

What is the Right Thing to Do?

The Seventh Session: Aristotle

Friday, November 16th, 2018

Introduction

What marks modern and contemporary moral thinkers from the Greek ancients, is the idea that justice, to be justice must have no truck with merit, or what Sandel refers to as “moral desert”. For all the moderns, libertarians and egalitarians – we have been concentrating on the latter in Kant, the Utilitarians, Bentham and Mill, and finally Rawls – justice is about equality and freedom, not about giving people what is their due, what they deserve. This may all sound fairly self-evident. However, it has not always been like this. For the Greeks, and in particular for Aristotle, justice does have to do with a sense of entitlement, justice does have to do with merit, “deserved-ness”. Another word for it is virtue. To put it bluntly, quoting George Orwell’s “Animal Farm”, some are more equal than others”. But, how does this reasoning work. How can it possibly be that justice serves what on the face of it, is “privilege”, the service of an elite? How so?

Aristotle – Powerful and Strange

For Aristotle, justice is a matter of working out someone’s fit in a society, their appropriate social roles. He writes,

“Justice involves two factors: things and the persons to whom the things are assigned. In general, we say that persons who are equal should have equal things assigned to them”

But, this raises the question of equal in what respects. His response is that this depends upon what is being distributed. For example, if we are distributing flutes, then we should ask, what is the basis for merit or deserved-ness when it comes to flutes? Who should get the best ones? He answers, the best flute-players. Is it just to discriminate in favour of the best flute players? Clearly yes. For Aristotle all justice involves discrimination. What matters is that the discrimination be according to the relevant excellence, according to the virtue of having flutes. To discriminate on the basis of wealth or nobility of birth, or physical beauty, or even chance is unjust. But to discriminate on the basis of skill in playing flutes is just, and why: because flutes are made to be played, that what flutes are for. Flutes being given to flute players who excel rewards virtue. What is interesting is that Aristotle is not a utilitarian. He does not say that when the flutes are played by the people who re entitles to them, then everyone will enjoy the music. Rather, he is saying that flutes are to be allocated to the best flute players because flutes are made to be used to their maximum: they have a purpose, and in meeting that purpose virtue is rewarded. So, what is fundamental to Aristotle is that in thinking through a just use of something, one must think through its purpose, goal or end – the *telos* (τέλος). This is called teleological reasoning – reasoning from the purpose. This has some value in it. For instance, to the question who should have priority playing on the best tennis courts at Harvard. One could answer, those who can pay most, or those who are the ‘big shots’, the heads of departments. Aristotle would say no. Rather it should be those who play the best tennis. That is what tennis court are for. That is their purpose, their *telos*, and in so doing the virtue of the accomplished tennis players is acknowledged.

This idea of purpose is a bit strange to us moderns. For the ancients, nature itself was teleological, it was understood to be purpose driven. It was thought that fire rose because it was reaching for the sky – its natural home. It was also thought that stones fall, because they were striving to get closer to the earth.

So, in summary For Aristotle, reasoning from the purpose, the end, the *telos* is essential for working out what is just and what is not.

Politics

But while modern moral thought is no longer teleological, as it used to be. What about social and political institutions. How does teleological thinking apply? Well it still is relevant for political thought and social institutions. In what follows, we listen to Sandel’s explanation of Aristotle’s approach under three headings: the purpose of politics, can you be a good person if you don’t participate in politics, learning by doing and politics and the good life.

The Purpose of Politics

When we talk about how things should be distributed in society (distributive justice), we often think about wealth, in the form of income and assets. For Aristotle, distributive justice also included things like honour

and offices or roles. Who should have the right to rule? How should political authority be distributed? Today we would say, equally of course: one person one vote. There are other possibilities which are more discriminatory. Aristotle contends however that all distributions of wealth and power are discriminatory. The issue is which is just? In order to think this through, he begins with the question that we dealt with above: what is the purpose or telos of politics: “what is political association for”?

This is difficult to answer. It is one thing to speak about a flute, quite another to talk about politics. Today as moderns, we tend to think that about politics as an open process, shaped by the changing priorities that citizens espouse. Theoretically at least, this is why we have elections: to establish the changing priorities. In other words, we do not tend to think that politics has a particular telos or purpose. This is not Aristotle’s way of thought. For Aristotle, politics is less about framing politics in a set of rights that is neutral in purposes, and more about forming good citizens and cultivating good character or virtue. So, the highest end of a political association is not “to provide an alliance for mutual defence”, or “to promote economic intercourse” but to enable people to develop their distinctive human capacities and virtues – to deliberate about the common good, to acquire practical judgment, to share in self-government and to care for the fate of the community as a whole. While he acknowledges that defence and trade pacts are legitimate, they are not the essence of politics.

If the purpose of politics is to form virtue – what he calls the good life – what does this make distributive justice look like: the distribution of offices (roles) and honours? As with flutes, so with politics. These office and honours should go to those who are best placed to exercise them, those who excel in civic virtue, those who are best at thinking through issues related to the common good. So, for Aristotle, people like Pericles should indeed have the role, as he did. Consideration should be given to property holders, and even to the majority concerns at time, but in the end, it is those with particular character qualities that suit them to politics and good governance who should govern.

Can You be a Good Person if you don't Participate in Politics?

Aristotle is clear that politics is central to the good person and the good life. Why can’t we be good people without politics? In contrast to modern thought that sees politics a perhaps a necessary evil, or at best a means to an end, even good ends, Aristotle sees that politics is basic to our nature. Only by living in the city (*polis*) and participating in its life through politics can we fully realize our nature as human beings. His reason for this view is that we humans are unique in that we use language. Other animals can make sounds that express basic pleasure and pain, but we in language we can declare what is just and unjust, right and wrong. Through language we deliberate about and discern the good. Further, it is only in political association, we can maximize our capacity for language, since we deliberate *with others* about justice and injustice, and the good. In doing this, in developing the habit of deliberating together, we become virtuous. We learn virtue through practice.

Learning by Doing

If moral virtue is something we learn by doing, we have to therefore develop the right habits in the first place. For Aristotle, this is the primary purpose of law – to cultivate the habits that lead to good character. This does not mean that moral and civic education is about rules or rote learning. Rather it is about character that is able to discern the specific features of a situation, that may call for this rule or that. Moral virtue then requires judgment, a sort of knowledge that Aristotle calls “practical wisdom”. He defines practical wisdom as “a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to the human good”.

Politics and Citizenship: A High Calling

Returning to the idea of telos, or purpose, it is possible to see how Aristotle arrives at the conclusion that the telos of politics and citizenship to build the good, requires a particular sort of human being: one of good habits, of good character, one who is capable of deliberation and practical wisdom. But again, these people do not just pre-exist. They come about due to practice, due to living the life of the citizen. Aristotle’s vision of citizenship is more elevated and strenuous than today’s. For him, politics is not economics by other means. Its purpose is higher than maximizing utility (Utilitarianism) or providing fair rules for the pursuit of individual interest (Libertarianism). Rather, it is about giving expression to human nature, an opportunity for the unfolding of our human capacities for the good.

Questions

1. The idea that from the purpose of something you reason back to what is just, seems rather elitist. It certainly makes us rethink justice. To a modern world where justice is about equality and freedom, Aristotle concludes it is about where we fit in society. Certainly, leadership and even citizenship falls only to the qualified. Does this make you uncomfortable or do you think it has something to say to us where everyone is deemed equipped to do everything?
2. Aristotle has a high view of politics and living politically. In fact, it is central to the good life. We cannot live in a fully human way without the city (*polis*). Do you think this is true?
3. The Biblical view of justice is very different. The Exodus is really rights based, grounded in people seizing their rights through Yahweh's liberating action. In the New Testament, Jesus liberates people from the societies that oppress them. Restoration is about people taking a new place in their cities. It seems that Scripture addresses the poor while Aristotle addresses the elites. Is the biblical view more edgy/radical?