



## SIX GREAT IDEAS

(The Television Series based on the book)

TRUTH - GOODNESS - BEAUTY  
LIBERTY - EQUALITY - JUSTICE

As broadcast on National Television (PBS)

*NOTE: Here we are providing only the video transcript of the intermittent conversations between Dr. Adler and Bill Moyers.*

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## THE GREAT IDEA OF TRUTH

Part 2 of 2

**MOYERS:** What is the difference between truth and reality?

**ADLER:** Truth is a property of our thought, reality is what measures that property.

**MOYERS:** Explain that.

**ADLER:** Well, “true” and “false” are adjectives that apply to the acts of our mind—our judgments, our opinions, our thoughts or our statements. Reality is what those thoughts, opinions or statements are about. And when the statements, thoughts or opinions we have agree with reality as tested by the pragmatic consequences of acting on our judgments, you see, then reality, which is independent of our minds, and is what it is regardless of what we think about it, sometimes supports our action when we think truly—and lets us go on—and when we think falsely it blocks us, frustrates us, and often does us in.

*[discussion at executive seminar]*

**MOYERS:** You say in the book, “If a given statement is ever objectively true, it is true forever and immutably true.” What does that mean?

**ADLER:** Let me give you an example. For centuries, most men and even most scientists thought that the earth was the center of the solar system. That the sun, the moon and the planets revolved around a stationary earth. That was Ptolemy’s astronomy, and the Greek astronomy—Aristotle’s astronomy. And Copernicus came up with the opposite view—the so-called heliocentric view—that in our solar system, not in the universe at large, the sun is the center and the moon and the planets including the earth revolve in orbits around the sun. It then took some time to prove the correctness of the Copernican theory. It took the time until we got to the Foucault pendulum, which really registers the motion of the earth. Now, that didn’t suddenly become true—it always was true. For all the centuries when men thought otherwise it was true that the earth revolved around the sun even though it took until the 17th and 18th centuries for us to come to know that to be true and generally acknowledge it. The truth is always the same when we know it—when we have it. The fact that men change their minds, that what scientists and other men think is true at a time when it is wrong, doesn’t make it true.

**MOYERS:** What determines whether a statement is true or false?

**ADLER:** As in this case, the evidence, the evidence of the Foucault pendulum absolutely shows the rotation of the earth.

**MOYERS:** And that will therefore be true forever.

**ADLER:** Well, no, not forever—as long as the solar system lasts. Not forever, I'm sorry, I can't guarantee the eternity of the solar system.

**MOYERS:** Do you believe in the reality of the imagination?

**ADLER:** I don't like the word reality. Do you mean, do men have imaginations? Yes.

**MOYERS:** But do you believe that in their imagination there is truth?

**ADLER:** No.

**MOYERS:** The truth of experience? If I imagine that some-thing is so.

**ADLER:** No, imagination—

**MOYERS:** What men see in their minds that you can't see—that's not true?

**ADLER:** Well, if, on the basis of what they imagine they make a statement about what they imagine, and the statement is about the real world, though they've come to it by the imagination, then that statement is either true or false. But it isn't their imagination that is true, it is the statement they make on the basis of their imagining. Imagination as such is neither true nor false.

*[discussion at executive seminar]*

**MOYERS:** But are you looking at the world from a peculiarly Western center?

**ADLER:** I have found that the ideas that—the great ideas that I've been concerned with are Western ideas. I think it is—I think I'm talking not about the great ideas of world culture, which doesn't exist yet, but the great ideas of Western culture. I have to admit that this is parochial. In fact, I've had some experience with Far Eastern colleagues at the East-West Center in Honolulu, and I have tried to find out whether we had any

common ground in discussing such simple ideas as liberty and Justice, and we don't. They have a totally different vocabulary. In fact, justice is not nearly as important for them as another idea, which is harmony, which doesn't count for very much in the West.

*[discussion at executive seminar]*

**MOYERS:** Can there be false knowledge?

**ADLER:** No, there can't be—you see, when you use the word true and false, you have in use the word opinions. There can be true and false opinions, but knowledge by its very nature carries the connotation of truth.

**MOYERS:** So when the ancients said the world is flat, it was a false opinion, not false knowledge.

**ADLER:** Right, it was not knowledge at all, it was false opinion.

**MOYERS:** Why do you think we prefer the opinions—and I'm quoting from your book here—why do you think we prefer the opinions to which we are attached on emotional, not rational, grounds?

**ADLER:** Well, it's simply that our emotional attachments are strong. We like to attach ourselves to opinions that favor our feelings, that favor our desires, that favor our temperamental inclinations. I don't think that's difficult to explain at all.

**MOYERS:** So opinion is stronger than truth.

**ADLER:** In many cases, yes. In fact, stronger than even ordinary opinions are deep-set prejudices, much stronger.

**MOYERS:** Even when we know that all men are created equal, and all men are by nature equal, we retain our prejudice that some men are inferior to others.

**ADLER:** Oh, no question about it.

**MOYERS:** How do you explain that—why is truth so often the victim?

**ADLER:** Because, because men in general are not given to using their minds as instruments for rational assessment of what is true and false. Most men just simply are persons who harbor opinions, cherish opinions, and don't submit them to tests or investigation. That's the reason, I think.

**MOYERS:** Does this invalidate the pursuit of truth?

**ADLER:** No. It does—

**MOYERS:** If you know that emotions are going to finally triumph?

**ADLER:** No. It simply means that we should try, I think—just as we should try to cultivate in every human being a good moral character, which is a moral character inclined habitually to making right rather than wrong choices, so we should try to cultivate in all human beings a rational mind. And a rational mind is one which suspends judgment when it doesn't have evidence or reasons for affirming something is true or false, and only judges in the light of evidence and sound reasons. And most people are not rational. They are capable of being rational, but—just as most people are capable of being good, and haven't got—do not have good moral characters cultivated—so most human beings, capable of being rational, do not have their minds rationally disciplined to assess evidence and reasons for affirming or denying.

*[discussion at executive seminar]*

**MOYERS:** Thomas Jefferson believed, I think he believed, that every generation has the right to a revolution, and I often think he meant the right to alter the view of the world.

**ADLER:** The pursuit of truth is a continual process of correcting errors, enlarging inadequate grasps of the truth. There are two ways, by the way, in which the pursuit of truth is carried on. On the one hand, an error is corrected, a falsehood is rejected and is replaced by a truer statement. And I say truer—when I say true. I always mean truer rather than completely true—no, I doubt if any statement we make is rich enough to be completely true; and truer at this time, not absolutely true or finally true, because every statement except for the self-evident ones are in the realm of doubt and are subject to enlargement

and correction by better evidence and better reasoning in the future.

*[discussion at executive seminar]*

**MOYERS:** You write in *Six Great Ideas*, “Disagreement about matters of truth is not, in the final reckoning, to be tolerated.” Now, that strikes me as consistent with what a tyrant would say, who has said, “This is the truth and there shall be no disagreement.”

**ADLER:** The crucial words in that statement are, “in the final reckoning.” If it’s a matter of truth, at the end of time all men should be able to agree about it. That’s the goal. If it’s a matter of truth, agreement is the ideal to be pursued.

**MOYERS:** But how do you pursue that agreement?

**ADLER:** Oh, by the continual effort to get better reasons, correct errors, you get better evidence. Look, if something is true, if something is objectively true in the system which we’ve been talking about it, all men should agree about it. If they don’t, someone is in error, and the error must be corrected. I’m not saying who is in error. But when there is disagreement about a matter of truth, someone is wrong.

**MOYERS:** Doesn’t that bespeak the totalitarian mentality?

**ADLER:** No, you don’t force it. You only mean that you must—not to be tolerated means no one should give up on it, no one should say, “Oh, well, let’s not argue any longer.” We should never give up the argument. If a matter of truth is disputed, you and I are obligated to the pursuit of truth, to go on arguing with one another, going out and getting more evidence, my correcting your errors of reasoning, your correcting mine, on ‘til the end of time, long as we live.

**MOYERS:** That’s the pursuit of truth.

**ADLER:** That’s right.

**MOYERS:** And it is in this *[holding book]*.

**ADLER:** That’s right.

*[discussion at executive seminar]*

**MOYERS:** In lectures and conversations and in personal meetings, I've heard you affirm the existence of God. Suppose I were an atheist, and I said after hearing you say God exists, "No, Mortimer Adler, you're wrong, God does not exist."

**ADLER:** I would have to proceed differently than I would in the case of the fish I caught is larger than the fish you caught. That we can put to the test by getting a tape measure out and putting the two fish on the ground and measuring them, observing the measurement. In the case of a disagreement about God's existence, there is nothing but an appeal to reason. I would have to say to the atheist, I have grounds for affirming God's existence, I think grounds beyond a reasonable doubt for affirming God's existence, would you listen to my arguments? All I could do, in fact I've written a book that tries to do this, to set the arguments forth as clearly and plainly as possible. Now, the atheist will raise objections to my arguments. I must then answer his objections. I may or may not succeed in persuading him. Suppose I fail, suppose he remains an atheist and I remain a theist, a person who affirms God's existence. One of us is right and the other is wrong, because either God does exist or God does not exist, and if the atheist is wrong, he's wrong forever, not just tonight, just now, for if God does exist, He's always existed and always will exist.

**MOYERS:** But in matters of religion, you say there is finally no way to decide which is true and which is not.

**ADLER:** About all matters of faith, articles of religious faith are beyond argument. If there were any way, if there were any way at all to offer evidence or reasons in support of one faith or another, it wouldn't be faith. Faith is that which goes beyond the evidence of things seen.

**MOYERS:** And that's very personal.

**ADLER:** Yes. I'd go further and say it isn't William James' "will to believe," something I do voluntarily. I think that the proper doctrine is to say it's a gift of God. Those who have faith have it as God's gift.

MOYERS: But you can't prove that.

ADLER: No. I can't prove it, that itself is unprovable. That itself is an article of faith.

MOYERS: So, then, in the final analysis, who determines truth?

ADLER: There is no answer to that question; no one determines truth. Truth is always a matter of the arbitrament of men arguing with one another. No one determines—the truth is determined—the truth of opinions is determined by reality; when two men disagree about what they think is true, that must be submitted to argument, to evidence, to observation, to reason.

MOYERS: So the pursuit of truth is not a destination; it's a process.

ADLER: Precisely. And one that will go on to the end of time. I don't believe it ever will stop. And I only hope that, though I think there is some backsliding, that if we have a long life for the human race on earth, if we live the 100 million years the planet will endure, that we will accumulate more and more truth, correct more and more error, enlarge our grasp of the truth. But we will always fall short, we'll always fall short of the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

MOYERS: *[voice over]*: Mortimer Adler. In our next episode, the idea is beauty. I'm Bill Moyers.

*[Closing credits]*

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## MEMBER'S DISCUSSION FORUM

Mr. O'Neill makes a number of points in his recent letter to the editor. In the interest of brevity I will limit my response to a subset of these points, specifically his comments on the mechanism(s) by which corporate wealth is distributed.

First, while conceding that shareholders are "capital partners entitled to a risk share", he attempts to differentiate between the entitlements of major and minor shareholders. In fact the "risk share" to which shareholders are entitled is, as it



must be, directly related to the amount of capital at risk. In fact, since I assume that Mr. O'Neill's major shareholders are in the highest income tax brackets, their after-tax return is perhaps lower than the average of all shareholders.

I do not have any hard data with which to contest the assertion that share ownership is highly concentrated in the "old money" class, but I must say that this seems highly unlikely given that 50% of U.S. households own equities and that state and private pension plans are among the largest holders of corporate securities. If, in fact, control of capital was concentrated in the hands of the few, there would be great cause for concern. However, if one considers that capital markets are global in nature, arguments that point towards inordinate concentration go beyond the dubious.

The next set of assertions amount to accusations that the corporation's shareholders act in an irrational manner, (and in a manner which is inconsistent with Mr. O'Neill's characterization). Shareholder's, intent on maximizing their return on equity, are accused of hiring managers who "are grossly over-compensated, even when they perform disastrously." They are also accused of being blind to opportunities in the management of their employees and of failing to "see the benefit to themselves of enriching the market by enriching the employees". These are indeed odd behaviors for a greedy set of exploiters intent on maximizing their own wealth. Perhaps what we really need are more self-interested capitalists?

In fact, the compensation of shareholders, managers and employees are all determined in highly competitive markets where numerous, fairly intelligent players each seek to maximize their individual position. Market systems have many flaws and are sometimes in need of intervention in order to ensure that the lubricant of competition is maintained. Nonetheless, Man has yet to develop an alternative system that even comes close to creating and allocating wealth in as effective, efficient and just a manner.

Jim Reardon

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