

(September 2007 / rev. June 30, 2008, korr. Jan. 9, 2014)

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Preliminary Notes Concerning Some Philosophical Issues Raised by Penner and Rowe

P&R's article is meant to contribute to both Plato studies and ethical theory, and so is the related work by these authors and others, including Reshotko's recent monograph. Their double concern is clearly brought out as follows:

"Lamentably enough, Socrates is just about the last philosopher in the West to think that the virtuous differ from those who are not virtuous in the quality of their understanding only. With the advent of Plato's irrational desires, we begin to have a differentiation of good people from bad people in the quality of their *wills*. In whatever other ways Plato and Aristotle might differ from Kant, on this point they are at one against Socrates." (Penner and Rowe 1994, 18)

My own emphasis will be laid upon the more systematic issues. But let me start with some remarks that pertain rather to the historical questions involved.¹

1. As a reference in Kant, it may suffice to recall the claim, in the opening passage to the first section of his *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*², that "nothing ... can be thought of that may be unconditionally regarded as good, except a *good will*."³ The incompatibility is obvious (but see section 2.) between this and the claim in the *Meno* that "one man is no better than another" (78b6) in "wanting good things" (78b3-4: *boulesthai ... agatha*). But P&R's case is less clear with respect to both Plato and Aristotle.

¹ In the sequel, I will neither address (a) the Socratic question nor (b) the developmental vs. unitarian issue concerning Plato. But it should be noted that,

ad (b): Penner's and Rowe's proposal to take the *Gorgias-Meno* account of motivation and purposive action seriously is worth considering independently of their embedding of that account into a coherent philosophy peculiar to Plato's earlier dialogues but later abandoned;

ad (a): even if a coherent philosophy which was later abandoned is seen to be displayed in Plato's earlier dialogues, its attribution to Socrates rather than Plato does not follow without further evidence. Plato himself may have changed his mind. And notably, Kahn's moderate unitarianism also allows for a development in Plato's literary output being stimulated by shifts in emphasis and intention.

² In English: *Groundwork* ...

³ Kant, *GMS BA 1*: "Es ist überall nichts in der Welt, ja überhaupt auch außer derselben zu denken möglich, was ohne Einschränkung für gut könnte gehalten werden, als allein ein *guter Wille*." - I have rendered "ohne Einschränkung" by "unconditionally".

There is, I think, no denying that Plato's doctrine of the tripartite soul is meant to allow for irrational desires aiming at things that are only apparently good. Yet, irrational desires are totally disregarded when it is claimed in *Republic* VI that "every soul",

on the one hand, "pursues (*diôkei*) the good and does whatever it does for its sake (*toutou heneka*)" but,

on the other hand, "cannot adequately grasp what it is" and thus "misses the benefit" of its actions.⁴

I think it hard to deny that the views presented in *Gorgias* and *Meno* are endorsed by this. In particular, given the view thus stated I see no possibility for the description of mistaken behaviour as resulting from the pursuit of apparent, instead of real, goods. Rather, mistakes are claimed to result from pursuing the real good in mistaken ways.⁵ My conclusion is that Plato, the Great Experimentalist, is not as coherent as one might expect him to be.

Similarly, the *Gorgias-Meno* account of motivation and purposive action is still presupposed in the opening passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle endorses without reservation the views that "every art, enquiry, action and choice aims at something that is good" (not: "appears to be good") and that, therefore, "the good is that at which all things aim" (not: "ought to aim, and do aim if guided by good reason", or so). This is not to deny that elsewhere Aristotle allows things to be aimed at that are only apparently good.⁶ But Aristotle doesn't seem to be as straightforward in this as P&R suggest.

Rather, both Plato and Aristotle ought to be read as combining two kinds of approach. One is a descriptive theory of motivation and/or purposive action which both in Plato (*Rep.*, *Phrd.*, etc.) and in Aristotle takes irrational desires etc. into account. The other may, on my reading, take the form of an ethical reflection such as, in the first (or second) person perspective,⁷

⁴ *Rep.* 505d11-e4, tr. Grube/Reeve.

⁵ This is essentially Kahn's reading of the passage. I doubt that Rowe is successful in defending his own interpretation in his discussion with Kahn (see Rowe 2002, Kahn 2002).

⁶ See, e.g. the claim at *Phys.* II 3, 195a25-26 that teleological explanation requires no distinction between 'good' and 'apparently good'. -- Of the passages mentioned by P&R (1994, 1), *Top.* VI 8, 146b36-147a11 seems to be more significant than *E.N.* III 4. In particular, Aristotle's remark at *Top.* 147a5-11 that desire for things that are only apparently good cannot be accounted for by positing Forms may be taken as indirectly supporting Kahn's reading of *Rep.* 505DE.

⁷ In Plato, the leading questions pertaining to ethical reflection are (1) "How are we to live?" (*Grg.* 492d5: *pôs biôteon*), (2) "Which way are we supposed to live?" (*Grg.* 500c3-4: *hontina tropon chrê zên = Rep.* I, 352d6), and (3) "What is a man supposed to be like?" (*Grg.* 487e9: *poion tina chrê einai ton andra*). -- But see also below, Section 4.

It should be noted that, on the one hand, the first person perspective brought out by Zeyl's translation (upon which I rely) isn't explicit in the Greek of (1) and (2), and is avoided by Plato's way of expression

We pursue the good and ought to better understand what it is we pursue, which clearly presupposes the *Gorgias-Meno* account. Answers to the questions involved in this are given by Plato in terms of the Form of the Good (*Rep.* 505a2 ff.) and by Aristotle in terms of the kind of function (*ergon*, *E.N.* 1097b28 ff.) that is peculiar to human beings.

If so, the employment of divergent conceptual frameworks by the two approaches described is the relevant novelty in Plato's middle dialogues. But may that novelty count as a progress? An affirmative answer may be suggested by the consideration that there is much more to say about human behaviour than first (and second) person perspectives allow. But this is not to say that third person accounts of motivation and action provide conceptual frameworks appropriate to ethical reflection in the first (and second) person perspective. Rather, there is a sense in which both kinds of perspective are equally fundamental (see below).

2. It is worth emphasizing that "the good" referred to in the formula for ethical reflection stated above, viz.

We pursue the good and ought to better understand what it is we pursue, is one's own happiness (*eudaimonia*).⁸ "Good" (*agathos*) is opposed in ancient Greek ethics to "bad" (*kakos*), not to "evil" (or "böse" in German) which has no proper equivalent in ancient Greek thought.⁹ In Kant, by contrast, "good" is opposed to "evil"; that's why, in any discussion of ancient Greek ethics, invoking Kant's conception of "a good will" may result in missing the point.

in (3). Yet, on the other hand, it is hard to deny that first and second person perspectives are essential features in anything that may count as a peculiarly Socratic way of practising *philosophia*. This is, at least, suggested in Plato's *Apology*, where the kind of "talk about *aretê* (etc.)" that is claimed to provide "the highest good for human beings" (*Apol.* 38a2-5) takes such forms as "Aren't you ashamed ..." (*Apol.* 29d9: *ouk aischynêi*) or "I'm witness to myself ..." (*Apol.* 21b4-5: *synoida emautôi*).

⁸ That's why Plato lets such questions as "How are we to live?" (*Grg.* 492d5: *pôs biêteon*; see my footnote above) boil down to the fundamental question as to "Who is happy and who is not?" (*Grg.* 472c9-d1, cf. *Rep.* I, 352d2 ff. etc.). Similarly, Aristotle equates "the highest of all goods achievable by action" with happiness at *E.N.* I, 1095a14-22 etc.

See also Penner 1991, Penner and Rowe 1994, Penner and Rowe 2005, Reshotko 2006, *passim*.

⁹ See Penner 1991, 162n17. The relevant distinction was famously brought out by Nietzsche (*Zur Genealogie der Moral* I 11 and *passim*, KSA 5, 274). -- Only a kind of substitute for the good/evil distinction is provided by the contrast of

"fine" (*kalos*; i.e. "what it is appropriate to display"; in German: "zum Vorzeigen", "schön") with

"shameful" (*aischros*; i.e. "what it is appropriate to conceal"; in German: "zum Verstecken", "häßlich).

3. In Descartes, "wanting" is one of the functions (*cogitationes*) that make up a *res cogitans* and to which I, who is the *res cogitans* in question, have immediate cognitive access.¹⁰ That is to say, I am a real thing (*res vera*, or substance) my own cognition of which, insofar as it refers to such features as wanting certain things, is beyond sceptical doubt. This view is denied by P&R in a very peculiar way, viz. by denying that wanting certain things is a function to which he or she who wants has immediate, i.e. infallible, cognitive access.

Reshotko's exemple is telling: The teacher asks a student to give her the piece of chalk that lies somewhere in the classroom. But what appeared to be chalk turns out as cheese, which she never wanted to hold in her hand. Hence, (a) what happened is what she asked for but not what she wanted, but (b) she believed she asked for what she wanted; as a conclusion, (c) she believed she wanted what she actually did not.

Given the distinction in the *Gorgias* (467e2-3) between things that are good, or bad, or neither good nor bad, both chalk and cheese are evidently in the third class. The good the teacher really wants is, Reshotko insists as P&R do, her own happiness. Let us assume that doing a good job as a teacher is a constituent of this.¹¹ In this case, the teacher may have had good reasons to believe it instrumental in her pursuit of happiness to get the thing into her hand she thought was chalk. She did not err about what she (ultimately) wanted but only about what is instrumental to this. Yet, insofar as she also wanted such things as are instrumental to her ultimate aim, and believed that false piece of chalk was, she falsely believed she wanted to get it into her hand. That is to say, she did err about what she wanted as a means.

So far, someone's beliefs about (a) what he or she wants as a means are seen to be fallible. But someone's beliefs about (b) what he or she wants as an (ultimate) end still seem to be as infallible as Descartes claimed them to be. I think P&R (p. 5 ff.) are right in pointing to a difficulty in distinguishing (b) from (a). P&R's Helen believes she desires bodily pleasure as her ultimate end. But since Helen's ultimate end is her happiness, P&R claim that bodily pleasure is at best an (in-

¹⁰ Cf. *Med.* II 8, AT 28 and III 1, AT 34: *volens*. In the first passage mentioned, the complete list is: "doubting, understanding (*intelligens*), affirming, denying, wanting, not wanting (*nolens*), imagining, sensing (*sentiens*)". The second passage also includes "not knowing (*ignorans*)" and (in the French version) "loving and hating".

My "I, who is ..." is meant to echo Descartes' paradoxical move from the first person perspective in the question as to "que j'étais" via "j'étais une substance ou la nature n'est que de penser" to the third person perspective in "ce moi, c'est-à-dire l'âme par laquelle je suis ce que je suis, est entièrement distincte du corps" (*Disc.* IV 2, AT VI, 32 f.).

¹¹ Doing a good job as a teacher may be taken as exemplifying the specifically human functions referred to in the Aristotelian account of happiness mentioned above. -- Similarly, Plato's carpenter in *Rep.* IV may count as happy as long as he can do the thing he knows to do best.

redient) means to this. Accordingly, if bodily pleasure turns out to be an inappropriate means to Helen's happiness, Helen can be denied by P&R to desire bodily pleasure at all.

Similarly, we may have assumed too rashly that for Reshotko's teacher, doing a good job as a teacher is a constituent of her happiness. Assuming, instead, that teaching at school isn't just her best thing to do,¹² she may still be unaware of this and, therefore, erroneously believe that doing a good job as a teacher is a constituent of her happiness. The P&R account, then, requires us to conclude that doing a good job as a teacher never was a constituent in what she (ultimately) wanted, but may merely count as an inappropriate means to this.

4. In presenting my objections to this conclusion, I take as a starting point the formula for ethical reflection stated above, i.e.

We (ultimately) pursue the good and ought to better understand what it is we (ultimately) pursue.

The formula suggests some progress to be made. But I do not see how we are led to better understanding what it is we (ultimately) pursue by merely abandoning false beliefs in the way described. The point in that formula is inevitably missed within the conceptual framework proposed by P&R. The meaning of its crucial phrase,

... to better understand what it is we (ultimately) pursue,

is misrepresented by the cognitivism P&R presuppose concerning such mental states as wanting etc. and, particularly, concerning the way mental states are related to objects.

For P&R, there is only a choice between Platonic (not: Socratic, I guess) and Cartesian types of cognitivism.¹³ As a (roughly speaking, Wittgensteinian) alternative, I propose an expressivist account of first person utterances concerning mental states. For obvious reasons, I can only give some hints on the present occasion.

Noteworthy, the leading questions, in the *Gorgias*, as to "Which way is it required to live" and "What is a man required to be like?" reappear in Cicero as "Who and what like do we want to be, and in what kind of life?"¹⁴ Plato's impersonal and third person perspectives are replaced here by a first person perspective. Even more significantly, what appears in Plato as an impersonal re-

¹² That thing may be rather gardening (as presumably in the case of Penner's tyrant; cf. Penner 1991, 186 and passim), or watching TV, or mathematical research, or raising children, etc.

¹³ In particular, Fregean meanings ("Sinn" in Frege's language) are described as Cartesian *cogitationes*.

¹⁴ Plato, *Grg.* 500c3-4 (= *Rep.* I, 352d6): *hontina tropon chrê zên*, *Grg.* 487e9: *poion tina chrê einai ton andra* (in the translations, I have retained the impersonal construction and replaced Zeyl's "supposed" by "required"); Cicero, *De officiis* I 117: *quos nos et quales esse velimus et in qua genere vitae*.

quirement (*chrê*) has become a matter of determining what "I want" (*velimus*).¹⁵ Evidently, the question would be reduced to triviality by such answers as "the good" or "my own happiness". Rather, Cicero's question amounts to letting what is ultimately good for me (or, what my happiness amounts to) be determined by my own volitional position as to the inclinations that nature and custom may have suggested to me.¹⁶

That is to say, Cicero's question as to "Who and what like do we want to be, and in what kind of life?" pertains to what Harry Frankfurt describes as second order desires or, I prefer to say, as second order concerns.¹⁷ Happiness, then, is a matter of being committed to certain second order concerns that give "thematic unity" to "our volitional lives."¹⁸ Taken in this way, my commitment is a matter of self-determination, that is, of my autonomy (and so is my finding out what my *ergon* consists in).

Accordingly, an essential element in my relevant self-description ought to refer to something in the determination of which I cannot be substituted by anyone else. Given a Cartesian framework, one might try to equate this with mental functions such as wanting etc. to which I have immediate cognitive access. But in the present case, my non-substitutibility has nothing to do with cognitive infallibility. Rather, what prevents me from being substitutable corresponds to the expressive (and hence, strictly speaking, non-referential) character my relevant utterances take which is lost as soon as the first person perspective is abandoned.

This is not the place to elaborate on this account of self-determination nor on the way Wittgenstein's private language argument may provide a conceptual framework appropriate to it.¹⁹ In conclusion, I should rather affirm that P&R may help us a lot in understanding both classical Greek ethics and the way in which modern (and even Stoic) ethics rightly departs from it.

References:

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¹⁵ I take it that the plural is inessential in Cicero and, accordingly, that Cicero's question is equivalent with Tugendhat's "principal practical question" ("grundsätzliche praktische Frage") as to "What sort of human being do I want to be?" (Tugendhat 1979, 234: "... was für ein Mensch ich sein will").

¹⁶ I take it that an appropriate approach to determining "who and what like do we want to be, and in what kind of life" is described by Cicero in his account of the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiôsis*, cf. his *De finibus* III 16 ff.

¹⁷ For Frankfurt, the choice of 'desire' (rather than, e.g., 'want') as a key term in the description of his approach is just a *façon de parler*. See Frankfurt 1971, 12n2 and 2004, 10.

¹⁸ Frankfurt 1999, 162.

¹⁹ Next to Tugendhat 1979, see also section 4.3. (p. 70-108) in Heinemann 2001.

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