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We are all 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 lives for ourselves. —Mortimer Adler



HOW CAN ONE INDIVIDUAL HELP ANOTHER TO BECOME MORALLY VIRTUOUS?

by Mortimer Adler

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 punishments, 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 heroic 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 essay 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 essay 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 acquainted 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 lives and in influencing the lives of others. Slight as the satisfaction may be that this gives you, it is the best I can do.

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

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As always, we welcome your comments.

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