THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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RELATIVITY TO INDIVIDUAL AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Mortimer Adler

(Part 2 of 2)

(3)

Henceforth, we should be able to use the word "happiness," when convenience recommends it, as short for the more cumbersome phrase "a whole life that is really good," which, if its meaning were fully spelled out, would read: "A whole life made good by the possession of all the things that are really good for a man, and by the possession of them to the fullest extent that they are really good, neither more nor less, together with the possession of such other goods as the individual may want, on the condition that obtaining these goods does not interfere with his getting real goods that he needs:" Thus understood, "happiness" and "a good life" are simply different names for the *totum bonum,* the totality of real goods among which the goods of leisure constitute the highest in the order of goods—the *summum bonum.*

Each type of real good that is a constituent element in the *totum bonum* corresponds to a different natural need. They are such

things as health, pleasure, wealth, friends or loved ones, and knowledge (where this term "knowledge" stands for all the things that develop or perfect man's ability to inquire, understand, and know). As the common-sense view recognizes, these real goods are either the intrinsic accompaniments of or the extrinsic results aimed at by four basic human activities—sleep, play, subsistence-work, and leisure-work. As we have seen, the needs or natural desires that these real goods satisfy consist in human capacities that call for realization or fulfillment. Let me repeat what was said earlier on this last point. A native capacity is both something positive and something negative. It is a disposition or tendency to act in a certain way, but it is also a lack or privation that calls for a remedy—an emptiness that calls for a remedy—and it is in this sense that every capacity is a need, every native ability a natural desire. Thus, by nature social animals, we have a capacity for social life, and this is the root not only of our tendency to associate with other men, but also of our need for friendships of one sort or another. So, too, by nature cognitive animals, we have a capacity for knowledge of all sorts, and this is the root not only of our tendency to inquire and to learn, but also of our need for more and more knowledge and understanding. The biological need we call "hunger" is the plainest paradigm of need as a tendency or impulse to action and also as a lack or emptiness to be filled.

When the common-sense view speaks of the result aimed at by all forms of leisure-work as personal self-improvement or betterment, it has in mind the acquisition of all those real goods that fulfill distinctively human capacities, such as man's capacities for acquiring arts and sciences or for making friendships. But what about certain things that common sense calls good, such as freedom from coercion or impediment, favorable circumstances bestowed by fortune, a good moral character, and sound judgment? Are these real goods? And if so, what need or natural capacity do they fulfill? The problem raised by these questions is a difficult and complicated one, but a brief answer for the moment consists in admitting, first, that these things do not correspond to natural needs in the sense in which food satisfies hunger, or knowledge our natural desire to know. We must go on to say, second, that these things are, nevertheless, all real goods, at least in the sense that they are goods that men do need and ought to seek. The apparent inconsistency of these two statements will be removed later when, in Chapter 15, we come to see that some real goods are needed only in the sense that they are recognized by human reason to be necessary as means for achieving a good life—man being by nature the kind of animal he is, and the circumstances of a human life being what they are.

Before going on, it may be useful to reiterate three points that have

been made about a whole life that is really good, or about happiness when that is identical in meaning with a really good life. The first is that, being the *totum bonum,* it omits nothing that is really good and so leaves no need unfulfilled, no natural desire unsatisfied.

The second is that happiness or a whole good life can never be experienced at any moment or period during the course of living, though the exercise of memory and imagination does enable us to consider our life as a whole. We can never say, during a man's life, that he is happy, any more than we can say, before his life is over, that he has succeeded in making a good life for himself, since while he is still alive, his whole life is still in the process of becoming. In view of this, we can say of a man who is succeeding in the task of making a good life for himself only that he is *becoming* happy or, in other words, that he is on his way to doing the job, but he has not yet finished doing it. This is the profound insight that lies concealed in the phrase "pursuit of happiness" and, as we shall see, this also explains why the basic natural right that a just society or government should try to secure—and aid or abet—for every individual is not, and cannot be, the right to happiness, but is rather the right to its pursuit. One way of remembering this point is to remember the qualification that must be added to the famous definition of happiness given by Boethius. He said: Happiness consists in the possession in aggregate of all good things—all the things that are really good for a man. The qualification that must be added is that life being a temporal whole and a good life something that can be made only in the course of using up the time of our lives, the possession of all good things can be achieved only successively and cumulatively—from day to day, and from year to year; it cannot be achieved in this life by the simultaneous presence of all good things at a single moment in time.

The third point is that a good life can include apparent goods of all sorts—things that men want even if they have no natural need for them and even if they cannot be rationally justified as necessary for achieving a good life. But this is true only with the stringent qualification or restriction that the apparent goods a man goes after, or the way he goes after them to satisfy his wants, do not in any way conflict with his getting all the real goods he needs, or with getting them to the fullest extent to which they are really good for him. In other words, the moral obligation to make a really good life for one's self does not preclude satisfying one's wants and seeking things that are apparent but not real goods, but only if they are *innocuous—only if* the pursuit of them *does not interfere* with the pursuit of happiness.

(4)

The foregoing clarifications and developments of the common-sense view cannot help but elicit from psychologists, sociologists, and cultural anthropologists an objection that was not mentioned earlier when I enumerated the various criticisms that philosophers would level against it. The objection is to the proposition that the *totum bonum*—happiness or a really good life—is the same for all men at all times and all places, and under all circumstances; in consequence of which, all men are under the same moral obligation when it is said that each ought to make a good life for himself. The empirical psychologist objects to this on the grounds that it ignores the whole range of individual differences in physique, temperament, and talent—intelligence and native endowments or aptitudes. The sociologist or cultural anthropologist objects to this on the similar grounds that it ignores the whole range of societal and cultural differences—differences in all the man—made circumstances that surround an individual life, and perhaps differences in the physical environment as well that often occasion or help to form particular social or cultural institutions.

The reply to both objections is the same. It consists, first, in acknowledging the relevance of all the facts about individual and cultural differences that we either know as a matter of ordinary experience or have learned from investigations conducted by the behavioral scientists. But these are not the only facts to be taken into account. There is also the pre-eminent fact that all men belong to the same biological species and, as such, are the same in nature, that is, have the same biological properties, the same basic native capacities—dispositions and needs. When this fact is put together with the facts of individual differences, we see that while the general outlines of a good life are the same for all men because they all have the same specific nature, the details that fill that outline in differ from man to man because men all differ individually from one another.

That is one reason why it was said earlier that the plan for making a good life—one that would be a common plan for all men to follow—can only be sketched in its general outlines and cannot be worked out in all its concrete details. The latter can be done only by each individual and only from moment to moment in the course of a whole life. A few examples may help to make this point clearer. Being the animals they are, all men must devote a portion of their time to the biologically necessary activities we have grouped together under the term *sleep.* But differing from one another in temperament and physique, as well as in external circumstances, they will not all engage in these activities in the *same* way or to the *same* degree. Similarly,

though all men ought to devote as much of their time as possible to *leisure-work,* because they cannot do too much of this for their own good, their individual differences in temperament and talent, as well as in the external circumstances of their lives, will lead them to engage in different types of leisure-work and to engage in them in different ways. The same holds for *playful activities,* which will differ both in degree and in manner from man to man, because of their individual differences and the differences in the circumstances that affect their lives. And it also holds for *subsistence-work* in the case of those men who, for want of enough wealth or property, are under compulsion to make a living for themselves.

Hence it is possible to say that happiness or a good life, conceived in its general outlines as the same for all, is attainable by all men, except those who are prevented by abnormal individual disabilities or incapacities or those who are prevented by the extremes of good or bad fortune. With the exceptions noted, all men have an equal opportunity to attain happiness or to make a good life, but this equality is one of proportionality. Differing individually in their capacities, each can fulfill his capacities to the utmost, and although the degree of happiness attained may not be identical for all, it will be proportionally equal for all who make an equally successful effort. This does not mean that all men will in fact make the degree of effort they ought to make or that, given differences in circumstances, the same degree of effort will be equally successful. As a result, all men may not achieve happiness or a good life to the fullest degree of which they are individually capable. In addition, quite apart from considerations of degree, the manner in which men engage in the pursuit of happiness will differ from individual to individual.

(5)

I said earlier that the same answer applied not only to individual differences, differences in native endowment, but also to societal and cultural differences, all of them environmental and circumstantial. But when we consider differences of the latter sort—the circumstantial differences—one qualification must be added that is not called for in the case of differences in native endowment.

Plato long ago observed that what is honored in a society is cultivated there. It would also seem to be true that what is not honored in a society—or, more emphatically, what is socially or culturally regarded as having little or no worth—cannot be cultivated there. It may be too much to expect any individual—or any but the rarest exception—to be so extreme a non-conformist that he will earnestly and steadfastly seek for himself things that, while really good

for him because he is a man, are not honored by the society in which he lives or, worse, are strongly disapproved of. The converse of this may also be true; namely, that the individual, conforming to the *mores* and value-system of the society in which he lives, will indulge in activities, or indulge in them to a degree, that lead to results that are not *really* good for him or any other human being, yet are generally *deemed* good by his society or culture. Consequently, it is highly probable that under certain societal or cultural conditions, it may be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for an individual to satisfy all his natural needs or to attain, to the requisite degree, all the things that are really good for him as a human being.

This being the case, we can judge human societies or cultures as good and bad, better or worse, in spite of all the injunctions against doing so delivered by the sociologists and cultural anthropologists. The sociologists and cultural anthropologists tell us that we cannot transcend what they call the "ethnocentric predicament" in which we find ourselves. Any judgment we make about a culture other than our own will assume the soundness or validity of the *mores* and value-system of our own society or culture. This would, of course, be true if *all* value-systems were relative and had validity—or acceptance—only for the culture in which they were inherent. However, the value-system involved in the scale of real goods that constitute a good human fife is relative only to human nature, and not to societies or cultures. As such, it provides a standard that transcends the mores and the diverse value-systems that are inherent in diverse cultures. It is a universally applicable standard because it is based on what is universally present in all societies—human beings, the same in their specific nature.

Hence, by applying this standard, it is possible to judge any society or culture as good or bad, better or worse, including our own, and we can do so without falling into the ethnocentric predicament, that is the bugaboo of the sociologists and anthropologists. A society or culture is good if it does not prevent its members from making a really good life for themselves, and one is better than another if, to a greater degree than that other, it facilitates the pursuit of happiness for all or for more o£ its members. A society or culture is bad if it prevents some or all of its members from achieving the *totum bonum* that constitutes a really good human life, and one is worse than another if, to a greater degree than that other, it interferes with the pursuit of happiness for all or for more of its members.

It is by this standard—*there is and can be no other to serve the*

purpose—that we shall judge the society and culture of the United States in the twentieth century when we come, in Part Four of this book, to consider the question whether this is a good time to be alive and whether ours is a good society to be alive in. Now, however, we must turn to the one remaining formal objection to the common-sense answer as that has been philosophically developed—an objection that would, if it were sound, support the relativism of the ethnocentric predicament because it denies that any value-system can have objective validity, that is, the kind of objective truth found in the empirical sciences.

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