

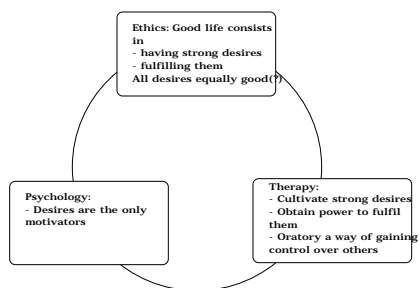
Moral Psychology

Session 2a
The Argument for an Objective Good
in the Gorgias

Last Time

- Callicles: “conventional” and “natural” senses of the word ‘good’
- Conventional: ‘good’ = “in accordance with what is approved with convention”
- Natural: ‘good’ = “in accordance with what I want”

Callicles’ Moral Psychology



Today

- Socrates and the Socratic Method
- Socrates’ questioning of Gorgias, Polus, Callicles
- The argument for the existence of an objective good.

Socratic Method

- Arguably an utterly new mode of conversation.
- Often described in the context of medical diagnosis -- Socrates a doctor of the soul?
- Aims at moving towards truth by uncovering and eliminating errors (458)
- Requires “understanding, good will, and willingness to be perfectly frank” (487)

Socratic Method

- A questioner probes the interlocutor’s beliefs on a subject.
 - All that matters is the interlocutor’s agreement, not what anyone else may think (473e)
 - Brings out inconsistencies between things a person believes (e.g., Socrates gets Gorgias to say both (a) that the orator does not need to know the subject he is persuading others about, and (b) that he would have to teach a student about moral matters in order to make him an orator.)
 - Explores consequences of their beliefs that may go beyond what they’ve considered before, which may bring out unforeseen issues (e.g., the bit about the itch later on)

Socratic Method

- Tends to end in the (early, early middle) dialogs with the interlocutor realizing that his previous ways of looking at things do not make sense, leaving him stunned (as though stung by a torpedo fish -- one of the metaphors for Socrates!)
- Can also result in the conception and birthing of new and beautiful ideas (Meno, Theaetetus, Symposium) (Another metaphor for Socrates is that of a midwife who brings forth the ideas of others.)

Interrogation of Callicles

- Callicles has equated the (“natural”) good with getting what one desires.
- Sounds as though the only and final arbiter of the (natural) good is desire -- I.e., whatever desires one happens to have.
- So Socrates explores this point: Does Callicles really mean that fulfilling any set of desires counts as a good and happy life, or that some desires are better than others? (494)

The Dilemma Callicles Faces

- Either
 - A) All desires and pleasures are on an equal footing, and fulfilling whichever of them one may have counts equally as a good life, or
 - B) Some desires and pleasures are better than others.

Horn 1: All desires are equal

- Sounds good when you’re talking about fame, power, wealth, food, drink sex.
- But there are plenty of other desires and pleasures as well
 - Itches
 - “the pleasures of a catamite” (494)
- The point: if all desires are equal, then the obsessive scratcher is as happy as anyone! No better life!

Horn 2: There are Better and Worse Desires and Pleasures

- Callicles reverts to this position in 499!
- But by what standard are we to compare desires and pleasures with one another?
- It must be some standard other than desires themselves!
- An admission of Socrates’ position that there is an objective good not reducible to pleasure or desire!

A way out? Evaluate pleasures after the fact

- Suppose what matters is not what we desire (what we think will be pleasant), but what would actually produce the greatest balance of pleasures in the long run.
- A sophisticated hedonism. (*hedonia* is the Greek word for pleasure)
- (In fact, most philosophers who start out hedonists end up endorsing a life of moderation!)

A way out?

- Even if this may save the consistency of viewing pleasure as the good, it does not save a relativism based on desire.
- There is some fact of the matter about what will in fact give you pleasure, make you happy. (And it may not be what you think.)
- Points in the direction Socrates wants us to look: we need to seek knowledge of what will in fact be good for us, make us happy.

The Dilemma Callicles Faces

- Either
 - A) All desires and pleasures are on an equal footing, and fulfilling whichever of them one may have counts equally as a good life,
 - *Leads to ridiculous consequences (the happy scratcher)*
 - B) Some desires and pleasures are better than others.
 - *Admits Socrates' claim that there are objective questions of better and worse ways of living.*

Where are we left?

- Seems to have argued, from things that Callicles himself believes, that there are objectively better and worse ways of living (even by the standards Callicles is willing to acknowledge!)
- Calls for a new moral psychology to accommodate these insights.

Next Time

- The moral psychology implicit in Socrates' discussion with Polus.
- Get clear on
 - Distinction between “doing what you please” and “doing what you will” (466ff)
 - What Socrates and Polus mean by ‘power’ (466ff)
 - Means/ends analysis of 467/8
 - Why is knowledge crucial to being virtuous?