PHILOSOPHY 151: Moral Philosophy

ARISTOTLE: Aristotle and the Pursuit of Happiness

Summary

1. Context
   1. Aristotle was a member of Plato’s Academy for twenty years
   2. He founded his own school in Athens, the Lyceum
   3. He recognized that his contemporaries disagree about what sort of life is the best one to live
2. Happiness as the goal of Life
   1. *Eudaimonia* (Happiness)
      1. It is our ultimate goal (*telos)* in life
         1. It is that for the sake of which we do everything we do
         2. *Telos* is the point or reason for doing something
      2. Unless there is something we desire for its own sake, our desire will be empty and vain
      3. Happiness is not simply a goal of our actions, but *the* goal
   2. Goals introduce unity within a single person’s life
   3. It is possible to “do everything for the sake of happiness”
      1. Even while pursuing a variety of different ends in life
      2. As long as I also pursue these ends for the sake of happiness
   4. The choice of lives
      1. Three main contenders for the happy life
         1. Life of pleasure
         2. Political life
         3. Reflective life
         4. He briefly adds a fourth: life of money making
3. The Political Life
   1. The domain of the ethical excellences encompasses the whole of a person’s private, social, and political life
      1. The ethical person aims at doing what is *kalon* (admirable)
      2. He avoids the opposite: the *aischron* (shameful)
         1. Person’s commitment to the *kalon* does not serve as a “comprehensive guide to conduct”
         2. A person can be doing everything “for the sake of” a single goal without being monomaniacal or leading an impoverished life
4. Philosophy in the political life
   1. Reflective activity is the most complete and self-sufficient activity, that is the mark of the ultimate *telos*
      1. Higher commitment to reflection determines when and whether he will engage in practical activity
      2. When one has the opportunity to engage in reflection only at the price of doing something shameful, one has the opportunity to withdraw from the ethical life
   2. Two greatest things of which man is capable:
      1. Living an ethical life
      2. Engaging in reflective intellectual activity
5. The Human Function
   1. We are functioning as human beings when we use our reason
   2. The function argument:
      1. Happiness is “doing well”
      2. “Doing well” for a human being is performing the function well
      3. The human function is to exercise reason
      4. Thus, happiness for a human being:
         1. Consists in using reason well
         2. Is activity of excellence of reason
6. Ethical Excellence
   1. Human excellence is excellence of reason
   2. Intellectual Excellence
      1. Part of the soul that “has reason” in the sense that it is itself capable of thinking and judging
      2. This is reason in the “strict” sense
      3. Two main types of Human excellence:
         1. Purely ratiocinative powers of a human being
         2. Full range of emotions, desires, and feelings that make up the rich array of human experience
   3. Virtue of character is a disposition (*hexis*) of our capacities for those feelings, desires, and actions
   4. Disposition of these capacities is an excellence if:
      1. It disposes the person to have the proper feelings and desires
      2. It disposes the person to engage in the appropriate actions in that particular domain
7. The Doctrine of the Mean
   1. One can be disposed to engage in its feelings and actions either too much or too little
      1. For every ethical excellence there are two opposing vices:
         1. One of excess
         2. One of deficiency
      2. A disposition that errs in either of these two ways is a vice of character,
      3. A disposition that avoids both excess and defect is a virtue of character
   2. Virtuous position is intermediate
      1. Virtuous person “hits the mean” in both feeling and action
      2. The notion of the “mean” is closely related to the notion of the “*kairos*” (the right moment), as well as the “appropriate” (*prepon*)
      3. Mean is relative to our goal as human beings
8. *Prohairesis*
   1. It is not simply what one does but also one’s reasons for doing it that issue from one’s character
   2. *Proheiresis* captures the general phenomenon of doing something for a reason
      1. It is a decision to do something that is in the decider’s power to do then and there and that actually moves him to act
      2. It is informed by deliberation and deliberation is always in the light of a goal
   3. Where it is clear what one’s goal requires and this is easy to do, one need not go through an explicit process of figuring out what to do.
9. Voluntary Action
   1. Voluntary action must originate in the agent
      1. The agent moves his own body parts
      2. The agent knows the “particulars” of the action
      3. Ignorance of the good does not make an action involuntary
10. The Role of Reason in Ethical Excellence
    1. The desires and feelings involved in ethical excellence are rational, not in themselves, but only insofar as they are capable of following reason
    2. It is the intellectual excellence that he calls practical wisdom
11. Intellectual Activities and Excellence
    1. Practical wisdom
       1. It is the excellence of reason involved in the ethical excellence
       2. It is the “right reason” that identifies the mean
       3. It is knowledge of what to do
    2. Mere proficiency at figuring out how to realize or execute one’s goals is mere cleverness
    3. It tells us not how to execute some determinate goal but rather whether it is good or fine or just to do so
    4. Only those in whom the rulers have inculcated a correct grasp of the just, the fine and the good will be restrained when the occasion calls for it and aggressive when the occasion calls for it
12. Universals and Particulars
    1. Aristotle insists that the knowledge expressed in the ethical excellences is practical rather than theoretical
    2. The kind of reason that aims to know such truths is called “scientific”
       1. There are eternal, immutable, necessary truths, which are expressed in perfectly universal generalization
       2. Its excellence, which is the condition of actually knowing these truths, is called science
       3. The ethical person is more like someone exercising a craft skill than a worker on a modern assembly line
       4. It is good judgment about whether a particular situation falls under a general principle that is the distinctive expertise of the *phronimos*
13. Reason, desire and knowledge
    1. Practical wisdom requires desires of a certain sort
       1. Reason without desire moves nothing whereas though that is “for the sake of something” brings about movement and action
       2. One cannot have *prohairesis* without an ethical disposition
    2. The function of reason is to grasp truth
14. Learning to be Good
    1. Learning how to live well requires training the appropriate, affective, and emotional sensibilities
    2. Practical wisdom must be acquired through experience
       1. The relevant experience is that of actually engaging in the activities of the practical discipline
       2. Virtue character is a kind of habit: an unreflective behavioral disposition
    3. Practice becoming good
    4. Three distinct stages of moral development and learning:
       1. The cultivation of sensibilities and shaping of aspirations from the earliest stage
       2. The acquisition of virtue is the stage of habituation by adult activities
       3. The stage of further intellectual inquiry
15. Responsibility for Character
    1. We become the sort of person we are
    2. We are not responsible for knowing what is just and unjust since this is a product of our upbringing and social context
    3. Only someone who has been raised in optimal conditions will have the correct views about what is fine and shameful
16. External Goods
    1. The person of ethical excellence regulates her pursuit of such objectives in the light of her higher commitment to the *kalon*
    2. Happiness requires the “external goods”
       1. Because they are necessary for the unimpeded exercise of the ethical excellences
       2. There is no such thing as exercising virtue while lacking the external goods