A. The Starting Point for Ethical Reflection

In the ancient world, the starting point for thinking ethically is the point at which you start thinking about your life as a whole. This will not happen until you have reached a stage of life at which you are mature enough to think about your life in the long term, and by that point you will already have an ethical context: You have grown up in a certain society, have a family and a position, and have taken in the major beliefs of your society about ethics. Ancient ethical theories do not try to get you to throw away all these beliefs or to pretend that ethically you are a blank sheet of paper. They get you to do what you are already doing—thinking about your life as a whole—but to do it more clearly and rigorously.

Rhetoric I, 5 (Extract)
ARISTOTLE

Nearly everyone has a kind of target, both privately for each person and in common, in aiming at which they make their choices and avoidances, and this is, in brief, happiness and its parts. So let us, by way of illustration, grasp what it is that happiness is, generally speaking, and what its parts consist of. All attempts to persuade and dissuade concern this and the things that conduce toward it and those opposed to it. For one should do the things that provide happiness or one of its parts or provide more, rather than less, and not do the things that destroy it or prevent it or produce the opposite.

Let happiness, then, be said to be doing well together with virtue or self-sufficiency of life or the most pleasant life together with security or affluence in possessions ... together with the power to protect and make use of them. For virtually all agree that happiness is one or more of these things. If happiness is something like this, then its parts must necessarily be good birth, having many friends, having good friends, wealth, having good children, having many children, a good old age; further, the bodily virtues, such as health, beauty, strength, size, competitive power; and reputation, honor, good luck, and virtue. For a person would be most self-sufficient if he possessed the goods internal to him and external, since there are no others. Internal are those of the soul and in the body, and external are good birth, friends, money, and honor. Further, we think that there should be powers and luck, for this is how one's life would be most secure.
How Should You Live?

COMMENTS

Aristotle is giving an outline sketch of what ordinary people think about happiness. He points out that most people think in terms of their lives as a whole and try con-sciously to organize their lives each as a unity, rather than blundering from one decision to another. Aristotle finds this a natural and widespread way of thinking that can be taken for granted. He also takes it for granted that people think of this overall goal as happiness.

These two points are important for the form that ancient ethics takes. The assumption is that most people already think, more or less intelligently, in terms of seeking happiness in their life as a whole. Philosophers begin from these basic beliefs and work within this framework, accepting that we all seek happiness, that thoughtful people seek it consciously and reflectively, and that ethical philosophy tries to improve our ordinary beliefs about it. The Greek for happiness is eudaimonia, and Greek ethics are often called eudaimonist because of this framework.

What is wrong with ordinary people’s views of happiness? As presented here, they appear commonsensical. People want to be healthy, rich, and good-looking, and they want to be popular and have a happy family life. They also want to be good people, who have the virtues. This is not very surprising and probably not different from the idea of happiness that many people have now. Questions and problems seem near the surface, however.

First, a view of your life as a whole demands that you set some priorities. If you want to be a virtuous person, for example, this will set bounds on the extent to which you can devote yourself to making money. If you regard all these things as “parts” of happiness, then a sensible view of your life as a whole is going to force some decisions about what kinds of parts they are and which are the most important.

Second, people seem to want “self-sufficiency”; they want not just to have riches, say, but to feel secure in their possession of riches. Yet many of the good things listed here as “parts” of happiness are such that either getting or keeping them involves a risk of losing wealth and wealth cannot guarantee.

It doesn’t take much thought, then, to see that when reflecting on how best to live, people should ask whether happiness is really a matter of money and good looks or has more to do with what you make of your own life.

HERODOTUS

Herodotus of Halicarnassus (in Asia Minor) lived from the 480s to the 420s B.C. His Histories, the earliest historical narrative we possess, focuses on the earlier Persian Wars, together with much social and geographic background material. His historiography and interests in narrative and descriptive, but the word “histoire,” from which we derive history, means inquiry, and Herodotus stories are often shaped by a desire to raise or explore points of theoretical interest. Herodotus, like Solon and Croesus, is unlikely to rest on any actual event, although both were real people. Solon, an Athenian politician, figures here as the stock Wise Man, and Croesus, a ruler of the Asian Minor Kingdom of Lydia, figures as the Rich and Powerful King. The audience knew that Croesus had extended his prosperous kingdom and made it powerful, but eventually he asked the Persians who conquered Lydia and deposed Croesus. This story is a Greek reflection on what happened to someone who trusted in the power of riches.

Histories I, 29–34

HERODOTUS

When these peoples had been subdued and while Croesus was increasing the Lydian empire, Sardis was at the height of its prosperity and was visited on occasion by every learned Greek who was alive at the time, including Solon of Athens. Two or three days after his arrival, Croesus had some attendants give Solon a tour of his various law courts and show him how magnificent and valuable everything was. Once Solon had seen and examined everything, Croesus found an opportunity to put a question to him. “My dear guest from Athens,” he said, “we have often heard about you in Sardis: you are famous for your learning and your travels. We hear that you love knowledge and have journeyed far and wide, to see the world. So I really want to ask you whether you have ever come across anyone who is happier than everyone else?”

In asking the question, he was expecting to be named as the happiest of all men, but Solon preferred truth to flattery and said, “Yes, my lord: Tellus of Athens.”

Croesus was surprised at the answer and asked urgently: “What makes you think that Tellus is the happiest man?”

“In the first place,” Solon replied, “while living in a prosperous state, Tellus had sons who were wise, upstanding men and he lived to see them all have children, all of whom survived. In the second place, his death came at a time when

he had a good income, by our standards, and it was a glorious death. You see, in a battle at Eleusis between Athens and her neighbours he stepped into the breach and made the enemy turn tail and flee; he died, but his death was splendid, and the Athenians awarded him a public funeral on the spot where he fell, and greatly honoured him.”

Crosus’ attention was engaged by Solon’s ideas about all the ways in which Tellus was well off, so he asked who was the second happiest person Solon knew; he had absolutely no doubt that he would carry off the second prize, at least. But Solon replied, “CLEOBIS AND BITON, because these ARGIVES made an adequate living and were also blessed with amazing physical strength. It’s not just that the pair of them were both prize-winning athletes; there’s also the following story about them. During a festival of Hera at Argos, their mother urgently needed to be taken to the sanctuary on her cart, but the oxen failed to pull up the cart from the path in time. There was no time to waste, so the young men harnessed themselves to the yoke and pulled the cart with their mother riding on it. The distance to the temple was forty-five stades, and they took her all the way there. After this achievement of theirs, which was witnessed by the people assembled for the festival, they died in the best possible way; in fact, the gods used them to show that it is better for a person to be dead than to be alive. What happened was that while the Argive men were standing around congratulating the young men on their strength, the women were telling their mother how lucky she was in her children. Their mother was overcome with joy at what her sons had done and the fame it would bring, and she went right up to the statue of the goddess, stood there and prayed that in return for the great honour her children Cleobis and Biton had done her, the goddess would give them whatever it is best for a human being to have. After she had finished her prayer, they participated in the rites and the feast, and then the young men lay down inside the actual temple for a rest. They never got to their feet again; they met their end there. The Argives had statues made of them and dedicated them at Delphi, on the grounds that they had been the best of men.”

Crosus was angry with Solon for awarding the second prize for happiness to these young men, and he said, “My dear guest from Athens, do you hold our happiness in utter contempt? Is that why you are ranking us lower than even ordinary citizens?”

“CROSUS,” Solon replied, “when you asked me about men and their affairs, you were putting your question to someone who is well aware of how utterly jealous the divine is, and how it is likely to confound us. Anyone who lives for a long time is bound to see and endure many things he would rather avoid. I place the limit of a man’s life at seventy years. Seventy years make 25,200 days, not counting the intercalary months; but if you increase the length of every other year by a month, so that the seasons happen when they should, there will be thirty-five such intercalary months in the seventy years, and these extra months will give us 1,050 days. So the sum total of all the days in seventy years is 26,250, but no two days bring events which are exactly the same. It follows, Crosus, that human life is entirely a matter of chance.

“Now, I can see that you are extremely rich and that you rule over large numbers of people, but I won’t be in a position to say what you’re asking me to say about you until I find out that you died well. You see, someone with vast wealth is no better off than someone who lives from day to day, unless good fortune attends him and sees to it that, when he dies, he dies well and with all his advantages intact. After all, plenty of extremely wealthy people are unfortunate, while plenty of people with moderate means are lucky; and someone with great wealth but bad fortune is better off than a lucky man in only two ways, whereas there are many ways in which a lucky man is better off than someone who is rich and unlucky. An unlucky rich man is more capable of satisfying his desires and of riding out disaster when it strikes, but a lucky man is better off than him in the following respects. Even though he is not as capable of coping with disaster and his desires, his good luck protects him, and he also avoids disfigurement and disease, has no experience of catastrophe, and is blessed with fine children and good looks. If, in addition to all this, he dies a heroic death, then he is the one you are after—he is the one who deserves to be described as happy. But until he is dead, you had better refrain from calling him happy, and just call him fortunate.

“Now, it is impossible for a mere mortal to have all these blessings at the same time, just as no country is entirely self-sufficient; any given country has some things, but lacks others, and the best country is the one which has the most. By the same token, no one person is self-sufficient: he has some things, but lacks others. The person who has and retains more of these advantages than others, and then dies well, my lord, is the one who, in my opinion, deserves the description in question. It is necessary to consider the end of anything, however, and to see how it will turn out, because the god often offers prosperity to men, but then destroys them utterly and completely.”

These sentiments did not endear Solon to Crosus at all, and Crosus dismissed him as of no account. He was sure that anyone who ignored present benefits and told him to look to the end of everything was an ignoramus.

After Solon’s departure, the weight of divine anger descended on Crosus, in all likelihood for thinking that he was the happiest man in the world.

COMMENTS

Crosus, a king of legendary riches, is here presented as someone who thinks that external goods are what matter for happiness, so that the more riches and power you have, the happier you will be. But Herodotus’ audience already knew that Crosus eventually lost his kingdom.

Solon stresses that happiness cannot just lie in having riches and power; it depends on how your life as a whole turns out. His examples, however, show that he does not mean that the happy person will be the careful planner who saves for her later years. Tellus lived a conventionally good and happy life, leaving children to carry on the family, but he died prematurely in battle. Cleobis and Biton, at the
height of their achievement, died young. The happy life is not the life devoted to achieving security, but may involve risk and aspiration. The point is that whether you are happy depends on what you make of your life. If you have made your life a noble one, then it is happy even if cut short. But Croesus' loss of riches and power will make his life unhappy because he sees his happiness as depending on them. Solon's point is not just that riches can always be lost, but that Croesus' priorities are wrong.

B. The First Theories: Virtue and Happiness

It is remarkable that the first ethical theories that we have—those of Democritus and Plato—are both very bold in the way that they try to reform ordinary people's thoughts about happiness. Both of them think that we should think about our lives more rationally and reflectively than we do and that the results of doing so would make us happy. Plato, in particular, stresses the importance of being a virtuous, moral person, implying (though he does not work it out rigorously) that this is all that is needed to be happy. Neither philosopher, however, makes his assumptions and framework explicit. Both simply take over the assumption that everyone seeks to be happy and give us a surprising account of how to achieve happiness.

DEMOCRITUS

Democritus of Abdera (c. 460–370 B.C.) wrote extensively on a wide number of topics, but apart from some fragments and later reports, his works are lost. His ideas were influential on later philosophers, however. Both his theory of atomism and his ethical view that the goal of life is a pleasant and tranquil state were taken up and developed later by Epicurus.

The actual inventor of atomism seems to have been an obscure figure called Leucippus, but it was Democritus who developed the theory and was associated with it. Atomism is the most influential of the pre-Socratic theories that attempted to account for the nature of the observable world by postulating a small number of unobservable theoretical entities and a small number of mechanisms to get from them to the world we experience. Democritus postis only atoms, with differences of shape and void and is notable among ancient theorists for having no use for teleology. The comments we have from him about knowledge are puzzling and have been thought both to support and to undermine skepticism about knowledge. We have a large number of fragments on ethical matters, enough to see how they might have fitted into the framework that later writers tell us he employed—that of criticizing our conception of the happiness that we all seek and of trying to replace it with a better one.