

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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August 2019 *Philosophy is Everybody's Business* № 1006

Mortimer J. Adler  
Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital  
Baltimore, April 1980

**OPENING ADDRESS IN  
SYMPOSIUM ON PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESSES AND  
COPING MECHANISMS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS FAM-  
ILY IN THE 1980's  
Part 2 of 2**

### III. *THE MORAL PROBLEM AND ITS SOLUTION*

- A. As I have already intimated in a number of ways, the central problem that puts great stress on the troubled and unquiet life of many middle class families in our time arises from an insatiable or limitless desire for more, not on the part of the *have-nots*, but on the part of the *haves* who are not satisfied with *enough*.
1. In addition to being moved by ever-present human tendencies toward the vices of greed, avarice, and envy, many middle class families are pushed striving for more and more by the social mobility of our society which encourages their members to try to rise above their present circumstances.
  2. The constant striving of the middle class family for more (and its blindness to the adequacy or sufficiency of enough for all the important purposes of life) is also encouraged by the illusion so prevalent in our century that progress is mainly cumulative rather than meliorative.
    - a. Merely cumulative progress consists in an advance in quantity from less to more; e.g., from smaller to larger populations, from less to more wealth produced annually; from less powerful to more powerful instruments of destruction,

- b. Genuinely meliorative progress consists in an advance from what is morally a worse condition to what is morally a better condition.
  - c. In the life of the individual, meliorative progress occurs when the process of intellectual and moral education succeeds in achieving its goals,
  - d. In the life of society, meliorative progress occurs when advances are made in the pursuit of truth, when social institutions and economic arrangements improve in justice, when the conditions required for permanent world peace are more and more closely approximated, and so on.
  - e. The examples I have given of merely cumulative progress (with respect to population increase, increase of wealth or increase in the power of instruments of destruction) may be the very opposite of meliorative progress or, at least, represent obstacles to such progress.
3. Applying what I have just said about the two types of progress, the middle class family's constant striving for cumulative advances in the sphere of material possessions can act as a serious obstacle to that family's meliorative progress toward the use of a sufficiency of material possessions to lead better human lives.
- a. *Having enough is all that is required for a good human life.*
  - b. Constantly striving for more than enough can defeat the pursuit of happiness when that is properly understood as the effort to live humanly well—the effort to make a good human life for one's self.
4. The illusion that progress is mainly or entirely cumulative rather than essentially meliorative, an illusion that blinds the middle class family to the sufficiency of having enough, is accompanied by another illusion widely prevalent in our century.
- a. We live in a century when almost no one dies in the same world in which he is born: all the external circumstances of our lives are continually undergoing

alteration—often very rapid, often very fundamental, change,

- b. Middle class individuals, like most of the large corporations in our society, have come to regard a static condition akin to death.
  - c. Corporations do not think they are really alive and well unless they do a bigger business and make a larger profit next year than this one.
  - d. So, too, individuals and families do not think that they are alive and well unless they are engaged in the rat-race of rising expectations with regard to the external aspects of their lives.
  - e. They forget that what they should be mainly concerned about, if they have enough, is to make the best use they can make of their quite sufficient advantages to improve their inner life, not their external circumstances—to grow melioratively in moral, intellectual, and spiritual stature.
- B. I hope I have made it clear what I regard as the central moral problem that confronts middle class family in our time—the middle class family which suffers inquietude and stresses that arise from the good fortune of its having enough. That moral problem has a solution—a solution that is essentially ethical, not psychological.
- 1. In the opening book of Aristotle's *Ethics*, we learn that a good human life is one that is lived in accordance with moral virtue, to which Aristotle adds "and-one that is accompanied by a moderate possession of external goods."
    - a. By "external goods" Aristotle means all forms of wealth, not just money—all the comforts and conveniences of life, goods that the individual may work to obtain or be fortunate enough to possess without work.
    - b. Please note that Aristotle stresses that the successful pursuit of happiness, or the effort to lead a good human life, does not involve a *limitless* acquisition of external goods, but requires only a moderate supply of such goods. One has a moderate supply when one

has *enough*—a *sufficiency* for all the purposes of a good life.

2. In the opening book of Aristotle's *Politics*, we learn that men fall into two groups with regard to the acquisition of wealth.
  - a. On the one hand, there are those whose desires, being uncontrolled and insatiable, are driven toward a limitless acquisition of wealth ever seeking more and more and more, more than they need for a good life, more than is good for them, much more than enough.
  - b. On the other hand, those whom Aristotle describes as intent upon living well, not just living mindlessly, slaves to desires that reason has failed to control, are individuals who set definite limits to the acquisition of wealth—the limit being set by the natural needs of the family and its members.
3. Aristotle's deepest ethical insight turns on his understanding of the distinction between natural needs and acquired wants.
  - a. That which we truly need to satisfy our natural inclinations is always really good for us.
    - (1) There are no wrong needs.
    - (2) We never need anything that is really bad for us (with the one exception of pathologically induced needs, as in the case of drug addiction)
    - (3) And, most important of all, of the things that are really good for, us, we never need more than is good for us.
  - b. In contrast, that which we want to satisfy our individually acquired desires, desires that differ from individual to individual as natural needs do not, may either be really bad for us or at best innocuous.
    - (1) We often want what only appears good to us, but is really bad for us, appearing good only because we desire it.

- (2) Of the things that appear good to us and are innocuous when possessed in moderate amounts, we often want much, more than is good for us.
  - (3) Even some of the things that are really good for us in moderate amounts, we often want in immoderate amounts -excesses that are really bad for us.
3. Aristotle's understanding of the difference between natural needs and acquired wants underlies his understanding of moral virtue as an indispensable factor in the pursuit of happiness—necessary, not sufficient, because, please remember, we also need a moderate supply of external goods.
- a. Moral virtue consists in a firm habitual tendency to choose what is really good for us and avoid what is really bad.
  - b. The habit of making right choices from moment to moment among the various things that solicit our attention is the habit of choosing what we need to lead a good human life, of choosing such real goods in the right order and in the right proportion or quantity, and of satisfying our wants, over and above our needs, only if we can do so innocuously, that is, without impeding or preventing the satisfaction of our needs.
4. Centuries after Aristotle, the great Christian theologian St. Augustine said it all in a single sentence: Happy is the man, he said, who, in the course of a complete life, has all that he desires, *provided that he desire nothing amiss*.
- a. "Provided that he desire nothing amiss." That means "provided that he does not have wrong desires or excessive desires."
  - b. What assures this state of affairs? Only moral virtue, which is the habit of right desire, the habit of not desiring anything amiss.
- C. I wish I could follow this moral exhortation to the members of the middle class family by telling them how to acquire the moral virtue requisite for relieving the stress of striving from

which they suffer; or by telling parents how to form moral virtue in the children they are rearing.

1. Unfortunately, another piece of wisdom that we can learn from the Greeks is that moral virtue cannot be taught, as science is taught, or as mathematics is taught.
2. No one knows how 'to train the young to become morally virtuous men and women.
3. Nor does any one know what is required for the moral transformation of adults—from vice to virtue.
4. All that can be said is that a bad habit can be broken only by a resolute will to overcome its inclination and by acting repeatedly in a contrary fashion. A good habit can be formed only by repeatedly performing good acts and avoiding bad ones.
5. We become virtuous only by acting virtuously, only by making the right choices time and time again.

D. Let me conclude by saying that the middle class family in our day has one of the two essentials for the pursuit of happiness—that sufficiency or moderate supply of external goods which Aristotle thought was necessary. The revolution of our century has brought the middle class family into predominance and given it one of the two conditions needed by its members for leading good human lives.

1. Unfortunately, another condition is also necessary—moral virtue; for without it, the Individual is unlikely to limit his desires for material possessions or external goods to an amount that is quite enough.
2. Without moral virtue, the good fortune that the revolution of our century has conferred upon the middle class family may turn out to be, as I tend to think it has become for many middle class families, a profound misfortune.
  - a. *Having enough is not enough for them.*
  - b. Striving for more not only results in injurious excesses, but it also tends to turn their energies away from using the external goods, of which they have enough, for the purpose of their own moral,

intellectual, and spiritual development the improvement of their inner life:

3. Being satisfied with enough in the domain of material or external goods may result in their lives being static (I hope they would not say “stagnant”) in that domain, but that is hardly the only or the main sphere of human life
4. While the external circumstances of one’s life remain static (quiescent in having enough), the dynamism of the inner life not only survives but prospers—the dynamism by which the individual makes meliorative progress toward the fullest realization of all his potentialities.
5. In fact, one might go even further and say that it is only when the striving for cumulative progress in the possession of external goods ceases, can meliorative or moral progress in the inner life of the individual be steadily achieved.




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## 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 Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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