

Handout Aristotelian Piety Reconsidered

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Introduction

Why does Aristotle not discuss piety?

The Passage

And the person active in accordance with intelligence, and taking care of it, seems to be in the most excellent condition and most dear to the gods. For if any attention is paid to human [a25] affairs by the gods, as it is thought, it would also be reasonable if they both delight in what is most excellent and closest in kind to them (and that would be intelligence) and benefit in return those who love this most of all and honour it, because they pay attention to what is dear to the gods, and acting correctly and finely. And that all this [a30] is true of the wise person most of all is not unclear; therefore he is most dear to the gods. And it is likely that the very same person is also superlatively happy; so that, in this way too, the wise person would be happy most of all. (1179a22-32)

Does Aristotle discuss piety here? This would help rehabilitate the Passage, dismissed by most interpreters.

Problems in the background

Aristotle forcefully argues for the superiority of the theoretical life, concluding that 'the life in accordance with [theoretical] intelligence ... will also be superlatively happy', whereas 'the life in accordance with the other virtue' will be 'secondarily <sc. happiest>', for 'for the activities in accordance with it are human' (X.7-8.1178a6-10).

And that complete/perfect happiness is a kind of reflective activity is also apparent from this here: for we hold the assumption that the gods most of all are blessed and happy. [b10] But which actions should one attribute to them? Just ones? Or would they appear ridiculous, making contracts and returning deposits and so on? How about courageous ones? <sc. Or would they appear ridiculous> withstanding what is fearful and facing danger because it is fine? Or generous actions? But to whom will they give? And it is out of place [b15] if they also have a currency or anything like that. And if they are moderate, what would they be? Or would the praise be vulgar that they do not have bad appetites? And everything pertaining to the actions will appear small and unworthy of gods to those who go through all of them.

But nonetheless everyone assumes that they are certainly alive and therefore active; for they assume, then, that they do not sleep like [b20] Endymion. Then, for someone alive, when performing actions is taken away, and producing something even more so, what is left except reflection? Therefore, the activity of the god, excelling in blessedness, will be reflective: and of the human ones, the one most nearly akin to it will be productive of superlative happiness. (1178b7-23)

¹ [1] Lines 1178b12-13 are corrupt. I read *hupomenontes* with Kb, and follow Burnet in reading *kinduneuontes*.

Problem 1: the gods do not act

Problem 2: the gods do not think of human beings

For the whole life of gods is blessed, whereas the life of human beings is blessed only insofar as a certain similarity with this sort of activity exists: and none of the other animals will be happy since they share in no way in reflection (1178b25-8).

The Passage in context

And happiness for a human being will also need external prosperity, for our nature is not self-sufficient for reflection, but needs also bodily health [b35] and food and the other services to be in place. [1179a1] Now, one must really not think that the person who is happy will need a great many of them, even if it is not possible to be blessed without external goods: for what is self-sufficient does not depend on excess, nor does action, and also without ruling land and sea one can do [a5] the fine things. For one can act in accordance with virtue also from moderate means (and one can see this clearly, for private citizens seem to do the decent things no less than those in positions of power, but even more), and it suffices to have resources to this extent. For the life of the person active in accordance with [the] virtue will be happy. (1178b33-1179a9)

Solon

And Solon, too, [a10] perhaps represented the happy well, when he said that they had been moderately provided with external resources, but had done the finest things (in his view), and had lived moderately: for it is possible that those who possess only moderate means do what one should. (1179a9-13)

Anaxagoras

And Anaxagoras, too, seems to have assumed the happy person to be neither rich nor in a position of power, saying that [a15] he would not be astonished if the happy person appeared out of place to the many, for they judge by the external resources, as they see only them. The arguments, then, seem to agree with the views of the wise. (1179a15-17)

Upshot: the thought behind the Solon passage structures the Unit (1178b33-1179a32). The lack of self-sufficiency raises the question of good fortune and divine influence.

How the Passage works

Against problem 2: Aristotle singles out divine intelligence as leading element from the compound human being and identifies each person with the authoritative and better element (X.7.1178a2-3).

Against Problem 1: the benefits can only be intellectual and hence will not involve action. If reflection is something perfect, it will automatically come with good fortune. The wise person will be benefited by thinking about the divine.

Conclusion

The Passage follows from the Unit. Piety neither motivates the Passage, nor explains it. Hence: what happened to piety?