



THE ULTIMATE AND COMMON GOOD

Mortimer Adler

FOR SOMETHING TO BE ULTIMATE in any dimension or direction, it must be that beyond which one cannot go. What can possibly occupy that unique place in the realm of goods?

We have observed that some goods are mere means, never desired for their own sake, but only for the sake of something else. Other goods, we have noted, are ends as well as means. They are desired for their own sake as well as for the sake of something else. Is there anything that either is or ought to be desired for its own sake and never for the sake of anything else? If so, that is the ultimate good, not just *an* end, but *the* end, the final end beyond which one cannot go.

In antiquity, the word “happiness” was used as the name of this ultimate good. The ancients paid attention to the obvious fact that according to everyone’s sense of what the word “happiness” means, it names something desired for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. It is impossible for anyone to complete the sentence “I want happiness because ...” except by saying, “I want it.” Of anything else that one wants, it is always possible to say, “I want it because it will contribute to my happiness.”

The ancients also observed that, while everyone uses the word “happiness” to name that which is desirable solely for itself and not as a means to anything else, individuals differ in their conception of what happiness consists in. If, for the moment, we put aside our basic distinction between real and apparent goods, there will be as many different conceptions of happiness as there are differences with respect to the apparent goods that different individuals want. Each is purely subjective, entirely relative to that individual’s wants.

The miser who wants only money, or King Midas who wants everything that he touches turned into gold, should accordingly count himself happy when he gets what he wants. If he wants money or gold for its own sake and if he wants nothing else, he has achieved his goal. He has reached the end of his striving. He has arrived at his ultimate good—his happiness. The same thing can be said of the individual who identifies his happiness with the enjoyment of sensual pleasures, or of the individual who identifies it with gaining and holding power over others.

Once we come back to the distinction between real and apparent goods, the picture changes radically. Far from achieving happiness, the miser, the playboy, and the power-hungry individual have achieved only a counterfeit of it. They have got what they wanted, but not what they ought to want. On the contrary, getting what they want may have resulted in their being deprived of many things they need and ought to want—health, friendships, knowledge, and other goods of the mind.

Properly conceived (which means objectively rather than subjectively conceived), happiness consists in having obtained all the goods that everyone ought to want. So conceived, it is the same for all human beings. It is the common good as well as the ultimate good. It is the ultimate good because it leaves nothing more to be desired, as it would if it were just one particular good among others.

While life goes on, the pursuit of happiness can be defeated by misfortunes of all sorts, or by mistaken choices on the part of the individual. That is why the ancients placed happiness in a whole life well lived—well lived as a result of the individual’s choosing as he ought for the most part and also as a result of the individual’s being blessed by fortunate external circumstances, again for the most part.

Happiness, we now see, is a human life fulfilled by the accumulation of all the real goods that everyone needs. It is, in addition, a life enriched by whatever apparent goods may be innocuously sought by this or that individual according to his or her different tastes or wants. To confirm this understanding of happiness, we must observe a number of negative strictures.

The first has already been indicated. Happiness is not the supreme good, the *summum bonum*, the highest or best among the real goods to be sought. Instead, it is the totality of goods, the *totum bonum*, the all-inclusive or -encompassing whole comprised of all the real goods. In this sense, it is not *a* good, but *the* good, in the same sense that the ultimate good is not *an* end, but *the* end.

The second negative concerns the character of happiness as *the* end. We usually think of an end as a terminal goal or objective that can be reached and at which, when reached, we come to rest. The end of one's travels lies at the destination where one's traveling terminates, where one stops moving and settles down. The same holds for all other strivings that come to an end when they attain what they are reaching for—all except the striving for happiness.

Conceived as a whole life well lived, happiness is different from all other ends that we strive for or pursue. It is not a terminal goal that can be reached and rested in, for there is no moment of time in which a whole life well lived exists to be enjoyed or experienced. Every other end can be attained at some time during the course of one's life and, as attained, its goodness can be enjoyed or experienced. But the ultimate good that is *the* end cannot be attained short of a whole life being lived.

A whole life comes into existence only with the passage of time. It does not exist at any interval or moment during the time it is coming to be. When we aim at happiness as our ultimate good, we are aiming at something we can never enjoy or experience, as we can the goals that are terminal ends.

If the natural process of human life on earth has a terminal end, it is death, not happiness. Only if there is the hereafter for which religion holds out hope can there be a truly terminal end as the ultimate good and goal of all human striving—the heavenly rest that is enjoyed by the saints in the presence of God. It is certainly understandable why those who yearn and strive for the eternal happiness that is for them the supernatural ultimate good regard as a pale and feeble imitation of it the temporal happiness that is the ultimate good of this earthly life.

The third negative adds a qualification to an earlier statement that happiness as the ultimate good of human life is the same for all human beings. That remains true to the extent that happiness consists in a life fulfilled by the accumulation of all the things that are really good for everyone. But it must also be said that, in another respect, the happiness of one individual is not the same as the happiness of another. Each, according to his individual temperament, nurture, and circumstances, may want quite different things. Consequently, the enrichment of the individual life by the addition of those apparent goods that are innocuous will produce a good life that is somewhat different in its content for one individual and another.

The fourth and final negative calls attention to the fact that happiness is not the same for all in still another respect. Happiness as the ultimate good—the goal at which everyone should aim and toward which everyone should strive—is an ideal that is seldom if ever completely realized.

A terminal goal that we could not reach would be an illusory will-of-the-wisp at the end of the rainbow. Because it is not a terminal end, happiness is not an illusory goal, even though we can achieve it only in some measure or degree that falls short of completeness or perfection. In this respect, one individual may be more successful than another in the pursuit of happiness, either through his own good choices and efforts or through being facilitated in those efforts by the benefactions of good fortune. Accordingly, one individual may achieve a greater measure of happiness than another.

One question remains. We understand that temporal happiness, being a whole life well lived, cannot be a terminal end—a goal that can be reached, enjoyed, and rested in. How, then, can it be an end at all, much less *the* ultimate goal of all our striving?

The answer lies in a function that is performed by any end, whether it is terminal or not. Given an end to be sought or pursued, we are under an obligation to employ whatever means are called for to achieve it, preferring of course the most efficacious of the means available. If we wish to achieve the end in view, we must make use of such and such means.

The imperative here expressed is hypothetical. We must or ought to employ certain means *if*—and *only* if—we desire the end they serve, the goal they can help us to reach. A categorical, not a hypo-

thetical, obligation is imposed on us by happiness as an end or goal. We do not say, "If we wish to achieve a good

life, we ought to do this or that." On the contrary, we acknowledge that we ought to aim at a good life, consisting as it does in the attainment of everything really good. This acknowledgment follows from recognizing the self-evident truth that real goods ought to be desired.

Even though it cannot be a terminal goal reached and enjoyed, the ideal of a good life functions as all other ends do by prescribing certain means that we must employ and proscribing other things that we must eschew in order to pursue the ultimate good of our lives effectively. Happiness cannot be achieved by any means whatsoever, but only by choices and actions that add real goods to our life and that avoid apparent goods that interfere with the attainment of real goods.

To think, as is so widely believed today, that happiness consists in achieving whatever apparent goods an individual happens to desire according to his wants, without regard to the difference between right and wrong desires, leads to opposite conclusions all along the line. The ultimate good ceases to be the same ideal for all human beings. It ceases to be the common good of mankind. It functions as a terminal goal that can be completely achieved at some moment of one's life, not just approximated in some measure or degree in the course of a whole lifetime.

In addition, it becomes difficult if not impossible to understand how a good society, through the justice of its institutions and arrangements, can serve to promote the pursuit of happiness by all its members, differing as they do in their individual wants and more often than not brought into conflict with one another in their effort to satisfy them. It becomes meaningless to say that the state and its government should serve the common good of its people, for the happiness they strive for is no longer a common good.

No government or society can undertake to fulfill the obligation expressed in the maxim "To each according to his individual wants." The pursuit of happiness can be aided and abetted by just laws and institutions only to the extent that the state can do whatever may be necessary to provide all its members with the conditions requisite for fulfilling their common human needs. Over and above this, it should also permit them to satisfy their individual wants if doing so does not impede or frustrate others in their pursuit of happiness.

A single marvelously succinct statement by St. Augustine puts all of this in a nutshell. “Happy is the man,” Augustine said, “who, in the course of a complete life, has everything he desires, provided he desire nothing amiss.”

That kernel of wisdom calls for some expansion to make fully explicit the insight it contains. To desire nothing amiss is to desire only what one ought to desire and to refrain from desiring what one ought not to desire. The pursuit of happiness, properly conceived, puts us under the categorical obligation to seek everything that is really good for us and nothing that interferes with the attainment of all the real goods that fulfill our human needs.

To discharge this obligation, we must form the habit of choice that consists in desiring aright and desiring nothing amiss. We must aim at happiness, which is the ultimate good of our lives, and choose aright the means of achieving it.

That right aim conjoined with that right habit of choice constitute what the ancients called moral virtue. This is only one of the two indispensable factors in the pursuit of happiness. The other is the good fortune of being blessed by external circumstances that facilitate rather than frustrate its pursuit, especially with regard to the goods of chance partly or wholly beyond our control.

Aristotle’s definition of happiness includes both of these factors and indicates that they are complementary: “Happiness consists in a complete life (i) lived in accordance with virtue *and* (ii) attended by a moderate supply of external goods” (or whatever goods depend in whole or in part on good fortune).

The individual may be a good person in the sense of being virtuous. But a good person does not always succeed in the pursuit of happiness—in making a good life for himself or herself. Virtue by itself does not suffice for the attainment of the ultimate good. If it did, mankind would have little or no reason to carry on its age-old struggle for a good society, with liberty, equality, and justice for all. 📖

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