

---

## IS ANYONE EVER PERFECTLY VIRTUOUS OR COMPLETELY HAPPY?

**Mortimer Adler**

Since we are here concerned with a philosophical understanding of virtue and happiness and not with theological doctrines concerning these subjects, I will state the Christian answer to this question only for the sake of its contrast to the philosophical answer.

Christianity teaches that the saints achieve perfect or heroic virtue, but only with God's gift of grace. It also teaches that natural moral virtue cannot exist except in the company of the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and charity. In addition, it teaches that having these virtues, taken together, assures happiness hereafter, the eternal happiness of the saints in the presence of God.

When happiness is regarded as we have been regarding it (as temporal, not eternal; here on earth, not hereafter in heaven), then loyalty to the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience and other abstentions from worldly goods result in an earthly life that is voluntarily deprived of many real goods that we have counted as indispensable to an enriched and expanded human life here and now,

though such deprivations may be required for eternal happiness in the life to come hereafter.

Perfect moral virtue, philosophically considered, is an ideal always to be aimed at, but seldom if ever to be attained. Our moral characters are blemished by this flaw or that. Individuals who have morally good characters are morally virtuous to a degree that is measured by the frequency with which they commit acts that are not virtuous. That frequency may not be so great that it breaks the habit of virtuous conduct, but it can be great enough to weaken an individual's moral fiber.

The result is a degree of moral virtue that only approximates the ideal aimed at. Accordingly, individuals may have moral virtue in varying degrees, some more, some less, but rarely if ever is the ideal of perfection attained.

Another consequence is the incompleteness of the happiness achieved. The more virtuous a person is, the more that individual has it in his power to make a good life for himself or herself. However, variations in degree of moral virtue are not the only factor in determining how nearly individuals can approximate the ideal of complete happiness in their earthly lives. The other factor consists in the degree of good fortune with which the individual is blessed. Some are more fortunate, some less. The more fortunate a person is, the more he will come into possession of all those real goods that are not wholly within his own power to obtain.

Reference to good fortune and misfortune leads us to another factor that flaws our happiness and renders it incomplete. Almost all of us at one time or another, and even perhaps on several occasions, meet with the misfortune of having to make a tragic choice. Circumstances beyond our control confront us with alternatives that permit us no good choice. Whichever alternative we choose results in our voluntarily taking evil unto ourselves.

This occurs when we must choose between one love and another, between love and duty, between conflicting duties or between conflicting kinds of law to both of which we owe loyalty, and between justice and expediency.

One of our greatest debts to the ancient Greeks is their discovery of human tragedy, so clearly exemplified in two plays by Sophocles, *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*. Modern exemplifications of it exist in the classical French tragedies of Racine and Corneille and also in one short story told by Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*. But let no one

suppose that tragedy befalls only these fictional heroes and heroines. The rest of us also experience it through tricks of fate, played on us by outrageous fortune.

Tragedy befalls only the morally virtuous who are already on the way toward making good lives for themselves. It does not occur in the lives of fools or knaves, villains or criminals. They have ruined their own lives. There is nothing left for misfortune to ruin.

We could not speak of degrees of moral virtue were it not one and the same personal perfection for all human beings. Nor could we speak of degrees of happiness did not a good human life comprise the same real goods for all human beings. Only in the purely psychological meaning of the word "happiness" does what makes one man happy make another miserable. Only in that meaning of the term are there as many different states of happiness as there are different individuals.

The felt contentment or satisfaction that is called happiness psychologically depends on our individually differing wants as well as on the extent to which they are fulfilled or frustrated. In contrast, the whole good life that is called happiness ethically depends on the fulfillment of our common human needs as well as upon the extent to which they are fulfilled by the attainment of the real goods that we seek.

So far as its enrichment by all real goods is concerned, one person's happiness or good life is the same as another's, differing only in the extent to which their common human needs are fulfilled. However, there may be another source of difference between one person's happiness and another's. While remaining the same with respect to the real goods that everyone needs, it may differ with respect to the apparent goods that individuals want. The things that appear good to one person because he or she wants them will obviously differ from the things that appear good to another person. That individual's wants are different.

Of all such apparent goods, some may also be real goods, needed as well as wanted. Some may be merely apparent goods, not needed but nevertheless innocuous in the sense that wanting and getting them does not interfere with or impede our attaining the real goods all of us need. And some may be noxious rather than innocuous. Wanting these and getting them can defeat our pursuit of happiness.

Apparent goods that are detrimental to the pursuit of happiness cannot, of course, play any part in differentiating one person's happiness from another's. But in addition to being enriched by all the same real goods, in varying degrees, one person's happiness may also differ from another's by the different innocuous apparent goods that still further enrich the happiness of each.

One further question remains concerning the degree to which individuals approximate the ideal of complete happiness on earth. As almost everyone is subject to the occurrence of tragedy in their lives, so almost everyone is also subject to misfortunes, some more dire than others. An early death, enslavement, the agony of poverty carried to the extreme of destitution, imprisonment in solitary confinement, these things can completely frustrate a person's pursuit of happiness. They result in the misery that is the very opposite of happiness. However, misfortunes may not completely frustrate, but merely impede, an individual's effort to make a good life for himself or herself. Under what conditions are we best able to overcome such misfortunes and still save our lives from the wreckage of bad luck?

The stronger our moral virtue, the more likely are we to be able to make good lives for ourselves in spite of these misfortunes. The other side of the same picture is that hard luck and adversity, when the misfortunes do not cause irreparable damage or destructive deprivations, may result in the strengthening of moral virtue.

Being blessed by benign conditions and the affluence of unmitigated good fortune usually has exactly the opposite effect. It is more difficult to develop moral virtue under such conditions than it is under adversity, when that is not crippling or totally destructive.


I wish to end this chapter by returning to one recurrent theme that provides a transition to the second part of this book. Readers probably do not need to be reminded that success in the pursuit of happiness depends on two factors, not one, each necessary, neither sufficient by itself. But they may be interested in examining Aristotle's one sentence definition of happiness. It summarizes the point compactly and succinctly. In reporting it below, I have added in brackets words not in the original, but which make its intent clearer.

Happiness consists in a complete life [well-lived because it is] lived in accordance with [moral] virtue, and accompanied by a moderate possession of [wealth and other] external goods.

I never tire of reiterating the importance of understanding that moral virtue by itself is not enough to make a life good. Were it sufficient by itself, there would be no point whatsoever in all the political, social, and economic reforms that have brought about progress in the external condition of human life.

If morally virtuous persons can live well and become happy in spite of dire poverty; in spite of being enslaved; in spite of being compelled by circumstances to lead two- or three-part lives, with insufficient time for leisure; in spite of an unhealthy environment; in spite of being disfranchised and treated as nonparticipating subjects of government rather than as citizens with a voice in their own government, then the social, political, and economic reforms that eliminate these conditions and replace them with better ones make no contribution to human happiness.

Precisely because being morally virtuous is not enough for success in the pursuit of happiness, it is better to live in a full-fledged state than in a small village, in a society that has all the advantages peculiar to a political community; better to live under the peace of civil government than under the violence of anarchy; better to live under constitutional government than under despotism, no matter how benevolent; better to live in a democratic republic and in a capital-intensive socialist (but not communist) economy than under a less just political institution and under less favorable economic arrangements.

I trust readers will perceive the ways in which the two foregoing paragraphs connect the pivotal idea of happiness with all the other ideas so far considered and with all the ideas that remain to be considered in the rest of this book. 

## QUOTATIONS WITHOUT COMMENT

### *With Regard to Happiness*

. . . We call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, Ch. 7  
(4th cent. B.C.)

. . . The final good is thought to be self-sufficient. Now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship. But some limit must be set to this; for if we extend our requirement to ancestors and descendants and friends' friends we are in for an infinite series. Let us examine this question, however, on another occasion; the self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be; and further we think it most desirable of all things, without being counted as one good thing among others—if it were so counted it would clearly be made more desirable by the addition of even the least of goods; for that which is added becomes an excess of goods, and of goods the greater is always more desirable. Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, Ch. 7  
(4th cent. B.C.)

Why then should we not say that he is happy who is active in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life? Or must we add “and who is destined to live thus and die as befits his life?” Certainly the future is obscure to us, while happiness, we claim, is an end and something in every way final. If so, we shall call happy those among living men in whom these conditions are, and are to be, fulfilled—but happy men.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, Ch. 10  
(4th cent. B.C.)

This definition of Happiness given by some—Happy is the man that has all he desires, or, whose every wish is fulfilled—is a good

and adequate definition if it be understood in a certain way, but an inadequate definition if understood in another. For if we understand it absolutely of all that man desires by his natural appetite, thus it is true that he who has all that he desires, is happy, since nothing satisfies man's natural desire except the perfect good which is Happiness. But if we understand it of those things that man desires according to the apprehension of the reason, in this way it does not pertain to Happiness to have certain things that man desires; rather does it belong to unhappiness, in so far as the possession of such things hinders man from having all that he desires naturally; just as reason also sometimes accepts as true things that are a hindrance to the knowledge of truth. And it was through taking this into consideration that Augustine added so as to include perfect Happiness—that “he desires nothing amiss,” although the first part suffices if rightly understood, that is to say, that “happy is he who has all he desires.”

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I-II, Q. 5, A. 8.  
(c. 1265)

Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so.

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Ch. 4  
(1863)

***With Regard to the Moral and Intellectual Virtues  
and the Unity of Moral Virtue***

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. II, Ch. 6  
(4th cent. B.C.)

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (ἠθική) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word ἔθος (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. . . . Neither by nature, then, nor contra-

ry to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. II, Ch. 1  
(4th cent. B.C.)

. . . It is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without moral virtue. But in this way we may also refute the dialectical argument whereby it might be contended that the virtues exist in separation from each other; the same man, it might be said, is not best equipped by nature for all the virtues, so that he will have already acquired one when he has not yet acquired another. . . . The choice will not be right without practical wisdom any more than without virtue; for the one determines the end and the other makes us do the things that lead to the end.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, Ch. 13  
(4th cent. B.C.)

. . . Human virtue is a habit perfecting man in view of his doing good deeds. Now, in man there are but two principles of human actions, namely, the intellect or reason and the appetite. . . . Consequently every human virtue must be a perfection of one of these principles. Accordingly if it perfects man's speculative or practical intellect in order that his deed may be good, it will be an intellectual virtue, but if it perfects his appetite, it will be a moral virtue. It follows therefore that every human virtue is either intellectual or moral.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I-II, Q. 58, A. 3  
(c. 1265)

. . . Moral virtue can be without some of the intellectual virtues, namely, wisdom, science, and art, but not without understanding and prudence. Moral virtue cannot be without prudence, because moral virtue is a habit of choosing, that is, making us choose well. Now in order that a choice be good, two things are required. First, that the intention be directed to a due end; and this is done by moral virtue, which inclines the appetitive power to the good that is in accord with reason, which is a due end. Secondly, that man take rightly those things which have reference to the end, and he cannot do this unless his reason counsel, judge and command rightly, which is the function of prudence and the virtues joined to it.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I-II, Q. 58, A. 4  
(c. 1265)



. . . Speaking absolutely, the intellectual virtues, which perfect the reason, are more excellent than the moral virtues, which perfect the appetite.

But if we consider virtue in its relation to act, then moral virtue, which perfects the appetite, whose function it is to move the other powers to act . . . is more excellent. And since virtue is called so from its being a principle of action, for it is the perfection of a power, it follows again that the nature of virtue agrees more with moral than with intellectual virtue.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I-II, Q. 66, A. 3  
(c. 1265)

### ***With Regard to External Goods and the Goods of Fortune***

. . . All men think that the happy life is pleasant and weave pleasure into their ideal of happiness—and reasonably too; for no activity is perfect when it is impeded, and happiness is a perfect thing; this is why the happy man needs the goods of the body and external goods, i.e. those of fortune, viz. in order that he may not be impeded in these ways. Those who say that the victim on the rack or the man who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good, are, whether they mean to or not, talking nonsense.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VII, Ch. 13  
(4th cent. B.C.)

It is also disputed whether the happy man will need friends or not. It is said that those who are supremely happy and self-sufficient have no need of friends; for they have the things that are good, and therefore being self-sufficient they need nothing further, while a friend, being another self, furnishes what a man cannot provide by his own effort; whence the saying “when fortune is kind, what need of friends?” But it seems strange, when one assigns all good things to the happy man, not to assign friends, who are thought the greatest of external goods.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. IX, Ch. 9  
(4th cent. B.C.)

. . . Herein of necessity lies the difference between good fortune and happiness; for external goods come of themselves, and chance

is the author of them, but no one is just or temperate by or through chance.

Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. VII, Ch. 1  
(4th cent. B.C.)

. . . A good life requires a supply of external goods, in a less degree when men are in a good state, in a greater degree when they are in a lower state. Others again, who possess the conditions of happiness, go utterly wrong from the first in the pursuit of it.

Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. VII, Ch. 13  
(4th cent. B.C.)

We do not acquire or preserve virtue by the help of external goods, but external goods by the help of virtue.

Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. VII, Ch. 1  
(4th cent. B.C.)

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

---



---

## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Is published weekly for its members by the

### CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.