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HAPPINESS AND CONTENTMENT

Mortimer Adler

(Part 2 of 2)

How different is the excellence aimed at by architects and builders who, when they have completed their work, can point to a fine edifice in existence as the result. The building completed is a terminal goal which can be reached, rested in, and enjoyed at a given moment.

One cannot say the building the architect is working on is a good building until it is completed and stands there to be admired. So, too, one cannot say of a football or baseball game that it is a good game until the last play has been made and the whistle blows. When, at a baseball game, fans stand up in the seventh inning to stretch, one may say to the other, "It's a good game, isn't it?" The other should reply, "No, it's not over yet; it's becoming a good game; if it's as well played in the remaining innings as it has been played so far, it will have been a good game when it's finished."

Trite though it may be to say so, leading a morally good life or living well resembles the conduct of any of the performing arts or the playing of athletic games. The happiness which is identical with a

morally good life is a normative goal. The excellence aimed at inheres in a temporal whole—a life from birth to death.

If an individual at some midpoint in life is asked whether or not he has achieved happiness, the answer should be like that given by the baseball fan: “No, not yet, my life is not over; but if its closing years continue to have the same quality as the years gone by, I dare to say that I will have led a happy life when it has come to an end.”

What is true of terminal goals is equally true of normative goals. The goal aimed at controls one’s decision about the means to be taken to achieve it. The fact that a terminal goal can be reached and rested in, while a normative goal cannot be, makes no difference to the point. A normative goal aimed at, no less than a terminal goal, determines what we must do to achieve it.

Thus there should be no difficulty in understanding how happiness as the excellence of a whole life well lived, a morally good life, functions as a final end that is a normative not a terminal goal. Every step we take in that direction brings us nearer to its full realization, even though we never enjoy that full realization at any one moment. Every means we choose is good or bad accordingly as it tends in the right or the wrong direction—toward or away from the final end we are aiming at. Great insight is to be found in the statement that rightly directed means are the end aimed at in the process of becoming achieved or realized.

One further point should be noted. When, according to John Dewey, there are no final ends and every end is a means to something beyond itself, we are under no inexorable moral obligation to aim at any one of these ends. We may acknowledge a hypothetical imperative of the following sort: *if* we wish to achieve this particular end, *then* we ought to choose such and such means to achieve it.

The understanding of the “if” and “then” indicates the hypothetical character of the imperative—the prescriptive judgment. Only when the end aimed at is truly a final end (and it can be that in this life only if it is also a normative rather than a terminal end) must we acknowledge a categorical rather than a hypothetical imperative.

The self-evident principle that we ought to seek everything that is really good for us puts us under a moral obligation that is categorical. There are no “ifs” and “thens” about it. We cannot say “If we wish to lead a morally good life, then . . .” “We are under a categorical obligation to try to do so.

I said a moment ago that happiness can be a final end *in this life* only if it is a normative rather than a terminal goal. I repeat that here to call attention to the fact that, in Christian moral theology, what holds for terrestrial, temporal happiness does not hold for heavenly, eternal happiness—the happiness of those who, in the presence of God, enjoy the beatific vision. The latter is a terminal goal, as the former is not.

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Still another mistake about happiness is to be found in John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*. He vacillates between identifying, in certain passages, happiness with momentary contentment, and, in other passages, conceiving it as truly a final end, the excellence to be desired in a whole human life. His failure to distinguish between real and apparent goods as the objects of natural and acquired desires (needs and wants) adds to the confusion. But that is not the mistake to which I now wish to call attention.

Rather, this mistake consists in his setting before us two ends, each of which is supposedly a final or ultimate goal, yet one of which is to be subordinated to the other. On the one hand, Mill proposes as a self-evident truth that his own happiness is the ultimate goal at which the individual should aim. On the other hand, he also proposes that each of us should work for what he calls “the general happiness,” sometimes also referred to as the greatest good of the greatest number.

When there is any conflict between these two aims, the latter should take precedence over the former. We should aim at the general happiness even if that does not also serve the purpose of procuring for ourselves our own individual happiness.

It is impossible for there to be two ultimate goals that are not ordered to one another; and if they are so ordered by the subordination of the one to the other, then both cannot be ultimate goals.

The mistake on Mill's part might have been avoided if he had known and understood the distinction between the *bonum commune hominis* (the happiness or ultimate good that is the same for or common to all human beings) and the *bonum commune communitatis* (the common good of the organized community in which its members participate).

Because each human being as a person is an end to be served, not a means to be used, the organized community, in relation to its

members, is a means, not an end. The happiness of the individual person is the one and only ultimate goal or final end in this life. It is a common good in the sense that it is the same for all human beings.

The good that is common to and shared by all human beings as members of society (the *bonum commune communitatis*) is an end to be served by the organized community as a whole. We sometimes refer to this common good as the general welfare. Participating in the common good or general welfare provides the members of society with means that serve the pursuit of their individual happiness. By aiming directly at the common good or general welfare, a good society and a just government also aim indirectly at the happiness of all the persons who constitute the society and are under its government.

The common good or general welfare is only the proximate goal at which a good society and a just government should aim. The goal achieved serves as a means to society's ultimate goal—the individual happiness of each of society's members or the general happiness of all.

The crucial point here is that individuals by themselves cannot work *directly* for the general happiness—the happiness of all other persons in the society in which they live. They can do so *indirectly* only by working with others for the common good or general welfare of the political community, which is itself a means to the happiness of each and every individual.

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Finally, we come to a mistake about happiness to be found in Kant's moral philosophy. What I have in mind here is not the mistake that is prevalent throughout much of modern thought—the mistake of identifying happiness with the contentment experienced when our desires, whatever they may be, are satisfied.

Kant does make that mistake and, as a result of it, rejects any moral philosophy that regards happiness as an ultimate end, for which means should be chosen, as merely utilitarian and pragmatic. In this connection he writes contemptuously of “the serpentine windings of utilitarianism.” He dismisses any utilitarian or pragmatic ethics, which is concerned with means and ends, as devoid of what is essential to a sound moral philosophy, namely moral duties, obligations that are categorical, not hypothetical.

As we have already seen, his charge against a moral philosophy that makes happiness, properly conceived, an ultimate goal is without foundation. It may apply to happiness when that is identified with contentment, but it does not apply to happiness conceived as a morally good life—a normative, not a terminal, goal. We are under a categorical imperative to aim at the excellence of a morally good life when we acknowledge the self-evident truth that we ought to seek everything that is really good for us.

If we drop the word “happiness” and deal instead with a morally good life, we can pinpoint the error that is so dominant in Kant’s moral philosophy. It is a mistake also to be found in antiquity (in Platonic thought and in the teachings of the Stoics), as well as in the writings of other modern philosophers.

It consists in saying, as Kant so explicitly does say, that a good or righteous will, by discharging its moral obligations, suffices for the purpose of leading a morally good life. Plato’s way of saying the same thing is to be found in the *Apology* where, at the end, he has Socrates declare that “no harm can come to a good man in this life or the next.” Epictetus and other Roman Stoics repeat again and again that a good will suffices for the achievement of happiness.


The error here resides in the word “suffices.” There can be no question at all that having moral virtue (which is identical with having a will rightly directed to happiness as the ultimate goal and habitually disposed to choose the right means for achieving it) is absolutely necessary for the leading of a morally good life. Necessary, yes, but not by itself sufficient. The other, equally necessary but also not sufficient, ingredient is being blessed by good fortune.

There are many real goods, most of them external goods, such as wealth, a healthy environment, political liberty, and so on, that are not solely within the power of the most virtuous individual to obtain for himself or herself. Obtaining these goods in the pursuit of happiness depends on fortunate circumstances that are beyond the individual’s power to control.

Deprived of these goods of fortune, a human life can be ruined even for the most morally virtuous individual. He or she may be a morally good person and still be deprived of the happiness of a life well lived by such misfortunes as enslavement, grinding poverty, crippling illness, the loss of friends and loved ones. Being a morally good human being does not automatically result in the achievement of a morally good life.

Aristotle sums up this critical point in his single sentence definition of happiness as “a whole life, lived in accordance with moral virtue, and accompanied by a moderate possession of wealth” [and all other external goods that are ours through the blessings of good fortune]. I have put in brackets what I think serves to explicate a point too briefly expressed.

Were this not so, there would be little or no reason for all the historic efforts that have been made to reform our political and economic institutions by removing injustices and improving the conditions under which human beings live. If happiness can be achieved by moral virtue alone, then why abolish slavery, why attempt to alleviate grinding poverty or destitution, why be concerned with providing health care and the protection of health, why extend the suffrage to all so that all human beings can exercise political liberty by having a voice in their own government?

To these questions, there can be only one answer. The political and economic reforms that have occurred in the course of history would be pointless if moral virtue by itself sufficed for the attainment of happiness and the leading of a good life. Nothing more need be said, in my judgment, to persuade anyone of the seriousness of the mistake made by Plato, by the Stoics, by Immanuel Kant, and by other modern philosophers. 

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