

Thinking Straight Ethical Reasoning Workshop 7-1 May 10, 2011

- I. Near the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle says what is the highest good attainable by action "...most people would probably agree : for both the common run of people and cultivated men call it *eudaimonia* [misleadingly translated as *happiness*], and understand by *eudaimonia* the same as *living well* (*faring well*) and *“doing well”*

A. In small group,

1. Discuss what Aristotle seems to mean by “*eudaimonia*” (literally, *eu* good, *daimon* (spirit, demon)). R&R talk about it indirectly (p. 166) when they indicate that for Aristotle “the virtuous person will fare better in life...flourish”. Timmons discusses it at length (p. 214-217) SEP discusses it (p. 3, para 5). How does *eudaimonia* as Aristotle differ from *happiness* as you understand the English term?
2. Discuss Timmons’ “functional argument” to the conclusion that “The highest good (and hence *eudaimonia*) is a life of rational activity of the soul in accord with virtue.”

Plenary Discussion

3. Discuss Aristotle’s view that “Virtue is a mean in so far as it aims at what is intermediate.” Timmons p. 217. Do you think that all “moral virtues” can be described as an intermediate between two extremes? Go back to the list of virtues in R&R p. 161. Are all of them a “mean” between extremes?
4. Discuss Aristotle’s notion that *phronesis* (translated as *practical wisdom* or *practical intelligence*) is central to possessing virtue in the full sense. (Timmons p. 218; SEP p.2 para 4 to p.3 para 4). In particular, discuss the SEP view that the “modern concept is best understood by thinking of what a virtuous morally mature adult has that nice children, including nice adolescents, lack.”
5. What does SEP mean when it say that (moral) virtue is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for *eudaimonia* (SEP p. 3, para 3rd from bottom). Do you agree? How might your life be different if you pursued *eudaimonia*, rather than happiness as more commonly understood?

Plenary Discussion

II. In small Group

1. Discuss SEP’s example of the virtue: honesty (bottom p.1 to top of p.2).
2. Apply it and a consideration of any other relevant virtues to the following case:
You are an administrator in a state agency. You write yearly evaluations of your subordinates, and these evaluations weigh heavily in promotion decisions. A new administrative position is opening up, for which two of your people are competing. You work well with Javits, but his job performance is only adequate, not outstanding. If he were working alongside you as a peer, he wouldn’t upstage you or threaten your degree of control in the agency. Dooley, by contrast, is outstanding, but her tendency to shake things up and push for change makes it very hard for you to work with her. And she might well threaten you as a peer. You know that other administrators at your level try to move people who be supportive of them into positions of power, so you are considering the same by a very strong evaluation for Javits but a mediocre one for Dooley. from *Ethics at Work*, Cederblom and Dougherty

Plenary Discussion

III. In small group

1. Discuss Timmons' approach to the ethics of care (pp. 224-231) as a version of virtue ethics.
2. Discuss how it might relate to some decision or action in "Gone Baby Gone"

Plenary Discussion

IV (If time permits) in small group.

Discuss the following "pluralist" approach to *eudaimonia* and the morally good life.

If today we differ with Aristotle it is in being much more pluralistic than Aristotle was. Aristotle recognized that different ideas of *eudaimonia*, different conceptions of human flourishing, might be appropriate for different individuals on account of difference in their constitution. But he seemed to think that ideally there was some sort of constitution that everyone ought to have; that in an ideal world (overlooking the mundane question of would grow the crops and who would bake the bread) everyone would be a philosopher. We agree with Aristotle that different ideas of human flourishing are appropriate for individuals with different constitutions, but we go further and believe that even in the ideal world though would be different constitutions, that diversity is part of the ideal. And we some degree of tragic tension between ideals, that the fulfillment of some ideas always excludes the fulfillment of others. But to emphasize the point again, belief in a pluralistic ideal is not the same thing as belief that every ideal of human flourishing is as good as every other. We reject ideas of human flourishing as wrong, as infantile, as sick, as one-sided. (Hilary Putnam *Reason, Truth and History*, 1981)

Plenary Discussion

Ethical Reasoning Assignment for next Tuesday May 17 (Not this Friday):

Read: R&R Ch. 13 "What would a satisfactory Moral Theory be like?" plus Handout available Tuesday, May 10. **Submit:** A paper (1 or 2 pages) that (a) Characterizes Virtue Ethics, (b) discusses and evaluates some strengths and weakness from your perspective in the light of all three readings on Virtue ethics (R&R, Timmons and SEP), and (c) applies virtue ethics to a decision in *Gone Baby Gone*.