

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Human beings cannot lead good lives in total isolation from one another. We are social, not solitary, animals. We depend for our happiness upon associating with others, living in society and deriving the benefits that living in society confers upon us, especially the goods that are not wholly within our power to obtain for ourselves.

—Mortimer J. Adler



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# STATE AND SOCIETY (in four parts)

*by Mortimer Adler*

## PART I

Happiness, we have seen, is the ultimate goal of human striving, for the sake of which everything else should be sought and to the consummation of which everything else should be ordered. It is the complete good, the whole that includes all other goods as its component parts.

However, society and the state are larger wholes than their individual members. The prosperity of society and the welfare and security of the state would also appear to be ultimate goals.

The individual members of society manifest their justice by acting for the good of the society and state in which they live. Serious antisocial conduct is criminal injustice, doing injury or damage to the welfare of the community as well as to other human beings who participate in the community's common good.

Hence the very first question that confronts us is, perhaps, the most fundamental of all the questions we have to face. How are these two ultimate goods to be ordered in relation to one another—the happiness of individual persons who are members of a society and the welfare of the society to which they belong?

A solution of the problem requires us to resolve the contradiction contained in the phrase “two ultimate goods.” Two ultimates are impossible; there can be only one. That being so, the problem to be solved is: Which one?

Both are common goods, but they are common in different senses of that term. The happiness of individuals is common in the sense that the essential components of a good human life are the same for all human beings, their happiness differing only in accidental respects. The Latin name for this common good is *bonum commune humanis*, the human common good.

The welfare of society and of the state is common in the sense that it is a good in which all the members of the state participate, deriving benefits for themselves from that participation. The Latin name for this common good is *bonum commune communitatis*, the social common good.

Each of these two common goods subordinate all individual goods. The essential components of happiness, the real goods that are the same for all human beings, subordinate the accidental components, the apparent goods that differ from individual to individual.

The selfish interests of individuals should be subordinated to the common good that is the welfare of society as a whole and the security of the state. Almost everyone, certainly all virtuous persons, recognize this as soon as the security of the state or the welfare of the community is seriously threatened.

But the pursuit of happiness is not a selfish individual interest. It seeks the attainment of a good that is shared by all human beings because it is the same for all of them. Should the human common good be subordinated to the security of the state and the welfare of the community, even when the social common good is seriously threatened?

For those who hold, as philosophers from Plato to Hegel have held, that man is made for the state, not the state for man, the question is already answered, yet not

without residual difficulties.

For those who hold, from Aristotle to John Dewey, that the state is made for man, not the other way around, the question is also answered, again with residual difficulties that are not easy to resolve.

I do not hesitate to say at once that I side with the latter answer. It is true that individual members of a society are parts of a whole. It is also true that the good of a part can be sacrificed for the good of the whole. But it is not true that individual human beings as members of society are parts of that whole in the same way that arms and legs are parts of a human being.

The critical error here consists in converting a metaphor into a literal truth.

When it is said that the society or the state is a living organism or an organic whole, the truth is that it is like a living organism or an organic whole because it, too, is organized, as all living organisms are. But its being organized only makes it appear to be a living organism.

The apparent likeness does not make it really a living organism. That it is an organized whole having parts does not subordinate the parts to the whole as the parts of a living organism are subordinated to the organism as a whole.

Residual difficulties remain for anyone who tries to solve this problem simply and neatly. This becomes manifest to us when we discover that Hegel, who subordinates individual human beings to the state as parts to a whole, also declares that the state serves the happiness of the persons who are its members. So also Aristotle, who says again and again that the happiness of its citizens is the ultimate good to be aimed at by the state, permits himself, in one passage, to compare the individual members of society to the limbs of a living

organism. Nor does he avoid the implication that they can be sacrificed, as arms and legs can be sacrificed, for the good of the whole.

Setting such difficulties aside for the moment, I think the most telling point in favor of the position that the state is made for man, not man for the state, lies in our recognition of the fact that participation in the social common good is indispensable to the happiness of human beings. In contrast, the welfare of the community can be achieved and preserved even if all its individual members do not succeed, by lack of moral virtue, in attaining their own personal happiness.

Human beings cannot lead good lives in total isolation from one another. We are social, not solitary, animals. We depend for our happiness upon associating with others, living in society and deriving the benefits that living in society confers upon us, especially the goods that are not wholly within our power to obtain for ourselves.

On the other hand, if the welfare of society depended upon the successful attainment of happiness by all its members, it would follow that the common good of the community could never be achieved. We know that all human beings do not become morally virtuous persons. For that and other reasons, all do not and never will succeed in attaining happiness, even to a slight degree.

The two common goods are, therefore, not both equally ultimate as, of course, they simply cannot be. The social common good is ultimate only to the extent that it is the good aimed at by individuals in their social or public lives. But human beings also lead private lives, of which their social conduct is only an aspect.

Their personal happiness is their ultimate good without any qualification. The social common good is ultimate for them only in so far as they act socially.

Their action for the common good of the society in which they live does more than serve its welfare. It serves their own happiness, which depends on their deriving benefits from society that are beyond their power as solitary individuals to achieve.

The truth of this is confirmed by the fact that the benefits conferred upon its individual members by society are all external goods and, as such, are possessions that rank lower in the scale of human goods than a human being's personal perfections.

Even when the views just expressed are fully understood and accepted, the fact still remains that the only two entities that human beings have ever acknowledged as their superiors are the state on earth and God in the cosmos.

We find the English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, referring to the state as "that great Leviathan, or (to speak more reverently) as that Mortal God, to which we owe under the Immortal God, our peace and defence." We find the German philosopher, Hegel, declaring that "the State is the Divine Idea as it exists on earth."

Those who, in our time, are proponents of the totalitarian state and worship the state in a pseudo-religious fashion, turn it into a secular divinity. They alone acknowledge no residual difficulties when they maintain that man is made to serve the state and that all individual interests are subordinate to the welfare of the state and can be sacrificed for it.

#### **WHEN STATES EXIST, ARE THEY IDENTICAL WITH SOCIETY?**

The question is introduced by a conditional clause. States did not always exist. In what we regard as the remote past, the only human associations were families

or tribes and villages.

To answer the question, it is necessary to spend a moment on the words that crowd in on us when we consider these ideas. We have already used some of these words: “society,” “community,” “association.” These appear to be synonymous. Every form of human association is a type of human society. Every type of human society is a community.

We have already used the word “state.” Other words occur in this connection: “political community,” “civil society,” “body politic,” “commonwealth.” These words, too, appear to be interchangeable synonyms. Two of them—“civil society” and “political community”—indicate at once that what their synonym, “state,” refers to is always only one type of society or community, in contradistinction to still other types of human associations—clubs, fraternities, companies, corporations, labor unions, trade associations, professional associations, and so on.

Still other words remain to be considered, such as “city,” “nation,” “country,” and even “civilization” and “culture.” As we shall see presently, two of them enter into hyphenated conjunctions to form such terms as “city-state” and “nation-state.” Whether or not the difference between these two kinds of state are important in other connections, they are not important in connection with the problem of how state and society are related.

The word “country” adds little to the connotations of the other words except, perhaps, the indication of a place on earth that is the location of the state. We more often say “my country” than we say, “my state” because it is so obviously the place of our birth or the place we have moved to as an inhabitant.

A Greek and a Latin word add to our understanding

of these matters. The Greek word “*polis*” is translated into English by the word “state” whether that refers to a city-state or a nation-state. Its ancient reference was to a city-state. That persists in modern times when we refer to a large city as a metropolis. The phrases “political community” and “body politic,” both of which refer to a state, also derive from that Greek root. When Immanuel Kant held before us what he regarded as the utopian idea of a world state, he called it a “cosmopolitical ideal.”

The Latin equivalent of the Greek *polis*, the word *civis*, comes down to us along another etymological stream, in which what is called a “civil society” is synonymous with what is called a “political community.” It also adds a new connotation to the word “state.”

From *civis*, we derive the English word “civilization.” When we distinguish civilization from culture, as we should, we are able to recognize that other forms of society have cultures, but only civil societies or states bring civilizations into existence.

To live in a civil society, to engage in political activity is to lead a civilized life, which means more than what is meant by saying that to live in any society that has a culture enables individuals to become cultured. Becoming acculturated is not the same as becoming civilized.

One concrete example of these concentric spheres should suffice. Take the present population of the United States. It is made up of persons who inhabit the land that stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the Canadian to the Mexican border, and also the land of Alaska and of the Hawaiian Islands. Viewed another way, that same population is composed of all the members of the society, called by the same name that we give to the land on which they live. Viewed in still another way, they are also citizens or subjects of the



state, for which once again the same name is the label; and they are involved in the American economy, or the economy of the United States.

“United States of America” or “Americans,” used as an identifying label in all four ways, identifies four different associations or organizations of the same people.

That the four circles in which the same people are related to one another involve them in different relationships and different activities underlies the distinction among the four sciences that investigate those relationships and activities: geography, sociology, political science, and economics.

With these considerations in mind, let us now return to the question posed: When states exist, are they identical with society? The totalitarian answer to this question is affirmative.

Why? Because the totalitarian state is one in which there are no human associations of any sort, including the family, that are not politically controlled or are not creatures of the state. Even the cultural activities of the totalitarian state, its educational institutions and its artistic productions, are all organized by the state, conducted by the state, and controlled by the state. So, too, are its professional enterprises and its economic associations and operations.

Under such conditions, and only under such conditions, the state is identical with society. Nothing that human beings do is left out. Nothing is a private concern. Everything is affected with the public interest.

Under all other conditions, society and state are not identical. The state represents only the political aspect of society. Though the geographical boundaries of a state and a society are coterminous, and though the

individuals who are members of the state are also members of the society, by reason of the fact that they live together in the same place, in the same country, it remains the case that the human beings who are members of the state also belong to associations or organizations that are not political, not creatures of the state, and not state-controlled.

They engage in many forms of activity which are not political in character and so do not involve their participation in the state. Their civilized life includes much more than that. It includes their domestic interests and their family life. It includes all their cultural activities that involve forms of leisuring. It includes all their business or professional associations through which they engage in work that is either toil or compensated leisure. It includes, above all, their private lives in which they seek, in addition to all other goods, their own personal perfections and their personal happiness.

When men voluntarily associate with one another for a common purpose, the purposes for which they associate differ in many ways. Only one of these purposes is purely political. It is that purpose and that alone which makes their association a state. When they associate for other purposes, they belong to communities or organizations that are parts of the all-embracing political society that is identical with the state.

What I have just said may appear to contradict the statement that state and society are not identical. It does not.

True, the political community or civil society, which is identical with the state, is all-embracing in the sense that it includes within its borders all other forms of human association that are entered into for nonpolitical purposes. But that truth does not conflict with the fact that the all-embracing society has many nonpolitical aspects. Nor does it conflict with the fact that its

members engage in many nonpolitical activities.

Not everything that human beings do in a state is either prescribed or prohibited by the laws of the state. Much is merely permitted, still more lies totally beyond the scope of state-made laws—all the personal and purely private pursuits that affect only the individual engaging in them and no one else.

This, it must be added, holds true even in totalitarian states. No state can possibly be so completely totalitarian that it touches every aspect of human life and enters into its inviolably secret nooks and crannies. What is essentially private can never be totally transformed into something public.

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## **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

Max,

I have not had a chance to let you know how pleased I am with THE GREAT IDEAS video tapes that I purchased. I thought I would quickly work my way through the tapes. By chance, I happened to be reading and studying Aristotle's POETICS when the tapes arrived. Consequently, I started with the tape on ART. I have viewed the four programs on art four times and expect to revisit them several more times. What a treat to have Dr. Adler at my beck and call! My plans to breeze through the tapes are dashed. There is enough material in these programs to keep me thinking, reading, and discussing for years to come. When I think about what I pay for a 10 week course at a university, the tapes are an unbelievable bargain. These tapes will be a valued resource and aid to the rest of my studies. I have one lifetime to complete the course.

Again, thank you.

All the best,

Gary Schoepfel, The Great Books Foundation  
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I hope I might be so bold as to suggest my own Great Books index site, "Great Books and Classics". I have links to online etexts (as well as some Amazon.com texts, audio files, etc.) for over 200 authors and over 1000 works. I have these works indexed by Author-Alphabetical, Author-Chronological, Title-Alphabetical, by non-English language (for works with non-English texts or etexts), and via various reading lists. I believe my site can be a valuable resource for those with an interest in the Great Books and the classics.

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## **WELCOME NEW MEMBERS**

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**As always, we welcome your comments.**

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