The Good in Ancient Philosophy

The Sophists: Antiphon and Protagoras

1. Further Reflections on Eudaimonia

One of the earliest sources is Hesiod (fl. 700 BCE) mentions *eudaimonia* at the very end of his poem *Works and Days*: ‘That man is happy and lucky in them who knows all these things and does his work without offending the deathless gods, who discerns the omens of birds and avoids transgression.’ So, a *eudaimon* person is let alone by the gods, untouched by their (potential) ill will, not out of favour with the deities—and so unaffected by luck.

This is perhaps a paradox: we are lucky insofar as our moral actions are immune to luck (i.e. chance, or divine ill will).

Even *good* luck seems not up to us: it has nothing to do with what we do, or how we act, or our character. (Remember Heraclitus fr. 135.)

The idea is that moral value is free from external contingencies; that it is ‘unconditioned’. What results from happy or unhappy circumstances does not really count as the outcome of moral considerations—motives, intentions, and moral character.²

*eudaimonia* is thus an achievement; perhaps the one thing we desire for its own sake—that our life goes well. In this sense, *eudaimonia* is linked with well-being (*Gorgias* 478c): *S* is *eudaimon* if and only if *S* lives a life that is best for *S* (all things considered).³ This is how *virtue* (*aretē*) comes into play: excellence is a sort of ‘bestness’.

So, two ideas stand out: (i) that of a good life for a person, and (ii) that of perfection—a tendency towards an individual’s best possible (excellent) state.

Perhaps there are also (iii) the idea of perfection as the process of perfecting one’s life; and (iv) the implication that this requires an *objective* theory of the good. (More of this as we go along.)

2. Sophistic Themes

There is probably no unity in Sophist moral thinking. Yet there is a tendency for a certain *style* of thinking about ethics⁴, perhaps like a movement: namely a naturalistic or empirical approach to moral questions.

This approach has subversive and provocative overtones, and this is one of the central features of the Sophistic movement: are we really sure what morality is; is it really what we think it is? (This subversive streak may be part of why it is relevant for the accusers of Socrates to portray him as a Sophist; see the *Apology*.)

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1 τάων ειδοίμων τε καὶ δόξιων, ὀς τάδε πάντα / εἰδὼς ἐργάζεται ἀναίτιος ἀθανάτως. /
In this climate arises the dispute between convention and nature: nomos and phusis. It is a question about the source of moral norms, and hence of the source of their authority.

If morality is conventional, then it may lack universal authority, since it is relative to certain agreements or conventions. If variable to specific situations, what is good on one context may be bad in another; what is good for some people is bad for others (see Callicles speech in Gorgias).

The variability may also entail a lack of unity. Consider the swarm of virtues in Meno, and Socrates attempt to find out what is common to all the virtues, what they share. Plato postulates a reality (the form of Good) that achieves this unity: things are good insofar as they ‘partake’ in the form of the Good.

There is also the spectre of moral relativism. In Theaetetus (152a–c) Plato reports a thesis by Protagoras: ‘Man is the measure of all things, of those that are that/how/as (ὡς, hōs) they are, and of those that are not, that/how/as they are not.’ If this suggests that nobody is wrong about anything, then everyone is also right about moral matters. If paired with the idea that good is to the advantage of individuals, a shared or universal morality looks doomed.

Similarly, Thrasymachus (in the Republic) suggests that the variety of moral judgements is only apparent: for justice, he says, is the interest of the stronger—regardless of who in fact is the stronger, and regardless of what exactly these interests are. (This makes his a ‘formal’ approach to ethics, rather than a ‘material’ one.)

But we need to be careful: Protagoras’ perceptual or phenomenal subjectivism may not be the same as social relativism: at Theaetetus 167c, the discussion of his thesis suggests that moral claims are corrigible, that it is thus possible to be mistaken about the wrongness of infanticide, say, namely when the laws of the polis say otherwise. Convention so ensures universality after all. Remember also Protagoras’ ‘Great Speech’: without nomos, there is no peaceful or harmonious civil life. See also the Crito passage.

The Sophistic attacks on convention suggest that morality is natural (see the Antiphon extracts). Only the weak obey the laws. For instance, we are just only because we must, naturally, we are not. Morality is at best a contract that can be broken when it suits us. Also: wrongdoing others is beneficial to us, and so naturally good.

Aside: the verb phuō (φύω) means to grow, produce, bring forth, or to become. The earth produces plants, which are ta phuta—the grown things, the phusical (i.e. physical) things. This includes us: Plato compares humans to heavenly plants (φυτὸν ... οὐράνιον; phuton ... ouranion at Timaeus 90a).

However, perhaps the contrast between nomos and phusis is spurious. We could say that even if morality is conventional, it is a natural product nonetheless insofar as humans naturally tend to establish communities of ethical conduct; that subordination under a moral law comes naturally to humans when they form societies.