

Who Gets to Define the Good Life? Role Models, Knowledge, and the Conditions for Human Flourishing

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Who do we aspire to become? For readers at the Angelicum, there is perhaps one obvious answer that supersedes all others: Jesus Christ. Yet other saints, popes, clergy, family members, friends, scientists, politicians, authors, athletes, or artists may also come to mind. We admire them because of their prudence, bravery, humility, kindness, or wisdom. By following their example, however, we do not merely attempt to become like them. Rather, they help us discover what kind of person we ought to become.

Role models are figures we aspire to emulate. They embody an interpretation of the Good life: a conception of what human flourishing entails (Manne, 2018; Srinivasan, 2021). Plato's allegory of the cave can be read as an image of the movement from an imperfect

understanding of reality toward a fuller apprehension of the Good (Plato, trans. 1991; Manne, 2018). Yet interpretations of the Good are not fixed or inevitable; they are shaped by historical, cultural, social and political circumstances (Bregman, 2014; Hamad, 2020).

Consider, for example, our relationship to work. In the nineteenth century, leisure was often a sign of wealth and status, while labour was associated with necessity (Veblen, 1899). Thorstein Veblen (1899) even described leisure as the "honorific sign" of the elite, a way to demonstrate one's elevated social standing through "conspicuous consumption." Today, the social norm has largely been inverted: being busy

frequently signals importance and value (Bregman, 2014). Work has increasingly become connected not only to economic survival but also to identity and personal meaning (Bregman, 2014). What counts as a successful or flourishing life is therefore continuously interpreted and reinterpreted.

This raises an important question: who has the authority to define what the Good life is? Some individuals and groups possess greater epistemic authority than others (Manne, 2020; Srinivasan, 2021). They are regarded as reliable "knowers" whose interpretations of reality carry more weight (Manne, 2020). Scientists, artists, politicians, and other public figures who achieve success are often



assumed to possess exceptional insight, judgment, or sensitivity (Manne, 2018; Srinivasan, 2021). Their success is interpreted not merely as the result of talent, opportunity, or circumstance, but as evidence that they understand something fundamental about truth, beauty, or human flourishing (Profeta, 2026; Todorova, 2026).

However, the connection between success and knowledge should make us ask who determines what counts as knowledge and who is recognized as a legitimate knower (Manne, 2020; Srinivasan, 2021). The same mechanisms that elevate certain individuals as role models can also reduce others to people who supposedly lack understanding (Bregman, 2014; Manne, 2018).

This becomes apparent in how contemporary societies respond to social problems. Some behavioural interventions can be understood as resting on a Socratic assumption: if people act wrongly, they do so because they lack the correct knowledge (Manne, 2020; Srinivasan, 2021). Therefore, providing education or information should enable them to make better decisions. While knowledge is undoubtedly important, this assumption may overlook other explanations for human behaviour, such as the material conditions of poverty or the structural protections afforded to certain "golden boys" (Bregman, 2014; Manne, 2018).

Aquinas offers a more nuanced perspective through his concept of *malitia*. Human beings do not always act wrongly because they do not know what is right. They may know what is good and still choose otherwise because their desires, interests, or sense of power—their "apparent good" (*bonum apparens*)—outweigh their moral obligations (Aquinas, ST I–II, q. 78; Manne, 2020; Paoli, 2014; Srinivasan, 2021). Wrongdoing is therefore not always a matter of ignorance; a person may knowingly pursue an apparent good—such as status, pleasure, or power—even when doing so conflicts with the good of another person (Manne, 2020; Srinivasan, 2021).

This distinction is relevant in discussions surrounding #MeToo. Sexual harassment cannot always be understood simply as a failure to understand consent or changing norms around sexual behaviour (Fischel, 2019; Srinivasan, 2021). In

some cases, the issue may not be that individuals lacked information, but that they prioritized their own desires, status, or access to power over another person's autonomy (Manne, 2020; Srinivasan, 2021). If the diagnosis is merely a "lack of knowledge," the solution becomes education alone (Manne, 2020). Yet effective interventions may also require changing the environments that enable harmful behaviour: workplace cultures, unequal power relations, and the absence of meaningful consequences (Fischel, 2019; Manne, 2018).

A similar problem appears in discussions of poverty. People living in poverty are often portrayed as lacking financial literacy or the skills necessary to improve their circumstances (Bregman, 2014). This interpretation assumes that better information will lead to better decisions. However, research on scarcity suggests that people experiencing poverty may make rational decisions within extremely constrained circumstances (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013, as cited in Bregman, 2014). Their difficulty is not necessarily a lack of knowledge, but a lack of "mental bandwidth" or space to act upon that knowledge (Bregman, 2014).

George Orwell (1933) described this experience during his own period of poverty as a form of "tunnel vision": when survival becomes the immediate priority, the future becomes harder to consider (as cited in Bregman, 2014). A person who chooses immediate relief over long-term planning may not be irrational; they may be responding to circumstances that limit the choices available to them (Bregman, 2014).

Therefore, interventions aimed at improving human behaviour should not only ask: "What knowledge do people lack?" They should also ask: "What conditions prevent people from acting according to what they already know?" (Bregman, 2014; Manne, 2020). For people experiencing poverty, this may require reducing scarcity and creating the material conditions necessary for long-term decision-making (Bregman, 2014). To prevent sexual harassment, this may require not only education but also social environments where equality, accountability, and respect are structurally supported (Fischel, 2019; Manne, 2018).

Ultimately, the issue is not simply

whether people know better and can do better. It is also about epistemic authority: who is allowed to make claims about reality, whose experiences are taken seriously, and whose knowledge or testimony is dismissed (Dotson, 2011; Srinivasan, 2021). Justice requires recognizing people's phenomenological experiences as meaningful sources of knowledge about their own lives (Dotson, 2011; Hamad, 2020; Manne, 2020). This does not mean accepting every interpretation without question, but rather acknowledging that people should have the right to make epistemic claims about their own reality, avoiding the "testimonial quieting" that occurs when their status as knowers is denied (Dotson, 2011; Manne, 2020).

A truly inclusive society therefore requires more than the transmission of correct information. It requires the recognition of people as knowers, as well as the social and material conditions that allow them to pursue the Good life (Bregman, 2014; Dotson, 2011; Manne, 2020; Srinivasan, 2021).

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