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THE ETHICS OF ENOUGH

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Who has not said or heard someone else say “Enough is enough”? The statement is a tautology and, as such, uninformative. But everyone knows what that idiomatic statement means: “That’s enough, I don’t want any more.”

All of us have heard people say “That’s not enough, that’s too little, I want more” or “That’s too much, I want less than that.” And, perhaps, we are even acquainted with persons who have never said “That’s enough” because they always want more.

If one were to ask the top executives of our major corporations, as they prepared for an annual board meeting, whether the gross income and profit margin of the year just closing was at a rate that satisfied them, so that the goal they set for the coming year was simply to duplicate it, their answer would be negative. A business that does not grow each year is likely not to remain stable, but rather to decline.

Few businessmen who have developed their business into a mature corporation that has managed to achieve what, for a given year, is a satisfactory gross income and profit, would be satisfied with a fu-

ture in which that same satisfactory gross income and profit were repeated year after year. Why not? Is it true that what does not grow, necessarily declines? Is it folly in business ever to say “enough” when one has achieved a satisfactory gross income and margin of profit?

There are other aspects in the conduct of a business where the standard of enough is usually employed. Personnel officers, charged with hiring workers for different jobs, set a scale of remuneration for different levels of work. They know what it means to pay either too much or too little and they try to fix a rate that is just enough. Similarly, those who set prices for merchandise to be sold, try to estimate what existing market conditions will support. Other factors enter into the calculation: the sales volume desired and the margin of profit sought. When all the variables are considered, the price set should be just enough to achieve the goal, neither too much nor too little. It is not only with respect to wages and prices that we have a general acquaintance with the standard of enough. That standard operates in many other walks of life. Everywhere there are traffic laws that regulate the speed of automobiles driving on the highways. The speed limit determines a velocity that is prohibited because it is more than enough for safety; and, in some states, driving too slowly on the freeway is also prohibited. There is a range of speeds—neither too slow nor too fast—that are regarded as safe; and though we are not given to using the word “enough” for the safe speeds, that, in fact, is what they are—just enough for safety in transportation.

Another area of life in which we generally recognize the standard of enough is medical therapy. When physicians prescribe pills as a remedy, they almost always specify the quantity of each pill and the frequency with which they should be taken. The physician usually cautions us to be careful in this regard: “Don’t fail to take them just as prescribed”—neither too little nor too much, but just enough for the therapeutic effect desired.

It is not a far step to go from moderation with respect to food and drink. Most of us regard anorexia and gluttony as the baleful or perilous extremes of too little and too much, between which there is a range of amounts that we are willing to settle for as just enough. Is it not also true that a house that is not a palace can have too many rooms for anyone’s ordinary use as a home? That one’s closet can have in it too many pairs of shoes, too many suits or dresses, too many overcoats for anyone’s normal use? Is it not also true that those living in the temperate zones, who do not have any shelter at all that they can call their own, any clothing except rags

on their back, or any shoes on their feet, have too little? Are the bare necessities of life enough? Are there not also certain amenities that everyone should enjoy in order for them to achieve a decent standard of living? Beyond that, are there not also certain things that are or should be regarded as luxuries because human beings can live well without having them?

All these questions and many more confront us the moment we think of anything to which the three estimates of too little, too much, and just enough apply. To whatever objects of desire these estimates apply, they also apply to our desires for them. If one can have too much of any purchasable commodity, it necessarily follows that the desire for that amount is an excessive desire—a desire for more than enough.

Are there any objects of desire to which these three estimates do not apply? Yes. I will consider them later in Chapter 4 where we are concerned with right desires. Here it is only necessary to point out that the familiar maxim of conduct—moderation in all things—is incorrect. It is a guideline for conduct only with respect to those things about which our desires should be moderate because, even if they are really good to possess, we can have too much of them. We can have too much of some good things, but not of all.

The important exception having been noted, it remains the case that in the ethics of right and wrong desire, the ethics of enough has crucial significance. One cannot go far in Aristotle's Ethics without discovering the importance of this point.

In Chapter 6 of Book II, after Aristotle has engaged in a preliminary exploration of moral virtue, he takes up the question of what is neither too much nor too little, but just enough. Moral virtue consists in habits of choice that aim at what is intermediate between excess and defect—in short, habits of choice that are properly moderated by reason and thereby aim at the mean.

Aristotle's discussion of what has come to be called "the golden mean" raises a serious problem for us. The mean, he says, is relative to the individual. A breakfast that is not excessive for a lumberjack who has worked in the woods for two hours before he sits at the table would be too much for a sedentary worker who goes to breakfast on arising. Similarly, the number of rooms in the house of a junior government official would be too few for the uses to which senior office-holders must put their residence. Hence there

would appear to be no absolute standard of enough that applies to all human beings, without variation from individual to individual.

Having said that “excess and defect are characteristic of vice, and the mean of virtue,” Aristotle goes on as follows:

Virtue, then is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.

We manifest our desires in the choices we make. Moral virtue consists in the habit of right desire—in the stable and steadfast disposition to make right choices. Sometimes, but not always, these choices stem from moderate desires, aiming at the mean or what is intermediate between excess and defect. But that mean, Aristotle appears to say, is relative to the individual. What is enough for one individual, according to that individual’s physique, temperament, and surrounding circumstances, may be either too much or too little for another individual, differing in physical constitution, temperamental disposition, and conditions of life.

Hence when reason—in the form of prudence or practical wisdom—operates to determine what is just enough, what is moderate in amount or intermediate between excess and defect, it must take into consideration all the individual differences that make the mean, or what is just enough, different for different individuals.

How, then, can we avoid the relativism that asserts there is no absolute standard of right desire, a standard not relative to individual differences and the varying circumstances of time and place? If there is an acceptable answer to this question, it must lie in the sameness of the human nature in which all human beings participate equally, for no person is more or less human than another.

The sameness of the human nature in which all human beings equally participate does not eliminate individual differences entirely, but it does limit extent to which they occur. One example will suffice to make this clear. With respect to stature, no mature human being is taller than eight or shorter than three feet; heavier than four hundred pounds or lighter than fifty pounds. The numbers I have used may not be statistically precise but they nevertheless suggest the limited range within which individual differences vary.

The sameness of human nature, physically, biologically, and psychologically, sets a limit to the range within which individual differences can occur in any trait. Accordingly, the line that runs from the extreme of defect to the extreme of excess is defined by a point that is absolutely too little for everyone to a point that is absolutely too much for everyone. What is intermediate or the mean between these two extremes is not a single point on that line which is enough for everyone. Instead, there is a circle in the middle of the line which encloses all the degrees of enough for everyone. What is a degree of enough for one individual may be too much or too little for another, but what is enough for everyone, varying in degree, falls within this circle that is intermediate or the mean between what is absolutely too much or absolutely too little for any human being, precisely because they are all equally human.


The sameness of human nature, in which we all participate, provides another escape from the relativism that appears to follow from the means being determined relative to the attributes and circumstances of the individual. Individuals do not differ from each other in all their desires. There are two modes of human desire: (a) desires which are the same for all human beings because they are inherent in human nature and so are natural desires, and (b) desires that individuals acquire from the way in which they are nurtured or as a result of the circumstances that impinge upon them in the course of their lives. The natural desires are common human desires; the acquired desires differ widely from individual to individual.

Two English words—"needs" and "wants"—are the names for these two modes of desire. When they are not misused, as they are by children, who frequently say they "need" what they should say they "want," these two words have great significance for the ethics of enough. We certainly can want too much or too little of something that is really good for us, but we can never need too much or too little of it.

Consider our basic biological needs—our natural need for food, drink, for sleep, for shelter, and for clothing. In all these instances of things our human nature needs because we cannot survive without them, we may want more or less than we need (pathologically, abnormally, viciously); but our need can only be for enough—neither too little nor too much.

The human need for these biologically indispensable goods will fall within the circle of the mean (i.e., the degrees of enough with respect to which individuals differ). Though there are degrees of

individual difference with respect to needs, the needs of every human being will fall within that circle. In that qualified sense, all human needs are the same and what is enough for any human being is enough for all.

The controlling insight can be stated as follows: enough of any good is that amount of it which serves the end that ought to be sought by everyone as the object of their right desire. 

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