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A person who performs a single virtuous act may not be a virtuous person. 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. —Mortimer Adler



HABITS OF MIND AND CHARACTER

by Mortimer Adler

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

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, 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

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 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 person. 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 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 in tending the right end and choosing the right means for attaining it.

* From his book A Vision of the Future (1984)

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max,

I just finished reading TGIO #110, and following the Adlerian motto of “read and discuss”, I would like to do the latter.

I found the essay quite an excellent example of using the “common sense” first principles to philosophically illuminate a practical matter. As the parent of a three year old son, I am constantly aware of what habits that my son is forming, mainly for the purpose of developing him into a good and responsible person. This essay also struck a timely note regarding an issue that was recently discussed in my church. During a recent sermon our pastor was half-frustratedly lecturing us on his observation that most American Christians were “educated beyond their level of obedience”. I have been mentally reviewing this over the past few weeks in regards to the habits in my life and those of my friends. Many Christians I know can quote scripture address and verse for daily situations, and have been schooled in doctrine and biblical principles, however they often do not follow through with these rules in the actions of their daily lives (myself included). In laymen’s terms they do not “walk the talk”. Your analysis has led me to realize that habit has both physical and mental constituents. I recently re-formed my morning reading habit by purposely ignoring the newspaper and opening the bible (physical act) and reading the scripture (mental act). This is now the new habit that I desired. I am trying to form the habit of praying before going to bed each evening, and while I mentally desire this habit, I have been poor as physically following through. If I desire to transform

myself to be more Christian I must be obedient to both constituents to form these new habits.

In reading the book of James this morning, the author entreats us to exhibit our faith by works. In this way he is prescribing that if you desire to show faith in God (mental action), then this obedience must be accompanied by works (physical action). The following verses were taken from the NAS bible. To grow in the habit of faith we must have mental and physical obedience.

James 2:17 - Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

James 2:18 - But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

James 2:24 - You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Thanks for helping to keep the cobwebs out of my mental gears each day.

Hank Rawlins

Dear Max:

I thought you'd appreciate the import of the following. Someone sent it to me and it's worth sharing.

Bob Heller

Parable of the Mule

Once there was a farmer who owned an old mule. One day the mule fell into the farmer's well and the farmer heard the mule 'praying' or whatever mules do when they fall into

wells. After carefully assessing the situation, the farmer sympathized with the mule, but decided that neither the mule nor the well was worth the trouble of saving. Instead, he called his neighbors and enlisted them to help haul dirt to bury the old mule in the well and put him out of his misery.

Initially, the old mule was hysterical! But as the farmer and his neighbors continued shoveling and the dirt hit his back, a thought struck him. It dawned on him that every time a shovel load of dirt landed on his back he could shake it off and step up! This he did, blow after blow. “shake it off and step up...shake it off and step up...shake it off and step up!”. He repeated this to encourage himself. No matter how painful the blows, or how distressing the situation seemed, the old mule fought “panic” and just kept right on shaking it off and stepping up! It wasn't long before the old mule, battered and exhausted, stepped triumphantly over the wall of that well!

What seemed like it would bury him actually helped him...all because of the manner in which he handled his adversity. That's life! If we face our problems and respond to them positively, and refuse to give in to panic, bitterness, or self-pity the adversities that come along to bury us usually have within them the very real potential to benefit us!

God Bless always

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Lucie Boyadjian

Lorie Call

Jane Fraser

Charlotte Ostermann

As always, we welcome your comments.

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