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## GOOD, BETTER, BEST

**Mortimer Adler**

**W**e know from common experience that individuals differ in their desires. We also know that in our everyday speech we use the word “good” as a label for the things we regard as desirable.

If we look upon one thing as more desirable than another, we regard it as better. And of several desirable things, the one we desire most is best in our eyes.

Reflection on these facts of common experience and common speech led Aristotle to the common-sense conclusion that the two notions—the good and the desirable—are inseparably connected. As axiomatic as Euclid’s “the part is less than the whole” and “the whole is greater than the part” are “the good is desirable” and “the desirable is good.”

Let me remind you now of the problem we left unsolved at the end of the preceding chapter. We saw that differences in human desires made it difficult for Aristotle to persuade us that all human beings have the same end in view when they aim at living well, at a good

life, or happiness. What one human being thinks will achieve happiness might be quite different from what another thinks a good life consists of. That being so, how can Aristotle uphold his view that there is only one right plan for living well or for attaining happiness?

He cannot do so unless he can help us understand that human desires are not all of the same sort, and that what is true of one kind of desire is not true of another kind.

The kind of desires that we have been considering so far are individual desires, desires acquired in the course of an individual's life and experience. Since individuals differ from one another not only in their temperaments and dispositions but also in the lives they lead and their special experiences, they differ in their acquired, individual desires.

While each human being is a unique individual with a unique life and unique experience, all human beings, as members of the human species, share in a common humanity. The multitude and variety of individual differences overlie the common traits or attributes that are present in all human beings because they are all human.

For the most part, these differences are differences in degree. All human beings have eyes and ears, are able to see and hear, but one individual's vision or hearing may be more acute than another's. All human beings have the ability to reason, but that common ability may be greater in one individual than in another. All human beings need food for sustenance and vitality, but one individual, being of larger build than another, may need more nourishment than another.

That last example of a common trait underlying individual differences calls attention to the other kind of desire—a kind of desire that is natural, not acquired, and that is the same in all human beings, not different in different individuals, except in degree. When we say that we need food, we are saying that we desire food, just as much as when we say that we want a new automobile, we are saying that we desire it. These two words—"need" and "want"—both indicate desires, but not desires of the same kind.

Needs are inborn or innate desires—desires inherent in our human nature because we have certain natural capacities or tendencies, capacities or tendencies common to us all because we all have the same human nature. We all have a biological capacity for nour-

ishment. All plants and animals have that capacity; stones do not. That is why all living things need food. Without it, they die. The fulfillment of the capacity is necessary to sustain life.

The individual does not acquire the desire for food in the course of his lifetime or as a result of his own special experience. He needs food whether he knows it or not, and he needs it even when he does not feel the need, as he does when he has pangs of hunger. Hunger is merely the experience of feeling a natural need that is always present and present in all.

Individuals born in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America all have the same need for food and drink, and all will, on certain occasions, experience the pangs of hunger and thirst. But born in different environments and growing up under different circumstances, these different individuals will acquire desires for different kinds of food and drink. When they feel hungry or thirsty (which is their awareness of a natural need), they will want different kinds of edibles and drinkables to satisfy their desire.

They do not need different kinds of edibles and drinkables. They want them. If the kind of food or drink they want were not available, their need could be satisfied by food and drink they do not want because they have not yet acquired a desire for it.

The example we have been considering is a biological need, a need common not only to all human beings but also to all living things. Let us now consider a peculiarly human need, one that is common only to human beings because it arises from a capacity that is a special attribute of human nature.

Earlier in this book, I suggested that human beings differ from other animals by their capacity for asking questions with the aim of acquiring knowledge about themselves and about the world in which they live. Recognizing this fact, Aristotle begins one of his most important books with the sentence: "Man by nature desires to know." He is saying, in other words, that the desire for knowledge is as much a natural need as the desire for food.

However, there is one interesting difference between the need for knowledge and the need for food. Deprived of food, most human beings are conscious of that deprivation when they feel the pangs of hunger. But deprived of knowledge, it is not always the case that human beings are conscious of their deprivation. Unfortunately, we seldom experience the pangs of ignorance as we feel the pangs of hunger.

All acquired desires are desires we are conscious of when we have them. That is not true of all natural needs. Some of them, like the need for food and drink, we are conscious of when we are deprived of what we need. But other natural needs, like the need for knowledge, we may or may not be conscious of, even when we are deprived of what we need.

The fact that we are not conscious of a natural need should not lead us into the mistake of thinking that the need of which we are unaware does not exist. It is there whether or not we are aware of it.

I have given a few examples of natural needs in order to contrast them with acquired wants and in order to illustrate Aristotle's distinction between two kinds of desire. It is not necessary here to try to give you an exhaustive enumeration of the natural needs that all human beings share in common, as they share in common all the potentialities, capacities, and tendencies that are inherent in their specific human nature. My present interest is in showing how Aristotle's distinction between two kinds of desires will help him to persuade us that there is one right plan for living well that all of us ought to adopt.

To understand his argument, we must recognize what I think all or most of us do recognize—that we often want things we do not need. We even make the mistake of saying that we need them when we only want them. No one needs caviar, but many people, having acquired the taste for it, want it; and they may even allow themselves to say they need it.

That is not the only mistake you can make about your wants. You can also want something that is not really good for you. Some human beings want drugs or other substances that are harmful to them. They have acquired strong desires for these things and want them so strongly that they ignore the injury they are doing themselves. They want something that is bad for them. But because they want it, it appears good to them at the time they are seeking to gratify their desires.

If it did not appear good to them, it would be false to say that the desirable is good. When they desire that which is really bad for them, it nevertheless appears good to them. Their desire or want was wrong or mistaken. That is why that which appeared good to them was not really good.

In contrast to the things you want, which appear good at the time you want them but may turn out to be the opposite of good at a later time, the things you need are always good for you. Because they are really good for you, they are not good at one time and the opposite at another.

You may be mistaken in thinking that you need something when you only want it—caviar, for example—but your needs are never wrong or misdirected, as your wants may be and often are. You cannot have a wrong or mistaken need. And anything you need is something really good for you, not something that merely appears to be good at a certain time because you desire it.

We now see that Aristotle's distinction between natural and acquired desires (or between needs and wants) is closely related to another distinction he makes—between real and apparent goods. The things that are really good for you are the things that satisfy your natural needs. The things that only appear to be good for you, and may not be really good for you, are the things that satisfy your acquired wants.

Another way of making this point is to say that apparent goods are the things we call good because we do in fact consciously desire them at the time. We want them. Because we want them, they appear good to us and we call them good. In contrast, real goods are things we need, whether we are conscious of the need or not. Their goodness consists in their satisfying a desire inherent in human nature.

There is still one other way of making the same point, and it is worth considering because it advances our understanding of Aristotle's argument. The good is the desirable and the desirable is good. But a thing may be desirable in two different senses of "desirable," just as it may be good in two senses of "good." We can call something desirable because at a given time we do in fact desire it. Or we can call something desirable because we ought to desire it whether, at a given time, we actually desire it or not.

What is desirable in one sense may not be desirable in the other. We may actually desire what we ought not to desire, or in fact fail to desire what we ought to desire. That which is really good for us is something we always ought to desire because we need it, and we cannot have wrong needs. But that which only appears to be good for us is something that may be wrong for us to desire. It may be something we ought not to desire because it will turn out to be

really bad for us even though, at the time we want it, it appears to be good because we want it.

The one right plan for achieving happiness or a good life is, according to Aristotle, a plan that involves us in seeking and acquiring all the things that are really good for us to have. They are the things we need not only in order to live but also in order to live well. If we seek all the real goods that we ought to possess in the course of our lives, we will be pursuing happiness according to the one right plan of life that we ought to adopt.

Since natural needs, based on our common human capacities and tendencies, are the same in all human beings, what is really good for any one person is really good for any other. That is why human happiness is the same for all human beings: it consists in the possession of all the things that are really good for a person to have, accumulated not at one time but in the course of a lifetime. And that is why the one right plan for living well is the same for all human beings.

No human life can be completely deprived of real goods, for on the biological level the total deprivation of basic needs would make it impossible to stay alive for long. The biological needs for food, drink, clothing, shelter, and sleep must be satisfied, at least to a minimal extent, in order for the living organism to stay alive. But when those needs are satisfied to that minimal extent and no more, just staying alive—or bare subsistence—serves poorly as a means to living well.

Not only must these basic biological needs be satisfied beyond the level of the barest minimum required to sustain life itself but, in addition, many other human needs must be satisfied in order to approach the fulfillment of all our human capacities and tendencies. If happiness consists in such complete fulfillment, then one individual approaches more closely to achieving it in proportion as he is more able than another to satisfy his human needs and come into the possession of the things that are really good for him.

One plan for living well is better than another to the extent that it guides the individual to a more complete realization of his capacities and to a more complete satisfaction of his needs. And the best plan of all, the one we ought to adopt, is one that aims at every real good in the right order and measure and, in addition, allows us to seek things we want but do not need, so long as getting them does not interfere with our being able to satisfy our needs or fulfill our capacities.


Not all apparent goods—things that we want but do not need—turn out to be bad for us. Some are not injurious in themselves; and some are not disadvantageous in the sense that they impede or frustrate our effort to get the things that we need and that are really good for us. The pursuit of happiness by one man may differ from its pursuit by another even if both are following the one right plan for living well.

The reason for such differences, when they occur, is that each individual may want different things for himself over and above the things he needs. Though what is really good for one human being is the same for all, what appears to be good to one individual, according to his wants, may be quite different from what appears to be good to another individual. What each individual wants for himself may be an apparent good that is neither injurious to him nor an impediment to his pursuit of happiness.

You now have some grasp of Aristotle's views about happiness and how it should be pursued. You see why he thinks it is the same for all human beings and why all should try to achieve it by adopting the one sound plan for doing so. Other questions remain to be answered.

What are the real goods that an individual should seek in order to live well or make a good life for himself or herself? We have mentioned some of them, but not all. Can the enumeration of real goods be completed?

If it can be, then there is still a further question—the most important of all: How should we try to come into possession of all the things we naturally need—all the real goods we should have in our lives? What means are indispensable to achieving the ultimate end we have in mind?

Only when these questions have been answered will we have a full grasp of the plan of life to be followed in order to achieve happiness. 

Chapter 11, from his book, *Aristotle for Everyone*.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR:

Dear Max:

It is with some degree of trepidation that I forward the following reaction to the Roger Kimball piece on books and culture today. I got it and reacted from my long held pet peeve about such writing...

It stands out as one of the best examples of faux- intellectual clap-trap. It is worse than condescending; it is contemptuous of present day books today.

He starts out on the subject of current books and current culture by saying he reads as few contemporary books as possible and asserts that most books written today (as in the past) will not last thru the ages. Then he adds the insult that *his* friends agree with him.

They experience nausea or amusement when considering current novels. The articles than meanders about, reaching no conclusion. There is not an original thought or revelation that I could find. He also adds a "disclaimer" that of course there are some good books being written today.

He gets around to the bromide that novels today have more competition for attention (what with TV) than in the 19th century. He finally gets around to quoting the masters from Plato to Hegel to Henry James to TS Eliot on the novel to demonstrate how intellectual, intelligent, cultured he is. The parade of quotes sound as tho they were cribbed from one or more books of quotations. If that does not impress you, he also uses big, little known words where little one would do just as well. Have you ever come across the word "adumbrate" ???? Mr. Kimball does not rise to the level of a sophist.

But he does present an easy target and a joy to shoot at.

Al Moscow

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