation, and conversely, where there is no legal obligation, there is no legal right. The same co-implicative connection exists between moral rights and moral obligations. I can have moral obligations toward another man, and he can have moral obligations toward me, only if each of us has moral rights one against the other.

But what is a moral right as contradistinguished from a legal right? It is obvious at once that it must be a right that exists without being created by positive law or social custom. What is not the product of legal or social conventions must be a creation of nature, or to state the matter more precisely, it must have its being in the nature of men. Moral rights are natural rights, rights inherent in man's common or specific nature, just as his natural desires or needs are. Such rights, being antecedent to society and government, may be recognized and enforced by society or they may be transgressed and violated, but they are inalienable in the sense that, not being the gift of legal enactment, they cannot be taken away or annulled by acts of government.

The critical point to observe is that natural rights are correlative with natural needs. I said a moment ago that where one individual has an obligation—legal or moral—to another, it must be in virtue of some right—legal or moral—possessed by that other. There is a deeper and more significant connection between rights and obligations, but one that obtains only in the case of moral rights and moral obligations. I do not have any moral rights *vis-a-vis* others unless I also have, for each moral right that I claim, a moral obligation to discharge in the sphere of my own private life. Every moral right

of mine that imposes a moral duty upon others is inseparable from a moral duty imposed upon me.

For example, if I have a moral—or natural—right to a decent livelihood, that can be the case only because wealth, to a degree that includes amenities as well as bare necessities, is a real good, part of the *totum bonum*, and thus indispensable to a good life. The fact that it is a real good, together with the fact that I am morally obliged to seek it as part of my moral obligation to make a good life for myself, is inseparable from the fact that I have a natural right to a decent livelihood. If I did not need a modicum of wealth to live well or achieve happiness, it would not be a real good, I would not have a moral obligation to seek it, and ipso facto I would also have no natural right to a decent livelihood. That which I do not need for my own good life or that which is not an essential ingredient in my pursuit of happiness does not impose a duty on me, as far as my own private conduct is concerned, nor does it impose a duty on others with regard to their conduct toward me because such matters give me no natural or moral rights that others must respect.

Let me summarize this by calling attention to the set of basic notions that are inseparably connected with one another: (a) natural needs, (b) real goods, (c) the duties or moral obligations I have in the conduct of my own life, (d) moral or natural rights, and (e) the duties or moral obligations I have in my conduct toward others. Natural needs make certain things really good for me; the things that are really good for me impose moral obligations on me in the conduct of my private life; these, in turn, give me certain moral or natural rights, and my having such rights imposes moral obligations on others with respect to me. The order of enumeration can be reversed, but it cannot be scrambled, and no link in the chain can be omitted. And just as natural needs and the real goods correlative to them are the same for all men because they have the same specific nature, so too,

and for the same reason, the remaining items on the list are the same for all men. We all have the same moral obligations in the conduct of our private lives; we all have the same natural rights; and we all have the same duties toward others.

As our primary moral obligation is to make a really good life for ourselves, so our primary natural right is our right to the pursuit of happiness. To respect this right that I have, others are under the obligation not to do anything that prevents me or seriously impedes me from discharging my basic obligation to myself. If I did not know in some detail the things I ought to do in order to discharge the obligation I am under to make a good life for myself, I could not know what behavior on the part of others interfered with my pursuit of happiness and so was wrong—a violation of my natural rights. In other words, all my subsidiary natural rights—rights to life, security of life and limb, a decent livelihood, freedom from coercion, political liberty, educational opportunities, medical care, sufficient free time for the pursuits of leisure, and so on—stem from my right to the pursuit of happiness and from my obligation to make a good life for myself. They are rights to the things I need to achieve that end and to discharge that obligation.

I will subsequently discuss these subsidiary natural rights at greater length. The only point I wish to reiterate here, because it is of such prime importance, is that the individual would not have a natural right to the pursuit of happiness if he did not have a moral obligation to make a good life for himself; and if he did not have that one basic natural right, he would not have any subsidiary natural rights, because all other natural rights relate to the elements of individual happiness or to the parts of a good life—the diverse real goods that, taken together, constitute the whole that is the sum of all these parts.

The foregoing discussion of natural rights and moral

duties not only throws light on the primacy of the good over the right, but also enables us to connect the good and the right with the notion of justice and injustice. Let me briefly expand both of these points.

If we did not know or could not know what is really good or bad for the individual, we would not and could not know what is right and wrong in the conduct of one individual toward others; nor could we know what is right and wrong in the individual's conduct of his own life. If, without reference to others, we speak of an individual as acting rightly or wrongly, we are saying no more than that he is or is not discharging his moral obligation to make a really good life for himself. So when, with reference to others, we say that an individual acts rightly or wrongly, we are similarly saying that he is or is not discharging his moral obligations toward them, based on their natural rights—rights that are grounded in each man's moral obligation to make a good life for himself.

Ordinarily we use the terms *just* and *unjust* when we are considering the right and wrong acts of one individual in relation to others, but seldom or never do we use them when concerned with the individual's moral obligation to himself. What I have described as a matter of ordinary usage can, for good reasons, be made a matter of stipulation. There is some point in preserving the distinction between an individual's moral obligations to himself and his moral obligations to others. He does not claim any rights against himself, as he claims rights against others. His moral obligations toward others are grounded in their rights, and determine the rightness or wrongness of his conduct toward them. To preserve this distinction, the words "just" and "unjust" should be applied only to an individual's conduct toward others—to say, in other words, that the individual is just only when he acts rightly toward others, and unjust only when he acts wrongly toward them.

Two further points emerge with regard to justice. One concerns the ancient observation that justice consists in virtuous action toward others. We have seen that fortitude and temperance, which are aspects of moral virtue or strength of character, and prudence or soundness of judgment, operate instrumentally as necessary means toward the end of making a good life for one's self. A good moral character and sound judgment would also seem to be involved in making the effort that we are under a moral obligation to make in our conduct toward others—to act rightly toward them and to avoid wronging them, which is another way of saying that we ought not to injure them by preventing them from making good lives for themselves. Thus we can see what is meant by saying that justice in general consists in having the moral character that the individual needs in the effort to make a good life, for when his moral character or virtue is directed toward the good life that others are under an obligation to make for themselves, it has the aspect we refer to as justice rather than as temperance or fortitude.

The second point concerns the obligations of organized society as a whole toward its individual members, and leads us to the consideration of justice and injustice in our social institutions, our economic arrangements, our laws, our constitution, and our government. Our basic natural right to the pursuit of happiness, and all the subsidiary rights that it encompasses, impose moral obligations on organized society and its institutions as well as upon other individuals. If another individual is unjust when he does not respect our rights, and so injures us by interfering with or impeding our pursuit of happiness, the institutions of organized society, its laws, and its government, are similarly unjust when they deprive individuals of their natural rights. Just governments, it has been correctly declared, are instituted to secure these rights. I interpret that statement as going further than the negative injunction not to violate the natural rights of

the individual, or deprive him of the things he needs to make a good life for himself. It imposes upon organized society and its government the positive obligation to secure the natural rights of its individuals by doing everything it can to aid and abet them in their efforts to make good lives for themselves—especially helping them to get things they need that are not within their power to get for themselves.

* A retitled excerpt from Chapter 14, *The Time of Our Lives*.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fellow Members:

The Classical Homeschooling magazine website is now up and about 99% finished. Anyone may now go there and download the first issue for free.

The Great Books Academy website is expected to be up in 2 weeks, as is The Angelicum Academy website.

www.classicalhomeschooling.com
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Regards,

Steve Bertucci

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

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As always, we welcome your comments.

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