

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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# 113

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.

—Mortimer Adler



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## **IS ANYONE EVER PERFECTLY VIRTUOUS OR COMPLETELY HAPPY?**

*by Mortimer Adler*

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.

You 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 you 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.

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

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**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

Max:

I am just downloading, printing and storing the excellent fruits of your labor. Hey, did you write President Elect George W. Bush's acceptance speech. It was very good and I didn't even vote for him. I didn't hear Al Gore's but I hear it was very good, too. Maybe now we can all get back to business, putting into practice the wisdom from the Center for the Study of the Great Ideas!

Cheers

Mike Murphy

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Dear Max,

I just finished reading # 112. I could not agree more with

Dr. Adler. As a Court Appointed Special Advocate for children in the Juvenile Court System because they have been abused, I can attest to the truth of what Dr. Adler says in # 112. I have seen parents who have taken parenting courses on whom the course made no impression at all in terms of changes in observable behavior. Typically the parent was raised under an abusive parental system as well. So the cycle repeats itself in spite of all the counseling and social services rendered to the current parents. I worked on a case where the parent was given counseling by three different social service agencies over the course of three years to no avail in terms of changing her observable behavior. It is truly sad that in spite of all our knowledge of the physical world we cannot it would seem change ourselves without as Dr. Adler says a heroic effort which few of us are willing to make. Though I must admit that the changes required in the lives of some of the people are so great that it is no wonder they are unwilling to even try. Moreover, many of them see nothing wrong with their current mode of living.

What this says about the choices society makes about leadership is also crucial. We have only to look at the war disasters of the 20th Century to appreciate how critically important it is to choose mature leaders of highest possible character and wide experience in dealing with the world. It is equally sad to see how seldom we do.

Perhaps individuals cannot learn virtuous behavior but maybe nations can. The United States certainly learned something out its experiences in W.W.I and W.W.II. In the 1920's we refused to support the League of Nations with our membership and leadership which in my opinion was instrumental in setting up the conditions which lead to the Second World War. After the Second World War we helped rebuild the our friends and enemies and were, I like to think, the leading advocate of the setting up the United Nations which while it has not been a roaring success has nevertheless been instrumental in providing the world with 55 years of general peace. My principle concern today is that we may forget the hard lessons that that generation of Americans had

to learn with their blood, sweat and tears to paraphrase W. Churchill. When we refuse to pay our UN dues and sign treaties that we helped negotiate with other nations in good faith I fear that we are forgetting those lessons. Santayana was right, that is why the study of history is so important. We must not forgot the lessons of the past in a nuclear world.

Regards,

Lyle Sykora

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**As always, we welcome your comments.**  
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