

Aristotle's philosophy has been prominently influential over centuries and is still being studied nowadays, particularly as an important source of scientific methodology, modern metaphysical and political thought. A substantial part of Aristotle's work is constituted by his writings on ethics, to a large extent concerned with the problems of ethics foundation. Particularly, in the major work known as "Nicomachean Ethics", or simply "The Ethics", a problem of objective ethics, of ethical fundamentals located either in human nature or in the society, is thoroughly examined.

On the other hand, Aristotle's view on human nature is tightly connected with his notions of rationality and laws of thought. For this reason, the ethical context is linked in this essay with some arguments of "Organon" in an attempt to identify Aristotle's answers to a set of basic question regarding human nature. These questions can be formulated as follows. Is man virtuous or vicious by nature? Does man possess a natural knowledge of the good and the evil? What is the state of man in comparison to nature, and to the transcendent? The treatment of these questions is in numerous senses interrelated in the text of "The Ethics".

Aristotle defines ethics as one of the primary political issues, as the knowledge and the practice aiming towards the universal happiness of mankind. The author immediately notes the importance of the public account both of the matter of happiness and of ethical issues as such ("Ethics", Book 1, ch. 4). This emphasis on subjectivity of moral qualities does not only form a basis for treatment of ethics as a social convention, but further reveals some fundamental judgements on the human status in nature and ability to infer universal truths.

The author proceeds to examine the problem of searching foundations of ethics in human nature. Another important conclusion is that there is a potential for both virtue and vice in human nature, but none of them exist in human nature or determine our behaviour: "...nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature... Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us." ("Ethics" Book 2, ch. 1).

On the other hand, the human natural inclinations obviously play a major part in behaviour. This role is explained by a brief discussion on the composite nature of soul, which is also important in Aristotle's ethical, as well as metaphysical view. The rational and the irrational part, constituting the soul, are in their turn also twofold, forming certain irrational fraction that has the tendency to obey the rational argument, "as one does one's father" ("Ethics", Book 1, ch. 13). It is this obedience or disobedience, the relation between rational and irrational parts of human nature, which forms the basis of moral and immoral conduct.

At the same time, this irrational principle which is stated to be shared by all the living nature, yet at the same time subject to conscious analysis, hints at a possibility of an inherent knowledge of the good and the evil. This is not the case, Aristotle argues, providing the answer to our second posed question. Since several books of "Ethics" concerning the problem of pleasure and inclination towards pleasure, presumably originating from different sources, seem to contradict each other at times, one must consider all of them in order to trace the author's argument.

In Book 2 of "Ethics", defining the principles of virtue as the mean between the excesses, which are both vices, several conclusions are made as to the possible achievement of this desirable mean (ch. 8). All of them are based on the observation of inclination towards one of the opposite excesses, which has to be counter-acted in order to come to the mean. The first inclination is based, according to the author, on the properties of the moral qualities as such. Of the two vices, one is usually considered (again an important reference to public account) closer to the mean than the other. The second is based on the properties of human nature, "for the things to which we ourselves more naturally tend seem more contrary to the intermediate" (ch. 8), and thus have to be avoided. This leads to the two principles, defined further in chapter 9. The first is the choice of the least evil of the two excesses, which is related with the first inclination. The second is related to the inherent human nature and

sounds quite unambiguous: dismiss pleasure. “Now in everything the pleasant or pleasure is most to be guarded against, [...] for if we dismiss pleasure thus we are less likely to go astray” (ch. 9).

This principle of avoiding pleasure establishes a clear link between the natural human impulses and the moral knowledge, seemingly supporting a widely explored concept of the good as an opposite to the pleasant. However, the discussion of pleasure in “Ethics” is not limited to stating this principle, but goes on to its negation in Book 10. In its chapter 4, a definition of pleasure is given first through an example of sensual perception, as a perception of an object most suitable to the sense (i.e., a perception of beauty) with a perfect function of the sense. The sensual perception is then extended to the whole human activity, and thus pleasure becomes not a quality in itself, but a manifestation of completeness of an activity, which accompanies it. Furthermore, pleasures obviously differ in kind, the “proper” pleasure enhancing the activity and its result, while the “alien” pleasure ruins both (Book 10, ch. 5).

All pleasures, therefore, are not treated equally, some of them being “proper” and fruitful, and therefore worth choosing, the others being “alien” and worth avoiding. Is man able to recognize the two types in the same unambiguous way as in the previously stated principle of “dismissing pleasure”? The author’s answer is no. The knowledge of proper pleasures is based, as it is further stated, on the socially agreed knowledge of proper activities: “But they [the pleasures] vary to no small extent, in the case of men at least; the same things delight some people and pain others, and are painful and odious to some, and pleasant to and liked by others. [...] But in all such matters that which appears to the good man is thought to be really so.” (Book 10, ch. 5).

One could argue, therefore, that Aristotelian definitions of ethical principles are tautological, or, in his own words, constitute a circular demonstration, which, as it is shown in “Posterior Analytics” is not possible logically or, alternatively, allows to demonstrate

anything: “Now demonstration must be based on premisses prior to and better known than the conclusion; and the same things cannot simultaneously be both prior and posterior to one another: so circular demonstration is clearly not possible...” (“Posterior Analytics”, Book 1, ch. 3). The treatment of pleasure and its relation to virtue is not the only example of circular demonstration; the references to the public account, to the conventional nature of moral values, noted above, represent in fact the same tautology.

This departure from the logical rules established by the author himself shows the important distinction, widely recognized afterwards but not explicitly considered in “Ethics” – the distinction between scientific knowledge of things present in nature and the moral knowledge of things absent in nature. By emphasizing that “...that which every one thinks really is so; and the man who attacks this belief will hardly have anything more credible to maintain instead” (“Ethics”, Book 10, ch. 2), the author clearly opposes the social fact to the scientific fact, the latter demonstrable and deducible from general principles (“Posterior Analytics”, Book 1), the former, as we have seen, not subject even to definition.

This radical separation of the natural and the social allows a glance at the transcendent nature of human reason, “the better part”, as the author calls it (“Ethics”, Book 10, ch. 7). Human is in a sense in an intermediate position relative to god and beast (“brute”) and possesses, due to the twofold nature, the discussed moral qualities (virtues and vices) not inherent neither to beast, neither to god (Book 7, ch. 1). Book 7 of “Ethics” is to a large extent dedicated to what might be seen as a possible explanation of divine transcendence of moral qualities. Knowledge, as Aristotle states, is not limited to the simple awareness of the facts or to communicative abilities, “as a drunken man may utter the verses of Empedocles” (“Ethics”, Book 7, ch 3), but is in itself the superior motivation, incompatible with irrational passions or appetites. This is an extension of Socrates’ view on the relation of ethical knowledge and moral action, a statement that the one possessing the proper knowledge is not

able to act immorally (Book 7, ch. 2). A comparison to a sleeper or a drunk is often repeated throughout the text, being an important metaphor to stress the unity of rational principle (in this extended, metaphysical sense) and the divine state “higher than virtue” (Book 7, ch 1). It is, therefore, crucial to fulfill this potential of transcending the intermediary human state by living contemplatively according to one’s reason, “since reason more than anything else is man” (Book 10, ch. 7), in order to reach ultimate happiness and thus, the ultimate aim of ethical knowledge.

This analysis of the text of “Nicomachean Ethics” allowed us to identify Aristotle’s account regarding several basic questions on human nature. Human is neither virtuous nor vicious, as the moral qualities do not originate anywhere in nature, but are the product of a set of relations, namely between the individual and the society, and between rational and irrational fractions of human soul and, therefore, motivation. Moreover, a man is not able to obtain any a priori ethical knowledge originating in one’s inclinations and feelings; the only source of such knowledge, as well as the condition of its reception, is the society. This social component constitutes knowledge and reason, understood broadly to maintain Socrates’ ethical views. Finally, the human state is understood as intermediate between beasts and gods, for the divine origin of reason (and, implicitly, of society) gives the possibility to rise above the human moral qualities.

References:

Aristotle. (n.d.). *Nicomachean Ethics*. Retrieved October 29, 2009 from

<<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>>

Aristotle. (n.d.). *Posterior Analytics*. Retrieved October 29, 2009 from

<<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/a8poa/>>