The Life Most Worth Living:
Virtue Theory in ancient and modern perspective
L6
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Aristotle and the LMWL

- Examination and serious thought indeed critical
- So is direct, willful action
  - On the part of the self
  - On the part of the community
    - To make a self capable of the LMWL
    - And to live it
  - Young are adapted to “receive virtue”
    - Ethics and politics tightly intertwined
    - Political (gregarious) animals
Fast account of psyche

• Similarities and differences WRT Plato
• Tripartite (crudely)
  – Rational
  – Nonrational
    • Nutritive
    • Perceptive (Appetitive)
• Various beings’ highest functions map onto these
  – Vegetables, trees, etc.
  – Animals
A stalk of celery

• Has its own virtue
• Nutritive functions “organize” its life
• “Be all that you can be”
• But try as it might
  – It lacks “sensation” in a meaningful sense
• Animals, including humans, have celery-like functions
A Kitten

• Has its own virtue
• But nutritive functions are not enough
• It perceives and has appetites (interests)
• . . . and aversions; perception “organizes” life
• We can watch desires and fears battle in animals
  – In the virtuous, a functional balance is achieved
  – In the vicious, dysfunction
• Humans have nutritive and perceptive/appetitive aspects too
Humans

• Have their own virtue
• But nutritive and perceptive/appetitive functions are not enough
• Rationality is needed
  – And is a distinguishing organizing characteristic
• Rational function: “Some sort of life of action of the [part of the soul] that has reason” (1098a3)
Eudaimonia and Reason

- Flourishing; ongoing attainment; happiness; fulfillment; LMWL
- Harmony among aspects is necessary for a life well-lived
- Sorts of reason
  - Capacity and *activity*
- Human function: soul’s activity expressing reason as having and obeying it
Virtue, reason, eudaimonia

- Think of a musician
- Has and expresses virtuosity
- An *activity* or maybe pursuit of excellence
- According to the functions of a musician
- Can be accomplished with varying degrees of virtue
- And so it is with the expression of reason in a well-lived life
Relativism

• “There are no absolutes” is way problematic
• Different customs or behaviors do not mean that values differ (descriptive-normative distinction)
• Emphatically not “whatever”
• Culture by itself cannot “invent” the good
• “Might makes right” worries over just what culture is relevant
• Culture/polis can foster eudaimonia (or fail to)
• Eudaimonia from a biological perspective
• Species are “determined” by natural facts
• “Ordered” culture and politics
Essential functions and teleology

- In a limited sense, we do get an “ought” from an “is”
- A thorough, active display of what it is to be a member of this species, as an individual
- Capacities engaged with excellence; good for the species
- Rationality enables forecasting for eudaimonia
Present and future

• One can imagine different lives and their constituent appetites
• One can also imagine having un-actualized potentialities
• And so, self-determination as both an intellectual exercise what to “make of oneself” and the activity of making
• One becomes a bicyclist by bicycling
  – Importing and exporting dispositions
• Done properly, regards the whole self
Self-Determination

• Is (will) the producer (be) pleased with the product?
• A friendly relationship with the self?
• “Bracketing” might be helpful here
• “Orders” of “wants”
• Assume we understand the LMWL within the limits of precision it allows
  – Remember the worries over thoroughgoing relativism and mistakes (excess love of money, etc.)
A bit of Harry Frankfurt

• “Wants” can conflict
• Not all desires contribute to the LMWL
• Reason can do retrospective judging and forecasting; sits on a “perch”
• What desires are most functional?
• And which are least?
• Can discover “higher-order desires”
Idealism and realism

• Reason is essential
• Experience is pretty special too
  – Describe eating a lemon to someone who never ate one
  – Offer a bite of lemon
  – London by guidebook; living in London
• Applies widely to life’s experiences
• Living as experiencing
Pleasure and habituation

• Steer the youth (1172)
• Closely allied to virtue in a well-lived life
• The virtuous take pleasure in the good
• A so-called “virtuous cycle”
  – “Forever will it dominate your destiny”
• Not always evident to the ignorant
• Compulsion, transaction, transformation?
Virtue and choice

• An exploration of fine but vital distinctions
• What we observe in various forms of training
  – Humans are *remarkably* adaptive
  – (Wise) Institutions train for function
    • And identity?
  – Think of “profession”
    • Jurisdictions
    • Who one is
Can the trained still be free?

• No *compelling* theory that I know of
• Libertarianism; Determinism; Compatibilism
• Frankfurt’s attempts
  – Unending higher-order desires (regress?)
  – Identification and reason -- commitment
• Training the self
  – Freely rendering oneself “un-free”
  – “Here I stand; I can do no other”
• Ethics as a science of limit
• Autonomous self-limitation
Education and training

- Reason as discovering “why”
- Activity is required for the LMWL reason prescribes
- And activity is not mere caprice
- Direction, order required to flourish
- “Trained” reactions facilitate the LMWL
- Taking pleasure in the good
- Making the LMWL “look easy”
Eudaimonia

• It tough to pursue but does frequently *ensue*
• . . . from virtue
• More than that, though, as developing virtue is itself a form of eudaimonia
• Think of the best day and the worst
• “Good” and “easy” map in interesting ways
• Discoveries and surprises
• Community
Friendship

• No one would choose to live without it
• Helpful for all
• Parents and children (throughout our travels)
• Holds cities together
• Necessary conditions
  – A soul
  – Reciprocal
  – Aware
Three Sorts of Friendship

• Corresponding to three sorts of love
  – “Instrumental”
    • Utility
    • Pleasure
  – “Complete”
    • A friendship of good (virtuous people)
    • Cf. Plato’s Symposium
  – Community (ideal?)
“Supreme virtue”

• Self-sufficient, enduring, and good in itself
• Loving wisdom
• Does “insult” from underestimating us illuminate?
• Do the powerful always respect virtue?
• The base is always with us; the noble may be as well
Modern perspectives

• Evolutionary psych
• The pursuit and the letdown
  – Functional
• Psychology as a branch of biology
• Life as pioneering
• A series of hypotheses?
• And enduring works/enduring problems
• Dissatisfied satisfaction
Meaning

- Projects, devotions, love
- Other-oriented (Frankel)
- Seemingly predictive of survival
- Natural or even necessary to the sort of beings we are?
- Giving-up?
  - What to care about
- Shoving-back against ignorance
- Nothing virtuous can come from stupidity
  - Not quite Socratic Prescriptivism
Loose ends?

• Education and training
• Functional imperatives
• Who gets to say?
• Worries over egalitarianism?
• Reason’s uneasy juxtaposition to power
• Induction – worthwhile hypotheses?
• Self-deception and cognitive dissonance
  – Friends; honesty and loyalty
What’s next?
Branches of Philosophy

- Metaphysics
- Epistemology
- Logic
- Aesthetics
- “Philosophy of . . .”
- Ethics
  - “The normative science of human conduct”
Ethics

• Two generally recognized (and interrelated) branches
  
• Decision theories -- choosing
  
  – Deontology
    • Duties, rights; centered on what people deserve
  
  – Consequentialism
    • Greatest good for the greatest number; centered on happiness
  
• Virtue theory and the practical question LMWL
  
  – What sort of person to be?