

## CHAPTER 1

# What Kind of Person Should I Become?

How many of you would like to live in a society that benefits others as well as yourself? Of course, we all would. But we know that's just a fairy tale ... or is it?

Most of us have experienced how difficult it is to find the balance between making others happy and doing what makes "me" happy. It's great when the two coincide, but what happens when they don't?

For instance, you are in the doorway about to run to a meeting that you expect to be pleasant and fun, though not necessary. Suddenly your friend calls and says he's in trouble. What is more important for you: your personal joy or your friend's misfortune? You cannot just tell him to leave you alone because you have no time to deal with his problems now, can you?

Or imagine a different situation. Your friends have invited you to a party and you are eager to go. But you know that your parents will not approve of your plans. What will you do?

Every day we come across situations requiring a moral choice. Sometimes it is easy to make a decision, but at other times we are really at a loss about what to do. These everyday little decisions have a lot to do with forming our character and determining our future life. That is why it is so important to consider a basic question: "What kind of person am I now and what kind of person do I want to become?"

Our choice of the moral principles that can guide our lives is very important and deserves careful consideration. Now you are at an important time – a time of such decisions — and may still have doubts about your opinions and convictions. For example:

- ✗ Should you be honest all the time, or are "white lies" acceptable?
- ✗ Should you assume that happiness depends primarily on material possessions and a high position or on something else — for example, satisfying social work that has a lower pay, or investing time in family relationships, etc.?
- ✗ Should you respect all people or assume that some people or groups are better, more human or more deserving of rights than others, based on skin color, nationality, religion or sex?
- ✗ Should the deciding factor in your choice of career be to study at a prestigious institution, to receive a high salary, and to be able to take frequent business trips abroad — or to have the possibility to make full use of your talents?
- ✗ Is it important to maintain chastity before marriage, or is it OK for two people to have sex if they feel a strong attraction to each other?

What kind of person  
am I becoming and  
what kind of person  
do I want to become?



Such questions bring us to wonder about adopting a system of moral values and principles that may guide us through these difficult choices. A basic understanding of spiritual and moral realities is vital for every person—the formation of our character depends on it. All of us want to be good people guided by values that we can rely on to help us to make the right choices. Do we like it when someone points out our bad qualities? Not usually, but we certainly like it when someone recognizes our good points. It's because we have an inner desire to be a good person. We don't like to be considered bad. It's the same when it

comes to being right. We don't like making mistakes, because we wish to be right. Do we usually like to win or lose an argument? Sometimes we're willing to fight to prove we're right. Isn't it true?

Intuitively we also feel that we must be honest with ourselves and other people. We know in our heart whether we've truly done a good thing or not, or whether we are right or wrong. Why is that? It's because of a mysterious thing called conscience, an inner voice helping us to make decisions in complicated situations. What our conscience whispers often resembles the voice of a teacher or a parent, but from deep inside our heart and mind. If our conscience normally urges us to do what is good, what happens when we go against the conscience? We experience the pangs of remorse, don't we?

## Good and evil

What does it mean to be a good person? If you ask ten different people, you are sure to receive ten different answers. Though each of us strives to be good, either consciously or unconsciously, it's possible that our concepts of good and bad may be incorrect. Besides, every person goes through changes in life, and in the process of

growing, our ideas develop as well. Our notions of good and evil mature — that is, if we make a certain amount of effort.

So, on what basis do you define a good choice, one that is morally justified? To the right are some examples of what some teenagers consider good and what they would like to achieve in their lives.

Do you agree with such perspectives? Do you think you can become happy if guided by such principles? Can you think of problems you might come across if you determine good and evil in such terms?

## To be human

Before trying to answer the question "What kind of person am I and what kind of person do I want to become?" perhaps we should ask a more general question: "What does it mean to be human?"

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### I would like ...

- to be liked and admired by others;
- to make a lot of money;
- not to encounter many difficulties or suffering in my life;
- to be able to influence other people;
- not to be the object of others' criticism or fault-finding;
- to have others do what I like

... and, generally, what I like is good and what I don't like is evil.

A tree grows involuntarily, receiving sunlight along with minerals and other nutrients from the soil, and, at maturity, bears fruit. From this point of view, everything that supports the purpose of this tree, namely its growth, is “good” — fertile soil, favorable climate, etc. Likewise, everything that interferes with the natural process is “evil” — a drought, a harmful insect, strong winds which break branches, and unexpected summer frosts.

In the same way, when considering human experience, good and evil should be determined based on a general notion of human personhood — with an ideal of being fully human, rather than by mere whims of any particular human being. Then everything that enables my human nature to develop to the fullest is good, while evil is that which hinders or detours this process. Unlike a tree, humans can experience good or bad influences both from within themselves and from outside of themselves.

All of us would agree that the first answer to the question “What kind of person should I become?” is that we become fully human, our truest, best selves. Only after considering what fulfilling our humanity really means, can we think about those particular forms of humanness that make me a unique personality among the billions of people living on the planet.

What are some general ways in which people express their humanity? We can think of our attitudes as having four directions: attitudes toward higher principles, toward oneself, toward people and toward nature.

#### *Attitude toward higher principles.*

To be fully human means, first of all, to ask many questions about life, not only about one’s daily affairs, but also the so-called “eternal” or “ultimate” questions, such as about the nature of human existence. For centuries philosophers have tried to understand the things that make humans distinct from other beings. In his writings about proving the existence of God and the uniqueness of the human mind, Rene Descartes concluded that the only thing knowable with certainty is the fact that man is the only being in the world capable of questioning his own nature. By calling everything into doubt, Descartes laid

the foundations of modern philosophy. He deduced that human beings consist of minds and bodies; that these are totally distinct “substances.” He also asserted that God’s existence was a certainty because of the profundity and clarity of the idea itself present in the human mind.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a rhinoceros spending his days speculating about what it means to be a rhino. Would it make any difference in his actual life if he did? Human beings, however, since time began have been asking themselves about the meaning of life and death, of suffering and joy. This existential searching is fundamental to human nature. At some point in life we need to think about the principles and values that can guide our life. Though each of us might pose them differently, we all wonder about things such as: “What is the purpose of life?” “What is true love?” “What is happiness?” “How can I distinguish between right and wrong?”

### *Attitude toward oneself.*

Having asked these timeless questions, we cannot expect immediate or easy understanding. The whole of human life provides ample opportunities to deepen our knowledge and insight as we grow in experience and awareness. Comprehending the depth and beauty of life always involves striving for consistency between thought or our beliefs and practice. If we just sit and wait until we know all the right answers, we may, in the end, realize nothing at all. At every stage of life it is best to practice what we've learned thus far. Only then will such general questions become real and meaningful to us. By the same token, asking the question "What is love?" brings us to reflect on our own capacity to be a loving person. "What is the purpose of life?" prompts me to think about the significance of my own life and how I want to live it. Practice helps me sort out what is and is not effective and how to best use the time I have while I'm alive.

### *Attitude toward people.*

Often what we realize on our course of self-discovery is something that fits well with the experience of others; what holds true for myself is the same for others. For example, many people recognize that we all need one another, that human beings are interdependent. No one can live fully satisfied as an isolated person. Solitude can be very important in life if it is freely chosen, but if it's a result of our inability to communicate with others, it may lead to despair. Communication is important to us and remains so as we enter into marriage, a profession and the larger society. For now, we may be most concerned with our relationship with our parents and other members of our family, teachers, classmates and friends. Later on, a husband or wife and children, colleagues, friends and associates will occupy most of our time, and, of course, we want that time to be most rewarding and fruitful.

### *Attitude toward nature.*

There is one more way in which every person expresses his/her essentially human nature: in one's attitude toward the natural world. Even if we have grown up in a large city surrounded by tall buildings and crowds, we cannot ignore nature, for we all live together on the same planet. Only recently have we discovered how much a significant natural disaster in one area can affect the ecological balance over a much wider area, even the whole planet. We've learned that one mistake of a few people working at a nuclear power plant can not only poison the air and water immediately around it, but also cause destruction to wildlife and people hundreds of miles away. The smallest actions of individuals and communities reflect our attitude toward nature. Leaving trash in a forest after a camping trip, allowing the leakage of gasoline and dumping of waste into rivers, and countless other careless actions have a far-reaching negative impact on the planet we all share.

### *Why should I be good?*

Each of us must have faced this question more than once. Why should I be good? Why can't I live just as I please? It is because being good means being human. And if we choose some other way, sooner or later we will face the consequences of our choice.

Imagine the following simple example. You are tired of brushing your teeth every day. So you decide that from this moment on you will never brush your teeth again. From your body's viewpoint it would be a wrong decision, and soon you experience the effects of that decision. In a couple of months you develop cavities. What is worse, you refuse to see a dentist, and eventually you lose your teeth. And so, the final consequence of your decision to be bad to your teeth is that you spend the rest of your life eating oatmeal.

In the moral sphere, things are more complicated, but the general principle is the same. For instance, everybody would probably agree that being good means to love others, be honest, help those in need, etc. If you think that it's not necessary to be honest and that telling lies is sometimes useful, you may find there are certain benefits to lying. Phony flattery may impress some; you may become a master at convincing classmates to take your side, and so on. But in time people will realize that you are untrustworthy. Even if at that point you should decide to be sincere, it will take a lot more to restore trust than it was in the beginning when people accepted your word. Everyone desires to have friends, even if it's only a few trusted ones, and it isn't always easy to find them. So, why would we want to make things harder for ourselves by lying or doing other things which we know in the end only create barriers between ourselves and others?

## What is morality?

Values and fundamental principles make up our personal morality and shape our character. Though we may not realize it, every day we make countless moral decisions. The decisions and choices we make, however small they may be or seem to be, shape the kind of person we become and reflect what life means to us. A wise saying captures this truth:

*Plant an act; reap a habit.*

*Plant a habit; reap a virtue or a vice.*

*Plant a virtue or a vice; reap a character.*

*Plant a character; reap a destiny.*

But then a very difficult question arises: Which values and principles should we adopt for our life?

Our standard of morality is important if we want to become a mature person who respects himself/herself and values others. Self-respect and self-acceptance are impor-

tant standards to begin an understanding of moral growth. If we are self-confident, feeling at peace with our conscience, we can be free to make sound decisions based on values we believe in. Instead of worrying about how we are coming across to others, we can look at a situation clearly and respond appropriately to what is needed.

At the same time, it is important to be aware of the significance of the moral choices we make every day and how they affect others, and not wander through life blindly. Some of our choices involve ordinary things such as what clothes to wear, what to eat, when to sleep, and so on. However valuable such things may be to us, they do not affect the development of our personality and character to the same extent that our spiritual or moral choices do.

Have you ever really asked yourself what kind of person you want to be? Perhaps you've thought of this before. Sometimes we want to be like this person, at other times like that person, and so on. We tend to model our lives after the people whom we most admire and respect. They become role models for us, and we seek to emulate their behavior and values in our own lives, even unconsciously. But how many times have we been disappointed when those people we admire do something that shatters our image of them? Especially in our teenage years, when our intellectual and deductive skills are growing keener, we begin to see the "real" state of affairs around us. We can see other people's faults and

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### A few definitions:

A **habit** is a regular pattern of acts.

A **virtue** is a good habit, an inner tendency to accomplish moral good.

A **vice** is a bad habit, an inner tendency to accomplish moral evil.

**Character** is the combination of our virtues and vices.

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weaknesses, and our ideal image of others goes through some dramatic and irreversible changes.

During this period of our lives an attitude of cynicism is often in competition with our idealistic views. Many of our dreams seem to shatter. We see confusion and corruption where we once saw stability and honesty. We see hypocrisy and deceit where we once saw integrity and loyalty. Is it any wonder that at times we feel confused or hopeless?

This shift in our perception usually takes place in our teenage years, but the effects of it may last a lifetime. The choices we make during this time can have a deep impact on our character and view of the world. Likewise, our success and effectiveness in life are largely determined by those choices.

Perhaps this is the main task that each of us faces now — to understand ourselves and to choose the way we'll be able to follow for all our life.

## For Your Journal



### Who am I?

Write a letter to an unknown person. Introduce yourself and tell who you are. Describe your appearance, background, activities, interests, and concerns. You might include something about where you live, work, or go to school (the environment in which you spend your time) as well as the significant people in your life.

Read the letter back to yourself, imagining you are the stranger who has received the letter. Write down your reactions to the letter.

# To Be Famous

by Boris Pasternak



To be famous is not in good taste.  
That is not what will exalt us.  
Don't build an archive, it's but a waste  
To raise with manuscripts a fuss.

Creation calls for self-surrender  
And not loud noise and cheap success.  
Shame on the ignorant offender  
Who lets all lips his fame confess.

Life must be lived without false face,  
Lived so that in the final count  
We draw unto ourselves love from space,  
Hear the future call from the mount.

Some blank spaces should be left to chance  
And not to this paper shuffling,  
Not marking the margins in advance,  
Places and chapters of nothing.

So plunge yourself in obscurity  
And conceal there all of your tracks,  
The way lands dissolve with surety  
In the fog where vision lacks.

Others then will track your living trail,  
Retracing step by step your feet,  
But you must inevitably fail  
To tell your triumph from defeat.

And you must not by a single hair  
Retreat from their face, nor bend,  
But be alive, alive your full share,  
Alive and only 'til the end.