



VIRTUE AND HAPPINESS

Mortimer Adler

Part 2 of 3

Habits of Mind and of Character

I have so far mentioned two kinds of habits: habits which are skills or arts, and moral habits—habits of conduct.

With respect to the first of these I have said that they always have a mental as well as a bodily aspect, but not all have a bodily as well as a mental aspect; for example, the skill of thinking logically as compared with the skill of any sport or the skill of higher arts, such as singing, playing a musical instrument, painting a picture, or photographing a scene.

With respect to moral habits, as contrasted with skills or arts, I have said that it is more difficult to explain how good habits are to be distinguished from bad. I postponed doing that until a little later.

With respect to all the types of habit so far mentioned, I have said that all of them are formed by the repetition of acts. I must now point out that this does not hold true of every type of habit, but only of those so far mentioned. Some habits can be formed by a single act. They are habits of mind, and they are especially habits of mind that have no bodily aspect, unlike most of the habits that are skills or arts.

When these are good habits of mind, we call them intellectual virtues. The three that I wish first to consider are habits of insight or understanding, habits of knowing, and habits of sound judgment about ultimate matters, usually called wisdom. The Greek words for these three intellectual virtues are “nous,” “episteme,” and “sophia.”

When, in the course of study or learning, I come to understand something or gain some insight by intuition rather than by reasoning, that understanding or insight is mine without having to repeat it over and over again. This is equally true of understanding or insight that results from a process of thinking. It is also true of knowledge that I acquire by learning or study. Once I have learned it, it is mine. I do not need to repeat the acts by which I learned it.

The only qualification to be added here concerns the liveliness or vitality of the habit. While a single act may be all that is necessary to form the habit, exercising it may be necessary to keep it alive. We do not lose these habits by failure to exercise them, but lapses in their exercise may result in their becoming weaker, so that we have to take action to revive them. Things that I once understood well may become less clear for me when I have paid no attention to the matter in question for a long time. I must then do something to reactivate my understanding and restore it to the clarity it once had. Everything alive tends to atrophy without exercise.

The three intellectual virtues named above do not exhaust all good habits of mind. There are two others. One kind we have already treated sufficiently—all the arts or skills, whether purely mental or both mental and bodily. The first three intellectual virtues can all be described as habits of knowing—either knowing that something is the case or knowing why it is so. The fourth group—the arts or skills—can be described as knowing how rather than as knowing that or why. Every art and skill is knowing how to perform a certain activity well or how to produce something that turns out to be well-made.

The fifth and last of the intellectual virtues can also be described as knowing how, but the know-how here concerns how to judge well and make good decisions with regard to our conduct. This virtue is called prudence. It is sometimes called practical wisdom to distinguish it from the philosophical or speculative wisdom that consists in knowing why about the most ultimate matters.

Like the arts or skills, prudence is a habit formed by repeated acts of deliberating well in order to reach sound judgments or decisions. Unlike the arts and the other intellectual virtues, prudence and prudence alone is concerned with the conduct of our lives. It alone of the intellectual virtues cannot be separated from the moral virtues.

As we shall see, it is impossible to be morally virtuous without being prudent, or prudent without being morally virtuous. That is not true of any of the other intellectual virtues. Illustrious examples abound of great artists and excellent performers in athletic contests who, by their conduct, cannot be judged morally virtuous. The same applies to great scientists and philosophers.

It should be clear from everything that has been said so far that the meaning of the word “virtue” is completely expressed in the phrase “good habit.” The Latin word from which the English word “virtue” is derived gives it a slightly different connotation, introducing the notes of virility and strength. The Greek word “arete,” which means excellence, is much nearer the mark. Every acquired excellence, of either mind or character, is a virtue. All habits are perfections in the sense of developments of the nature, but only the good habits that we call virtues are perfections in the sense of being developments that achieve excellence.

Turning now to the moral virtues, and associating the one intellectual virtue of prudence with them because it is inseparable from them, we must ask what they are good habits of doing. The answer is that they are good habits of desiring, as contrasted with good habits of knowing.

Desiring has for its objects (1) the goods we aim at—the ends or goals we seek, and (2) the means we choose in order to attain those ends or goals. Our desiring may also consist in (1) acts of will on our part, or (2) emotional impulses or drives. It may combine both at the same time. When it does, both mind and body are involved.

Since desire is the ultimate root and spring of all action, as understanding, knowing, or thinking by themselves are not, the moral

virtues, as good habits of desiring, give rise to morally good conduct. The moral vices, as bad habits of desiring, result in morally bad conduct.

Moral virtues, and also vices, are like the arts or skills. They are habits formed by repeated acts, morally good acts or morally bad acts. A single good or bad action does not give an individual a morally good or bad character, does not make him or her a virtuous or vicious person. Not even a few such acts do so. Only many repeated acts, all aiming in the same direction and carried out in the same way, will have that effect.

A person who performs a single virtuous act may not be a virtuous human being. Nor does the performance of a single, unjust, intemperate, or cowardly act, or even a few of them, deprive human beings of their moral virtue. To call a particular act virtuous is one thing; to call the individual who performs that act virtuous is quite another. Virtuous individuals can act unvirtuously and vicious individuals can act virtuously, under certain conditions. This brings us finally to the difficult questions I have so far postponed answering.

Question: What direction must the repeated acts take in order to form the good habits that are the moral virtues? Answer: They must be directed to the right ultimate end or goal.

Question: What is that? Answer: Happiness, ethically conceived as a good human life, an expanded life, a life enriched by all the things that are really good for a human being to be or have.

Question: How should this intended goal or end be achieved? Answer: By choosing the right means for attaining it, means that are not only effective for this purpose, but that do not tend in the opposite direction.

In the light of these questions and answers, we can now see that the moral virtues, together with the inseparable intellectual virtue of prudence, are habits of desiring that consist in aiming at or intending the right end and choosing the right means for attaining it.

Virtue and the Virtues: One or Many?

There is no question that there are many virtues if we consider both the intellectual and the moral virtues. Not only are these two kinds of virtues analytically distinct, but they are also existentially separable. We have recognized that a morally vicious person can have the intellectual virtues of art or science, or even of philosophical

wisdom. It is equally clear that a person can be a scientist without being philosophically wise, a scientist without being an artist, or the reverse. Hence these different virtues can exist in complete separation from one another.

Is this true of the moral virtues when we differentiate the three principal or cardinal moral virtues as temperance, courage, and justice, and associate prudence with them? That they are analytically distinct from one another can be made as clear in their case as in the case of the intellectual virtues. But are they existentially separable in the way that intellectual virtues are from one another and from the moral virtues?

Before I try to answer this question, let me be sure that readers fully understand the difference between analytical distinction and existential separation. When bread and butter lie on separate plates they are existentially separate as well as analytically distinct. We recognize their analytical distinction by how they taste and other perceptible properties. Their existential separation is made manifest by the separate plates on which they lie. Now butter the bread and eat it. The bread and butter remain as analytically distinct as before, both to our eyes and to our palates. But when the bread is buttered, the two become existentially inseparable. We cannot take them apart any longer, no matter how we try.

To the question about the unity or plurality of virtue in the moral sphere (whether there are three existentially separate moral virtues, which are also existentially separate from prudence, or four analytically distinct virtues, none of which is existentially separate from the others) the answer given, both by the popular mind and in philosophical treatises dealing with the subject, almost universally favors the plurality of virtue. There are many virtues, existentially separate as well as analytically distinct.

It is well nigh impossible to remove this view from daily speech. We cannot resist thinking of this particular virtue as contrasted with that particular one. We find ourselves saying that an individual has certain moral virtues, but lacks others.

All of our inveterate habits of thought and speech adopt the notion that there are many moral virtues which exist in separation from one another and from prudence. This is as true of the philosophers who write about virtue as it is true of the rest of us—with one exception, Aristotle. Even Thomas Aquinas, a faithful student and follower of Aristotle, when he comes to this question and states the

two opposite answers to it, adopts as the right answer the one that Aristotle rejects as wrong.

I reject it also and will try to explain why I think Aristotle was right. Before I do, let me make sure that there is no doubt about the clear analytical distinction of temperance, courage, justice, and prudence. All involve tending toward the right end and choosing the right means for attaining it. That is what is common to all of them as analytically distinct aspects of moral virtue.

Temperance is analytically distinct from the others by reason of its being concerned with pleasure in relation to other goods, either resisting the seductions of pleasure when yielding to them stands in the way of achieving other real goods we need or moderating our emotional desire for pleasure by recognizing that pleasure is a limited, not an unlimited good—good only in a certain measure.

Courage is analytically distinct from the others by reason of its being concerned with pain in relation to other goods, suffering pain for the sake of other real goods we need, which cannot otherwise be attained. Courage may also involve a habitual disposition to overcome our emotional reluctance to suffer any degree of pain or other hardships.

Justice is analytically distinct from the others by reason of its being concerned with the good of others and the good or welfare of the community, not our own good. Yet it also involves the recognition that our own good may depend upon not injuring the community in which we live or our fellow human beings.

All three, as analytically distinct aspects of moral virtue, constitute the good habit of intending the right end. Without a will that habitually aims at or intends the right end, we would not be habitually disposed to resist the temptations of pleasure or moderate our pursuit of it; we would not be habitually disposed to suffer pains and hardships; we would not habitually refrain from injuring other individuals or the community in which we live.

Prudence is analytically distinct from the other three by reason of being a habitual disposition to judge aright concerning the means for attaining the right end, intended or aimed at by the other three. Being a habitual disposition to judge, it is formed by intellectual acts. Being habitual dispositions with respect to pleasure and pain, temperance and courage are formed by acts of will and reason resisting, moderating, or otherwise controlling our passions, our sensuous inclinations, our animal impulses and drives. Being a habitu-

al disposition to act for the good of others, justice may consist entirely in acts of will and reason, though such acts may also involve our passions, our sensuous inclinations, and our animal drives.

All of the points so far made show clearly the respects in which the four habitual dispositions named by the words, “temperance,” “courage,” “justice,” and “prudence” are analytically distinct. But none of them provides any grounds whatsoever for asserting their existential separation.

On the contrary, when these points are carefully considered, it will, I think, be seen that the four habitual dispositions cannot exist in separation from one another.

Prudence cannot exist in separation from the other three because one cannot judge the right means for attaining the right end unless one intends or aims at that end.

Temperance, courage, and justice cannot exist in separation from prudence because one cannot be habitually disposed toward acting for the right end without judging aright the means for attaining it.

At one and the same time, an individual cannot be habitually disposed to aim at and act for the right end and also be habitually disposed to aim at and act for its opposite—one or another wrong end. Therefore, we cannot be temperate without being also courageous and just, courageous without also being just and temperate, or just without being also temperate and courageous.

The existential inseparability of aiming at the right end and selecting the right means for attaining it rests on the insight that the means are the end in the process of becoming. We move in the direction of any end, right or wrong, only to the extent that we resort to means effective for attaining it. The morally right end requires us to choose morally sound means for attaining it. No other means would be effective. Only in the case of morally wrong goals, or goals that are morally indifferent, does the end justify any means that are expedient, whether they are in themselves morally good or bad.

The existential impossibility of aiming at or intending the one right end and other wrong ends at the same time establishes the existential inseparability of temperance, courage, and justice.

The Aristotelian position with regard to the unity of moral virtue and its inseparability from prudence still permits us to refer to

temperance, courage, justice, and prudence as four analytically distinct aspects of moral virtue. We can, therefore, persist in our inveterate habit of using the words that name these four aspects as if they named four existentially separate as well as analytically distinct virtues.

When we do so, we are, for good reason, under the obligation to remember that such verbal habits of speech violate what should be a sound habit of thought; namely, that temperance, courage, justice, and prudence constitute a unity that cannot be broken up into existentially separable parts, each able to exist in separation from the others.

What are the good reasons that impose this obligation on us? I have already stated all the points about these four aspects of virtue that oblige us to acknowledge their existential inseparability. But there is one additional consideration that I must now mention.

Aristotle's position is the only one that provides an adequate and tenable solution of Plato's problem: Why should anyone be just to others—avoid injuring them or the community?

The oft-repeated golden rule fails completely as an answer. Why not do unto others what you wish no one would do unto you? Kant's categorical imperative, together with all the duties that he deduces from it, is merely a high-sounding and more elaborate statement of the golden rule. It is not much better. Nor is an appeal to conscience and the wish to avoid the pangs of remorse and guilt feelings.

The only categorical imperative that is a self-evident truth, which Kant's formulation is not, can be stated as follows: One ought to seek everything that is really good for one's self and nothing else. Since that categorical imperative imposes the obligation to pursue one's own happiness as the sum of all real goods, it heightens the point of the problem posed by Plato. It does not solve it.

Plato's problem once again: What reason is there for not being unjust to others if you can gain substantially by so doing, on condition, of course, that you can get away with it and go unpunished?

If we consider the difference between justice, on the one hand, and temperance or courage, on the other hand, it is easy to explain why we should be temperate and courageous. To be habitually intemperate or uncourageous is to ruin or seriously blemish our own lives. We injure ourselves by these vices. We cannot achieve hap-

piness or make good lives for ourselves without being habitually temperate and courageous.

But being habitually just toward others serves their pursuit of happiness, not our own, just as injuring them may frustrate or impede it. How are we barred from our own ultimate good, our own happiness, by the injustice we do others?

The solution of the problem lies in the unity of moral virtue. If we cannot effectively pursue our own happiness without being temperate and courageous, and if we cannot be temperate and courageous without also being just (because these three are inseparable aspects of integral moral virtue), then it follows inexorably that we must be habitually just for the sake of attaining our own ultimate end as well as for the sake of facilitating others in their pursuit of happiness.

Virtue as an End and as a Means

The intellectual virtues—the goods of the mind—occupy a high rank, if not the highest, in the scale of real goods. Moral virtue, while involving no form of knowledge, has an intellectual aspect, for it manifests the role played by reason and will in the control and moderation of the passions.

Together these virtues represent the greatest human perfections that can be achieved by learning and personal growth. These are the goods of mind and character that the pursuits of leisure aim at. They constitute the ends for which leisuring is the means.

But while they are ends, desirable for their own sake, they are also means to a good life. They are among its most important ingredients or components. A life not enriched by these goods would be greatly deprived, just as a life devoid of leisuring would be a contracted one.

Only happiness itself—a whole good life—is an ultimate end, never a means to be sought for the sake of some other good. Happiness, being the sum of all real goods, leaves no other good to be desired. That is why happiness should never be referred to as the *summum bonum* (the highest good), but rather as the *totum bonum* (the complete good).

The virtues may be the highest of all human goods, but taken all together, they are certainly not the complete good. One can have all the virtues and still lack freedom, friendship, health, and mod-

erate amounts of pleasure and of wealth. A virtuous person deprived of all these things would certainly be prevented from living well or achieving happiness in the course of time.

I have explained how the virtues are both ends, desirable for their own sake, and also means, desirable for the sake of a good life. I must now go further and explain how moral virtue, from which prudence is inseparable, differs from the intellectual virtues as means.

All the real goods are means to a good life in the sense that they are constitutive components of it. But moral virtue is more than that. It is one of the two operative factors—one of the two efficient causes—of our becoming happy. The other consists in such good fortune as befalls us and confers on us the real goods we cannot attain through free choice on our part and solely through the voluntary exercise of our powers.

In the light of all these considerations, we must finally face the question: Which is primary—the intellectual virtues or moral virtue? As constitutive components of good life, they are on a par as personal perfections. But if, with a view to becoming happy, one had to choose between strengthening one's moral virtue or increasing one's knowledge, one's skills, one's understanding, and even one's philosophical wisdom, there is in my mind little doubt as to what the answer should be.

It is better, in the long run and for the sake of a good life, to have strength of character than to have a richly cultivated mind. It is impossible to live without some knowledge and skill, but without moral virtue it is impossible to live well and to become happy. One can have all the intellectual virtues to the highest degree and for lack of moral virtue fail to lead a good life.

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