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Philosophy of Man

21 March 2008

The Making of a Philosopher

This paper explores the question of how we become what we become, according to Aristotle. More specifically, what causes someone to become a Philosopher? My thesis is that someone would become a Philosopher only if they were raised and educated a certain way such that their strongest desire would be the love of wisdom. I will work my way backwards through the *De Anima*, beginning with the characteristics of a Philosopher, and what makes them different from other people. I will examine the way we make choices, and what causes us to choose a greater good over a lesser good. I will look at the role of virtue has to play on how we make choices and how we perceive reality. Finally, I will look at how virtue is formed in a person.

The Philosopher is a lover of wisdom. That is, he makes wisdom the primary pursuit of his life. The pursuit of wisdom involves a series of actions that he chooses to make, and these actions are different from those chosen by someone who wants to pursue power, wealth or pleasure. Why does the Philosopher choose actions that lead to the pursuit of wisdom rather than the pursuit of other goals? Aristotle says that the last step of the practical intellect is the beginning of action (433a18), so it is the practical intellect that initiates the actions that are involved in the pursuit of wisdom. Why does the practical intellect of the Philosopher choose actions directed towards wisdom rather than other ends? It is the object of desire that moves the

practical intellect (433a17). Therefore the Philosopher has wisdom as his supreme object of desire, which moves his active intellect to choose actions directed towards the pursuit of wisdom, which is another way of saying that the Philosopher pursues wisdom because he is a lover of wisdom, confirming our definition of a Philosopher.

Now we must ask why the Philosopher desires wisdom above power, wealth, pleasure or other things that most people desire? The Philosopher desires wisdom because his judgment tells him it is more desirable. Aristotle calls this kind of desire a “wish” in order to distinguish it from lower levels of desire, which come from the appetite and may be contrary to judgment (433a23-26). Aristotle says that the intellect is always right, but desire may be right or wrong because of the imagination. The imagination may perceive something as an apparent good which is not truly good (433a27-29). For example, the imagination might cause someone to have a strong desire to party when it would be best for the person to study. He may have in his imagination, strong associations of pleasure with partying and displeasure with studying.

Does a Philosopher not have any desire for pleasure? Does he not hunger or thirst or enjoy parties like other people? A Philosopher, like all of us, may have many desires that are in conflict with each other (433b5). He may have a desire for pleasure that would be contrary to his pursuit of wisdom, but the desire for wisdom is stronger than the desire for pleasure so he is ruled by the desire or wish for wisdom. The person who pursues pleasure may also have a desire for wisdom, but it is not as strong as his desire for pleasure, so his practical intellect ends up being ruled by the stronger desire for pleasure. When a lower desire overpowers and displaces a higher wish, it is due to a weakness called “incontinence” (434a12-14). There may be many who have a desire for wisdom who do not in fact seriously pursue it due to incontinence. Therefore,

the successful Philosopher needs to not only have the desire for wisdom, but also the virtue of continence which gives him the strength to prefer the higher wish for wisdom in the face of lower desires.

One aspect that makes a difference between desires is the element of time. A person may see one action as desirable because it brings immediate pleasure or instant gratification. Another person judges a different action as desirable because it brings a long term benefit (433b7-11). For example, eating desert brings instant pleasure but at the cost of long-term health. On the contrary, exercising may bring long-term health, but it is not so pleasurable or convenient in the short-term. Similarly, the study of Philosophy is oriented towards a long-term good that is not as immediately pleasurable as partying. Note that there are other desires or wishes besides Philosophy, such as the acquisition of wealth or power, that involve the judgment of time so that a long-term wish for wealth or power is chosen over immediate gratification of the appetite's desire.

There seems to be three aspects of a person that would make the difference between someone who pursues wisdom and someone who pursues a lesser good. First, the imagination can color the perception of an apparent good over an actual good. Second, the intellect needs to know the value of a long-term good over an immediate gratification, or the value of wisdom over power in order to have the wish to pursue wisdom. Third, the person must have the virtue of continence to have the strength to pursue the higher wish rather than the lower desire.

Why would one person's imagination be colored such that he has bad associations with the pursuit of wisdom but another person does not have those associations? Aristotle says that the imagination may or may not be wrong (433a27). In fact, imagination is usually false in one way

or another (428a12). Our experiences shape our imagination, and these experiences include our culture and education.

Although the intellect can sometimes be clouded by passion, disease, or sleep (429a8), when it is working properly, it acquires knowledge through a process that begins with sensation of the sensible objects in the external world (417b17 ff). From sensation comes images in the imagination (427b15). These images are illumined by the active intellect (430a16) so that knowledge is acquired in the passive intellect (430a24). Because the passive intellect begins in all people as pure potential (429a23), everyone begins life with the same, blank passive intellect. The active intellect, being pure actuality, immortal, and eternal, is also the same for every person (430a23). Therefore, the only things that could be different in the intellect between a Philosopher and another person would be the particular information that he would have received through his senses, and the way that his imagination colored those sensations, which we have already said was shaped by experiences.

Although Aristotle does not talk about the acquisition of virtue in *De Anima*, it would seem to be learned through the same process as other knowledge, which begins with sense perception.

According to *De Anima*, everything that would make the difference between a person who becomes a Philosopher, and someone who chooses a different life, would always begin with what it received through the senses, which we can call the person's environment. Therefore, a person becomes a Philosopher if he is raised and educated in the proper environment that would produce the desires and virtues needed to be a Philosopher. If such an environment is not there,

the person will desire and choose some other course of life, or even if he does desire Philosophy, he may not have the strength of virtue to attain it.

What we have not considered is if there are variations in capabilities between different people beginning at birth. It may be that some people are not born with the capabilities needed for becoming a Philosopher, but such questions are not addressed in *De Anima*. If it is true that a person must be born with certain capabilities required for Philosophy, it only adds an additional constraint which is still beyond the control of the person.

Someone may object that our environment is something that is at least partially our own choosing. My parents could send me to the best schools, but I might not pay attention in class, or I might skip classes and not do my work so that I'm not exposed to the information that I would need to have my desires formed towards Philosophy. However, these choices to neglect my education would be according to desires that had been formed in me from my environment previously according to the same process we have already described. This same argument can be carried back again to previous choices until I arrive at my birth, over which I had no control.

Therefore, we see that a person becomes what they become due to forces outside themselves. Even a Philosopher is something that is made. This conclusion raises a couple of questions for me. The first is, how does this view of the human person lead to any different conclusion than did Plato's in *The Republic*? If the society needs various kinds of people, and we can produce these people through the proper environment, why shouldn't we do so? Even if there is a "nature" component that determines a person's aptitude for a certain role in society, that can be discovered through testing, and then the person can be formed for a role appropriate to their capabilities. My other observation is that although this model of humanity does a good job of

explaining the common cases, it doesn't explain the exceptions very well. It might explain why Philosophy developed where and when it did, but it is not as satisfying an explanation for why Socrates ended up going a different direction than the Philosophers who preceded him? How is it that anyone invents something new that did not occur in his environment? The best we can come up with is that it's the result of an accidental combination of environmental elements that result in the synthesis of a new idea or approach. How do we explain the extremely disadvantaged people who does so much more with their lives, and the people who seem to have it all: intelligence, good looks, wealth, education, but do seem to do much with it? Of course, what I'm missing in Aristotle is a "will" that can freely choose independently of a person's nature and environment.