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VIRTUE AND HAPPINESS

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Part 1 of 3

THE IDEAS OF WORK AND OF WEALTH belong to other disciplines as well as being objects of philosophical thought. Many think of wealth as exclusively the subject of economic science. But, as we have seen, philosophy has important things to say about it, things that deserve consideration prior to dealing with the phenomena and matters subject to scientific investigation by economists. Work is studied and discussed in schools of business and in connection with business administration as a profession. But, as we have seen, the philosophical clarification of kinds of work, especially in relation to leisure and the other parts of life, deals with more fundamental matters.

The idea of virtue and the conjoined idea of happiness are exclusively the concern of philosophy. Here, as in the case of work and wealth, the relevant branch of philosophy is moral philosophy.

Under the overarching idea of work, we dealt with all human activities and all the parts of life that use up the time of our lives. Under the overarching idea of wealth, we dealt with all the external goods that constitute human possessions and forms of property.

What important aspect of human life, its welfare and well-being, remains untouched? Virtue and the virtues, together with other human perfections, not only in themselves, but also in relation to human activities and human possessions.

We are faced with having to choose between one activity and another, with having to order and arrange the parts of life, with having to make judgments about which external goods or possessions should be pursued with moderation and within limits and which may be sought without limit. That is where virtue, especially moral virtue, comes into the picture. The role that virtue plays in relation to the making of such choices and judgments determines—in part at least—our success or failure in the pursuit of happiness, our effort to make good human lives for ourselves.

The distinction between perfections of all sorts (of body, of character, and of mind) and possessions of all sorts (economic goods, political goods, and the goods of human association) carries with it a distinction between goods that are wholly within our power to obtain and goods that may be partly within our power but never completely so. The latter in varying degrees depend on external circumstances, either favorable or unfavorable to our possessing them.

However, not all goods that are personal perfections fall entirely within our power. Like external goods, some of them are affected by external conditions.

For example, the way we manage our lives affects our being healthy and vigorous, but our being so is also critically affected by our having a healthy environment, having adequate access to medical care, and by other external conditions and opportunities. So, too, our being knowledgeable and skillful in a wide variety of ways depends upon our own efforts to think, learn, and inquire, but it also depends in varying degrees on our access to educational facilities in youth, to opportunities for continued learning after all schooling is finished, and especially on our having enough free time at our disposal to engage in leisure activities that involve learning of one sort or another.

The only personal perfection that would appear not to depend upon any external circumstances is moral virtue. Whether or not we are morally virtuous, persons of good character, would appear to be wholly within our power—a result of exercising our freedom of choice. But even here it may be true that having free time for leisure activities has some effect on our moral and spiritual growth as well as upon our mental improvement. Only in a capital-intensive economy can enough free time become open for the many as well as for the few.

The idea of happiness, which is conjoined with virtue, embraces all the other ideas considered in Part One of this book. Here it is necessary to remind readers that I am using the word "happiness" in its ethical meaning, not its psychological meaning.

When most people use the word, they have the latter meaning in mind. The word then connotes a mental state of satisfaction or contentment that consists simply in getting whatever one wants. Sometimes we feel happy because our wants at that moment are satisfied; sometimes we feel unhappy because our wants at that moment are frustrated or unfulfilled. Accordingly, we change from feeling happy to feeling unhappy from day to day, week to week, or year to year. In that meaning of the word "happiness," as the word "feel" that I have italicized above indicates, happiness and unhappiness are psychological phenomena of which we can be conscious and have experience.

Not so, when the word is used in its ethical significance. Then the word connotes something that we are never conscious of and cannot experience at all. It also connotes something that never exists at any one moment of our lives, and does not change from time to time.

In its ethical meaning, the word "happiness" stands for a whole human life well lived, a life enriched by all real goods—all the possessions a human being should have, all the perfections that a human being should attain. What makes them real, as opposed to merely apparent goods, is that they fulfill our inherent human needs, not just our individual, acquired wants. We ought to want them, whether in fact we do or not. Here again is where virtue comes into the picture, now in relation to our seeking or failing to seek the things that are really good for us.

A good life is a temporal whole. It does not exist at any one moment. It occurs with the passage of time and over a span of time. In this respect, it is like any game that human beings play.

In the middle of a football game, one should not say that it is a good game, but rather that it is becoming a good game. If it is as well played in the second half as in the first half, it will have been a good game when it is over.

The same applies to a human life. In the course of its coming to be, it can be described as on the way to becoming a good life or the opposite. Only when it is all over, can we say that it was a good life, that the individual who lived it achieved happiness.

In our consideration of the parts of life, in connection with work and leisure, we learned that a human life may be a contracted or an expanded life—a two- or three-part life, on the one hand, a four- or five-part life on the other, with the sixth part, involving necessary biological activities, common to both. Obviously the more expanded life is better than the more contracted one.

In our effort to live better rather than worse lives, the economic conditions under which we live certainly have an effect upon what types of activity we must and what types of activity we can engage in, and what opportunities we have for living expanded rather than contracted lives. But external circumstances are not the only determining factor. The other, equally important, factor is moral virtue, controlling the choices we make or do not make.

This brings us, finally, to the question whether being morally virtuous is not only necessary, but also sufficient, for the achievement of a good life. If that achievement also depends on the good fortune of living under favorable external circumstances, then the answer must be that moral virtue is only a necessary, not sufficient, condition and that the other necessary but not sufficient condition is good fortune.

That answer, given by Aristotle and by almost no other moral philosopher, is one I am compelled to adopt in the light of all the foregoing considerations. I hope my readers are also persuaded to adopt it. Adopting it leads us to see that moral virtue may make a man good, but without the addition of the external goods conferred by benign circumstances, it cannot make a life good, an expanded or happy life.

St. Augustine, in a little tract entitled The Happy Life, summed up matters by saying, “Happy is the man who, in the course of a complete life, attains everything he desires, provided he desire nothing amiss.” I have emphasized the proviso in order to point out that

that is where virtue comes into the picture. Being virtuous prevents us from desiring anything amiss.

Wonderful summary that it is, it is nevertheless incomplete. Augustine should have added another proviso. He should have said, “and also provided that he has the good fortune that bestows upon him other goods which are not entirely within the power of his own free choice.”

Habits, Good and Bad

Looked at one way, all habits are perfections, whether good or bad. They are improvements of the nature we come into this world with. A carpenter improves the raw materials he works with when he fashions a table out of them, even if, being a poor workman, the table he produces is an inferior one. The improvement consists in the carpenter’s realizing the wood’s potentialities for being shaped into the form of a table.

The human infant at birth is a cornucopia of potentialities, of diverse abilities needing development. The infant at birth cannot walk, speak, feed itself, wash itself, stand up, sit up, not to mention all the other things it cannot do then, which two to five years later it does: read, write, add, question and answer, judge, think. It may not do these very well—in fact, it may do them poorly—but actually being able to do them at all is an improvement on the raw material of undeveloped potentialities that constitute the baby at birth.

The development of a human potentiality is habit formation. Like the potentiality that it develops, the habit is also an ability. At any given moment, we have countless habits that we are not exercising by acting in one way or another. The unexercised habit is formed ability to act in a certain way. In contrast, the original, innate potentiality, before developed by habit formation, is an unformed ability to act in that way.

It is precisely this difference between two states of the same ability—the unformed state and the formed state—that explains why it can be correctly said that all habits are improvements, even perfections, whether good or bad.

Human beings are endowed at birth with the ability to speak any language, but then they can actually speak none. By early habit formation, they acquire the formed ability to speak the language of their parents and, subsequently, they may acquire the formed ability to speak another language. Two things should be noted about

this. In the first place, their native linguistic ability has been improved by such habit formation, whether they have developed good or bad habits of speech. Second, the habits they have formed are still only abilities, which the habituated persons may or may not be exercising at any given moment.

Attention to these two points enables us to understand the significance of the profound truth that habit is second nature. Habits consist of potentialities for action just as original nature does; but these are acquired, not innate, potentialities; that is why they are second nature.

Of all the actions that we perform every day of our lives, most of them issue from the habits we have formed. Very few of them are acts that exercise a totally unformed native ability. Some of these are the reflex reactions with which we are born, but even these may be conditioned and altered. Some may be spontaneous acts, done for the first time, and as such they do not reflect prior habit formation. Only if the spontaneous act is subsequently repeated again and again does habit formation ensue.

It should be obvious at once that without habit formation, we would be as helpless as the infant in the cradle. Without habit formation, we would have to act spontaneously on every occasion, or deliberately think out what we are about to do and decide each time on how to do it. Think of dressing and undressing every day without habits of doing so; think of doing any sort of work, engaging in any sort of play, driving a car, cooking a meal, and so on, without habits of doing so.

We recoil from the thought with horror, and rightly so. Human life without habit formation would be a nightmare. All the powers inherent in our human nature at birth would be as naught unless and until they are overlaid by habit and become our second nature.

How do we form habits? Let me answer that question by first considering all our bodily habits, all of which are acquired skills in the use of our bodily powers. Every habit of bodily performance is an acquired skill, from simple skills, such as the one that determines how we walk or how we position our body in one posture or another, to much more complex skills, such as those that determine how we play any athletic game, engage in any sport, or perform any artistic act—sing, play a musical instrument, write a letter.

By mentioning these more complex bodily skills along with the much simpler ones, I am calling attention to the fact that all skills

acquired by habit have a mental as well as a physical aspect. There are some purely mental skills, but all those mentioned above are skills of both body and mind. The simpler ones have a larger bodily aspect; the more complex ones, a larger mental aspect. All of them have both in varying degrees.

Regardless of where they fall in the spectrum of skills, the habits by which we acquire them are formed by the repetition of actions. By doing it over and over again, we learn how to walk in a certain way. By standing up straight every time we have to stand, instead of slouching, we form that habit of posture instead of the opposite. By repeating again and again the actions prescribed by our tennis coach, our athletic trainer, our piano or violin teacher, we form the habit that constitutes the skill aimed at by our coach, trainer, or teacher.

In the course of such training, our preceptor may stop us and say, “Don’t do it that way, do it this way,” or just, “Stop doing it that way; now try doing it again the right way.” Only if we follow instructions will we form the habit—the skill—that is the object of the exercise.

Habit formation is like the programming of computers, but with a difference. The reflex reactions with which we are born comprise our innate programming—something that nature provides, for which we have no responsibility. All the habits we form ourselves are acquired programming. Whereas computers are always programmed by others, whether human beings or other computers, our voluntary habit formation consists in self-programming, even when it is under the direction of coaches, trainers, or teachers. We can always, choose to follow their directions or not. All habits are, in this sense, voluntarily formed by the persons who acquire them. They result from free choices on their part.

A habit, once formed, can be broken in just the same way that it was formed—by repeated acts on our part, only now acts of an opposite sort. Instead of taking another cigarette or another strong drink, we refuse it, and substitute some other act for it. Similarly, in breaking the bad habit of stroking a tennis ball with our eyes somewhere else, we keep our eyes on the ball time and time again. Bad habits, in short, are broken in the same way that good habits are formed.

What, then, is the difference between good habits and bad? If both are perfections in the basic sense that they are developments of our innate abilities and improvements on the raw nature with which we

are born, why are good habits perfections in another sense, while bad habits are corruptions rather than perfections?

The only answer to this question should be obvious at once. Habits, are good, and therefore perfections, if they develop us in the right direction, the direction we ought to follow. They are bad, and therefore corruptions, if they develop us in the wrong direction, the, direction we ought to avoid. But what is the direction we ought to follow and the direction we ought to avoid?

The direction we ought to follow in our habit formation is one that accords with the rules for acting well. The truth of this is easiest to see in the case of any skill or art. I will postpone for a moment the types of habit formation which do not result in skills, concerning which it is more difficult to explain the criteria that divide right from wrong directions and good from bad habits.

In the case of any skill, technique, or art (the three words just used are all synonyms), the rules of the skill or art prescribe the right actions to be performed. The rules for driving an automobile; the rules for baking a cake, the rules for hemming a dress, the rules for making a bed, to take the simplest examples, all prescribe the right way of doing these things. By following such rules, and also by avoiding actions that the rules proscribe or prohibit, we form good habits. What is true of these rules is equally true of the rules of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, or the rules set forth in tennis manuals and other "how to" books that deal with sports and games.

I have written such books, concerned with reading, speaking, listening, and thinking, and I know that laying down the rules does not produce the desired good habits. Nor does learning the rules, being able to recite them in an orderly fashion, or even understanding them well. I have taught logic to students who could pass an examination that tested whether or not they knew and understood the rules. Those same students, put to another test, plainly revealed that they could not think logically and avoid logical errors.

Why? Because knowing and understanding rules of any sort that prescribe the right acts and proscribe the wrong ones do not form habits. Habits are formed by acting repeatedly in accordance with the rules, and in no other way. What I have just said is as true of moral habits as the habits of any art or skill. Knowing and understanding moral rules or ethical precepts does not produce a person of good moral character. One can pass an examination in moral philosophy and still be a scoundrel, knave, or villain.

A moral philosophy or a code of ethics that relies solely on obedience to the rules it sets forth for the result it aims at is totally unpragmatic. It is likely to be worse—unsound and dogmatic. Only a moral philosophy that prescribes the formation of good habits of conduct is undogmatic, sound, and truly practical. Extraordinary as this may seem, the only two moral philosophers who make habit formation, not obedience to rules, the center of their teaching are John Dewey in our own day and Aristotle in antiquity.

Though rules that direct acts to be done or avoided underlie habit formation, in the case of moral conduct as well as in the case of skilled performances of all sorts, once persons form the right habits, they not only can forget the rules, they also usually do forget them. They certainly become unconscious of them in the execution of the habits they have formed.

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