

# Pursuing the Good Life

In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis writes upon the differences between previous eras in human history and our modern world, which has arguably been building since the 1700s:

*“For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique...”*

In the past we saw our world as ruled by natural laws higher than ourselves. Today, we have attempted to have no laws or authority over ourselves. Modern man believes he makes his own rules and can use scientific knowledge to overcome any obstacles in his path. By doing so, mankind collectively attempts to become a sort of god of the universe, understanding all, able to manipulate the world at will.

The question for the individual, no matter the opinions of the dominant intellectuals of our age, is which way is the path of the good life? Do you join in the conquest of reality, attempting to make the world conform to your will? Or do you make peace with the world around you, accepting that man's power has limits, and discover how to conform to the natural laws?

If the latter, you may want to consider the four cardinal virtues (temperance, prudence, justice, and fortitude) as a starting point for making peace with the world around and the conflicts within ourselves. Aristotle famously codified them, but today we turn to St. Augustine for his perspective.

In his *City of God* (circa 426 A.D.), Augustine writes that, “The life of man, then, is called happy when it enjoys virtue

and these other spiritual and bodily good things without which virtue is impossible.”

Virtue isn't a word much celebrated today. It's no surprise given that the dominant cultural impulse is to conquer reality. The impulse to conquer that which we perceive as restraining our will is ultimately a desire to live an unregulated life, to pursue total individual freedom. The idea of virtue rests on the assumption that man cannot have such total freedom. Again, there are limits to our power, the most notable is death.

According to Augustine, virtue therefore is “the art of regulating life.” The cardinal virtues give us a framework to begin. Here are his definitions of the four cardinal virtues:

- 1. Temperance:** The bridling of carnal lusts.
- 2. Prudence:** The discernment of good from evil.
- 3. Justice:** Rendering to every man his due.
- 4. Fortitude:** Bearing patiently the ills of life.

*(Image: 'The Cradle of the Happy Family' by Fragonard)*