

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Aug '14

Philosophy is Everybody's Business

Nº 780



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GOOD HABITS AND GOOD LUCK

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Some of the real goods that are required for a good life are means to others. External goods, such as food, clothing, and shelter, are means to health, vitality, and vigor. We need wealth to live well because we need health to live well.

Similarly, we need health, vitality, and vigor in order to engage in activities that are necessary to obtain still other goods. If we did not have to do anything at all in order to live well, we would not need vitality and vigor in order to be active.

In the order of goods, the highest ranking belongs to those that we desire for their own sake as well as for the sake of a good life. Wealth, for example, is not desirable for its own sake, but only as a means to living well. But such real goods as friendship and knowledge are desirable for their own sake as well as for the sake of a good life.

Some real goods are limited goods; others are unlimited goods. For example, wealth and bodily pleasure are limited goods. You can want more of them than you need, and more than you need is not really good for you. Knowledge, skill, and the pleasures of the mind are unlimited goods. More of them is always better. They are goods of which you cannot have too much.

If there were no limited goods of which you could want more than you need; if all real goods were equally important, so that none of them should be sought for the sake of any other; if wanting certain things that appear good to you did not come into conflict with seeking other things that are really good for you—if life could be lived this way, then there would be little or no difficulty about living a good life, and there would be no need for good habits of choice and decision in order to succeed in one's pursuit of happiness.

But that, Aristotle knew, is not the way it is. If you think about your own life for a moment, you will see that he was right. Just think about the regrets you have had. Remember the times you were sorry because you were too lazy to take the trouble to do what was necessary to get something you needed. Or remember when you allowed yourself the pleasure of oversleeping or overeating and regretted it later. Or the time when you did not do something you ought to have done because you feared the pain you might suffer in doing it.

If you had made the right choice and decision every one of those times, you would have no regrets. Choices and decisions that leave you with no regrets are choices and decisions that contribute to your pursuit of happiness by putting real goods in the right order, by limiting the amount when it should be limited, and by putting aside things you want if they get in the way of obtaining things you need.

Moral virtue, Aristotle tells us, is the habit of making right choices. Making one or two right choices among many wrong choices will not do. If the wrong choices greatly outnumber the right choices, you will be moving steadily in the wrong direction—away from achieving happiness instead of toward it. That is why Aristotle stresses the notion of habit.

You know how habits get formed. To form the habit of being on time for appointments, you have to try to be punctual over and over again. Gradually, the habit of being punctual gets formed.

Once it is formed, you have a firm and settled disposition to be on time in getting where you promised to be. The stronger the habit, the easier it is to act that way and the harder it is to break the habit or to act in an opposite fashion.

When you have formed a habit and it is well developed, you take pleasure in doing what you are in the habit of doing because you do it with ease—almost without effort. You find acting against your habits painful.

What I have just said is true of both good and bad habits. If you have formed the habit of oversleeping, it is easy and pleasant to turn the alarm clock off and go on sleeping. It is hard and painful to get up on time. So, too, if you have formed the habit of allowing yourself to overindulge in certain pleasures or to avoid taking certain pains, it is hard to stop doing it.

Such habits are bad habits, in Aristotle's view, because they interfere with your doing what you ought to do in order to get things you need. The opposite habits are good habits because they enable you to obtain what is really good for you instead of what only appears to be good for you at the time and may turn out to be bad for you in the long run.

Good habits, or moral virtues, are habits of making the right choices among goods, real and apparent. Bad habits, which Aristotle calls 'vices,' are habits of making the wrong choices. Every time you make a right choice and act on it, you are doing something that moves you toward your ultimate goal of living a good life. Every time you make a wrong choice and act on it, you are moving in the opposite direction. The virtuous person is one who makes the right choices regularly, time and time again, although not necessarily every single time.

That is why Aristotle thinks that virtue plays such a special role in the pursuit of happiness. That is why he regards moral virtue as the principal means to happiness and as the most important of all the things that are really good for us to have. Moral virtue is also an unlimited good. You cannot have too much of it. Habits of making right choices and decisions can never be too firmly formed.

Aristotle calls one aspect of moral virtue temperance. It consists in habitually resisting the temptation to overindulge in pleasures of all sorts or the temptation to seek more than is good for us of any limited good, such as wealth. One reason why bodily pleasures tempt us is that we can usually enjoy them right away. Having

temperance enables us to resist what appears to be good in the short run for the sake of what is really good for us in the long run. Having temperance also enables us to seek wealth in the right amount—only as a means to other goods, and not for its own sake as if it were an end in itself and an unlimited good.

Aristotle calls another aspect of moral virtue courage. Just as temperance is an habitual disposition to resist the lure of pleasures for the sake of more important goods that overindulgence in pleasure would prevent us from getting, so courage is an habitual disposition to take whatever pains may be involved in doing what we ought to do for the sake of a good life.

For example, we recognize that getting knowledge and developing certain skills are intellectual virtues that we ought to have. But acquiring knowledge and skills may be painful.

Studying is often hard to do; learning how to play a musical instrument well, how to write well, or how to think well involves practicing that is often irksome.

The habit of avoiding what is difficult or irksome because it is painful can certainly interfere with your acquiring knowledge and skills that are really good for you to have. That bad habit Aristotle calls the vice of cowardice.

The person who habitually avoids taking pains and trouble for the sake of obtaining real goods is as much a coward as the soldier who runs away in battle for fear of getting hurt. The soldier who risks his life or overcomes his fear of injury for the sake of victory in a good cause has courage. So, too, has anyone who habitually takes trouble, undergoes hardships, and suffers pain, in order to obtain things that are really good for him.

Temperance and courage differ as aspects of moral virtue. One is concerned with resisting the lure of bodily pleasures and with limiting our craving for limited goods. The other is concerned with suffering pains and hardships. But both are alike in one very important respect. Both are habits of making the right choice between things that only appear to be good and things that are really good. Both are habits of making the right choice between something that may be really good, but only in the short run of today, tomorrow, or next week, and something that is really good for us in the long run or for our life as a whole.

Aristotle realized that it is hard for those who are young in years or

experience to keep their eyes on remote, future goods in relation to immediately present pleasures and pains. He knew that that is difficult even for those who are older. But he also reminded us that the difficulty of looking ahead to one's life as a whole is a difficulty all of us must overcome in trying to acquire moral virtue—the habit of choosing rightly between goods of lasting importance and transient pleasures and pains.

His pointing this out calls our attention to the fact that trying to live well is not easy for any of us. That does not make the goal any less desirable to attain. Nor does it relieve us of the obligation to make the effort. On the contrary, in Aristotle's view the satisfaction that comes from having succeeded in living a good life or in trying to live one is worth all the trouble and effort it takes.

However, a willingness to take the trouble and make the effort is not by itself enough. If an individual has the appropriate raw materials at his or her disposal and if he or she has the skill or know-how necessary for producing something that is well made, producing it is almost entirely within the individual's power. If individuals fail, the fault is theirs. Unfortunately, what is true of making a work of art is not true of living a good life.

Success in that venture is not entirely within our power. We can fail without being at fault. We can fail even if we have the moral virtue that Aristotle thought was requisite for success. Good habits of choice are requisite for success, but having them does not guarantee it.

The reason why this is so is that all the real goods we should seek to possess in order to live well are not entirely within our power to obtain. Some, such as good habits of mind and character (the intellectual and the moral virtues) are much more within our power to possess than others, such as wealth and health, or even freedom and friendship. Even acquiring knowledge and skill or forming good habits of choice may depend on having helpful parents and teachers, which is beyond our own control.

We are not able to control the conditions under which we are born and brought up. We cannot make fortune smile upon us. Much that happens to us happens by chance rather than by choice on our part.

Effort on our part does not assure us that we will come into possession of the external goods we need to live a good life. Nor does the care we take of our bodies assure us that we will retain our health and vigor. Poverty and disabling disease and even the loss of free-

dom and of friends can be our lot in spite of the most virtuous conduct on our part.

Moral virtue, however important it is for living a good life, is not enough because chance as well as choice plays a role in the pursuit of happiness. Good luck is as necessary as good habits. Some of the real goods we come to possess are largely the gift of fortune, though making a good use of them after we have them depends on our having good habits. That, in Aristotle's view, still makes mortal virtue the controlling factor in living a good life.

In addition, having good habits enables a person to bear up under misfortunes. If we cannot control what happens to us by chance, we can at least take advantage of the good things that fall into our lap as a result of good fortune; and we can try to make up for the things of which we are deprived by misfortune. Moral virtue helps us in both ways to deal with the twists and turns of fortune—good and bad.

Aristotle sums all this up when he says that our success in living a good life depends on two things. One is having the moral virtue that enables us to make right choices from day to day. The other is being blessed by good luck or good fortune. As moral virtue prevents us from aiming in the wrong direction and choosing things that are not really good for us, so good fortune supplies us with real goods that are not entirely within our power to obtain by choice.

A good life, it has been said, is one in which a person has everything that he or she desires, provided that he or she desires nothing amiss. In order to desire nothing amiss, one must have moral virtue. But one must also have goods that lie beyond the reach of choice—the goods bestowed on us by good luck, in addition to the goods acquired by good habits of choice.

Among these goods of fortune are things that depend on the physical environment and on the society in which we are born, brought up, and live our lives. Aristotle never lets us forget that we are social animals as well as physical organisms. Having a good family and living in a good society are as important as living in a good climate and having good air, good water, and other physical resources available.

Up to this point, we have been considering the pursuit of happiness as if it were a solitary affair—as if it were something each of us could do by himself or herself alone, with no thought of others.


That is hardly the way things are. Since we cannot live well in complete solitude, we must think of what we have to do in order to live well with others. We must also think of what others can and should do to help us in our effort to lead a good life.

The pursuit of happiness is selfish to the extent that the good life it aims at directly is one's own good life, not the good life of anybody else. But when we realize that we cannot succeed in the pursuit of happiness without considering the happiness of others, our self-interest becomes enlightened. We cannot be entirely selfish and succeed.

That is why, according to Aristotle, the two aspects of moral virtue that we have so far considered are not enough. In addition to temperance and courage, there is justice. Justice is concerned with the good of others, not only of our friends or those whom we love, but of everyone else. Justice is also concerned with the good of the all-encompassing society in which we live—the society we call the state.

Living in a good society contributes greatly to the individual's pursuit of his own happiness because a good society is one that deals justly with the individuals who are its members. It also requires the individual to deal justly with other individuals and to act for the good of society as a whole. That good is a good in which all the members of society participate.

Persons who are not temperate and courageous injure themselves by habitually making the wrong choices. Persons who habitually make the wrong choices will also be unjust and injure others as well as the society in which they live. The reason for this is that those who firmly aim at a really good life for themselves will regularly make choices that carry out that aim. Choices so directed will also aim directly at a really good life for others and at the welfare of the society in which others share as well as themselves.

Consider, for example, the person who wants more wealth than is really good for him; or the person who overindulges his appetite for bodily pleasures; or the person who craves something that is not really good for anyone—power over other human beings in order to dominate their lives. Such persons will certainly ruin their own lives. It is also highly probable that they will injure others as a result of aiming in the wrong direction. But persons who aim their own lives in the right direction cannot help benefitting others and the society in which they live. 

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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.

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