

Aristotle – Moral and Political Theory

Virtue Theory

The Callie Smartt story. P 184

Discuss the the case. Determine the teleological question the case raises, as well as the honorific one.

Two questions: 1) Is it fair to exclude her because of her disability? Is this unfair discrimination?

cheerleader? Depends on whether she can perform her role. But what is the role of a

Excite the crowd? Do gymnastic feats?

2) Why the resentment? Is Callie being accorded an honor she does not deserve? Does honoring her detract from the achievements of the other girls? Does including her redefine the role of cheer leading?

1. Justice is teleological: rights requires us to figure out the telos (purpose of the social practice in question.
2. Justice is honorific: When you reason about the goal of something, you have are also making a judgment about who you will honor since you honor and reward those who can accomplish that goal best.

Policies must turn on questions like: What is the purpose of a university? Obviously there are going to be disagreements about this, but we still need to do our best to answer the question. There is no avoiding it. And certainly there are better and worse answers.

In Political Philosophy the question (from an Aristotelian perspective becomes: What is the purpose of politics?

Aristotle's answer is: To form good citizens and cultivate good character (not set up a framework of rights and freedom and stay neutral with respect to what is good and bad. (On this view it is perfectly justifiable to make laws that ban smoking or sugary drinks.)

Aristotle criticizes to popular claimants to political authority: Oligarchs and Democrats. Oligarchs are wrong because political community is not just about protecting property rights. Democracy is wrong because you should not always give the majority its way. Both sides overlook the telos of political life which is to cultivate the virtue of citizens, The purpose of politics is to enable people to develop their distinctive capacities and virtues – to deliberate about the common good, to acquire practical judgment, to share in self government.

Who should get the honor of holding political office, to exercise power over others? Those who excel in civic virtue, are best at deliberating about the common good. Not the wealthiest or most numerous. (Pericles, Washington, Lincoln)

You cannot be a good person if you don't participate in politics. Why? The answer lies in our natures.

Only by participating in politics do we fully realize our nature. Social animals. We can best use language, reason, moral judgment – things other animals do not have.

But why can't we use language and reason in other pursuits than politics? Why can't we do this in clubs or families, or corporations?

Because the moral life aims at happiness, and Aristotle defines happiness, not like the hedonistic utilitarians do, but rather as exercising virtue and moral excellence. Happiness is the activity of soul in accordance with virtue. Virtue is taking pleasure in noble and good things, and pain in base ones. For example, one can find pleasure in the wrong things. Watching dog fights?

But why can't you exercise virtue in other pursuits than politics? The answer is virtue requires practice and exercise, and politics is where you get to practice it the most. (Analogous pursuits: Cooking, Comedy.) You learn by doing. Cultivate habits that lead to good character. Thank You letter, Miss Manners, p 198)

Legislators make good citizens by forming good habits in them. Moral principles are not enough. You need to know to apply them and when. Particulars are always important, and practice makes us familiar with particulars. Aristotle calls this practical wisdom. Doing the right thing to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive and in the right way."