



ARISTOTLE ON VIRTUE AND HAPPINESS

Mortimer J. Adler

Part I of II

Foreword

For the past several months, a unique project has been under way at Spring Hill Center. A series of four weekend seminars led by Mortimer Adler, the distinguished scholar and director of the Institute for Philosophical Research, has brought together a small group of Twin Cities civic leaders and their spouses to discuss issues basic to our society and to the changing world around us.

The catalyst for discussion has been an anthology, specially prepared by Dr. Adler, of the major writings of Aristotle, Plato, Locke, Jefferson, Mill, de Tocqueville and other important thinkers and statesmen. The anthology and the ensuing discussion have centered on four fundamental ideas—equality, liberty, justice and property—ideas which are indispensable to our understanding of democracy and capitalism.

Spring Hill Center is pleased to offer Mortimer Adler's presentation on Aristotelian ethics as the first publication in the *Dialogue* series. We hope that the series proves to be a useful way to highlight notable presentations from Spring Hill by outstanding leaders in the arts and sciences, humanities and public affairs.

Our intent is that the *Dialogue* series will reflect the diversity of Spring Hill Center's programming and highlight our efforts to serve as a catalyst for the clarification of issues and a source of new perspectives for planned, creative change.

Harry P. Day, *President, Spring Hill Center*

In the twentieth century there is prevalent in our universities and among the leaders of intellectual life what I would call moral relativism and moral subjectivism. This position, technically called the theory of non-cognitive ethics, states that only questions of fact can be answered by statements that are true or false. Questions of value about what is good and bad, or right and wrong, or statements about what ought to be done or ought not to be done, are not in the sphere of knowledge. Statements answering such questions are neither true nor false. The leading proponents of this view in Oxford, Cambridge, and American universities would say that when a person makes a moral judgment, he is either merely expressing his emotions or formulating prescriptions that are only his own personal prejudices and preferences. Bertrand Russell summarized this position by saying, "Ethics is the art of recommending to others the things they should do in order to get along with one's self." In other words, science belongs in the area of our knowledge of nature, our knowledge of man even, but when one gets into the field of morals, we cannot have science or knowledge.

This is a very serious matter. It is as deep a question as the question about whether there are natural rights or only legal rights. In fact, the view that there are only legal rights and no natural rights, that things are right and wrong only because the power behind law makes it so, is very similar to the position that moral judgments are subjective matters of opinion and not objectively knowledge of right and wrong.

What lies behind non-cognitive ethics is a definition of truth that goes back as far as Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle very clearly defined truth in the fourth book of the *Metaphysics*. A man thinks truly, said Aristotle, when he thinks that that which is, is, and that that which is not, is not. A man thinks falsely if he thinks that that

which is, is not, and that that which is not, is. In other words, truth simply consists in putting *is* and *is not* in the right place in one's thinking.

One can recognize this definition to be correct at once because we all know what a lie is. A lie consists in saying the opposite of what you think or believe. For example, if you are a stockbroker, and you honestly think the market is going up tomorrow and you tell somebody the market is going down, you are lying. Particularly if you are not merely misstating what you think but are intending to deceive him.

A great professor at Harvard at the beginning of the century, Josiah Royce, said that a liar is the man who willfully misplaces his ontological predicates, putting *is* where he should say *is not*, or *is not* where he should say *is*. If that is what truth is, then the contemporary philosophers who say that ethics is non-cognitive have a certain basis for saying so because a statement that contains the word *ought* cannot agree with the way things *are* or *are not*. Only descriptive propositions, or propositions that say *is* or *is not*, can be true if truth consists of agreement between *is* or *is not* with the way things *are* or *are not*. In this view, then, what can *ought* or *ought not* (or *good* and *bad*, or *right* and *wrong*) possibly agree with? If truth consists in the agreement of what the mind thinks or says to itself and the way things are, how can such statements as "You ought to seek knowledge," "You ought not to steal" or "You ought not to kill" be true?

However, Aristotle tells us that the truth of descriptive statements is only one kind of truth. The other kind of truth belongs to normative statements or, as he would say, practical statements. (A statement that says *ought* or *ought not* is practical, i.e. normative, whereas a statement that says *is* or *is not* is theoretical, i.e. descriptive.) The criterion of the truth of a normative statement, says Aristotle, is that it agrees with "right desire." What does he mean when he says a statement which contains *ought* or *ought not* is true or false according to whether or not it agrees with right desire? Right desire, as opposed to wrong desire, consists in desiring what you ought to desire. This almost looks circular, but pushing that idea a little further, what ought you to desire? The answer to that question must be that one ought to desire that which is good. The meaning of the word *good* is identical with the meaning of the word *desirable*. The desirable is the good and the good is the desirable. Whenever we desire anything we desire it under the aspect of its being good. We never desire anything that we deem to be bad. (I am not saying whether, in fact, it is or is not really good, but only that we deem it to be good.)

In Chapter IV of the Third Book of his *Ethics*, Aristotle makes a distinction between two kinds of desire: natural desires and acquired desires. That underlies his distinction between real and apparent goods. He says that those things which we by nature tend to seek in perfecting ourselves or fulfilling our capacities are really good. For example, he says that man by nature desires to know. If by nature man desires to know, then knowledge is really good. There are many other desires that are not “by nature”; we acquire them out of our experience and we acquire them from contact with our fellow men. Those desires also are desires for the good; we deem them to be good *because* we desire them. In sharp contrast, we desire real goods *because* they are good. In the case of apparent goods, we deem them to be good only because we desire them.

If that is so, then what we ought to desire is inexorable. Out of that comes one true, self-evident proposition: real goods ought to be desired. To test whether this proposition is self-evident, try to assert its opposite: you ought to desire that which is really bad for you or you ought not to desire that which is really good for you. If you understand the meaning of *ought* and you understand the meaning of *really good*, then *really good* and *ought to* go together and *not really good* and *ought not to* go together.

So we have one normative proposition that is self-evidently true: real goods ought to be desired. All other normative truths are derived from it. Let me take the simplest case of a practical syllogism. Knowledge is really good for me. That is a statement of fact. How do I know this? Because I know that I need knowledge, my nature craves knowledge. I have an intellect that needs knowledge as I have a stomach that needs food. Food is really good for me. Knowledge is really good for me. Therefore, I ought to desire knowledge. That conclusion follows at once.

The truth of these *ought* propositions comes from the truth of that first proposition. I ought to desire whatever is really good for me. Knowledge is a real good, wealth is a real good, health is a real good, friendship is a real good, love is a real good, pleasure is a real good. These are real goods in terms of what I understand my nature to need. Ultimately, the factual basis of my conclusions under that general premise rests in my understanding of what appetites or tendencies are inherent in my nature.

Curiously enough, it is that single sentence of Aristotle’s about normative truth consisting in conformity with right desire that leads us to understand the truth of that first normative proposition (I ought to desire whatever is really good for me) and the truth of

all the conclusions that I can draw from that proposition.

This takes us back to the first book of the *Ethics* in which Aristotle enumerates a series of goods and talks about happiness. The English word *happiness* is used by us in two quite different senses: the psychological meaning and the moral, or ethical, meaning. The psychological meaning of the term is the most prevalent today. In its modern, psychological use, happiness is something you feel. What kind of summer did you have last summer? A happy summer. You are describing a summer in which your pleasures and joys and satisfactions outweighed your pains and discontents and frustrations. It could even be a summer in which you had nothing but pleasures and joys and satisfactions.

Psychological happiness is something you enjoy from moment to moment. Happiness, in the ethical sense, is not something you experience, it is not something you ever enjoy, and you never have it at any moment in your life. To be sure, a happy life should have a great many happy moments in it. The second use of the word *happy* is psychological, the first use of the word is ethical. An ethically happy life should have a lot of psychologically happy moments.

Psychological happiness is a state of mind. What it really means is that you are happy when you get what you want. Your happiness can be measured from moment to moment in terms of the current state of your wants and their satisfaction. That is purely psychological and has nothing to do with morality or ethics. Most people use the word *happiness* that way, in terms of apparent goods, or the things that they deem to be good.

Let us take the classical case of the pathological miser. All he wants, he says, is gold. Not to spend, though; he wants to see it piled on the table, and in the flickering candlelight of his dark, dank cellar he looks at the gold and touches it. That is all he wants. In order to get what he wants, he sacrifices health, he has no friends, he does not participate in the life of the community, he has allowed himself to become ignorant, and his mind has been stultified. But he has what he wants. Is he happy or not? Psychologically, he is perfectly happy. Morally, he is the most miserable creature alive. He is stunted. He is dwarfed. He has corrupted his human nature. Ethically, he is as far removed from happiness as anyone in the world can be. But he says that he is the happiest man alive. Here is the chasm between the psychological meaning of happiness and the ethical meaning of happiness.

What is the ethical meaning of happiness? Aristotle says that hap-

piness is an end which is not a means to anything else. No one, he says, can complete the sentence “I want to be happy because ___” You want to be happy because you want to be happy. Any of the goods I mentioned—health, wealth, knowledge, friends—are a means to my happiness, but happiness is not a means to anything else. Even the miser, the man who has misconceived his happiness, is using the word *happiness* to name the last end, the end for which everything else is a means. If that is the case, says Aristotle, then happiness must be completely self-sufficing: it must leave nothing to be desired. For example, if the miser wanted both gold and friends and had only gold, he would not call himself happy because he lacked something he wanted. In the psychological and the moral sense, the man who calls himself happy has nothing more to desire. All his desires are satisfied.

If happiness is the ultimate end that we seek and is not a means to anything else, and happiness leaves nothing more to be desired, says Aristotle, then happiness cannot be counted as one good among many. For if happiness were one good among many, then you could have happiness but not some other goods that you desired. If one understands what Aristotle means by happiness, one can never call it, as it has been miscalled throughout the history of Western thought, the *sumum bonum*, the highest good. Happiness is not the highest good; rather, it is the *totum bonum*, the whole of goods. The happy man is the man who has acquired, in the course of a complete lifetime, all the things that are really good for him. He has nothing left to desire.

Among all of the goods there is an order, and some are means to others. For example, wealth is really good: one needs a certain amount of external goods for subsistence. One needs health. One needs friends. One needs a good society in which to live. One needs to be a citizen and to participate in political life. One needs to be self-governing. One needs knowledge. Among these goods that constitute the parts of happiness, some are limited goods and some are unlimited goods. Wealth is not an unlimited good; you can have too much wealth. Knowledge is unlimited; you cannot have too much knowledge. Pleasure is a real good, but you can have too much pleasure. In order to pursue happiness one must moderate achieving certain goods to allow for possession of other goods. The happy man is the man who achieves in a lifetime the *totum bonum* in which all real goods are present.

Happiness is the end of life, the goal we all seek. Think of that curious meaning of the word *end*. When you and I say we are going to Venice and think of Venice as the termination of our journey, we get there and come to rest. In Christian terms, the ultimate goal

is eternal salvation; when you die and go to heaven and achieve the state of the blessed in the presence of God, you have it, you enjoy it. But happiness in this life is a very peculiar thing. It is an end you never reach because it is a temporal whole. It is, therefore, not like a terminal end which is something you arrive at, enjoy, and possess at a moment in time (or forever in the case of eternal happiness).

Happiness in this life is like a performing art. When a conductor conducts a symphony, the symphony does not exist at any moment. The first movement is over, the second movement is over, the third movement is over, the fourth movement is over, and when it is all over, you do not have the symphony. You have heard it and it is now done. It was a good symphony if it was played well, but at no one moment is it a good symphony. The conductor has an ideal of the total performance which he is trying to produce at every moment and this ideal guides him in what he does. A life is exactly like a symphony. It is a temporal whole, it has parts, it is ordered. And just as the conductor must at every moment be thinking of producing that whole in time, so you and I are obligated to try to live decent lives and are, at every moment, making choices to produce a whole life.

An architect can go through the long process of building a building. When he is finished, he has the building. It is there, in space. It can be lived in and enjoyed. That goal is quite different from the goal of the conductor who conducts a symphony and never has it at any moment. The difference between the two kinds of works, spatial wholes and temporal wholes, is very important to understand. You can produce a temporal whole, but you cannot have it or enjoy it. That is why you cannot, in this life, obtain happiness at any moment. You are conducting your life to make it a good life the way the conductor of the symphony is conducting the music to make it a good performance. But when can you say it is a good performance? Only when it is finished!

You cannot call a football game *good* at the half, because it is only a half-played game. If you go out in the middle of a football game and your friend says to you, "It's a good game, isn't it?", you should say, "No, it is not a good game, but it is becoming one. If the third quarter is as good as the first two, and the fourth quarter also, it will have been a good game when it is finished."

A final illustration. The first book of Herodotus tells the story of an early Greek wise-man named Solon who was visiting the great Lydian king, Croesus, a man of untold wealth. Croesus said, "Tell me, wise-man, of all the men you know, who is the happiest?"

And Solon replied, “Harmodius and Aristogiton.” Croesus said, “Tell me about them.” And he told them about them. Croesus then said, “Tell me about some other people who are, in your judgment, happy.” Solon named some others. Finally, Croesus got very impatient and said, “But why don’t you think of *me* as happy? Look at the power I have. I am king of Lydia and the wealthiest man in the world. Why don’t you call me happy?” And Solon said, “You are not dead yet.” In fact, within the next year the Persians invaded Lydia and Croesus was killed in battle. His life ended abruptly. Aristotle uses the story to make his point. One cannot ever reach the *totum bonum* in this life, one can only pursue it.

You cannot teach ethics to the young, you cannot even teach them moral philosophy. When you are young, you cannot understand this. You have to be older to understand the notion of making a whole life for yourself. Children and young people up to the age of twenty or twenty-five are thinking of today, tomorrow, and the next day. It is very hard for them to think of their actions today as somehow directed toward the construction of a whole life. It is beyond their imaginations. And yet to lead the moral life, you must have that curious kind of goal in mind as you make choices from moment to moment throughout a lifetime.

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