Philosophies of Happiness

Appendix 2: Aristotle: The Neutral State

Although Aristotle argues for enjoyment of pleasures in moderation, it is clear that he does not regard the neutral, painless state as the ideal, as does Epicurus. We see this in the subtle argument to which he turns next, an answer to Speusippus. It is generally agreed that pain is bad and to be avoided, for one type of pain is unconditionally bad—in other words, pains that simply hurt and are uncomfortable for the body or mind—and another bad in a particular way, by impeding activities. It then would seem that the contrary of what is to be avoided, in so far as it is bad, is a good. Pleasure must therefore be a good.

Speusippus offered a solution to this problem. The greater is contrary to both the less and to the equal. By that reasoning, the good could be a neutral state, contrary to both pain—which we have agreed is bad—and to pleasure, which would also be bad. Hence we couldn’t simply argue that since pain is bad, pleasure is good, for the neutral state might be the ideal. Aristotle, however, rejects this argument, because Speusippus would not say that pleasure is something essentially bad, as his argument would require.

Why would his argument require this? Imagine the neutral state is the good—like the Stoic or Epicurean notion of undisturbedness (ataraxia) or the Buddhist notion of nirvana, which is neither pleasure nor pain. Its contraries would then be both pain and pleasure, each of which would be bad. The goal would be a state of calm equanimity, an absence of both the high and low of pleasure and pain, which would be seen as equally detrimental. But Speusippus cannot use this argument to assert that the neutral state is good without arguing that pleasure is essentially bad. However, we know on independent historical grounds that Speusippus did not argue that pleasure is essentially bad, and Aristotle must have known this as well. Thus the argument fails.
In Book 10, we see a stronger justification for this argument, in his treatment of Eudoxus. Eudoxus held that the goodness of pleasure is clear from its converse. Pain, he thought, is in itself something to be avoided by all, and therefore, similarly, its contrary is something to be chosen by all. Aristotle mentions and refutes an objection to this argument. The objection is that even if pain is bad, it does not follow that pleasure is a good, because both pleasure and pain could be bad, and both opposed to a third neutral state which is good. In Book 7, Aristotle ascribed this argument to Speusippus and refuted it by declaring that Speusippus would not say that pleasure is essentially bad; however, Aristotle did not make clear why Speusippus should not say this. In Book 10, Aristotle gives a reason. To say that pleasure and pain are alike in that both are bad and objects of aversion does not square with empirical evidence. In fact, people avoid pain as bad and choose pleasure as good. Aristotle takes seriously our natural attraction to pleasure and aversion to pain; the empirical fact that we do all seek pleasure and avoid pain overrides the theoretical argument that pleasure and pain could equally be bad or equally indifferent. If both pleasure and pain were evil, we would find people avoiding both equally. If both pleasure and pain were indifferent, then we would find people avoiding neither, or avoiding both alike. Aristotle takes seriously the practical evaluations of ordinary people. From a modern perspective, this is a remarkable position for an ethical theorist to take. He is in sympathy with the hedonist argument of Eudoxus: the fact that people avoid pain and choose pleasure is some sign that it is genuinely good. While Aristotle is explicitly responding to the anti-hedonist arguments of Speusippus, Gerd Van Riel argues that the issue of hedonism is a red herring; the real issue is the redefinition of pleasure away from the model of restoration from lack to a model of positive expression of activity. See Gerd Van Riel, “Aristotle’s Definition of Pleasure: a Refutation of the Platonic Account,” Ancient Philosophy 20 (2000): 119-138; see likewise Frede, op cit.

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ii 7.13, 1153b 1-10.

iii See Broadie, Nicomachean Ethics, 403.

iv See H. H. Joachim, Commentary to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, 263-4.

v Broadie, Nicomachean Ethics, 432.

vi Deborah Achtenberg pointed out to me that this is an endoxic argument that pleasure is good but not an account of why it is good.