



How Can I Make a Good Life for Myself?

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I have just set forth, in the form of questions, twelve considerations that should be borne in mind—the more explicitly the better—by anyone who seriously confronts the problem with which we are concerned, and even more so by anyone who tries to solve it. These twelve questions provide a measure of anyone's understanding of the problem of making a good life for one's self.

They also indicate the steps one must begin to take in order to find a solution that will be sound, adequate, and thoroughly practical

Before I turn to the solution that I think would be developed by a wise and practical man of common sense, I would like to spend a moment more on the analogy between making a work of art and making a good life. While the analogy may be enlightening, it can also be misleading. Making a good life is, in its fundamentals, radically different from artistic creation. Let me explain why.

The architectural analogy fails not only because the work of building is directed by a plan that is much more detailed in its specifications than any that can be developed for leading a good life, but also because the final product, being a spatial whole, can exist all at one time, whereas a whole life is a temporal whole and exists only as a process of becoming. Even though the plan one can draw up for making a good life may be more comparable to the kind of rough sketch that painters put upon a canvas before they apply pigments, the finished painting has the same kind of existence as a building, and so is not like a human life as a whole.

There is a closer resemblance between the performing arts and making a good life. A good performance, like a human life, is a temporal affair—a process in time. It is good as a whole through being good in its parts, and through their good order to one another. It cannot be called good as a whole until it is finished. During the process, all we can say of it, if we speak precisely, is that it is becoming good. The same is true of a whole human life. Just as the whole performance never exists at any one time, but is a process of becoming, so a human life is also a performance in time and a process of becoming. And just as the goodness that attaches to the performance as a whole does not attach to any of its parts, so the goodness of a human life as a whole belongs to it alone, and not to any of its parts or phases. In neither case can the goodness of the whole be experienced at any moment in the process, as the goodness of the parts is experienced from moment to moment. This has a bearing on the distinction between a good life as a whole and a good time from moment to moment.

However, the analogy between the performing arts and making a good life also fails for a number of reasons, reasons that indicate that making a good life differs radically from artistic making or production of any sort. In the first place, rehearsals in advance are always possible in the case of artistic performances, but never in the case of making a life. In the second place, while a performing

artist cannot repeat a single performance he regards as a failure, he can usually try again. But none of us gets a second chance at making a good life for ourselves. When we have finished that job, we are finished—for better or worse. In the third place, the man who has artistic skill does not have to employ that skill to produce a work of art. Whether he does so or not is an option he is free to exercise. But unless we commit suicide, we have no choice about making a life for ourselves. We are engaged in the process of doing so, willy-nilly, like it or not. Our only option is between making our life good as a whole and failing to do so.

This last point, as we shall see, is crucial. It draws a sharp line between the sphere of moral conduct and the sphere of artistic production. Making a good life is not a work of art. The aesthetic approach to life is superficial; it overlooks the underlying difference between life and art. The one point of resemblance that should be retained is the usefulness of some kind of plan. A work of art cannot be well-made without a plan; so too, a life cannot be well-lived without a plan.

Anyone who has read Plato's account of the trial of Socrates will remember his observation that an unexamined life is not worth living. When we understand what he means, I think we will also be led to conclude that an unplanned life cannot be lived well. That conclusion directs the effort of this book to answer the question with which it is concerned, for it tells us in advance what we are looking for—*a sound and practical plan of life that will help us to make our whole life good.*

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A plan of that character consists of a small number of prescriptions about the goods to be sought and the manner and order of seeking them. These prescriptions, formulated with a universality that makes them applicable to all men without regard to their individual differences or the special circumstances of their individual lives, constitute what little wisdom it is possible for the moral philosopher to attain with reasonable certitude, and that little is nothing but a distillation of the wisdom of common sense.

The reader will gradually come to appreciate the significance of what I have just said, as later chapters reline common-sense opinions into philosophical insights —especially the chapters of Part Three, which attempt to set forth the ethics of common sense. By the time he reaches the end of Chapter 15, he should understand

the contribution that the wisdom of a commonsense ethics can make to the conduct of his life—not only understand its applicability to his own problems, but also realize both how inadequate and how indispensable it is for their solution. I will repeatedly stress both its inadequacy and its indispensability, for it is of the utmost importance not to overlook either, or to make the mistake of supposing that because moral philosophy cannot by itself solve our individual problems of day-to-day living, it is of no value or use whatsoever. Equally unfortunate is the opposite error of supposing that because moral philosophy has some invaluable wisdom to offer, we need nothing more than it for guidance in dealing with every exigency, moral crisis, or tragic dilemma that life serves up to us. The small core of wisdom that moral philosophy affords may go to the heart of our practical problems, but it does not and cannot cover all the intricacies and complications in which such problems are embedded.

In acknowledging that the reader may not fully understand and appreciate all this until he finishes Chapter 15, and at the same time confessing that I do not know how to bring him more quickly to the state of mind in which I hope to leave him at that point, I am also aware that he may be put off or even turned away by quite excusable misapprehensions of what is being said in the earlier portions of this book. Since I do not want that to happen, I have no other recourse than to caution him here and now about misunderstandings that may occur and that I would like to see him avoid. I do this with some trepidation, not only because I have little faith in the effectiveness of this method of preventing misunderstanding, but also because I fear that the reader will be more impressed by what I have to say about the inadequacy of moral philosophy than by what I have to say about its indispensability. That impression might dissuade him from reading on, which is hardly the result I am aiming at.

Let me start with one misunderstanding that may have occurred already. In this chapter, I have dwelt on the importance of a plan for putting the parts of one's life into some perspective and order, and I have compared such a plan with the kind of rough sketches that an artist makes of the work he is going to produce. The reader may mistakenly suppose that in emphasizing the indispensability of a plan, however sketchy, I am exhorting him to develop one for himself. I am not doing that. If he goes back and reads carefully the last sentence of Section , he will see that I am promising him that the effort of this book to solve the problem of making a good life for one's self will be directed toward the exposition of a sound and

practical plan that will afford some measure of help and serve as a guide.

But while I am not recommending that the reader undertake at once to develop such a plan for himself if he has not done so before, neither am I recommending that he desist from doing so. If he already has some sort of plan for his life as a whole, my only recommendation to him would be that he be open-minded about it and willing to alter it if the prescriptions for a good life that are developed in this book should appear to contain some points of wisdom he has overlooked or negated. If he has not yet seriously thought about planning his life, then I would hope he might be persuaded and helped to do so by this book.

By emphasizing all the differences between making a good life and making a work of art, I have tried to prevent the reader from mistaking a book on moral philosophy for a how-to book—a book of highly specific rules that can, through practice, be applied, with an acquired perfection of skill, to accomplish unerringly and with some measure of excellence the result aimed at. If there were an art of living, the problem of making a good life could be solved with the same regularity, the same assurance, and the same mastery that the problem of erecting a bridge or of composing music can be solved. But there is no art of living, and no man can ever expect to attain in that domain the skill or mastery possessed by many engineers or musicians in their respective fields of work. The relevant wisdom that moral philosophy has to offer does not consist of specific rules of conduct analogous to rules of art; it goes no further than prescriptions so general that they apply to all human lives, and precisely because the principles of moral philosophy have such universality, they are of use to the individual only if he will make the effort to apply them to the contingent singularities of his own individual life.

Moral philosophy, moreover, cannot provide him with anything more than the most general guidance for particularizing its principles. Unlike a navigating chart, it does not indicate every reef, shoal, or shallow to be skirted, or plainly plot the channels or courses to be followed. It cannot do that because each individual life is an unchartable sea, full of unforeseeable dangers and untoward complications. But that does not mean that such practical wisdom as is available can provide no guidance at all; by defining the problems to be solved and by laying down the principles to be applied by anyone who will exercise intelligence in their solution, it points out the goal to be reached and supplies the only directions

that can be formulated for reaching it. Following such directions may sorely tax the individual's intelligence and strain his will-power; nevertheless, the difficulties he encounters in following them should not cause him to make the mistake of thinking he would be better off were he to proceed in life without any destination to aim at and without directions to follow.


In short, moral philosophy, as I have already indicated, does not get down to the nitty-gritty or the nuts and bolts of the vexatious practical problems that each of us has to resolve in the most trying moments of our lives. Frankly to acknowledge this is itself an essential bit of practical wisdom; to pretend the opposite is consummate folly. In setting forth what I have learned from the reflections of common sense on the common experience of mankind, and in expounding it philosophically in the form of the ethics of common sense, I will, in the pages that follow, go no further than such wisdom allows. I will not pretend to be wise about the infinitely varied trials and tribulations that make the business of living—and especially of trying to live well—difficult for every individual. But that does not mean that I am unacquainted with the hard and often harsh realities of the human condition, nor cavalierly oblivious to what many experience as the angst and the despair occasioned by the distressing facts of life.

I know that even the best human life, precisely because it is the life of a man and not of a god, may not escape the taint of tragedy. Every human life, even under the most fortunate circumstances, has its share of frustration and discontentment, its burden of remorse for avoidable mistakes committed, its insoluble dilemmas—insoluble in the sense that their only solution requires us to choose between alternatives both of which we desperately wish to avoid. Tragedy thus enters our lives through the evils we must choose to embrace because circumstances present us with alternatives we are compelled to choose between. Even when moral wisdom guides us as well as it can in the task of making a good life, and even when we apply its prescriptions with the most flexible and resourceful intelligence and with a will habitually disciplined to act intelligently, we cannot prevent the intrusion of tragedy because we cannot avoid having to make the tragic decisions that are the price we must pay for being free to make any decisions at all. Much less can we hope to be exempt from some measure of the misfortunes that, in varying degrees, mar every human life. (Nevertheless, I must add, it remains possible—with wisdom and will united in the effort—to lead a good life, one that accumulates, over the years, more goods than evils, and is embellished by joys and satisfactions.)

If the reader supposes that inattention to all these somber facts in the following pages betokens a dismissal of them as matters of no concern, he will mistake the simplicity of moral wisdom for simple-mindedness. Precisely because the few basic truths of moral philosophy are elementary and clear, moral wisdom is truly simple, as it should be; but that should not lead anyone to regard it as a collection of simple-minded homilies or a set of simplistic solutions. It does not get down to the level of life's most perplexing difficulties because that is the level at which no one can be philosophically wise. All that it can do is provide what little guidance wisdom is able to give every human being because of what life is like for all of them.

That minimum guidance, in my judgment, is indispensable for intelligent living. Without it, we move from day to day blindly and aimlessly. The fact that moral philosophy cannot adequately solve life's particular problems certainly does not warrant the conclusion that it makes no contribution at all to their solution. This is an error that many men make. They dismiss a clear definition of justice as of no practical utility because it does not automatically enable them to decide, in a particular difficult case, whether a certain act or policy is just or unjust, forgetting that they would not and could not even be troubled about justice in that particular case if they did not have some definite standard of justice to apply to it. It is equally foolish to dismiss the clarity and simplicity of moral philosophy as of no value—as simple-minded or simplistic—because it does not automatically tell us what to do in this or that trying moment of our lives. Without its wisdom we could not even begin to see our way through those dark moments.

One word more. In what follows, especially in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I will propose a number of distinctions among the types of human activity, together with a classification of the parts of a human life, in order to discover what common sense can contribute to the solution of the problem of making a human life good—good as a whole. Analytical distinctions and classifications are often misunderstood. Things that can be separated in thought by analysis are usually not separate in actual existence. To convert analytical distinctions into existential or experiential separations is an egregious error, yet one that is frequently made. I therefore hope this advance notice will prevent the reader from making the mistake of supposing that life comes in separate chunks because thinking about it—if we are to do any thinking about it at all—draws lines that divide one kind of activity from another and that isolate the various aspects of life. Such divisions and isolations enable us to see how the

things that are divided or isolated in thought combine, overlap, fuse, and flow together in the changing existential mix that is life's actual process. 

Excerpted from his book *The Time of Our Lives*.

EDITOR'S NOTE

It has come to our attention that the article we recently published by Edward R. Murrow appears to have been a fabrication written by Victor D. Hanson. It was published in William F. Buckley's *National Review* [where we found it].

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