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Happy is the man who, in the course of a complete life, attains everything he desires, provided he desire nothing amiss. —St. Augustine



VIRTUE AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

by Mortimer Adler

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.

The distinction between perfections of all sorts (of body, of character, and of mind) and possessions of all sorts (economic goods, political goods, and the goods of association) carries with it a distinction between goods that are wholly within our power to obtain and goods that may be partly within our power but never completely so. The latter in varying degrees depend on external circumstances, either favorable or unfavorable to our possessing them.

However, not all goods that are personal perfections fall entirely within our power. Like external goods, some of them are affected by external conditions.

For example, the way we manage our lives affects our being healthy and vigorous, but our being so is also critically affected by our having a healthy environment, having adequate access to medical care, and by other external conditions and opportunities. So, too, our being knowledgeable and skillful in a wide variety of ways depends upon our own efforts to think, learn, and inquire, but it also depends in varying degrees on our access to educational facilities in youth, to opportunities for continued learning after all schooling is finished, and especially on our having enough free time at our disposal to engage in leisure activities that involve learning of one sort or another.

The only personal perfection that would appear not to depend upon any external circumstances is moral virtue. Whether or not we are morally virtuous, persons of good character, would appear to be wholly within our power—a result of exercising our freedom of choice. But even here it may be true that having free time for leisure activities has some effect on our moral and spiritual growth as well as upon our mental improvement. Only in a capital intensive economy can enough free time become open for the many as well as for the few.

It is necessary to remind you that I am using the word “happiness” in its ethical meaning, not its psychological meaning.

When most people use the word, they have the latter meaning in mind. The word then connotes a mental state of satisfaction or contentment that consists simply in getting whatever one wants. Some times we *feel* happy because our wants at that moment are satisfied; sometimes we *feel* unhappy because our wants at that moment are frustrated or unfulfilled. Accordingly, we change from feeling happy to feeling unhappy from day to day, week to week, or year to year. In that meaning of the word “happiness,” as the word “feel” that I have italicized above indicates, happiness and unhappiness are psychological phenomena of which we can be conscious and have experience.

Not so, when the word is used in its ethical significance. Then the word connotes something that we are never conscious of and cannot experience at all. It also connotes something that never exists at any one moment of our lives, and does not change from time to time.

In its ethical meaning, the word “happiness” stands for a whole human life well lived, a life enriched by all real goods—all the possessions a human being should have, all the perfections that a human being should attain. What makes them real, as opposed to merely apparent goods, is that they fulfill our inherent human needs, not just our

individual, acquired wants. We ought to want them, whether in fact we do or not. Here again is where virtue comes into the picture, now in relation to our seeking or failing to seek the things that are really good for us.

A good life is a temporal whole. It does not exist at any one moment. It occurs with the passage of time and over a span of time. In this respect, it is like any game that human beings play.

In the middle of a football game, one should not say that it is a good game, but rather that it is becoming a good game. If it is as well played in the second half as in the first half, it will have been a good game when it is over.

The same applies to a human life. In the course of its coming to be, it can be described as on the way to becoming a good life or the opposite. Only when it is all over, can we say that it was a good life, that the individual who lived it achieved happiness.

In our effort to live better rather than worse lives, the economic conditions under which we live certainly have an effect upon what types of activity we must and what types of activity we *can* engage in, and what opportunities we have for living expanded rather than contracted lives. But external circumstances are not the only determining factor. The other, equally important, factor is moral virtue, controlling the choices we make or do not make.

This brings us, to the question whether being morally virtuous is not only necessary, but also sufficient, for the achievement of a good life. If that achievement also depends on the good fortune of living under favorable external circumstances, then the answer must be that moral virtue is only a necessary, not sufficient, condition and that the other necessary but not sufficient condition is good fortune.

That answer, given by Aristotle and by almost no other moral philosopher, is one I am compelled to adopt in the

light of all the foregoing considerations. I hope you are also persuaded to adopt it. Adopting it leads us to see that moral virtue may make a man good, but without the addition of the external goods conferred by benign circumstances, it cannot make a life good, an expanded or happy life.

St. Augustine, in a little tract entitled *The Happy Life*, summed up matters by saying, “Happy is the man who, in the course of a complete life, attains everything he desires, ***provided he desire nothing amiss.***” I have emphasized the proviso in order to point out that that is where virtue comes into the picture. Being virtuous prevents us from desiring anything amiss.

Wonderful summary that it is, it is nevertheless incomplete. Augustine should have added another proviso. He should have said, “and also provided that he has the good fortune that bestows upon him other goods which are not entirely within the power of his own free choice.”

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

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DR. ADLER: A TRIBUTE

by Dr. Jonathan Dolhenty

This is the end of one year and the beginning of another. Actually the first year of the new millennium. On December 28th of this year, Dr. Mortimer J. Adler was 98 years old. He, so much a part of the past millennium, has now become a part of the new. And I owe this man, this thinker, this philosopher, a debt I can never repay. Somehow, I don't think he cares about that debt. I don't expect to see an invoice for services rendered.

I was about 14 years old when I decided that the philosophical questions were the most important questions

and that I had to confront them and attempt to seek answers to them. That was a few years before I even knew who Mortimer Adler was. Of course, he had already been at work on dealing with those questions, while I was still trying to figure out how to shave my face and deal with the problems of puberty.

At twenty years of age, I discovered Mortimer Adler. Somehow, I was presented with the opportunity to buy a set of The Great Books of the Western World. I had little money. I was a senior in a private liberal arts college but I knew I had to have a set of those “Great Books.” At that time the cost was about \$1000, but that included the bookcase. I just had to have them. Period.

So I bought them with loaned money, which I paid off over a three-year period. I have carried that set of the “Great Books” with me over many journeys, many changes of addresses, and for over forty years. I read them now and then and intermittently over a period of four decades. That original set of books is beside me now as I write this essay.

Then all of a sudden it was 1998. Much had happened between 1959, when I purchased my set of The Great Books, and January of 1998, when I decided to set up a website promoting what is called “Classical Realism.” I had graduated from college, with degrees in philosophy and political science, gone on to graduate school in philosophy at the University of Washington and become disenchanted with the subject, transferred into a program in education and received a BA in education and a teaching certificate, gone on to receive a master’s degree, and then finally a doctoral degree in education and philosophy. Plus I wrote a doctoral dissertation on Ludwig Wittgenstein.

And now it was 1998. I set up the website, called it The Radical Academy, and thought I would put up a few of my essays for others to read. Since moving to Oregon in 1993, I had published (with the help of many others, including Gordon Corbett and Dr. Eugene Narrett) a print publication called “The Freedom Express.” But printing that newsletter

was becoming increasingly expensive since the price of paper was going sky-high as was the cost of laser-toner which we used to print the publication. Of course, the post office wasn't helping either since we sent it via first class mail.

So in January of 1998, we decided to stop printing and mailing "The Freedom Express" and put something similar up on the Internet. I knew nothing about the World Wide Web, and it took me a few months to figure things out and get up to slow-speed. After all, I had been designing publications in Aldus Pagemaker and postscript and now I had to rethink things in HTML code and a new application called Claris HomePage. I had to learn what a "gif" was and what a "jpeg" was and all sorts of other things. No mean thing for an old philosopher!

Anyway, The Radical Academy came online, tentatively in January of 1998, then full-blown in April of 1998, and then, after a year of experimentation, full-full-blown in 1999. In the meantime, we had been contacted by Max Weismann, the co-founder with Dr. Adler of The Center for the Study of The Great Ideas in Chicago, who had spotted our website on the Internet. When he mentioned Mortimer Adler, I immediately perked up and paid attention. Since The Radical Academy was promoting basically the same Classical Realism that Dr. Adler promoted for so many years, Max asked me if we might be interested in publishing some of his work on our website. Now, how could I refuse such an invitation!

Over the next few months we published all the essays and other material by Dr. Adler that Max sent to us. From a few essays sent initially, we eventually developed The Mortimer J. Adler Archives on The Radical Academy website. The Adler Archives is one of our most popular sections and continues to grow to this day. It is, to be sure, one of our proudest achievements. And we owe it all to Mortimer Adler for having the courage to continue to promote Classical Realism even in the face of much opposition from philosophical relativists and subjectivists.

Thank you, Max Weismann, for contacting us back in 1998 and allowing us to share in the promotion of Dr. Adler's philosophical thought.

Hi Max.

Just a brief note to say again **Thank You** to both you and Dr. Adler. Each day I read and reread some aspect of philosophical thought/concept in either Dr. Adler's books or from the web site. I was just reading Ethics by Aristotle and because of the background supplied by M. J. Adler I can understand them. To see the words of an individual from 2400 years ago is amazing, wonderful.

Alan MacFarlane

Max,

You might suggest that members look again at the Center's web site <http://www.thegreatideas.org/> in particular, *Adler On* <http://www.thegreatideas.org/adler-on.html> which, I hope, shows that Dr. Adler structured his works in a way that now makes them especially suitable to on-line adaptation. Members can send any questions or comments about the site to me at berrestr@execpc.com

Terry Berres, Center Webmeister

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WELCOME NEW MEMBERS:

Philip Lucius
Jason Moore
Herminio Rivera
William Ruland

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As always, we welcome your comments.
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