



HOW CAN I MAKE A GOOD LIFE FOR MYSELF?

Mortimer Adler

(1)

There is an entry in the *Note Books* of Samuel Butler that reads as follows:

IS LIFE WORTH LIVING?

That is a question for an embryo, not a man!

One might be tempted to say something similar of the question, *How can I make a good life for myself?* It is a question for children, not for adults.

Such a witticism—if it is a witticism—would spring from the consideration that the older one gets, the less of one's life is left open to the choices that are operative in making it either good or bad. However, while it is true that the younger you are, the more time you have before you in which to engage in the effort to make a good life for yourself, it certainly is not true that the question with which we are concerned is only for the young. There are several reasons for this.

In the first place, it is certainly not a question for the very young—those whom the law classifies as infants, and describes in old-fashioned terms as not yet having reached the age of reason or of consent, and not yet knowing the difference between right and wrong. In the second place, such terms as “young” and “old” can be quite misleading if one carelessly identifies mental, moral, or experiential age with chronological age. We all know men of advanced years who are still immature or even childish in character; we also know other men whose maturity greatly exceeds their years. In the third place, the distinction between the mature and the immature can be misleading and irrelevant, if it connotes a difference between persons whose minds are fully developed and whose characters are fully formed, and persons whose minds and characters are still in the process of development and formation.

If the term “mature” is used in that last sense, it is highly doubtful whether there are any mature human beings. I hope there are not, and I certainly hope there are few if any among my readers, for nothing I have to say can be of any practical significance or use to them. The problem of making a good life is a genuine problem only for those who do not regard the job as done; and that includes everyone who is over the age of six or ten and has grown up enough to be able to think about the problem. On the other hand, I must add the observation, made by a wise old Greek, that it is inadvisable to give lectures on moral philosophy to the young. What he had in mind, I think, is that a certain amount of experience in the business of living and a certain seriousness of purpose are required for anyone to understand the problem of making a good life and to judge whether this or that proposal for its solution is practically sound.

With all these considerations in mind, I am going to address this book to persons who, in experience and character, are old enough not only to understand the question but also to judge the answers, and young enough in years to do something about applying what they have learned to their own lives during whatever time remains to them on earth. In other words, I will proceed on the assumption that my readers already have enough common-sense wisdom to become a little wiser through the ways in which philosophy can extend and enlighten common sense. I hope they share with me the further assumption that it is never too late just as (with the one exception of infancy) it is certainly never too early to give thought to the direction one is going in, and to take steps to rectify it if, upon reflection, that direction is seen to be wrong.

(2)

We can put these matters to the test by seeing what is involved in understanding the question—understanding it in the light of common sense and common human experience. When you think about the question, *How can I make a good life for myself?*

(1) Do you realize that the question concerns the whole of your life, from the moment you begin to direct it for yourself until it is over—or at least until no genuine options remain?

(2) Do you think of the whole of your life, or whatever part of it that remains, as a span of time—of hours, days, months, and years—that is like a vacuum in the sense that it is time you can fill in one way or another, time that, in any case, you are consuming or using up, no matter how you fill it?

(3) Do you recognize that the ways in which this vacuum of time can be filled by you consist of the various activities you engage in, either entirely by free choice or under some form or degree of compulsion?

(4) Do you include among these ways of consuming the time of your life an option that can be called “time-wasting” or “time-killing” because it consists in passing the time by doing nothing or as nearly nothing as possible?

Another and, perhaps, better name for this form of inactivity or relatively slight activity might be “idling.” I shall have more to say on the subject of idling and idleness later.

(5) Do you understand that, whereas your choice is not entirely free because you are under some degree of compulsion to spend time doing this or that, the compulsion is never so complete that your freedom is totally abrogated?

The glaring exception is, of course, the chattel slave, whose life is not his own, whose time belongs to another man to use as *he* sees fit. Slavery is a thing of degrees—from the extreme of complete bondage or chattel slavery, where the human being is owned and used like a piece of inanimate property or a beast of burden, to the milder forms of servitude in which a man’s life is not wholly his own, but some portion of his time remains for him to use as he himself sees fit. The question with which we are concerned is clearly not one for chattel slaves; it may not

even be a practically significant question for those who are slaves in any degree or form of servitude.

(6) Do you appreciate, in consequence of what has just been said, that freedom in all its forms, especially freedom of choice and freedom from coercion and intimidation, is an indispensable prerequisite for dealing, in any practically significant way, with the question, *How can I make a good life for myself?*

Without the essential freedoms—the two I have just mentioned, and others equally important that I will mention later—the time of our lives is not ours to use and fill. If the distinction between a good life and a bad life, between living well and living poorly, between a life worth living or having lived and a life that is not worth living or having lived, can be made intelligible and can be defended against those who carp against such words as “good” and “bad” applied to a human life or anything else, then freedom is certainly good and slavery or lack of freedom is certainly bad; and the goodness of freedom consists in its being indispensable to our trying to make good lives for ourselves: it is good as a means to this end.

(7) Do you further appreciate that the exercise of your freedom at one time often imposes some limitations upon further use of your freedom at a later time, for the time of your life consists of stages, and the decisions you make in its earlier stages affect the choices left open to you in later stages?

Hence the decisions any of us make in youth are among the most important decisions we are ever able to make, because they have such far-reaching effects on the range and character of the options that remain open to us. This holds true to some extent of every stage of life. Every choice we make is one that should involve a weighing of its immediate against its remote effects.

(8) To state this last question in another way, do you realize that the use of your time today or this year affects not only the quality of your life in the present, but also its quality in the future? Do the activities with which you now fill your time and which now seem good to you preclude your using your time later in a way that will then seem good to you? Or will they, in addition to seeming good to you now, facilitate your living in a way that will seem good to you later—years later?

(9) If you do realize this, do you also understand the full significance of the statement that, if life were a day-to-day affair, either we would have no moral problems at all or those problems would be so simple as to deserve little or no thought?

If, at the end of each day, we closed the books, if there were no carry-over accounts from one day to the next, if what happened to us in the days of our childhood or what we did when we were young had little or no effect on the rest of our lives, then our choices would all be momentary or passing ones and a jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou might well be enough for life on a day-to-day basis. In fact, this is the way that animals do live—on a day-to-day basis, without a thought for the morrow, except in the case of certain hoarding instincts that, being instincts, involve no thought on the animal's part.

(10) Do you, in consequence, understand further that the problem of making a whole human life that is really good—good in each of its parts, and good in a way that results from each part's contributing what it ought to contribute to the whole—exists for you precisely because, at every stage of your life, in every day of your existence, you are faced with the basic moral alternative of choosing between a good time today and a good life as a whole—a choice between what is only useful, expedient, or pleasant in the short run, and what will contribute, in the long run, to making your whole life good?

Of all the points made so far, this is, perhaps, the one most difficult to understand in the early years of life—the time when, practically, it is most important to understand it. It is in the early years of our lives that we are disinclined to make choices that favor the long as against the short run, probably because the eventualities of the long run then seem so remote. This lies at the root of the generation gap. On one side are those who find the long run unreal or too remote to think about; on the other are those for whom it has become a reality and a dominant consideration. The great misfortune of the human race, in every generation, is that its younger members—at the time of their lives when it is most important to understand this point—find it extremely difficult to understand and often fail to understand it. But if the point is only difficult, not impossible, for the young to understand, then it is of the greatest importance that sound moral instruction and training help them to understand it at the earliest possible moment in their lives. Their elders may finally have come to understand it only too well, and with some

measure of remorse that their understanding has come too late for them to make the best use of such wisdom.

(11) In the light of the fact that making a good life as a whole necessarily entails long-range considerations, does it not now seem evident that you cannot make a good life for yourself by choice rather than by chance unless you have some kind of plan for your life as a whole—a plan for the use of its time in the present, in the years immediately ahead, and in the long run?

If everything were left to chance, there would be no point in even asking the question, *How can I make a good life for myself?* Seriously to consider that question is to assume that one can solve it by the choices one can make. But to exercise choice in the earlier stages of life without a plan for the whole is to leave much to chance. Early choices may severely limit our freedom in later stages of life, and so the lack of a plan may result in our having to fill our time in ways we would not have chosen had we foreseen the remote effects of our earlier choices and had we made them with a plan in mind.

(12) Finally, does not this point about the obvious need for a plan suggest the analogy between making a whole life that is good and making a work of art that is good?

In some of the creative arts, such as architecture, the process of building does not begin until a detailed plan or blueprint is ready. In other arts, the plan of the thing to be produced—a painting, a novel, a piece of music—is usually much less detailed than that. It is often only a sketch or an outline of the creative idea. But in any case the work of the artist is always guided by some vision, more or less detailed, of the end result. Without such a guiding plan, the end result would be a thing of chance rather than a work of art. To this extent at least, there is a parallel between the production of a work of art and the making of a good life.

(3)

I have just set forth, in the form of questions, twelve considerations that should be borne in mind—the more explicitly the better—by anyone who seriously confronts the problem with which we are concerned, and even more so by anyone who tries to solve it. These twelve questions provide a measure of anyone's understanding of the problem of making a good life for one's self. They also

indicate the steps one must begin to take in order to find a solution that will be sound, adequate, and thoroughly practical

Before I turn to the solution that I think would be developed by a wise and practical man of common sense, I would like to spend a moment more on the analogy between making a work of art and making a good life. While the analogy may be enlightening, it can also be misleading. Making a good life is, in its fundamentals, radically different from artistic creation. Let me explain why.

The architectural analogy fails not only because the work of building is directed by a plan that is much more detailed in its specifications than any that can be developed for leading a good life, but also because the final product, being a spatial whole, can exist all at one time, whereas a whole life is a temporal whole and exists only as a process of becoming. Even though the plan one can draw up for making a good life may be more comparable to the kind of rough sketch that painters put upon a canvas before they apply pigments, the finished painting has the same kind of existence as a building, and so is not like a human life as a whole.

There is a closer resemblance between the performing arts and making a good life. A good performance, like a human life, is a temporal affair—a process in time. It is good as a whole through being good in its parts, and through their good order to one another. It cannot be called good as a whole until it is finished. During the process, all we can say of it, if we speak precisely, is that it is becoming good. The same is true of a whole human life. Just as the whole performance never exists at any one time, but is a process of becoming, so a human life is also a performance in time and a process of becoming. And just as the goodness that attaches to the performance as a whole does not attach to any of its parts, so the goodness of a human life as a whole belongs to it alone, and not to any of its parts or phases. In neither case can the goodness of the whole be experienced at any moment in the process, as the goodness of the parts is experienced from moment to moment. This has a bearing on the distinction between a good life as a whole and a good time from moment to moment.

However, the analogy between the performing arts and making a good life also fails for a number of reasons, reasons that indicate that making a good life differs radically from artistic making or production of any sort. In the first place, rehearsals in advance are always possible in the case of artistic performances, but never in the case of making a life. In the second place, while a performing artist cannot repeat a single performance he regards as a failure, he

can usually try again. But none of us gets a second chance at making a good life for ourselves. When we have finished that job, we are finished—for better or worse. In the third place, the man who has artistic skill does not have to employ that skill to produce a work of art. Whether he does so or not is an option he is free to exercise. But unless we commit suicide, we have no choice about making a life for ourselves. We are engaged in the process of doing so, willy-nilly, like it or not. Our only option is between making our life good as a whole and failing to do so.

This last point, as we shall see, is crucial. It draws a sharp line between the sphere of moral conduct and the sphere of artistic production. Making a good life is not a work of art. The aesthetic approach to life is superficial; it overlooks the underlying difference between life and art. The one point of resemblance that should be retained is the usefulness of some kind of plan. A work of art cannot be well-made without a plan; so too, a life cannot be well-lived without a plan.

Anyone who has read Plato's account of the trial of Socrates will remember his observation that an unexamined life is not worth living. When we understand what he means, I think we will also be led to conclude that an unplanned life cannot be lived well. That conclusion directs the effort of this book to answer the question with which it is concerned, for it tells us in advance what we are looking for—a *sound and practical plan of life that will help us to make our whole life good*.

(4)

A plan of that character consists of a small number of prescriptions about the goods to be sought and the manner and order of seeking them. These prescriptions, formulated with a universality that makes them applicable to all men without regard to their individual differences or the special circumstances of their individual lives, constitute what little wisdom it is possible for the moral philosopher to attain with reasonable certitude, and that little is nothing but a distillation of the wisdom of common sense.

The reader will gradually come to appreciate the significance of what I have just said, as later chapters refine common-sense opinions into philosophical insights—especially the chapters of Part Three, which attempt to set forth the ethics of common sense. By the time he reaches the end of Chapter 15, he should understand the contribution that the wisdom of a common-sense ethics can make to the conduct of his life—not only understand its applicabil-

ity to his own problems, but also realize both how inadequate and how indispensable it is for their solution. I will repeatedly stress both its inadequacy and its indispensability, for it is of the utmost importance not to overlook either, or to make the mistake of supposing that because moral philosophy cannot by itself solve our individual problems of day-to-day living, it is of no value or use whatsoever. Equally unfortunate is the opposite error of supposing that because moral philosophy has some invaluable wisdom to offer, we need nothing more than it for guidance in dealing with every exigency, moral crisis, or tragic dilemma that life serves up to us. The small core of wisdom that moral philosophy affords may go to the heart of our practical problems, but it does not and cannot cover all the intricacies and complications in which such problems are embedded.

In acknowledging that the reader may not fully understand and appreciate all this until he finishes Chapter 15, and at the same time confessing that I do not know how to bring him more quickly to the state of mind in which I hope to leave him at that point, I am also aware that he may be put off or even turned away by quite excusable misapprehensions of what is being said in the earlier portions of this book. Since I do not want that to happen, I have no other recourse than to caution him here and now about misunderstandings that may occur and that I would like to see him avoid. I do this with some trepidation, not only because I have little faith in the effectiveness of this method of preventing misunderstanding, but also because I fear that the reader will be more impressed by what I have to say about the inadequacy of moral philosophy than by what I have to say about its indispensability. That impression might dissuade him from reading on, which is hardly the result I am aiming at.

Let me start with one misunderstanding that may have occurred already. In this chapter, I have dwelt on the importance of a plan for putting the parts of one's life into some perspective and order, and I have compared such a plan with the kind of rough sketches that an artist makes of the work he is going to produce. The reader may mistakenly suppose that in emphasizing the indispensability of a plan, however sketchy, I am exhorting him to develop one for himself. I am not doing that. If he goes back and reads carefully the last sentence of Section 3, he will see that I am promising him that the effort of this book to solve the problem of making a good life for one's self will be directed toward the exposition of a sound and practical plan that will afford some measure of help and serve as a guide.

But while I am not recommending that the reader undertake at once to develop such a plan for himself if he has not done so before, neither am I recommending that he desist from doing so. If he already has some sort of plan for his life as a whole, my only recommendation to him would be that he be open-minded about it and willing to alter it if the prescriptions for a good life that are developed in this book should appear to contain some points of wisdom he has overlooked or negated. If he has not yet seriously thought about planning his life, then I would hope he might be persuaded and helped to do so by this book.

By emphasizing all the differences between making a good life and making a work of art, I have tried to prevent the reader from mistaking a book on moral philosophy for a how-to book—a book of highly specific rules that can, through practice, be applied, with an acquired perfection of skill, to accomplish unerringly and with some measure of excellence the result aimed at. If there were an art of living, the problem of making a good life could be solved with the same regularity, the same assurance, and the same mastery that the problem of erecting a bridge or of composing music can be solved. But there is no art of living, and no man can ever expect to attain in that domain the skill or mastery possessed by many engineers or musicians in their respective fields of work. The relevant wisdom that moral philosophy has to offer does not consist of specific rules of conduct analogous to rules of art; it goes no further than prescriptions so general that they apply to all human lives, and precisely because the principles of moral philosophy have such universality, they are of use to the individual only if he will make the effort to apply them to the contingent singularities of his own individual life.

Moral philosophy, moreover, cannot provide him with anything more than the most general guidance for particularizing its principles. Unlike a navigating chart, it does not indicate every reef, shoal, or shallow to be skirted, or plainly plot the channels or courses to be followed. It cannot do that because each individual life is an unchartable sea, full of unforeseeable dangers and untoward complications. But that does not mean that such practical wisdom as is available can provide no guidance at all; by defining the problems to be solved and by laying down the principles to be applied by anyone who will exercise intelligence in their solution, it points out the goal to be reached and supplies the only directions that can be formulated for reaching it. Following such directions may sorely tax the individual's intelligence and strain his willpower; nevertheless, the difficulties he encounters in following them should not cause him to make the mistake of thinking he

would be better off were he to proceed in life without any destination to aim at and without directions to follow.


In short, moral philosophy, as I have already indicated, does not get down to the nitty-gritty or the nuts and bolts of the vexatious practical problems that each of us has to resolve in the most trying moments of our lives. Frankly to acknowledge this is itself an essential bit of practical wisdom; to pretend the opposite is consummate folly. In setting forth what I have learned from the reflections of common sense on the common experience of mankind, and in expounding it philosophically in the form of the ethics of common sense, I will, in the pages that follow, go no further than such wisdom allows. I will not pretend to be wise about the infinitely varied trials and tribulations that make the business of living—and especially of trying to live well—difficult for every individual. But that does not mean that I am unacquainted with the hard and often harsh realities of the human condition, nor cavalierly oblivious to what many experience as the angst and the despair occasioned by the distressing facts of life.

I know that even the best human life, precisely because it is the life of a man and not of a god, may not escape the taint of tragedy. Every human life, even under the most fortunate circumstances, has its share of frustration and discontentment, its burden of remorse for avoidable mistakes committed, its insoluble dilemmas—insoluble in the sense that their only solution requires us to choose between alternatives both of which we desperately wish to avoid. Tragedy thus enters our lives through the evils we must choose to embrace because circumstances present us with alternatives we are compelled to choose between. Even when moral wisdom guides us as well as it can in the task of making a good life, and even when we apply its prescriptions with the most flexible and resourceful intelligence and with a will habitually disciplined to act intelligently, we cannot prevent the intrusion of tragedy because we cannot avoid having to make the tragic decisions that are the price we must pay for being free to make any decisions at all. Much less can we hope to be exempt from some measure of the misfortunes that, in varying degrees, mar every human life. (Nevertheless, I must add, it remains possible—with wisdom and will united in the effort—to lead a good life, one that accumulates, over the years, more goods than evils, and is embellished by joys and satisfactions.)

If the reader supposes that inattention to all these somber facts in the following pages betokens a dismissal of them as matters of no concern, he will mistake the simplicity of moral wisdom for sim-

ple-mindedness. Precisely because the few basic truths of moral philosophy are elementary and clear, moral wisdom is truly simple, as it should be; but that should not lead anyone to regard it as a collection of simple-minded homilies or a set of simplistic solutions. It does not get down to the level of life's most perplexing difficulties because that is the level at which no one can be philosophically wise. All that it can do is provide what little guidance wisdom is able to give every human being because of what life is like for all of them.

That minimum guidance, in my judgment, is indispensable for intelligent living. Without it, we move from day to day blindly and aimlessly. The fact that moral philosophy cannot adequately solve life's particular problems certainly does not warrant the conclusion that it makes no contribution at all to their solution. This is an error that many men make. They dismiss a clear definition of justice as of no practical utility because it does not automatically enable them to decide, in a particular difficult case, whether a certain act or policy is just or unjust, forgetting that they would not and could not even be troubled about justice in that particular case if they did not have some definite standard of justice to apply to it. It is equally foolish to dismiss the clarity and simplicity of moral philosophy as of no value—as simple-minded or simplistic—because it does not automatically tell us what to do in this or that trying moment of our lives. Without its wisdom we could not even begin to see our way through those dark moments.

One word more. In what follows, especially in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I will propose a number of distinctions among the types of human activity, together with a classification of the parts of a human life, in order to discover what common sense can contribute to the solution of the problem of making a human life good—good as a whole. Analytical distinctions and classifications are often misunderstood. Things that can be separated in thought by analysis are usually not separate in actual existence. To convert analytical distinctions into existential or experiential separations is an egregious error, yet one that is frequently made. I therefore hope this advance notice will prevent the reader from making the mistake of supposing that life comes in separate chunks because thinking about it—if we are to do any thinking about it at all—draws lines that divide one kind of activity from another and that isolate the various aspects of life. Such divisions and isolations enable us to see how the things that are divided or isolated in thought combine, overlap, fuse, and flow together in the changing existential mix that is life's actual process. 

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