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## How Can I Make a Good Life for Myself?

by Mortimer Adler

[in two parts]

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**T**here is an entry in the *Note Books* of Samuel Butler that reads as follows:

IS LIFE WORTH LIVING?

*That is a question for an embryo, not a man!*

One might be tempted to say something similar of the question, *How can I make a good life for myself?* It is a question for children, not for adults.

Such a witticism—if it is a witticism—would spring from the consideration that the older one gets, the less of one’s life is left open to the choices that are operative in making it either good or bad. However, while it is true that the younger you are, the more time you have before you in which to engage in the effort to make a good life for yourself, it certainly is not true that the question with which we are concerned is only for the young. There are several reasons for this.

In the first place, it is certainly not a question for the very young—those whom the law classifies as infants, and describes in old-fashioned terms as not yet having reached the age of reason or of consent, and not yet knowing the difference between right and wrong. In the second place, such terms as “young” and “old” can be quite misleading if one carelessly identifies mental, moral, or experiential age with chronological age. We all know men of advanced years who are still immature or even childish in character; we also know other men whose maturity greatly exceeds their years. In the third place, the distinction between the mature and the immature can be misleading and irrelevant, if it connotes a difference between persons whose minds are fully developed and whose characters are fully formed, and persons whose minds and characters are still in the process of development and formation.

If the term “mature” is used in that last sense, it is highly doubtful whether there are any mature human beings. I hope there are not, and I certainly hope there are few if any among my readers, for nothing I have to say can be of any practical significance or use to them. The problem of making a good life is a genuine problem only for those who do not regard the job as done; and that includes everyone who is over the age of six or ten and has grown up enough to be able to think about the problem. On the other hand, I must add the observation, made by a wise old Greek, that it is inadvisable to give lectures on moral philosophy to the young. What he had in mind, I think, is that a certain amount of experience in the business of living and a certain seriousness of purpose are required for anyone to understand the problem of making a good life and to judge whether this or that proposal for its solution is practically sound.

With all these considerations in mind, I am going to address this book to persons who, in experience and character, are old enough not only to understand the question but also to judge the answers, and young enough in years to do something about applying what they have learned to their own lives during whatever time remains to them on earth. In other words, I will proceed on the assumption that my readers already have enough common-sense wisdom to become a little wiser through the ways in which philosophy can extend and enlighten common sense. I hope they share with me the further assumption that it is never too late just as (with the one exception of infancy) it is certainly never too early to give thought to the direction one is going in, and to take steps to rectify it if, upon reflection, that direction is seen to be wrong.

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We can put these matters to the test by seeing what is involved in understanding the question—understanding it in the light of common sense and common human experience. When you think about the question, *How can I make a good life for myself?*

(1) Do you realize that the question concerns the whole of your life, from the moment you begin to direct it for yourself until it is over—or at least until no genuine options remain?

(2) Do you think of the whole of your life, or whatever part of it that remains, as a span of time—of hours, days, months, and years—that is like a vacuum in the sense that it is time you can fill in one way or another, time that, in any case, you are consuming or using up, no matter how you fill it?

(3) Do you recognize that the ways in which this vacuum of time can be filled by you consist of the various activities you engage in, either entirely by free choice or under some form or degree of compulsion?

(4) Do you include among these ways of consuming the time of your life an option that can be called “time-wasting” or “time-killing” because it consists in passing the time by doing nothing or as nearly nothing as possible?

Another and, perhaps, better name for this form of inactivity or relatively slight activity might be “idling.” I shall have more to say on the subject of idling and idleness later.

(5) Do you understand that, whereas your choice is not entirely free because you are under some degree of compulsion to spend time doing this or that, the compulsion is never so complete that your freedom is totally abrogated?

The glaring exception is, of course, the chattel slave, whose life is not his own, whose time belongs to another man to use as *he* sees fit. Slavery is a thing of degrees—from the extreme of complete bondage or chattel slavery, where the human being is owned and used like a piece of inanimate property or a beast of burden, to the milder forms of servitude in which a man's life is not wholly his own, but some portion of his time remains for him to use as he himself sees fit. The question with which we are concerned is clearly not one for chattel slaves; it may not even be a practically significant question for those who are slaves in any degree or form of servitude.

(6) Do you appreciate, in consequence of what has just been said, that freedom in all its forms, especially freedom of choice and freedom from coercion and intimidation, is an indispensable pre-requisite for dealing, in any practically significant way, with the question, *How can I make a good life for myself?*

Without the essential freedoms—the two I have just mentioned, and others equally important that I will mention later—the time of our lives is not ours to use and fill. If the distinction between a good life and a bad life, between living well and living poorly, between a life worth living or having lived and a life that is not worth living or having lived, can be made intelligible and can be defended against those who carp against such words as “good” and “bad” applied to a human life or anything else, then freedom is certainly good and slavery or lack of freedom is certainly bad; and the goodness of freedom consists in its being indispensable to our trying to make good lives for ourselves: it is good as a means to this end.

(7) Do you further appreciate that the exercise of your freedom at one time often imposes some limitations upon further use of your freedom at a later time, for the time of your life consists of stages, and the decisions you make in its earlier stages affect the choices left open to you in later stages?

Hence the decisions any of us make in youth are among the most important decisions we are ever able to make, because they have such far-reaching effects on the range and character of the options that remain open to us. This holds true to some ex-

tent of every stage of life. Every choice we make is one that should involve a weighing of its immediate against its remote effects.

(8) To state this last question in another way, do you realize that the use of your time today or this year affects not only the quality of your life in the present, but also its quality in the future? Do the activities with which you now fill your time and which now seem good to you preclude your using your time later in a way that will then seem good to you? Or will they, in addition to seeming good to you now, facilitate your living in a way that will seem good to you later—years later?

(9) If you do realize this, do you also understand the full significance of the statement that, if life were a day-to-day affair, either we would have no moral problems at all or those problems would be so simple as to deserve little or no thought?

If, at the end of each day, we closed the books, if there were no carry-over accounts from one day to the next, if what happened to us in the days of our childhood or what we did when we were young had little or no effect on the rest of our lives, then our choices would all be momentary or passing ones and a jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou might well be enough for life on a day-to-day basis. In fact, this is the way that animals do live—on a day-to-day basis, without a thought for the morrow, except in the case of certain hoarding instincts that, being instincts, involve no thought on the animal's part.

(10) Do you, in consequence, understand further that the problem of making a whole human life that is really good—good in each of its parts, and good in a way that results from each part's contributing what it ought to contribute to the whole—exists for you precisely because, at every stage of your life, in every day of your existence, you are faced with the basic moral alternative of choosing between a good time today and a good life as a whole—a choice between what is only useful, expedient, or pleasant in the short run, and what will contribute, in the long run, to making your whole life good?

Of all the points made so far, this is, perhaps, the one most difficult to understand in the early years of life—the time when, practically, it is most important to understand it. It is in the early years of our lives that we are disinclined to make choices that favor the long as against the short run, probably because the eventualities of the long run then seem so remote. This lies


at the root of the generation gap. On one side are those who find the long run unreal or too remote to think about; on the other are those for whom it has become a reality and a dominant consideration. The great misfortune of the human race, in every generation, is that its younger members—at the time of their lives when it is most important to understand this point—find it extremely difficult to understand and often fail to understand it. But if the point is only difficult, not impossible, for the young to understand, then it is of the greatest importance that sound moral instruction and training help them to understand it at the earliest possible moment in their lives. Their elders may finally have come to understand it only too well, and with some measure of remorse that their understanding has come too late for them to make the best use of such wisdom.

(11) In the light of the fact that making a good life as a whole necessarily entails long-range considerations, does it not now seem evident that you cannot make a good life for yourself by choice rather than by chance unless you have some kind of plan for your life as a whole—a plan for the use of its time in the present, in the years immediately ahead, and in the long run?

If everything were left to chance, there would be no point in even asking the question, *How can I make a good life for myself?* Seriously to consider that question is to assume that one can solve it by the choices one can make. But to exercise choice in the earlier stages of life without a plan for the whole is to leave much to chance. Early choices may severely limit our freedom in later stages of life, and so the lack of a plan may result in our having to fill our time in ways we would not have chosen had we foreseen the remote effects of our earlier choices and had we made them with a plan in mind.

(12) Finally, does not this point about the obvious need for a plan suggest the analogy between making a whole life that is good and making a work of art that is good?

In some of the creative arts, such as architecture, the process of building does not begin until a detailed plan or blueprint is ready. In other arts, the plan of the thing to be produced—a painting, a novel, a piece of music—is usually much less detailed than that. It is often only a sketch or an outline of the creative idea. But in any case the work of the artist is always guided by some vision, more or less detailed, of the end result. Without such a guiding plan, the end result would be a thing of

chance rather than a work of art. To this extent at least, there is a parallel between the production of a work of art and the making of a good life. 

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