

VIRTUE AND HAPPINESS

Mortimer Adler

Part 3 of 3

How Can One Individual Help Another to Become Morally Virtuous?

I am tempted to say, “Don’t ask,” because I am persuaded that no one has ever come up with the answer, and probably no one ever will. The fact that we know how moral virtue is acquired does not mean that we know how one person can help another to acquire it.

Had the question been about the acquisition of the intellectual virtues, all except prudence, the answer would have been by teaching and learning. We acquire knowledge with the aid of didactic teachers; we acquire all our arts or skills with the aid of teachers who function as coaches or trainers; we acquire such understanding and wisdom as we come to have through experience and with the help of teachers who ask questions as Socrates did.

None of these methods of teaching, nor any form of learning that is aided by them, avails when we turn from the intellectual virtues to moral virtue, linked with prudence. Twenty-five centuries ago, Socrates asked, "Can moral virtue be taught?" He argued that it cannot be. To my knowledge, no one has successfully countered the arguments advanced by Socrates in Plato's dialogues.

His reasons boiled down to three things. First, moral virtue is a habit formed by free choice on our part. While it is also true that free choice enters into the formation of the habits that are intellectual virtues, it does so only to the extent that one must be voluntarily disposed to learn and to profit from teaching. In contrast, every action we perform that develops either a virtuous or vicious habit is itself a freely chosen act. Precisely because free choice operates at every stage in the development of moral virtue, no one attempting to inculcate moral virtue by teaching can succeed.

Consider in contrast the teaching and learning of mathematics. Granted that the learner must be motivated to learn, must voluntarily submit to instruction, and must voluntarily make the effort required to succeed. However, given all these prerequisites, free choice does not enter into the actual process of learning mathematics. When presented with the demonstration of a conclusion in geometry, the student is not free to accept or reject the conclusion. The reasoning presented necessitates the assent of his or her mind.

The individual's passions and predilections do not function as obstacles to learning mathematics, as they do, often overwhelmingly, when it comes to an individual's adopting the moral advice or injunctions offered by parents or other elders. Neither the carrot nor the stick can overcome an individual's obstinate resistance to moral instruction, whether that takes the form of wise counsel, eloquent exhortation, praise and blame, or setting forth examples of good conduct and the rewards it reaps.

Please note that I am not saying that ethics cannot be taught or that morality cannot be preached. Of course, they can be. But remember what was said earlier: There is a world of difference between (1) knowing and understanding the principles of ethics and the moral precepts that should be followed and (2) forming the habit of acting in accordance with those principles and precepts. Being able to pass an examination in ethics does not carry with it having moral virtue or a good moral character.

A second point made by Socrates in his attempt to explain why moral virtue cannot be taught concerns the role of prudence as an inseparable aspect of moral virtue.

If moral virtue were identical with knowledge, it could be taught; but it is not identical with knowledge. We are acquainted with instances, in our own life and the lives of others, where individuals know what they ought to do and fail to do it, or do what they know they ought not to do.

However, it may be thought that prudence, like art, is a form of know-how. We certainly acknowledge that arts can be taught, by coaches or trainers. Why, then, cannot prudence be similarly taught?

The answer lies in the distinction between all the skills as forms of know-how and prudence as a very special form of know-how. The arts or skills consist in knowing how to perform something well or to produce something that turns out to be well-made. In every case, there are clearly formulated rules to be followed by an individual in the effort to develop skill.

There would appear to be rules that should be followed in order to develop prudence, which consists in knowing how to form a sound judgment and reach the right decision about the means to be chosen. These rules include taking counsel, deliberating about alternatives and weighing their pros and cons, and being neither precipitate or rash on the one hand, nor obstinately indecisive on the other hand.

But at each step of the way an individual's passions and predilections can intervene to prevent him or her from following these rules, as they do not intervene when one undertakes to acquire a skill. That is why no one can train or coach another person to become prudent, as one can train or coach another person to write well, play tennis well, play the violin well, and so on.

In the third place, Socrates calls our attention to facts of experience with which everyone is acquainted. If moral virtue could be taught, why do virtuous parents, who make every effort they know how to inculcate it in their offspring, succeed with some and fail with others?

Let us suppose, for the moment, that such parents bring their children up in substantially the same way, that they offer the same moral advice, that they mete out the same rewards and punish-

ments, that they tell them what good consequences follow from one course of action and what bad consequences follow from another, that they hold up examples of virtuous persons who succeeded in living well and persons who came to grief, and that they do all this with manifest love and kindness.

Would anyone dare to say that children thus reared in the same way will inevitably turn out in the same way? Only someone who had no experience at all in the rearing of children could be so foolish. The rest of us, giving the opposite answer, have some sense of why we think different children, similarly reared, turn out differently.

The different results, we sense, stem from the differences of the children—differences of temperament, differences in their innate propensities, inner differences in the way they think and feel that no outsider can ever touch, and, most fundamental of all, differences in the way they exercise their free will. The similarity in the way two children are reared, even if all the outer conditions are identical, cannot overcome these innate and inner differences between them.

The free choice that enters at every step into the formation of moral character and does not enter into the development of excellent behavior on the part of domesticated animals is the crux of the matter. That is why we can train horses and dogs to behave well habitually, but not human beings.

To the three reasons offered by Socrates, I would add a fourth. The thinking that enters into the formation of moral virtue as the habit of making sound judgments and right decisions about how one should act here and now involves considering one's life as a whole, taking the long-term view of it, and judging what is for the best in the long run.

This is the very thing that the young simply cannot do. Their thinking tends to consider the immediate moment, the next day, or the next week, but not much beyond that. Most of them are motivated by present or imminent pleasures and pains. Since they are unable to think about what is best in the long run, they are also unable to forego immediate pleasures for the sake of a greater good in the long run, or to suffer immediate pains for the same long-term reason.

Unfortunately, one's moral character gets formed, one way or another, in youth. It can, of course, be changed later, but only by he-

roic effort and, without that, seldom successfully. Toward the end of our lives, when maturity enables us to take the long-term point of view and think about our lives as a whole, little time is left for judgments about what is best in the long run. The young who have ample time ahead of them, and so should profit from thinking about their life as a whole, are prevented by their immaturity from taking thought for the future.

Parents and elders often tell children about their own experiences. They point out the bad consequences they suffered from acting in a certain way and the good consequences that followed from another course of action. Children listen to such talk, but do not have the experiences that prompt it. They are also unable to profit from the experience of an older generation. To paraphrase a statement by George Santayana, those who cannot profit from the mistakes of others are condemned to repeat them. They are thus destined to find out everything for themselves by trial and error. How this enables some of them to grow up into adults of sound moral character and others to grow up into adults lacking moral virtue, no one knows.

Is there, then, no answer at all to the question of how human beings, especially the young, can be aided in the development of moral virtue? I said at the beginning that there is none. There is one exception, perhaps. Christian doctrine makes the acquisition of moral virtue dependent upon having the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and charity. It declares that these supernatural virtues are not acquired by human effort, but are a gift of God's grace. This leaves us with a theological mystery. Why does God bestow that gift upon some and not upon others, since all who are born with original sin are in need of it for their moral virtue in this life as well as for their salvation hereafter?

Does my conclusion, that there is no philosophical or scientific solution of the problem of how to rear children so that they become morally virtuous adults, carry with it the corollary that there is little or no point in explaining why moral virtue is so important in human life and how it is to be acquired by the choices individuals make and by their actions? A large part of this chapter has been devoted to just that. To no effect whatsoever? Has it all been a purely academic exercise, with no practical benefit conferred?

I wish I could promise that the elucidations offered in this chapter would definitely produce good effects. But I know this to be far from the truth. I know, as all of us do, individuals who have developed good moral characters without the benefit of being acquaint-

ed with and understanding what has been said in the foregoing pages about moral virtue and its development.

I am, therefore, left with the relatively feeble conclusion that those who are acquainted with and understand these matters are thereby just a little better off in regulating their own lives and in influencing the lives of others. Slight as the satisfaction may be that this gives the reader, it is the best I can do.

Is Anyone Ever Perfectly Virtuous or Completely Happy?

Since we are here concerned with a philosophical understanding of virtue and happiness and not with theological doctrines concerning these subjects, I will state the Christian answer to this question only for the sake of its contrast to the philosophical answer.

Christianity teaches that the saints achieve perfect or heroic virtue, but only with God's gift of grace. It also teaches that natural moral virtue cannot exist except in the company of the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and charity. In addition, it teaches that having these virtues, taken together, assures happiness hereafter, the eternal happiness of the saints in the presence of God.

When happiness is regarded as we have been regarding it (as temporal, not eternal; here on earth, not hereafter in heaven), then loyalty to the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience and other abstentions from worldly goods result in an earthly life that is voluntarily deprived of many real goods that we have counted as indispensable to an enriched and expanded human life here and now, though such deprivations may be required for eternal happiness in the life to come hereafter.

Perfect moral virtue, philosophically considered, is an ideal always to be aimed at, but seldom if ever to be attained. Our moral characters are blemished by this flaw or that. Individuals who have morally good characters are morally virtuous to a degree that is measured by the frequency with which they commit acts that are not virtuous. That frequency may not be so great that it breaks the habit of virtuous conduct, but it can be great enough to weaken an individual's moral fiber.

The result is a degree of moral virtue that only approximates the ideal aimed at. Accordingly, individuals may have moral virtue in varying degrees, some more, some less, but rarely if ever is the ideal of perfection attained.

Another consequence is the incompleteness of the happiness achieved. The more virtuous a person is, the more that individual has it in his power to make a good life for himself or herself. However, variations in degree of moral virtue are not the only factor in determining how nearly individuals can approximate the ideal of complete happiness in their earthly lives. The other factor consists in the degree of good fortune with which the individual is blessed. Some are more fortunate, some less. The more fortunate a person is, the more he will come into possession of all those real goods that are not wholly within his own power to obtain.

Reference to good fortune and misfortune leads us to another factor that flaws our happiness and renders it incomplete. Almost all of us at one time or another, and even perhaps on several occasions, meet with the misfortune of having to make a tragic choice. Circumstances beyond our control confront us with alternatives that permit us no good choice. Whichever alternative we choose results in our voluntarily taking evil unto ourselves.

This occurs when we must choose between one love and another, between love and duty, between conflicting duties or between conflicting kinds of law to both of which we owe loyalty, and between justice and expediency.

One of our greatest debts to the ancient Greeks is their discovery of human tragedy, so clearly exemplified in two plays by Sophocles, *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*. Modern exemplifications of it exist in the classical French tragedies of Racine and Corneille and also in one short story told by Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*. But let no one suppose that tragedy befalls only these fictional heroes and heroines. The rest of us also experience it through tricks of fate, played on us by outrageous fortune.

Tragedy befalls only the morally virtuous who are already on the way toward making good lives for themselves. It does not occur in the lives of fools or knaves, villains or criminals. They have ruined their own lives. There is nothing left for misfortune to ruin.

We could not speak of degrees of moral virtue were it not one and the same personal perfection for all human beings. Nor could we speak of degrees of happiness did not a good human life comprise the same real goods for all human beings. Only in the purely psychological meaning of the word "happiness" does what makes one man happy make another miserable. Only in that meaning of the term are there as many different states of happiness as there are different individuals.

The felt contentment or satisfaction that is called happiness psychologically depends on our individually differing wants as well as on the extent to which they are fulfilled or frustrated. In contrast, the whole good life that is called happiness ethically depends on the fulfillment of our common human needs as well as upon the extent to which they are fulfilled by the attainment of the real goods that we seek.

So far as its enrichment by all real goods is concerned, one person's happiness or good life is the same as another's, differing only in the extent to which their common human needs are fulfilled. However, there may be another source of difference between one person's happiness and another's. While remaining the same with respect to the real goods that everyone needs, it may differ with respect to the apparent goods that individuals want. The things that appear good to one person because he or she wants them will obviously differ from the things that appear good to another person. That individual's wants are different.

Of all such apparent goods, some may also be real goods, needed as well as wanted. Some may be merely apparent goods, not needed but nevertheless innocuous in the sense that wanting and getting them does not interfere with or impede our attaining the real goods all of us need. And some may be noxious rather than innocuous. Wanting these and getting them can defeat our pursuit of happiness.

Apparent goods that are detrimental to the pursuit of happiness cannot, of course, play any part in differentiating one person's happiness from another's. But in addition to being enriched by all the same real goods, in varying degrees, one person's happiness may also differ from another's by the different innocuous apparent goods that still further enrich the happiness of each.

One further question remains concerning the degree to which individuals approximate the ideal of complete happiness on earth. As almost everyone is subject to the occurrence of tragedy in their lives, so almost everyone is also subject to misfortunes, some more dire than others. An early death, enslavement, the agony of poverty carried to the extreme of destitution, imprisonment in solitary confinement, these things can completely frustrate a person's pursuit of happiness. They result in the misery that is the very opposite of happiness. However, misfortunes may not completely frustrate, but merely impede, an individual's effort to make a good life for himself or herself. Under what conditions are we best able to overcome

such misfortunes and still save our lives from the wreckage of bad luck?

The stronger our moral virtue, the more likely are we to be able to make good lives for ourselves in spite of these misfortunes. The other side of the same picture is that hard luck and adversity, when the misfortunes do not cause irreparable damage or destructive deprivations, may result in the strengthening of moral virtue.

Being blessed by benign conditions and the affluence of unmitigated good fortune usually has exactly the opposite effect. It is more difficult to develop moral virtue under such conditions than it is under adversity, when that is not crippling or totally destructive.

I wish to end this chapter by returning to one recurrent theme that provides a transition to the second part of this book. Readers probably do not need to be reminded that success in the pursuit of happiness depends on two factors, not one, each necessary, neither sufficient by itself. But they may be interested in examining Aristotle's one sentence definition of happiness. It summarizes the point compactly and succinctly. In reporting it below, I have added in brackets words not in the original, but which make its intent clearer.


Happiness consists in a complete life [well-lived because it is] lived in accordance with [moral] virtue, and accompanied by a moderate possession of [wealth and other] external goods.

I never tire of reiterating the importance of understanding that moral virtue by itself is not enough to make a life good. Were it sufficient by itself, there would be no point whatsoever in all the political, social, and economic reforms that have brought about progress in the external condition of human life.

If morally virtuous persons can live well and become happy in spite of dire poverty; in spite of being enslaved; in spite of being compelled by circumstances to lead two- or three-part lives, with insufficient time for leisure; in spite of an unhealthy environment; in spite of being disfranchised and treated as nonparticipating subjects of government rather than as citizens with a voice in their own government, then the social, political, and economic reforms that eliminate these conditions and replace them with better ones make no contribution to human happiness.

Precisely because being morally virtuous is not enough for success in the pursuit of happiness, it is better to live in a full-fledged state

than in a small village, in a society that has all the advantages peculiar to a political community; better to live under the peace of civil government than under the violence of anarchy; better to live under constitutional government than under despotism, no matter how benevolent; better to live in a democratic republic and in a capital-intensive socialist (but not communist) economy than under a less just political institution and under less favorable economic arrangements.

I trust readers will perceive the ways in which the two foregoing paragraphs connect the pivotal idea of happiness with all the other ideas so far considered and with all the ideas that remain to be considered in the rest of this book. 

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