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# *How Should One Live?*

*The superior person is open-minded and not partisan.*

CONFUCIUS

## *2.1 Introduction*

Have you ever wondered about how one should live? Should we live compassionately, pursuing a wisdom that will free us from suffering? Or should we live a virtuous and sincere life of balance, harmony, and family loyalty? Perhaps we should live a life of critical reflection, searching for truth and following an argument wherever it may lead. Should we live in pursuit of happiness? But what exactly is happiness? How can we attain it? Perhaps we must unselfishly do what duty demands in devotion to God. But we must not lose sight of the fact that we are connected to this earth. We are all related, and this relatedness demands that we live peacefully and with ecological awareness.

The question of how one should live is fundamental to human existence. It is a question that has concerned ancient and modern peoples, Eastern and Western cultures. What do you understand by the question? If you had to write an essay on the topic, how would you begin? "One should live the good life," you might say. That seems a sensible way to start. But what is the good life? Well, what is most important to you? What sorts of things do you value the most? Health? Wealth? Pleasure? But just because you desire certain things, does that mean you *ought* to desire them? Desiring something is one thing, but claiming you ought to desire it is something else.

But what does *ought* have to do with this question about conducting one's life? "How *should* one live?" is not the same question as "How *ought* one to live?" You might say "I should go to the store," but that does not mean that you "ought" to in

the sense that you are morally obligated to do so. Yet your sense of what you are morally obligated to do often grows out of your sense of what you should do.

And who is the "one" whom this question addresses? It is an impersonal one. "How should *one* live?" is not the same question as "How should *I* live?" So does your answer hold good for you alone? What about others? Is there one way we all ought to live? Writing an essay about how you think you should live is one thing. Writing an essay about how you think everyone ought to live is another matter. For one thing, the latter essay is a lot more difficult to write.\*

If you have ever wondered about how you or anyone else ought to live, you have been concerned with what philosophers call *ethics* or *moral philosophy*. Ethics comes from the Greek word *ethos*, which means "character." For the Greeks, ethics had to do with developing a virtuous character. They believed that if you develop such a character, you will not only know the right thing to do but also do it.

Today we use the word *ethics* in many different ways. Sometimes it refers to moral rules or a way of life based on a religiously inspired moral code. We speak of "Christian ethics" or "Buddhist ethics." But sometimes it refers to the secular study of moral values and a search for the principles of right moral action. As a branch of philosophy, "ethics" is used in this latter sense to refer to reflection on or study of moral issues. It is concerned with such questions as: What is the morally right way to live? How can I know what is morally right? How can I decide morally difficult cases? What makes a society just?

We can answer moral questions in different ways. One way is **descriptive**. We might describe the kinds of values people have and the sorts of principles they use in making moral judgments. Another way is **normative**. Normative reflection has to do with trying to discover norms or principles by which we *ought* to live. Many philosophers maintain that ethics is primarily a normative study. It is not merely a description of what people find morally good and morally bad, but it seeks to discover norms that ought to guide our actions.

Though we can distinguish the kinds of questions moral philosophers ask, the answers often blend into one another. An answer to the question about how one should live will sooner or later have to address such issues as how we can know what is right, whether justice is possible, does God exist, is there life after death, and many more. The readings in this chapter directly address the question of how one should live, in a broad sense, but this same question is addressed one way or another by the other readings included in this book.

One useful way to approach the brief sampling of answers (which follow) to the question about how one should live is to see if you can find, explicitly or implicitly, answers to a set of what, how, and why questions. *What* is the good life? That is, what, according to the selection, is the goal of human life? *How* is the good life attained? That is, what are the means that the author recommends that would lead

\* See Chapter 1, "Socrates' Question," in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* by Bernard Williams (Cam-

one (presumably) to the goal of living a good life. *Why* is the life as described a good one? That is, is the goal of human life the author envisions appropriate and right? *Why* is the means recommended appropriate? That is, what reasons (if any) does the author give for thinking that the means will in fact lead to the goal? The “why” question asks you to find out how the author justifies his or her answer. At least two sorts of justification are called for: (1) a justification of the goal and (2) a justification of the means. You may wish to set up a grid on which you can write brief answers to these questions based on your reading and then compare the answers that are given.

Analyzing the answers in this way not only allows you to discern differences and similarities among the answers but also provides an opportunity for you to evaluate the answers. Is the good life as described or presupposed truly good? Can you think of a better one? Are the justifications adequate? *Why* should we think that the way to live (the means) will in fact result in a good life? Maybe there is something the authors have overlooked. What about luck? Maybe living a good life is not a matter of choice but dumb luck. Can we attain a good life if we live in a horrible society? Does social harmony or social disintegration have anything to do with it? What about illness or poverty? Are these significant factors?

As you read and think through these questions, your own understanding of the question and the issues should deepen, and your own answer should become clearer. What do you think the good life is, and how do you think it can be attained?