

## Moral Psychology f99

Session 1b  
Moral and Pre-Moral notions of the  
Good

## Plato

- 427-347 BC
- Lived most of his life in Athens
- A “pupil” of Socrates
- Started a philosophical “school”, the Academy, which lasted over 1000 years
- We know him through his dialogs, a few letters, and accounts from his contemporaries

## The Dialogs

- A unique literary form
- Socrates appears as a character
- Interacts with other prominent Athenians and some fictional characters
- Probably not a verbatim account of actual meetings -- the “Socratic conversation” is simply a fundamental way of doing philosophy.

## Plato’s Dialogs

- Several “periods”
  - Early “Socratic” dialogs -- tend merely to reveal other people’s confusions
  - “Early Middle” dialogs (E.g., Gorgias) -- attempt to elicit some fundamental philosophical views
  - “Middle” dialogs (e.g., Republic) -- present some grander philosophical theories (which may or may not be Plato’s own)

## Gorgias

- Dramatic setting: a conversation with two historical figures
  - Gorgias, one of the most notable traveling teachers of oratory
  - Polus, a student of his who later comes to some prominence
- And one who appears to be fictitious
  - Callicles, who appears to be a “perfect foil” for Socrates’ position, invented by Plato

## Gorgias

- Initial conversation on the topic, “What is an orator?” and “What is oratory?”
- Quickly leads to a more fundamental theme: what is the nature of the good life, and how ought one to live it.
- Callicles and Socrates seem to represent two fundamental options, the ground in between is shown to be unstable.

## The Gorgias in 4th c. Athens

- A key text in the development of what we think of as ethical thinking
- Develops an ethical use of the word 'good' against a backdrop of two other familiar uses -- in Callicles' terminology (483):
  - The conventional good
  - The natural good

## Natural and Conventional Good

- Most clearly presented as a comment on uses of the word 'good'.
- Can be seen as having two definitions:
  - Good<sub>1</sub> = "approved by the conventions of the community" (*Callicles' conventional good*)
  - Good<sub>2</sub> = "corresponding to what I want" (*Callicles' natural good*)

## The Conventional Good

- A perfectly familiar and ordinary use of the word 'good'
- Greek navigation and trade made them realize that customs and conventions were different in different lands. (Greek adage, "Custom is king!")
  - What is "good" in Persia might be a sin in Greece and vice-versa.

## A vision of the good life

- A good (good) person is one who does what is conventionally considered good; a good life is one in which one does what is conventionally considered good.
  - Usually relative to one's social station -- what's good for a king to do might be forbidden to a slave

## The Natural Good

- Again, a natural use of the word 'good' -- we say something is "good" (in sense #2) when it is what we wanted even if its is conventionally disapproved
  - Hence, as Polus suggests, we envy the tyrant the good things he has and the power he exerts, even though his having things through tyranny is conventionally evil, as are the deeds he performs to retain his power.

## Another vision of the good life

- A good life is one in which natural goods are maximized
  - Lots of strong desires
  - The ability to satisfy them
- This is Callicles' view of the good life.

### Callicles' Claims

- There are these two (and only these two!?) uses of the word 'good'
- It is the "natural" usage that is fundamental- the conventional good is concocted by those in power to perpetuate their hold on the things that are naturally considered good.
- Socrates trips people up by mixing up the two uses.

### Paralogism -- a form of fallacy

- A fallacy based on use of homonyms
- E.g.,
  - Bank(1) = place where money is kept
  - Bank(2) = shore of a river
- 1. Money is kept in banks.
- 2. Banks are the shores of rivers, *therefore*
- 3. Money is kept in the shores of rivers.

### A bad argument

- 1. Money is kept in banks(1).
- 2. Banks(2) are the shores of rivers,
  - *Does not imply.....*
- 3. Money is kept in the shores of rivers.

### Socrates Position

- Seems to accept that these two senses of 'good' are used
- But he is not using 'good' in either of these senses!
- Using it in a third sense -- a truly ethical sense -- which is not reducible to either of the other two.
- (We'll look at the case for his position next time.)

### Problems with Callicles' View

- Familiar problems arise, for us and for the ancient Greeks, out of the natural and conventional good.
  - 2 conventional goods conflict
  - 2 natural goods conflict
  - Conventional goods conflict with natural goods
  - Natural goods that you don't want after you get them

### Conflicting Conventional Goods

- A person has two duties which conflict with one another -- the basis of much Greek tragedy.
  - Antigone has duties
    - To the city, to obey laws and decrees
    - To family, to bury her brothers
  - Agamemnon has duties
    - To his family, to protect Iphigenia
    - To gods and state, to sacrifice her

## Conflicting Natural Goods

- A person wants two things which are mutually exclusive:
  - Bob wants to marry Brenda and to marry Alice
  - Bob wants to be faithful to Brenda, but also wants to commit adultery with Alice
  - Gretchen wants to be independently wealthy and also wants to be a professional harmonica player

## Natural and Conventional Goods

- A person wants a thing that is conventionally bad, or has to do a thing she does not want to do.
  - Oedipus wants to marry Jocasta (natural good) but it is wrong to marry your mother, whether you know it or not (conventional good)
  - Achilles decides he wants to abandon the Trojan war and go home, but is shamed into avenging the death of Patroclus

## Natural Goods are Deceptive

- You get what you wanted, but don't like it after you've got it!
  - Garrison Keillor: "Happiness isn't so much getting what you want, as getting what you've got, and realizing that it's what you would have wanted all along, if only you'd have known."
  - The dessert or drink that you desired makes you sick. (Extreme case of the drug addict.)
  - The person you were crazy about turns out to be the wrong person for you.

## Commonsense Connundrum

- These ordinary uses of the word 'good' -- obedience to convention and getting what we desire -- don't provide a sure way to be happy or lead a good life.
  - Often generate conflicting standards which cause unhappiness
  - May lead us in unhappy directions altogether

## Some Possible Explanations

- Both convention and our desires are arbitrary -- and are not necessarily connected with what will really make us happy or thriving individuals
- Suggests: to have a better chance of being happy and thriving individuals, we would need to have a better grasp of what really leads to happiness and thriving!