

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

June 2018

Philosophy is Everybody's Business

Nº 949



LUCK AND VIRTUE

By

Mortimer J. Adler

Given at LAKE FOREST ACADEMY

Saturday, May 26, 1984

Archivist's Note: Dr. Adler created almost every presentation he gave in outline form. This commencement address is presented in the outline form in which it was created. Dr. Adler took liberties with this form. My theory is that indentation was used to indicate subservience to what was less indented above. If there were multiple unnumbered or unlettered indents the I believe they were related to the most recent numbered or lettered section. I believe he used vertical space between items of the same or similar indentation was to indicate slight pauses in speaking.

Dr. Adler wrote several early books in outline form but then publishers convinced him that people disliked and/or were intimidated by the outlines. What do you think of the outline form? Does it help or hinder his presentation? *Ken Dzigan*

1. I am sure you will not be surprised to have me explain the theme I have chosen for this occasion by referring to a controlling insight in Aristotle's *Ethics*.

You know, I am sure, that I have the greatest respect for the wisdom of Aristotle, especially in regard to ethics and politics.

2. The controlling insight I just referred to involves two factors, factors named by the two words in the title of this address—*luck* and *virtue*.

- a. *Luck*: to be lucky in life is to be blessed by good fortune—to enjoy the gifts that only beneficent fortune can bestow on us.

- b. *Virtue*: to be virtuous is to have good habits—good habits of choice and of action.

The morally virtuous individual—the person who is courageous, temperate, and just—is one who chooses what is right and does what is right—

not only for his own good, but also for the good of others and the good of community.

3. Most of the great moral philosophers think that being virtuous—having a good will and acting rightly—is quite sufficient. They think that virtue alone can enable a man to achieve a good human life. Not so, according to Aristotle. What distinguishes Aristotle from all other moral philosophers is his insight that the pursuit of happiness—the achievement of a good life—involves two factors, not one.

Virtue is indispensable, but by itself, it is not enough.

It is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition.

If a virtuous individual is beset by outrageous misfortunes, his life can be ruined. Being virtuous will not redeem his life from poverty, serious illness, the loss of friends and loved ones, the oppression of unjust treatment by others, and so on.

One needs the blessings of good fortune as well as moral virtue to achieve happiness.

Nor is good fortune by itself enough. It is not enough to be blessed by good health, bodily strength or beauty, an ample supply of wealth, the surroundings of a good family and a good society, good friends.

One can have all these things as gifts of fortune but lacking moral virtue—the habit of making right choices—one can squander or misapply all these gifts to one's own detriment.

In fact, unless one is virtuous, one is likely to be tempted to misuse the gifts of good fortune.

Prosperity can lead one to relax one's efforts and take it easy. Adversity, on the contrary, may call forth strength and effort to combat the difficulties it puts in one's way.

4. Why am I telling you all this? Why have I chosen this basic piece of Aristotelian wisdom to give you a word of advice about the future?

a. Because I regard you—the members of this graduating class—as among the most fortunate young men and women of your age in this country.

The clearest indication of this lies in the fact that you have enjoyed four years at this very fine school—vastly superior to the schools attended by nine-tenths of your contemporaries.

b. You are fortunate, indeed. I hope you realize that. But I also hope that you now realize that being fortunate is not enough.

In fact, without your also being virtuous, it may be bad for you—in the way that I pointed out a moment ago when I said that prosperity can spoil and weaken the individual, whereas adversity may strengthen him.

c. The fact that you are fortunate calls upon you to make a special effort to be virtuous, too.

Perhaps, I should say—a special effort to strengthen your good habits, because the fact that you have successfully met all the requirements here at Lake

Forest indicates that you have already formed some good habits in the course of the last four years.

5. If you agree with me that you are, indeed, fortunate young men and women, I would like to suggest to you the way in which, from this point on in your educational careers, as well as in the rest of your life, you should express your gratitude for the good fortune you have so far enjoyed.

The best way to do that is to increase your efforts to deserve the blessings of fortune by strengthening the good habits you have already begun to form here.

None of us initially deserves the good fortune that befalls us.

But once we have been blessed by good fortune, it is our moral obligation to try to deserve it—by forming and strengthening the good habits, the moral virtue, we need to make the best use of the blessings that have been bestowed on us.

6. May luck continue to smile upon you, and may you continue to deserve it by virtuous choices and actions.

Even if luck sometimes frowns upon you and turns the other way, you will have the strength of character that lies in good habits to surmount the impediments or obstacles that misfortune throws in your way.

Your luck may change from time to time, but once you have formed and strengthened the good habits that constitute moral virtue, you have a hold on life and a control over your destiny that will abide until the end of your days.



THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501) (c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.