

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

MORTIMER J. ADLER

**PART III** (Continued)

**Questions About Moral Problems**

## 26. THE MORAL VIRTUES IN GENERAL

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*We have heard a lot lately about the intellectual qualities we should develop in our children through our educational system. But what about the moral virtues that we as parents are directly concerned with fostering in the young? Can you tell us what are the main moral virtues that a human being should have?*

*B. A.*

*Dear B. A.,*

The chief moral virtues—often called the “cardinal virtues”—are courage, or fortitude, temperance, justice, and prudence. These are the virtues which constitute the moral character of a good man. There are, of course, many other desirable traits of character, such as friendliness, gentleness, modesty, and honesty. But if a person possesses the cardinal virtues, he has the principles from which all other virtues flow.

Let me tell you briefly something about each of the four cardinal virtues.

Courage, or fortitude, consists in a habitual ability to suffer hardships or pains. We all know what it means to be a courageous soldier. But courage is needed in every walk of life, not just on the battlefield. Those who do not have courage give in when the going gets tough, turn back when they meet obstacles. It takes fortitude to persevere in any worthwhile undertaking, which, as Spinoza says, is always likely to be as difficult as it is noble.

As courage is concerned with suffering pains, so temperance is concerned with resisting pleasures. We are often tempted to do the thing which gives us immediate pleasure even though that may prevent us from achieving a future good of much greater importance. Overeating and over-drinking are obvious examples of intemperance which often result in our subsequent inability to discharge our obligations or do a good job. Temperance can, therefore, be defined as a habitual ability to resist the enticement of immediate pleasures which would interfere with our accomplishing greater, though more remote, goods.

Justice is that virtue which directs a man to treat his neighbor fairly, not to harm him, and to render to him what is his due. It also consists in the habit of being law-abiding and of acting for the common good or the general welfare of one's society. Examples of injustice are familiar and plentiful. The liar, the thief, the slanderer, the perjurer, the businessman who charges too much, and the laborer who loafs on the job—these are all unjust men.

Finally, we come to prudence, which is hardest of all to define. The prudent man is one who has the habit of being careful about the decisions he makes in the field of action. He takes counsel or seeks advice. He deliberates and weighs the pros and cons. He acts only after he has made a thoughtful judgment, instead of acting rashly or impulsively. He does not let himself be carried away by his emotions, but makes an effort to be as reasonable as a man can be, even under stress.

If you try to inculcate these four virtues in your offspring, you will be doing well. But don't underestimate the difficulty of the task. It is much easier to train the mind than form the character. And don't forget that the intellectual virtues, while not as important as the cardinal virtues, should be developed, too. The basic intellectual virtues are understanding, knowledge, and wisdom. A liberal education helps to form these virtues.

## 27. THE VIRTUE OF COURAGE

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*Courage is a much-praised virtue, but just what it is is not too clear. We usually associate it with fearlessness, but isn't it inhuman and abnormal to be without fear? And we usually think of the man of action when we think of courage—of the soldier, the big-game hunter, the mountain climber, the race-track driver. But isn't there such a thing as moral courage, which is far superior to physical daring and recklessness? What is courage?*

*S. G.*

*Dear S. G.,*

Another name for courage is fortitude. As the word "fortitude" suggests, courage consists in having the strength to hold fast against danger, pain, and stress.

We sometimes distinguish between physical and moral courage, according to the character of the pain or stress under which the individual does not yield. Men who risk bodily injury or death in war or in peacetime exhibit physical courage. Moral courage is shown by men who uphold religious or political convictions that result in social ostracism or personal unpleasantness for them.

Courage need not be obvious. It is manifested by scientists, artists, and scholars who accomplish their work only by unflagging patience and perseverance. It is found in the everyday life of ordinary men who carry on against odds and fulfill their duties, no matter what the temptation to despair and surrender.

This everyday hero is no more apparent to the naked eye than Kierkegaard's Knight of Infinite Faith, who looks like a tax collector and dresses like a bourgeois. The present-day knight may wear a fedora, have a paunch, and reside in the suburbs. The late Charles Péguy said that the true adventurers of the twentieth century are the fathers of families.

Courage should not be confused with recklessness or foolhardiness. Nor should it be confused with fearlessness. To be courageous is to have the strength to overcome fear. A man without fear may *appear* to act courageously, but he does not *really* have the virtue of courage. There is no virtue in doing what comes naturally, without effort. Courage involves conquering fear. It involves a respect for hardships and dangers together with an unflinching will to endure them for a good cause. Drunks who rush thoughtlessly into danger are not courageous.

Many great thinkers regard the courageous man as one who succeeds in avoiding the equally wrong extremes of foolhardiness and cowardice. Aristotle points out that courage consists in having the right amount of fear, neither too much nor too little. It calls for a sound judgment about risks or perils, or, as Epictetus says, a combination of confidence and caution. And Spinoza remarks that "flight at the proper time, just as well as fighting, is to be reckoned as showing strength of mind," that is, courage. The same virtue that moves a man to avoid danger in one case impels him to meet it in another.

The great moralists who discuss courage never treat it as a virtue in isolation from other virtues. In their view, courage is found only in men who are also temperate, just, and prudent or wise. Their reason for this is that taking risks or bearing hardships must be done for the right purpose. They would not call a gangster a courageous

man simply because he takes calculated risks or remains cool in the face of danger. Since he is overcoming his fears to achieve an evil, not a good, result, he exhibits not courage but a counterfeit of it.

The man who acts courageously is one who faces dangers and endures hardships because he rightly values certain things as more important than others. His courage is not mere brute strength nor disdain for his skin and his comfort. While he values his life, an unbroken body, and peace, he places a higher value on other goods, such as the welfare of his country or his family, his moral integrity, or the ideals to which he is devoted.

## 28. IS HUMILITY A VIRTUE?

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*Religious leaders are always preaching the virtue of humility to us. It is supposed to be wrong to push ourselves forward or to think too much about ourselves and about what we have coming. But is this really a virtue? Shouldn't an adult have a realistic sense of his qualities and attainments, and not be ashamed to claim whatever rewards rightfully belong to him?*

*P. L.*

*Dear P. L.,*

The different evaluations placed on pride and humility by classical antiquity and by the Judaeo-Christian religions afford an instructive example of the difference between philosophical and religious ethics.

Aristotle, in his famous work on ethics, says that the noblest type of human being is the magnanimous, or “great-souled,” man. Such a man is justifiably proud of the virtues of character and mind that he possesses. He is secure in his own proper self-esteem and self-respect. The magnanimous man welcomes honor as “the prize of virtue,” provided it is rightly bestowed by men who are worthy to judge virtue. He despises the good opinion of inferior men—popular acclaim or “fame.”

In this view, justifiable pride is a virtue and undue self-deprecation is a vice. Vanity and humility are, for Aristotle, the two extreme vices opposed to the virtue of magnanimous pride. A vain man

wants more honor than he deserves. A humble man does not think enough of himself; he seeks less honor than he deserves, or none at all. Hence the humble man is just as odious and ridiculous as the vain man. He lacks proper self-respect, which, for Aristotle, is essential to a noble human life.

Now, if we turn to the Bible and to Christian moral teachings, everything seems to be turned upside down. Pride, self-esteem, self-sufficiency—these are the worst sins. Humility, a sense of unworthiness, and dependence—these are the supreme virtues. The Psalms teach that we are to trust in God alone as the eternal rock and security. The Gospels teach that “the poor in spirit”—not those who are justifiably proud of their own worth—are the blessed among men.

Jesus preaches that men should avoid honors and privileges, even the title of teacher. The highest model for the Christian is the servant or slave, not the lord or master. The Christian does not seek high place or honor. “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” This preaching is concretely exemplified in Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet.

The Biblical view does not deprecate human virtue, but it ascribes it, like all good things, to God. It is always God that is magnified or glorified, not one’s self or one’s virtues. The Song of Mary, the “Magnificat” in the Gospel of Luke, is a model of the Biblical attitude. So, likewise, is the Jewish memorial service, which glorifies God, not the dead person or his virtues. In the Biblical view, only God is good or great.

The modern writer who most vividly expresses the Christian idea of humility is Feodor Dostoyevsky. His novels try to show the redemptive value of humility and self-sacrificing love. The modern writer who most cogently opposes Christian humility is Friedrich Nietzsche. He considers Christian ethics a subversive revolution which turned things upside down, a “slave morality” which expresses the revenge of the weak and lowly against the strong and great.

Thomas Aquinas attempts to reconcile the virtues of magnanimity and humility. He holds that a Christian rightly practices magnanimity when he considers himself “worthy of great things” because of the virtues he possesses as a gift of God. The “great things” are perfect works of virtue, in fulfillment of the nature which God has bestowed on man. Similarly, the Christian practices humility when he considers himself unworthy because of weaknesses inherent in

his nature, or his failure to fulfill God's gifts. Humility leads him to honor and esteem others as better than himself insofar as they embody the God-given virtues.

## 29. ENDS AND MEANS

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*Does the end justify the means? Can it sometimes be right to use a bad means to achieve a good end? Don't the conditions of human life require some shadiness and deceit to achieve security and success?*

*N. M*

*Dear N. M.,*

First, let us try to understand the sense in which the word "justifies" is used in the familiar statement that "the end justifies the means." After that we can consider the problem you raise about whether it is all right to employ any means—good or bad—so long as the end is good.

When we say that something is "justified," we are simply saying that it is right. Thus, for example, when we say that a college is justified in expelling a student who falls below a passing mark, we are acknowledging that the college has a right to set certain standards of performance and to require its students to meet them. Hence, the college is right in expelling the student who doesn't.

Or, to take another example, if a man refuses to pay a bill for merchandise he did not receive, we would say that he is justified. He is in the right. But if a signed receipt can be offered to show that someone in his family received the merchandise without informing him, the store would be justified in demanding payment.


Now, nothing in the world can justify a means except the end which it is intended to serve. A means can be right only in relation to an end, and only by serving that end. The first question to be asked about something proposed as a way of achieving any objective whatsoever is always the same. Will it work? Will this means, if employed, accomplish the purpose we have in mind? If not, it is certainly not the right means to use.

But the purpose a man has in mind may be something as plainly wrong as stealing or murder. With such an end in view, he may decide that certain things will help him succeed and others won't. While he would be right, from the point of view of mere expediency, in using the former and not the latter, is he right morally in taking whatever steps might serve as means to his end? If not, then he is not morally justified in employing such means.

This brings us to the heart of the matter. Since a bad end is one that we are not morally justified in seeking, we are not morally justified in taking any steps whatsoever toward its accomplishment. Hence, no means can be justified—that is, made morally right by a bad end.

But how about good ends? We are always morally justified in working for their accomplishment. Are we, then, also morally justified in using any means which will work? The answer to that question is plainly Yes; for if the end is really good, and if the means really serves the end and does not defeat it in any way, then there can be nothing wrong with the means. It is justified by the end, and we are justified in using it.

People who are shocked by this statement overlook one thing: If an action is morally bad in itself, it cannot really serve a good end, even though it may on the surface appear to do so. Men in power have often tried to condone their use of violence or fraud by making it appear that their injustice to individuals was for the social good and was, therefore, justified. But since the good society involves justice for all, a government which employs unjust means defeats the end it pretends to serve. You cannot use bad means for a good end any more than you can build a good house out of bad materials.

It is only when we do not look too closely into the matter that we can be fooled by the statement that the end justifies the means. We fail to ask whether the end in view is really good, or we fail to examine carefully how the means will affect the end. This happens most frequently in the game of power politics or in war, where the only criterion is success and anything which contributes to success is thought to be justified. Success may be the standard by which we measure the expediency of the means, but expediency is one thing and moral justification is another. 

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***



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