



HON 201 B: Week 3

Aristotle, Mitchell, Re-thinking thinking

Notes for Tuesday, January 24

Aristotle: How one thinks about happiness depends on assumptions one makes about human nature. What are yours?

Some choices:

For Aristotle, man is imperfect, yet strives for perfection.

For Plato, man cares only about satisfying his animal instincts. Give him more stuff, more pleasure.

Again, for Aristotle, beings should do what they do best. Giraffes should 'giraffe.' Eat grass off tall trees, or whatever. Man is best at reasoning, so he should reason. Abstract thought. Speculative thought. Moral thought. Learning. Oooh, learning!

Aristotle, and heeding him, Jefferson, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, believed in the natural right to the pursuit of happiness, which is why it is in our Declaration.

Your reactions to the very brief Aristotle reading, "The Pursuit of Happiness?" Is happiness the greatest good? Why or why not? How do you know?

How does he define "expert"? Who is the "expert" in any field? What does it mean to "hit the mean"? (Golden Mean)

The ideal work of art – how do you know it is in fact "ideal"?

Virtue must, therefore, aim at the golden mean. Human virtue deals with our feelings and actions, and in these we can go to excess or we fall short or we hit the mean. What do you think of this?

Notes for Thursday, January 26

Let's agree, if for only a while, that good = happy. Not the affective "happy" that we feel, that we celebrate over beers or birthday cake. But the "happiness" that is produced or "done" through conscious choices and by habits of virtue. Happiness is goodness, in this Aristotelian sense. Happiness is something we do, not something we feel.

Now, two really huge breakthroughs in my mind, from Tuesday:

Micah's idea of perspective, of the long term, of even eternity and, though he didn't use this word, of redemption. The notion that what Tommy did at the end of his life redeemed whatever had come before, taking what was if not bad, not quite 'good' and, by casting its shadow into that past, redeeming it or making it good by what it produced.

And Adam's wonderful celebration of education, which we start looking at more deliberately week after next. That when faced with a crisis point in his life, Tommy did what hopefully we would do – he considered what he knew, what he'd learned, what he'd been exposed to during his liberal arts education there at Loyola. He remembered his Theology class. He determined that whatever else he did, if he very deliberately loved, he would be doing a good thing, a right thing, a worthwhile thing. So he dedicated himself to loving those within his sphere, beginning with his immediate family. His education, presumably a good one, prepared him for his decision in crisis, for the ACTION he took, which was to love, to love deeply, even recklessly.

This also is an Aristotelian notion: That for people of reason, education is essential. Not any education, but real education. Not knowing about, but knowing. It is the cure of folly and the curb of vice. It is our only hope of escaping what Socrates called “the greatest peril of this our life” – the failure to make sense out of the better and the worse, and therefore to risk choosing the worse.

Tommy used his reason. He sought reason, and he found purpose and meaning for his life. Not THE PURPOSE AND THE MEANING OF LIFE, but purpose and meaning for his life, and thus how to live better, even for that short while. He learned or knew or found 'better' and he did better. Most of us know better but don't do better. This isn't goodness. The worst condition, though, is to be in a bad condition and not know it. This is the plight of those seeking merely beer, blondes, beaches and Beemers, or the condition of being hustled along on a wild ride of life by the disorderly and conflicting commands of a whole host of notions, appetites, hopes, and fears. The pursuit of the feeling of happiness, or happiness as feeling, as pleasure and nothing more than pleasure. And it is this condition or plight out of which education can lead us.

Richard Mitchell: “Education, I am convinced, must be nothing more than this: The Journey toward the limits of Reason, if there be any. And if any there be, so that some other and even better condition than education may lie beyond them” (41). He's talking of course about an examined life, and thus a good life. “Understanding what I do think, and why I think it, and whether I should think it, is, at best, an occasional and fleeting condition” (100).

So this education has little to do with school or a diploma. A good education helps you become able to do good. Able to do good. Whether you do or not, of course, is up to you. Most believe, including many at this institution, that education is merely to make you 'effective.' To teach you a particular skill or to make you able to do a particular type of work, like engineering (Adam) or social work or television broadcasting. Is that in fact education? Or is it simply becoming 'effective'? Effectiveness, even efficiency, requires some combination of talent, information, and practice. It's visible. It's measurable. And it would seem to have very little to do with Goodness.

Let's take this in a different or at least particular direction to consider it another way:

Is there any nexus or parallel or commonality, then, between or among education and parenting?

Let's make you a parent. Let's give you a daughter. I have three. What do you want her to be like? You want her to be good and happy, right? You want her to be, oh, here it comes: SUCCESSFUL. Why? Well, success is better than failure. And it's got a better shot at producing happiness than failure does, right? So, to help her become successful, what will you do?

You will want her to be industrious, but not obsessed with work. You will want her to be 'effective,' as we just described. You want her to be wise, as wise as you. So what will you do?

Well, what can't you do? You can't change what she looks like, basically. Whether she's smart or not, pretty or not. You can straighten her teeth, maybe. Keep her clean. But a lot of what she has to work with is fixed. It is what it is. Hopefully none of it will preclude what is good and happy, or whatever we mean by 'success.'

So what will you do? You will scold and exhort. Don't throw your food. Tell the truth! You will prize and reward good behavior and punish bad. Naturally. But why is it 'natural'? Why is it natural to want goodness, and to attempt to produce it in our children? More importantly, how do you reason this out? How do you think it through?

So we did some really heavy lifting Tuesday even though to me it really didn't feel like it most of the time. I'm new to philosophy; I'm not used to how abstract and how seemingly unproductive it usually feels or seems.

Our discussions have brought us to a big question, at least to me: I would also like us to consider, to wonder, to reason how compatible Christian notions of a good life are with Aristotelian ideas. Let's introduce and

begin to think about what the Christian faith has to say about or in answer to the question, What is the good life? This would seem to be an unavoidable, irresistible question.

Important here, therefore, I think is the soul and whether in fact it exists. Here's one idea:

The brain: a piece of meat. A computer. Data in through perception; data out.

The mind: the recommender, or interpreter of that data. Receives the perceptual information, the data, and makes a recommendation. Let's go this way or that way.

The heart: also a recommender, but based not on reason, rationale or the long term. What's important is the short run, the temporal, feeling, impulse, appetite, even such factors as color or texture. But emphatic, even rapturous recommendations.

The soul: the chooser, and the product of those choices, implying that some choices, many choices affect or influence future ones. Also from C.S. Lewis, and how souls are developed (actually, he used the word "character," but in this typology, it's the soul). By inches and degrees. In the myriad small decisions - hundreds, thousands of them - made each day, not in the crises or big decisions. White lies. Cutting corners. Shirking duties. Or not.

So in this typology, the soul really matters, and it's important in any answer to what is the good life. It exists, and it has a future, perhaps even an eternal one. The body, the meat, not so much. It's just for the "whisper" of time, as Micah put it, so feed it, exercise it, but don't get too attached to it. Your earth suit will die. Your soul might live on.

Earth suits. Lips. Personality. The soul.

Christ as a model of the mind, not just of feeling or of 'doing.' The adulterous woman about to be stoned to death in full accordance with the law. Walk through this.

IF TIME: Re-thinking Thinking

How might these biological possibilities affect our deliberations? Are we built for nothing more than evolutionary success? I've already tipped my hand. I believe we have souls, that those souls are formed and re-form, or degrade, and that they have an eternity.

Biologism: Two new-ish books attacking it.

Gazzaniga – The brain, the mind, the soul. The brain enables the mind, and mental activity isn't reducible to neural events. Mental activity: thoughts, perceptions, memories, intentions, exercises of the will.

Where, then, is responsibility situated? The mind, or in my typology, the soul. The chooser. Choosing among people, in community, an interaction, a social contract.

So, at stake here is free will. If all mental activity is in fact reducible to a neural event, free will is merely an illusion. And for some, that's enough.

“We are people, not brains.”

“We are not angels fallen from heaven. We are not just neural machines. Nor are we merely exceptionally clever chimps.”

And we need to pick up on or with Adam's scenario, of Sikhs. RE-STATE.