

GUILDFORD U3A PHILOSOPHY GROUP

SESSION 3

'The classical conception of the good life': Plato and Aristotle

GRAYLING

Ch 2 A.C Grayling 'What is Good? The search for the best way to live'

Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck College London, author of numerous books, newspaper articles, Appears on tv and radio: e.g. Melvyn Bragg's 'In Our Time'

Public intellectual

Condemns some but not all professional philosophers

Book for general reader considering 'what values should we live by to live the genuinely good life'.

Adopts a chronological approach taking us from Plato to Nietzsche

Admits he has an underlying point to argue:

'mankind's quest for the good has been a struggle between *humanism* on the one hand, and *religious conceptions* ... most human progress has occurred in the face of religious reaction, and most human suffering [is] the result of religion-inspired conflict and religion-based oppression'.

Last year we said Philosophy lay *midway* between:

- faith-based religion; and
- the rigorous logic of Science, generating hypotheses, testing them out, making proposals that in turn are tested by peer review.

Interesting to hear that Sophie Grace Chappell, OU Professor of Philosophy, is a practising Christian. Where do we go with that? Such a relief Richard will tell us in his session on Religion and Philosophy.

MY POINT, NOT GRAYLING'S

WE CAN'T REALLY MAKE CATERORICAL STATEMENTS ABOUT WHAT A PARTICULAR PHILOSOPHER SAID OR, MORE, BELIEVED

- May simply be difficult to understand, and, in a single work, express different and highly nuanced opinions
- Problems with translation: in her translation of Plato's 'Meno', Sophie Grace says 'Plato is repeatedly readier than we may be to equate words for "wisdom" with words for "knowledge".'

For us, 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' mean different things, so what does a translator do? Opt for one or the other? Opt for one but put the other in brackets like Sophie Grace? Either approach is confusing.

Plato offers particular challenges. Is it him 'speaking' or Socrates, the main speaker in most of the dialogues? Anyway, as he says in the Meno, he's only asking questions, not 'teaching' anything.

Doesn't necessarily get much easier with philosophers writing in English. With Hobbes, words have clearly changed meanings since he published 'Leviathan' in 1651, and his context requires screeds of footnotes to support understanding.

- Philosophers change their minds; Plato of the Symposium is very different to the austere Plato of The Laws, in which Socrates as a 'character' has dropped out and, although there are dialogues, Plato is saying what he believes. Apparently.
- 'What was Jane Austen's influence on Shakespeare?' problem. Shakespeare died in 1616, Austen born 1775. But we do see the past through the eyes of the present and are therefore frequently reinventing it. Professor Mary Beard says of classical texts that we are still discovering fragments of original manuscripts which may, when dropped into the manuscripts we previously had, change their meaning significantly.
- We see everything through our particular prejudices / experience / interests etc.

So Grayling in my mind, coming from his position of a humanist fiercely hostile to Religion, skates over Plato's **Platonic Realism**: his theory of Forms or Ideas, which refers to his belief that the material world as it seems to us is not the real world, but only a shadow or a poor copy of the real world. Heaven? In the *Meno* he does say that virtue is neither natural nor teachable: it comes to men—when it does come—by divine gift.

So the subsequent development of **neo-platonism** (fusing Platonism with eastern mysticism) not an accident, nor subsequent attempts to reconcile Platonism with Christianity.

So, for all these reasons, and more, it's difficult to say 'Plato thought this but Aristotle thought that' about the good life or anything else.

Worse there are particular challenges we'll look at later in terms of Socrates and Plato.

All of which matters if we're looking to Philosophy for clear, categorical answers, far less if we're looking to it to help challenge our presuppositions and at least, in Plato's words, come to appreciate how partial our knowledge is.

Having said which and providing we see we're using a kind of shorthand here,

Let's look at 'The classical conception of the good life' as set out in Grayling's second chapter.

Before looking at Plato and Aristotle, he has 4 introductory sections

INTRODUCTORY SECTION 1

THE GREEK VIEW OF LIFE

'the Greek view of life appears at its best in its appreciation of beauty, the respect it paid to reason ... its freedom of thought and feeling, its absence of mysticism [though see above point about Plato] and false sentimentality, and its humanism ... and sanity of outlook – which taken all together, specifies living nobly and richly in spirit as the aim of life.'

Grayling focuses on Plato's use in 'The Republic' of '**sophrosyne**', defining it as 'the agreement of the passions that Reason should rule, the corollary being that passion and the senses are important too'

Grayling contrasts that with St Paul's belief in *restraint of* passion and the senses and in the terribleness of *sin* (of which he says the Greeks had no sense)

For the Greeks, beauty including of the trained human body was a moral virtue.

They lived in the 'now' 'aiming to flourish, achieve, learn, appreciate and enjoy'

St Paul, in contrast, held 'now' was a preparation for the future: hopefully heaven.

INTRODUCTORY SECTION 2

THE FIRST ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE FIRST HUMANISM

(second one beginning in the C16th Century AD)

Thales (say 624 -545 BCE) father of Philosophy

concerned with what we'd now call Physics (nature, origin and laws of physical universe)

Though even then Protagoras said famously 'Man is the measure of all things'.

Socrates say 150 years later turned Philosophy into an enquiry of how people should live.

Xenophon, one of his pupils, said people listened to him to 'grow into good and noble men, and learn how to conduct themselves aright to their households and servants, their relations and friends, their county and countrymen.'

Civic virtues.

INTRODUCTORY SECTION 3

HEROIC VIRTUES

Mycenaean Age say 600 years before classical Athens.

Best expressed perhaps in Homer's Iliad (Trojan war, seeking to rescue the abducted Helen) and Odyssey (adventures of Odysseus during his return from the Trojan War and what happens when he gets home).

In those tales, the individual pursues his own honour in *physical* action.

Virtues: fitness, physical strength, alertness, fortitude, courage, boldness.

Classical philosophers respected those but respected more and were much more focused on e.g. contemplation, pursuit of knowledge, expressly civic (i.e. community, service) values of justice and friendship.

Included *every* citizen. Which Homer didn't.

INTRODUCTORY SECTION 4

CIVIC VIRTUES AND SOCRATES

Classical period stressed the importance of discussion and debate.

So it saw the rise of Sophists, teachers of rhetoric.

They provoked Socrates and Plato because they charged money, were indifferent to truth.

For Socrates and Plato:

- enquiry was *free*
- finding the *truth* was central
- Philosophy posed the most important questions you could address.

Plato turned Philosophy into 'the dedicated task of enquiring into the good life and the good society'.

He asked 'Is there a goal, a purpose, a value in life which is worthwhile as an end in itself and not merely as a means to other things?'

Another way of asking 'What's it all for?'

Happiness often cited as what makes life worthwhile. We'll look at that in the Epicureans.

For Plato, purpose of life consists in 'the perfection of the soul'.

Austere, intellectual, demanding.

So Plato's 'The Apology' (dramatized version of Socrates' defence at his trial for impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens) sets out that:

- Primary concern is to seek wisdom
- Goodness gives value to wealth and success
- Goodness consists in having a knowledge of *intrinsic* things men do and desire
- Once you know what good is, you can't do otherwise than be good

Method: getting people to see that they did not know what they thought they knew.

Socrates says in the Meno:

'Now that you know what you do not know, we can begin to make progress.'

Can seem inconclusive.

But shedding confusion the first step.

And the *quest* for him most important: 'the examined life'

SO

WHAT VALUES DID PLATO THINK WE SHOULD BY TO LIVE THE GENUINELY GOOD LIFE?

c. 428 - 348 B.CE. So died about 80.

Used Socrates as his mouthpiece but went far beyond him in setting out his own theories, which consisted in a set of interlinked views resting on metaphysical and epistemological premises (starting points: you couldn't challenge then and you have to start somewhere).

Metaphysics: branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of existence, being, and the world. Arguably, metaphysics is the foundation of philosophy: Aristotle calls it "first philosophy" (or sometimes just "wisdom"), and says it is the subject that deals with "first causes and the principles of things". It asks questions like: "What is the nature of reality?", "How does the world exist, and what is its origin or source of creation?", "Does the world exist outside the mind?", "Is there a God?" 'Meta' from Greek meaning 'More comprehensive', 'transcending'.

Epistemology: study of the nature and scope of knowledge and justified belief. It analyses the nature of knowledge and how it relates to similar notions such as truth, belief and justification (showing something to be right or reasonable). Also deals with how we produce knowledge, as well as scepticism about different knowledge claims. Asks questions like: "What is knowledge?", "How is knowledge acquired?", "What do people know?", "What is its structure, and what are its limits?", "What makes justified beliefs justified?", "How we are to understand the concept of justification?".

2 Platonic dialogues impt. in showing development of his ethical views: The Republic and Gorgias. In the latter, Gorgias, Sophist, destroyed:

It establishes there are 2 types of persuasion:

1. Giving rise to knowledge because it gives reasons for accepting a belief
2. Using rhetorical tricks to cause you to accept a proposition, true or not

2 points of great importance emerge:

1. Importance of sharing: 'an unjust person will be denied the friendship of the gods and other people if he is not capable of sharing'.
2. To live well is to have an ordered soul in harmony with itself.

'The Republic'

Presents itself primarily as a work of political philosophy looking at what constitutes the good and just state.

But also uses the state as an analogy for the individual life, so what constitutes the good and just state constitutes the good life.

e.g.

in the same way the state achieves social harmony by balancing its 3 orders of citizens (rulers, army, general population)

so individual achieves personal harmony by balancing reason, emotions and appetites, achieving that harmony being 'the object of the intelligent man's life.'

Personal harmony requires self-control, moderation, proportion, self-reflection:

all of which you could package up and call 'justice' (connotations 'justice has for us not necessarily helpful):

That will make you happy because without 'justice' you won't set a limit on your desires so will always be discontented.

