



RELATIVITY TO INDIVIDUAL AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Mortimer Adler

(Part 1 of 2)

(1)

The distinction between the real and the apparent good, which has been so important in the defense of the common-sense view against its philosophical critics, contributes as well to our fuller understanding of the good life as a goal to be sought. I have in mind particularly the point that emerged in the discussion (toward the end of the preceding chapter) of the notion of happiness, as that term is used by modern philosophers from Locke and Kant to Mill and the present day.

Happiness, for them, consists in the satisfaction of whatever desires the individual may have, without regard to their being right or wrong desires. This means that happiness for each man consists in getting the things he wants, whether he ought to want them or not, and so the components or elements of happiness may be as various as the variety of individual wants. In sharp contrast, the shape of a good life is the

same for all men. Its component parts, the elements that make it up and are the constitutive means of achieving it, consist of things that are really good for a man—things that he needs, not just things that are apparently good because he wants them whether he needs them or not. Since the needs to which all real goods correspond are needs inherent in the specific nature of man, they are common to all men, and so whatever is really good for one man is really good for everyone else.

In the sphere of wants and apparent goods, individual differences tend toward an infinite variety. The diversity of human wants, like the diversity of individual tastes, predilections, interests, and opinions, is an essential feature of the human world, and one that can never be denied or overlooked. But underlying this diversity of individual differences lies the common or specific human nature that is individually differentiated in this man and that. Each of us is not only this unique human being, individually differing from all the rest; each of us is also an individual instance of the human nature we share with all the rest. This fact is as obvious and undeniable as the fact of individual differences, though it is often ignored and even explicitly denied—by philosophers and social scientists, if not by men of common sense.

The human good, the good for man as man, is a whole life made good by the possession of all the real goods toward which the common human nature of each individual tends for the satisfaction of its inherent needs. Since real goods are goods we ought to seek, the ideal of a good life as constituted by the sum total of real goods functions normatively as the complete or ultimate goal toward which we ought to strive. It is, as I shall explain presently, not the *summum bonum*, not the *highest* good in an order of goods, but the *totum bonum*, the whole of goods. And the moral obligation that each man has to make a good life for himself—to achieve this *totum bonum* in his individual life—is not only a categorical ought; it is also one that is universally binding on all men in the same way.

Much more remains to be said in order to show, not only more clearly but also more concretely, how a good life as a whole is constituted by the possession of the totality of real goods, goods that correspond to natural needs. Our understanding of the good life as the *totum bonum* which leaves no needs unsatisfied must be such that it does not obscure or negate any essential feature of the *totum bonum* as the ultimate goal of our efforts to live well. Although the *totum bonum* is an end that is never a means to anything beyond itself and although, in this sense, it is the only ultimate end of human activity, it is not and cannot be a terminal end, one that the individual is able to arrive at and come to rest in at any moment in his life. Rather, as I pointed out

earlier, it is purely a normative end, one that imposes categorical obligations upon us and sets the standards by which the particular choices we make in life and the courses of action we embark upon can be judged as right or wrong—as directed toward the achievement of a really good life as a whole or as directed toward the attainment of merely apparent goods that the individual may mistakenly suppose would make his life good.

All this must be understood with sufficient concreteness to make it meaningful to the individual who is often more intensely aware of his own special predilections, interests, and wants—the expressions of his individual temperament—than he is of the deeper or underlying needs inherent in the human nature he shares with all other men. This requires us to deal with all the incontrovertible facts of individual and cultural differences as they bear on and affect the meaning of the proposition that every human being is aiming at the same thing when he obeys the injunction to make a really good life for himself. But before I attempt to enlarge on these matters, I would like to return briefly to the subject of happiness in relation to the good life. For reasons that will become evident, I am unwilling to relinquish the use of that term, in spite of its misuse in modern philosophical discourse as well as in everyday speech.

(2)

In the opening pages of this book, I pointed out that the terms *happiness* and *a good life* had been used interchangeably by certain philosophers in antiquity. But in view of the fact that the ethical meaning of happiness has been overlaid and mixed with psychological connotations in modern thought and in current usage, I told the reader that I was going to refrain from using the word in the early chapters of this book, expressing the hope that it might later become possible for me to use *happiness* and *a good life* as terms having exactly the same moral connotation, without any danger of being misunderstood.

One contemporary philosopher for whose book, *The Varieties of Goodness*, I have great respect, was led to the opposite decision by his understandable repugnance for the word “happiness.” Professor Georg Henrik von Wright felt that “happiness” could not be shorn of its misleading psychological and hedonic connotations to be serviceable as the name for the ultimate good of man. He decided to use instead the term *human welfare*. While the significance he attaches to that term does not correspond in all essentials with the significance of *a really good life* as we have come to understand it, it comes much closer than the term *happiness* as that is used by Locke, Kant, Mill, and other modern philosophers.

My chief reason among others for not wishing to relinquish the term *happiness* is the political significance of Thomas Jefferson's famous phrase "the" pursuit of happiness." I hope to be able to show that Jefferson's use of this phrase to signify one of man's basic, unalienable natural rights—the primary natural right which, as we shall see, underlies all the others, such as the rights to life and to liberty is unintelligible and indefensible unless "the pursuit of happiness" and "the effort of the individual to make a really good life for himself are identical in meaning. For this to be so, the terms *happiness* and *a really good life* must be interchangeable or synonymous.

In order to make them interchangeable or synonymous, we must denude the term *happiness* of its psychological connotations and retain only the ethical or moral connotations that it has as well. When these are exclusively stressed, the term *happiness*, as we shall see, becomes identical in meaning with *a really good life*.

The following rules of usage indicate the psychological connotations of "happiness" that must be exorcised. (1) "Happiness" must not be used to name an experienceable or enjoyable state of mind or feeling, such as the experience of feeling pleased or satisfied when one's immediate desires are realized by getting the things one wants. (2) It must not be used to name an enjoyable state of contentment of any temporal duration which, whatever its length, occupies only a portion of the time of one's life. (3) It must not be used to name an experience that can be enjoyed at one time and not at another, something that can be gained at one time and lost at another.

With these psychological connotations of the word removed, the term *happiness* can then be given the following ethical connotations, so that its meaning coincides with the meaning of a *good life* as we have come to understand it in the development of the common-sense view.

(1) What is meant or understood in both cases is something—a goal or objective—that everyone desires. No one desires to be unhappy or miserable. No one desires a bad life, one that is utterly ruined or spoiled.

(2) In both cases, the objective or goal is never desired as a means or stepping stone to anything that lies beyond itself. So understood, happiness or a good life is an ultimate end, an end that is not in turn a means to anything else; and it is the only ultimate end, the

only end that is not a means to or a part of something else that is sought. No one can meaningfully finish the sentence “I want to be happy because ... ,” just as no one can meaningfully finish the sentence “I want a good life for myself because” This is true of nothing else. Let X stand for anything other than happiness or a good life, and it is always meaningful to say “I want X because I want to be happy” or “I want X because I want a good life for myself.”

(3) Finally, in both cases, the achievement of the goal—the attainment of happiness or a good life—omits nothing that ought to be desired. Nothing could have been added to it that would have increased its goodness. In other words, both *happiness* and *the good life* signify the *totum bonum*—the whole or sum total of goods.

I should not need to remind the reader that these elements of meaning common to *happiness* and *the good life* do not make either a term of purely ethical significance, divested of all psychological connotations, *unless the goods involved in the totum bonum* (whether it is called “happiness” or “a good life”) *are all real goods, goods that every man ought consciously to want because they satisfy his natural needs.* If the distinction between real and apparent goods, or between the things one ought to desire and the things one merely wants, does not govern our interpretation of the three points made above, the word “happiness” retains its psychological connotations; and even if some quasi-ethical connotations also remain in virtue of its standing for an ultimate end that men in fact desire, “happiness” would still signify an end that each individual could envisage in his own individual way, and no one could be mistaken about the things that constituted his happiness. The same would be true of “a good life” if that phrase were not understood as meaning *a really good life*, for then each man could make a good life for himself in his own way as he saw fit, and two individuals who were utterly opposed in the things they wanted for themselves could be equally successful in making good lives.

One test of whether we are using *happiness* as a purely ethical notion, identical in meaning with the notion of a really good life, is our affirmation and understanding of the proposition that happiness is the same for all men, for that is precisely what we are able to affirm and understand when we speak of a really good human life. Another test is our recognition of the fact that moral virtue—the habitual disposition to make the choices we ought to make in order to achieve the *totum bonum*—is an indispensable means to happiness, as it is an indispensable means to a really good life. A morally bad or vicious person

cannot attain happiness any more than he can succeed in making a good life for himself.

Still another test by which to tell whether we have separated the ethical from the psychological connotations of “happiness” is our ability to relate the psychological to the ethical connotations in the following way. We should be able to understand that *happiness* (in the ethical sense of the term in which it is identical with *a really good life*) may include moments that can be described by the words “happy” and “unhappy” when these words are used in their purely psychological sense. In other words, we must see that it is possible to make a good life for one’s self or to attain happiness, even though in the course of doing so, there will be only certain times when *we feel* happy or contented, as there will be other times when *we feel* unhappy or discontented.

The pursuit of happiness or the making of a good life does not exclude the frequent enjoyment of happiness (in its psychological connotation), but it might almost be laid down as a rule that the person who seeks to be happy (in this sense) *all* the time is one who will fail to make a really good life for himself and be defeated in his pursuit of happiness. He has committed the cardinal error of wanting a good time—from day to day—above all else, and in preference to making for himself a whole life that is really good. His mistake, stated in other terms, is the error of the hedonist who makes pleasure—whether as an object of desire or as the satisfaction of his wants, whatever they may be—either the highest good or the sole good; for the hedonist, who uses “happiness” with a mixture of psychological and quasi-ethical connotations, it is the hedonic character of happiness—pleasure experienced and pleasure sought—which makes it appear to be the *summum bonum* or highest good.

Mention of the *summum bonum* leads me to one further observation that bears on the meaning of happiness and a really good life. It would be a serious mistake to call a good life the *summum bonum*. The use of that epithet presupposes an order or scale of goods, in which some are lower, some are higher, and one at least is the highest or supreme among all the things that are really good. It should be clear at once that a good life, as constituted by the possession of all real goods, cannot be called the “*summum bonum*” It is the whole or sum total of all real goods, not one good among others, even though that is the best of all.

The same thing is true of happiness—a point that has not been recognized by those who have used that term with a mixture of psychological and quasi-ethical connotations. They have repeatedly referred to happiness as the *summum bonum*, understanding thereby the highest

good, the good to be preferred to all others. But if happiness were the *summum bonum*, then it would be possible to attain and enjoy happiness while still lacking other and inferior goods, in which case one's happiness would be increased if, in addition to having the supreme good, one also had one or more of the inferior goods. This is manifestly a self-contradiction in terms, if happiness is conceived, psychologically, as a state in which all desires are satisfied and, ethically, as an ultimate end to be sought. We are thus brought to the conclusion that happiness, like a whole life that is really good, must be the *totum bonum*, not the *summum bonum*, for only as *totum bonum* can it function, normatively, as the ultimate end to be sought; and "happiness" can have this meaning only when it is used, in a purely ethical sense, as a synonym for a whole life that is really good.

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 Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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

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