CHAPTER 3

THE CANON: DEVELOPMENT

It should be emphasized that the scheme to be constructed in the pages that follow will be entirely conventional. Other typologies with different sorts of structure are possible and would be instructive. The four options of our canon can boast no logical or gnoseological priority with respect to other possible systems. To some extent arbitrary as well as conventional, the canon will be structured on the basis of an analogy between conceptual models and political models (of which there is no dearth in the history of political doctrines and of the philosophy of law). This scheme should nonetheless suffice (1) to identify four possible options in relation to the problem of happiness/unhappiness in the two senses noted above and (2) to claim and defend a right to unhappiness.

Our four options rest neither on a philosophy of the mind nor on some set of logico-metaphysical underpinnings, nor again on a philosophy of history. The chronological organization must not suggest a historical succession of possibilities. The four options are to be thought of as entirely synchronous and equally open, but we shall return to these matters.

The canon, then, will equip us to classify and compare alternative options. The various options will be presented only briefly, reporting for example the thoughts of some of those authors who could be considered paradigmatic, sometimes through the interpretations offered by contemporary philosophers or jurists. These moderns will be chosen from among those who exhibit more than superficial affinities with the author they interpret, which should demonstrate that, at least on a theoretical plane, all four options can be sustained in current philosophical debate.

Finally, these options will be developed as the canon takes shape in such a way as to guarantee all four the same theoretical dignity. The pluralistic stance deemed appropriate
to this stage would be obviated by building a hierarchical position into the presentation. In each of the four, however, the question of unhappiness will emerge in different terms.

1. THE FIRST OPTION. INTENSIONAL, COLLECTIVE: INCOLAE HYPERURANII ANTE REM PONUNT UNIVERSALE

1.1. Philosophy

Plato proposes a single universal, the idea, which is distinct and separate from the entities it controls; and if these entities are to have any value they must conform to this unique model. The worth of a drawn circle will lie exclusively in its relative likeness to the celestial idea of circle.

The same holds true for the political universal. There is but a single celestial model of the ideal city, which can be brought into being only by applying this one perfect paradigm. The further the real political world moves from this one truth the more sharply its worth declines. Distance from the true model spells degeneration. There is but one justice, and this one true form of justice accounts collectively -- despite its detachment -- for all possible "excellent cities", be they past, present or future. Moreover, this idea of justice also explains the degenerative phenomena of the non-excellent cities, which can be grasped and gauged according to their relative distance from the heavenly model.

This is an intensional model: it defines a distinct sort of justice, the virtue of the polis. This justice manifests itself as much in the polis as in the human being. The polis is a human being writ large. The internal structure which confers this special quality, its characteristic virtue, is the same for both. Plato seeks it in the polis in order to find it in mankind. Once again, there is but one unique and true form of justice.

With this model it is senseless even to raise the issue of individual autonomy or of an individualized eudaimonia (like the Epicurean notion). Individuals, strictly speaking, do not exist. What exists, as a realissimum, a true justice which can, and to some extent must, be realized on earth, which explains the notoriously illiberal features of Platonic thought. Happiness itself, according to this construct, regards first and foremost the whole. The happiness of the parts is derivative and thus secondary.
1.2. Political Theory

The political universal, the “excellent polis, accounts collectively, for each of the citizens taken together, as “parts” of the whole, by composing an organic structure on the basis of their various characters (which leads to the well-known division into three classes in the Republic), on the basis, that is, of the very intension of the political universal itself. The parts of the whole are categorized on a qualitative basis (their common origin “from the earth” recounted in the “Phoenician tale”); and these distinct qualities can and must find expression in distinct ways: the shared “metallic” component of the citizens’ souls can and must be broken down into the gold, silver and bronze strains which shape the political anthropology of the Republic.

In these characteristics one can discern a form of despotism of the truth. We have seen how according to authoritative scholars, for example, the Greeks dealt with the question of happiness by recourse to the concept of health. We have already noted on various occasions the pivotal role of eudaimonia in Greek ethics, and health can be taken to represent, for example, the good and an objective well-being independent of the autonomous will of the individual subject. If it is legitimate and noble to impose health, it may be just as legitimate and noble to “impose” happiness: a new way to compellere intrare.

Plato is confronted with sophistic thought, according to which the traditional ideas about happiness are wrong. The sophists argued that that man is happy who is able through his own actions to realize his personal profit, his own interests. Platonic thought rests on an awareness that the ethical tradition of the polis no longer has the force to justify conformity; such ingenuous obedience to traditional values can no longer be expected. The idea that individual endeavor must be directed toward one’s own personal interests is by now indispensable even to Plato. The basic Platonic argument, however, gives these two theoretical suppositions a particular twist: since one can no longer rightly demand that the time-honored notions be followed “ingenuously”, the relationship between the individual and the polis must be placed on a new footing; the new supposition is that individual enterprise must be directed toward one’s own correctly understood personal interest. Now -- and this is the argument -- autonomous endeavor in one’s own correctly understood interest is discovered to coincide with virtuous behavior, since such behavior confers that maximal profit which is happiness; and because justice is interpreted as the overarching virtue which commands ta heautou prattein, virtuous
Political Friendship and the Good Life
Two Liberal Arguments Against Perfectionism
Zanetti, G.
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