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## GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

### PART III

#### Questions About Moral Problems

#### 22. THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*The Declaration of Independence proclaims the pursuit of happiness as an inalienable human right. Being unhappy is supposed to be a sin, and we all try to be happy. But what is happiness? Is it the fulfillment of material wants, peace of soul, being well thought of, or something else?*

*M. M.*

*Dear M. M.,*

The word “happiness” has a wide assortment of meanings in everyday speech. But the great thinkers use the term with some precision. In the great books of moral philosophy, happiness is the ultimate or supreme good—the goal of all striving. It is in this sense of the word that the Declaration of Independence includes the pursuit of happiness among man’s basic natural rights.

The philosophical conception of happiness is radically different from the ordinary sense of the term. We hear people say, in a moment of satisfaction or joy, that they feel happy. Or they say that they are happy when they are having a good time. But, according to Aristotle and others, happiness is not something you can feel or experience at a particular moment. It is the quality of a whole life. The happy life is the good life.

Unacquainted with the philosophical conception, most people would say that children can be happy. But Aristotle argues that that is quite impossible. They can be gay or joyous but not happy, because they have not lived a complete life. In fact, Aristotle, following the wisdom of Solon, goes so far as to say that it is necessary to wait until a man’s life is finished before we can accurately judge whether or not it was, as a whole, a happy life.

One way of understanding happiness as the *summum bonum*, or the complete good, is to recognize that the happy life, as Boethius says, is one that is enriched by the possession in aggregate of all good things. The surest sign that a man is happy is that he wants for nothing. All his basic desires are satisfied; all the strivings inherent in his human nature are fulfilled. Obviously this cannot be done in a day or a year, but only in the whole course of a life. At the end of his life, looking back at all the real goods which he gradually came to possess, happy is the individual who can say to himself, “I did a good job of living; I lived well.”

What are the various kinds of goods which all together contribute to happiness? They include external or bodily goods, such as wealth, health, and bodily pleasures; social goods, such as honor, love or friendship, civil peace, and justice; and intellectual goods, such as understanding, knowledge and wisdom. Each of these goods corresponds to a real human need. The possession of each contributes to the fulfillment or perfection of man’s nature. Each, therefore, is desired not only for itself alone but as a means to happiness.

Happiness, on the other hand, being the sum of all good things, is desired for itself alone, and is the only thing we so desire. “I want

to be happy,” goes the popular song, and it voices the universal desire of mankind; but if anyone were to say, “I want to be happy because . . .,” he couldn’t complete the sentence except by saying, “because I want to be happy”

I have briefly summarized Aristotle’s theory of happiness. There are, of course, other conceptions of happiness and the good life. Plato, for example, defines happiness as a harmony within the soul—the spiritual well-being of the truly virtuous man. He pays no attention to material goods, or the goods of fortune, as Aristotle does. For him nothing external can make a virtuous man unhappy.

At least one great thinker in our tradition denies that happiness should be our goal. Immanuel Kant regards the pursuit of happiness as selfish, setting personal satisfaction above the objective norm of duty and right. The moral law, says Kant, commands the performance of duty unconditionally, not just in order to attain happiness. Happiness should be the consequence, not the purpose, of moral action. We should strive not to be happy, but to deserve happiness.

### 23. IS SUCCESS NECESSARY?

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*Is worldly success necessary for happiness? In our society we tend to estimate other people in terms of success, and we usually measure that by the amount of material wealth they have been able to accumulate. But I wonder if we aren’t setting up a false idol. Is human happiness really measurable in terms of material success?*

*E. D.*

*Dear E. D.,*

In my discussion of happiness in the preceding chapter, I pointed out that it consists in a life made perfect by the possession of all good things—all the things that human beings need in order to lead fully satisfactory lives. The material goods of wealth are included among these good things, as well as moral and intellectual goods. But, as everyone knows, you can have too much of certain good things, and that is why wealth raises a particularly difficult moral problem.

In its most general meaning, success consists in the attainment of any goal, purpose, or desire. If we achieve some measure of the happiness we strive for, we are successful. But, as you point out, many people today think of success almost exclusively in terms of accumulating worldly goods. When the notion of success is limited

to this, success is not the same as happiness, for material goods cannot by themselves make a man happy. In fact, they may prevent him from being successful in the pursuit of happiness.

The ancient as well as the modern world was well acquainted with the view that material wealth was the be-all and end-all for man. But philosophers such as Aristotle observe that this is a very narrow and distorted view of human life. He sets up a scale of goods in which wealth occupies the lowest rank, ministering to the needs of the body and subordinate to the goods of the mind and of character.

Aristotle's evaluation of wealth roughly corresponds to the popular saying that money is not important unless you don't have any. You need certain material things in order to keep alive, and since you must keep alive in order to lead a good life, a certain amount of material goods is indispensable. But since living well goes way beyond merely keeping alive, material goods alone cannot make a life worth living.

Aristotle makes an important distinction between two kinds of wealth-getting. The first kind is familiar to any housewife. It is the process of acquiring enough wealth to maintain a family in decent style, that is, with a reasonable supply of the means of subsistence and the comforts and conveniences of life.

The other kind of wealth-getting seeks to accumulate money for money's sake. Some persons, Aristotle observes, think that their sole object in life is "to increase their money without limit. . . . The origin of this disposition in men is that they are intent upon living only, and not upon living well." Such men, Aristotle maintains, may succeed in becoming as rich as Croesus, but like Croesus they may end their lives wondering why wise men like Solon do not look upon them as happy.

Plato, like Aristotle, holds that the man who "shares with the miser the passion for wealth as wealth" will end up miserable. "To be good in a high degree and rich in a high degree at the same time," Plato thinks, is impossible. This is certainly the view of the Gospel verse which says that a rich man has as hard a time getting into the Kingdom of Heaven as a camel through a needle's eye.

But such remarks must not be interpreted as meaning that material possessions are wrong in themselves. What is wrong is to make wealth the be-all and end-all of life—to become possessed by one's possessions. The Bible inveighs not so much against wealth as against the covetousness and greed that it arouses in men.

The prophets and the Psalms vividly depict the moral blindness which often accompanies the possession of great wealth. But it is St. Paul who makes the essential point quite clear. St. Paul does not say that money is the root of all evil. He says that it is the love of money which leads men to their moral destruction. Obsession with material success leads to spiritual failure.

## 24. DOING OUR DUTY

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*Duty is the highest virtue of the soldier. But there are also political, moral, and religious duties, as we are constantly reminded. What do the philosophers have to say about the nature of duty and its role in human conduct?*

*J. D.*

*Dear J. D.,*

There is perhaps no more fundamental issue in moral philosophy than that between the ethics of duty and the ethics of pleasure or happiness. According to the morality of duty, every act is to be judged for its obedience or disobedience to law, and the basic moral distinction is between right and wrong. But where pleasure or happiness is central, the basic distinction is between good and evil, and desire rather than law sets the standard of appraisal. Of course, any ethics of duty has to take some account of happiness, just as any ethics of happiness and pleasure has something to say about duty. But there are great differences in the role which is assigned to duty.

At one extreme there is the position which totally excludes the concept of duty. This attitude more than any other characterizes the Epicureanism of Lucretius.

In Aristotle's ethics of happiness, duty is not entirely excluded, but neither is it given any independent significance. It is merely an aspect of the virtue of justice, and amounts to no more than the just man's acknowledgment of the debt he owes to others: or his recognition that he is under some obligation to avoid injuring other men and to serve the common good.

For Plato, too, the virtue of justice underlies duty or obligation. But for him justice, though only one of the virtues, is inseparable from the other three—temperance, courage, and wisdom. It is almost indifferent; therefore, whether one attributes moral obligation to our sense of justice or to virtue in general.

At the other extreme there is the position which identifies the sense of duty with the moral sense. In the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, to act rightly is to do one's duty and to set aside all contrary desires.

Kant's much more elaborate moral philosophy presents the same fundamental teaching. Nothing can be conceived as "good, without qualification," except a "good will." Happiness is not a good without qualification. It is "a rational being's consciousness of the pleasantness of life uninterruptedly accompanying his whole existence," and its basis is "the principle of self-love." An ethics based on happiness and one based on pleasure both commit the same mistake. Both "undermine morality and destroy its sublimity, since they put the motives to virtue and vice in the same class, and only teach us to make a better calculation." Both admit desire as a moral criterion of good and evil. Both measure the moral act by reference to the end it serves.

For Kant, "an action done from duty derives its moral worth, not from the purpose which is to be attained by it, but from the maxim by which it is determined...." And so he goes on to say that "duty is the necessity of acting from respect for the law." From this he argues that duty, and consequently all moral action, must be done because it is right, because the law commands it, and for no other reason.

"An action done from duty," Kant writes, "must wholly exclude the influence of inclination, and with it every object of the will, so that nothing remains which can determine the will except objectively the law, and subjectively pure respect for this practical law...." The law, which is the source of duty and of all moral action, is Kant's famous "categorical imperative." According to its decree, Kant declares, "I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law." By obeying the categorical imperative, we can do our duty and rest assured that our will is morally good.

For Kant, therefore, duty is objective. It consists in following the commands of the categorical imperative, independently of subjective inclinations, desires, and needs. In doing our duty, we follow the voice of reason alone.

## 25. WHAT IS CONSCIENCE?

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*Is there such a thing as “conscience,” an inner voice that tells us what is right and what is wrong? Is it based on reason or intuition, or is it merely a reflection of what our parents and other authorities have told us? What is conscience, and how does it operate?*

*R. B.*

*Dear R. B.,*

Conscience, as the word indicates, is consciousness. It is a specific kind of consciousness—moral awareness, an inner sense of right and wrong. And it is an awareness that has compelling power. We feel bound by it. It commands us. If we disobey it, we feel remorse or anxiety.

Whenever we keep a promise or fulfill a moral or legal obligation, conscience is involved. Thinkers down the ages differ as to why we follow the voice of conscience or are troubled if we do not obey it. Some thinkers believe that the reason and force of conscience lies in external commands and sanctions—of God or of the state. Others believe conscience is solely a matter of the virtue, reason, or moral self-consciousness of the individual person.


The seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes holds that our sense of moral obligation is merely a response to the superior power and authority of the state. Some religious thinkers view conscience similarly, as an automatic response to the external power and authority of God. Other thinkers, both secular and religious, emphasize the inner judgment or voice of reason as the decisive element in the operation of conscience.

The grounding of moral awareness and compulsion in human reason and virtue goes back to Plato and the Stoic philosophers. But it is the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant who most forcefully expresses this basic idea about conscience.

According to Kant, it is the moral law that governs our whole moral life. No external laws or sanctions are required. A man keeps his promises, insofar as it is physically possible, because his “moral self-consciousness” commands him to do so, in fulfillment of a universal moral law. The moral man is “compelled” to do so, but not by fear of external force, or the desire to conform to social custom, or the dread of divine punishment. He does so simply as a moral being righteously fulfilling his duties.

In Kant's view, conscience commands our private lives—what we do to and with ourselves. Conscience forbids us to lie to ourselves or do harm to ourselves, as well as to other men. We have “internal” as well as “external” obligations. This view is as far removed from that of Hobbes as anything can be. But it is close to the religious view, which condemns covetousness, lust, hypocrisy, and other inner faults.

The religious view sees conscience as both an inner voice and a response to divine commands. In the Bible, it is David's “heart” that smites him when he commits acts offensive to God. It is Job's “heart” that finds him righteous. The Biblical view of conscience assumes a law promulgated to one chosen people by God himself, but the prophets recognized the moral precepts as universally binding on all men. The idea arose that God is universally known and served by man's moral consciousness and conduct, even where God's law has not been directly promulgated. Paul said that the Gentiles had the law written in their hearts and that their conscience bore witness to it.

Christian thinkers, such as Thomas Aquinas, understand the conscience implanted in every man as a response to God and His law. They hold that the natural law, which is inscribed in men's hearts, is also God's work, and that their moral consciousness is directed toward God. According to this view, our deepest inner voice and God's commands are intimately bound together and imply one another. The secular thinker Kant, too, recognizes that our personal responsibility, voiced in moral self-consciousness, is ultimately an obligation to God. 

**[We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.](#)**

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