



WHAT DOES BEING AN “ARISTOTELIAN” REALLY MEAN?

O QUE SIGNIFICA REALMENTE SER UM “ARISTOTÉLICO”?

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Abstract. *The present paper presents two main arguments: 1) The meanings of terms like “(neo-) Aristotelian” or “Aristotelianism” have become extremely ambiguous in the present literature of ethics and political philosophy. These terms have even become confusing rather than being descriptive or explanatory. The following questions seem to have no proper answers: Who is actually “Aristotelian,” or “neo-Aristotelian,” to what extent and for what reasons? What does “(neo-) Aristotelian” really mean? 2) In order to give some clues to properly answer these questions, as its second argument, the present paper attempts to define the essential methodological characteristics of Aristotelian ethical/political exploration. To be called as an “Aristotelian,” a research should start from the methodological peculiarities of Aristotle’s practical philosophy that make a research “Aristotelian” rather than “Kantian” or “Hegelian.” In the second part of the paper, these peculiarities are defined as methodological prudence and medical dialectics, which are characteristic aspects of Aristotelian way of inquiry regarding ethics and political philosophy.*

Keywords: Aristotle, Aristotelian, Aristotelianism, ethics, political philosophy, methodology.

Sumário. *Este artigo apresenta dois argumentos principais: 1) os significados de termos como “(neo-) aristotélico” ou “aristotelismo” tornaram-se extremamente ambíguos na actual literatura de ética e filosofia política. Estes termos tornaram-se confusos, perdendo o seu carácter descritivo ou explanatório. Parece que para as questões seguintes não há uma resposta adequada: quem é que, de facto, é um “aristotélico” ou “neo-aristotélico”, em que medida e por que razões? O que significa realmente “(neo-) aristotélico”? 2) o segundo argumento, para fornecer algumas pistas que permitam responder adequadamente a estas questões, tenta definir as características metodológicas essenciais de uma investigação ética/política aristotélica. Para ser designado como “aristotélico”, o investigador deve partir das peculiaridades metodológicas da filosofia prática de Aristóteles que fazem dela uma filosofia prática “aristotélica” e não “kantiana” ou “hegeliana”. Na segunda parte deste artigo estas peculiaridades são definidas como prudência*

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metodológica e dialéctica médica, que são os aspectos característicos da forma aristotélica de investigação em ética e filosofia política.

Palavras-chave: *Aristóteles, aristotélico, aristotelismo, ética, filosofia política, metodologia.*

0. Introduction

It would be no exaggeration to say that in the contemporary literature of moral and political philosophy, one's mind can easily be confused when he comes to realize the abundance of ways available for conducting a research on the current problems of ethics and/or politics. There are so many currents, which could be divided into their rival sub-currents that it seems almost impossible to draw the entire genealogical tree illustrating all of the divisions in a detailed and an indisputable manner. While the literature especially as regards the normative claims about the nature of and the relations between human beings has propagated more and more, intensive efforts have been shown to differentiate all these diverse approaches from each other. These attempts have eventually created their own literature of meta-ethics.

One of the ways often taken in distinguishing scholars and their views regarding ethics and/or political philosophy from each other is to highlight the name of a philosopher who is pursued by them in principle. That is why existing viewpoints in political philosophy are usually denominated as "Aristotelian," "Spinozist," "Kantian," "Humean," "Hobbesian," "Hegelian," *etc.* Moreover, most of the scholars typically add prefixes like "neo" or "post" in front of these terms and employs notions like "Neo-Aristotelianism," "Neo-Kantianism," "Neo-Humeanism," and so on. This leads to a widespread usage of dichotomies in the literature of meta-ethics, such as "Kantian/Aristotelian," "Kantian/Hegelian," "Kantian/Humean," *etc.* Though their meaning and the validity of their utilization have become a subject of an ongoing debate, all these distinctions have notoriously been employed for categorizing various sorts of inquiries on current problems of ethics and political philosophy. Among them, the most commonly used one is the "Aristotelian/Kantian" distinction, which roughly divides the present literature of moral and political philosophy into two predominant camps. As the prominent figures of the Kantian camp one could give the following short list: John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Otrified Höffe, Karl Otto Apel, Robert

Nozick, Thomas Nagel, Allen Wood, Barbara Herman, Christine Korsgaard, Onara O`Neil, Rom Harre, David Cummiskey, Henry Allison and Marcia Baron. The names generally placed into the Aristotelian camp are the following: Hannah Arendt, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Michael Walzer, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Carven Nussbaum, Terece Irvin, Richard Kraut, Sarah Broadie, Philippa Foot, David Wiggins, Peter Simpson, Fred D. Miller, David Keyt and Stephen Salkever.

1. Who is an "Aristotelian" and How?

Although it is still a subject of a relatively wide-spread and ongoing debate that to what extent and in which sense these diverse philosophical views attributed to the above listed scholars can be called as "Kantian" or "Aristotelian," one might say that the list more or less reflects the general view in the literature. Let us note that terms such as "Aristotelianism" and "Kantianism" have closely been associated with political philosophy rather than metaphysics or epistemology (Benhabib 1988, 38). For instance, Richard H. King holds that there are left and right wings in both Aristotelian and Kantian circles. In his classification, King places Rawls to the left wing and Nozick to the right among Kantians; he sees Richard Berstein closer to left Aristotelians and counts Richard Rorty as one of the liberal Kantians. He also makes use of the terms like "democrats" for Walzer and Sandel (King 1990, 104). In employing left/right dichotomy, Bernard Yack takes a similar path. His notion of "left Kantians" has veritably an entirely different meaning (Yack, 1990). It must be noted that political appraisal of Kant's works engendered to radical interpretations of his practical philosophy, according to which there are in fact close affinities between Kant and Marxism.¹

Likewise, if we look to the Aristotelian camp, we can see that Aristotle is either regarded as a passionate defender of participatory democracy or as a detrimental enemy to it.² Nussbaum at this point seems right in holding that the works of Aristotle actually gave inspiration for supporting a variety of modern political thoughts like Catholic social democratic views (Jaques Maritain),

¹ See (Linden 1988) and (Karatani 2003).

² For an interpretation presenting Aristotle as a defender of democracy, see for instance, (Bates 2003) and (Frank 2005). For an argument typically depicts Aristotle as against the democracy, see (Wood & Wood, 1978).

conservatism (Finnis), Catholic communitarianism (MacIntyre), humanist Marxism (David A. Crocker) and British liberal social-democratic tradition (Ernest Barker)(Nussbaum 2001, xix). In parallel with Nussbaum's remark, John R. Wallach argues that "Aristotle may, depending on which neo-Aristotelian you read, augment or condemn Rawlsian liberalism, revive or undercut Straussian naturalism, rehabilitate or discredit the tradition of Thomism, support or oppose humanistic Marxism" (Wallach 1992, 615). There is a dispute widely known as the liberalism versus communitarianism debate, in which both Aristotle's and Kant's works have been appropriated by various rival political projects and have even played a significant role in developing them.³

What can be inferred from such a complicated picture at first glance is that there are various competitive political projects generated within both the "Aristotelian" and the "Kantian" circles. These political interpretations indicate the existence of sundry competing perspectives, which have been in principle inspired or even derived from Aristotle's and Kant's studies on practical philosophy, in order to support or oppose certain political stances. It could however be contended that this trend is actually something closely related with politics in its ordinary sense, not with methodologically adhering to Kant's or Aristotle's original works. Understood this way, adopting these political terms as canonical criteria for distinguishing a number of Aristotelian and Kantian currents hardly provides us a proper key to grasp what makes an inquiry an "Aristotelian" one rather than a "Kantian." Let us note that the meaning of political notions like right/left distinction is in itself contentious. Although these distinctions always refer to a certain political affiliation, they are still vague terms. Secondly, the political philosophies of Aristotle and Kant were originally neither liberal nor Socialist. Being an Aristotelian or a Kantian should not be, first of all, treated as a matter of supporting a certain political view. It seems that attributing our modern political terminology to their political philosophies would rather be perplexing due to its derivation from misused retrospective evaluation. The tendency towards appealing to the categories briefly reviewed above may of course be convenient in sociological mapping of the current tendencies in the literature under consideration, though this would not possibly be explanatory in

³ For general lines of this debate, see (Mulhall & Swift, 1992).

explicating the methodological peculiarities of aforementioned ways of research conducted in the fields of ethics and political philosophy.

Alternatively, grappling with the question of "what does ('neo-) Aristotelian' philosophically mean?" one may at the very beginning prefer to embark on an inquiry into the methodological characteristics of Aristotle's practical philosophy. In the relevant literature, contrasting Aristotle with Kant has nevertheless become a conventional option to deal with this question. On the other hand, there has also been an inclination towards introducing a disjunction for meta-ethically categorizing the salient contentions. Some of these are: teleological ethics versus deontological ethics, eudaimonist versus deontological ethics, practical ethics versus procedural ethics, virtue ethics versus duty ethics and so on. Then, the well-known Aristotelian/Kantian division is not a singular enterprise. Within the frame broadly drawn above, the present Aristotelianism in political philosophy literature is in no doubt generally associated with being teleological, eudaimonist, substantial and practical. In other words, contrary to Kantian ethics, it has been advocated that the Aristotelian point of view privileges the concepts of human good, happiness and virtue over the concepts like right, duty and obligation. In this sense, virtue ethics is often thought to be a kind of ethics which "[p]uts primary emphasis on aretaic or virtue-centered concepts rather than deontic or obligation-centered concepts" (Crisp & Slote, 1997, 3). Defining Aristotelianism as virtue ethics, thus, has turned out to be another consensus, characteristically exemplified in R. Anna Putnam's words: "[v]irtue ethics is what Aristotle did" (Putnam, 1988, 379). Likewise, when Phillip Mantague identifies two foremost currents in the contemporary literature under consideration as virtue ethics and duty ethics, his perspective represents this common view (Mantague 1992).

At first glance, it seems reasonable to accept the virtue/duty ethics distinction and to interpret Aristotle as the canonical example of virtue ethics. Again, such taxonomical endeavors have for the most part appeared to be more and more confusing rather than being explanatory as the debate progress. Some scholars, notably Nussbaum, have drawn our attention to the point that "virtue ethics" conceived as one of the premier approaches in contemporary debates does not solely belong to Aristotelianism. Likewise, Nussbaum does not hesitate to direct her enthusiastic criticisms against the propensity for opposing virtue ethics

to Kantianism and Utilitarianism.⁴ Her critique fundamentally rests on the assumption that both Kant and Utilitarians actually developed a considerable account of virtue. This is the rationale behind her preference to consider Kantian and Utilitarian views as mere exemplars of virtue ethics. In the accompanying literature of ethics, she further enunciates that there seems to be at least two distinct trends, which can be classified under the category of virtue ethics. The first viewpoint, according to her argument, basically undertakes as a duty to reconcile Aristotelian and Kantian perspectives. Scholars who are assumed to belong to the first group, in this sense, “are best understood as motivated by a dissatisfaction with Utilitarianism (...) These ‘virtue theorists’ are likely to turn to Aristotle, or a certain reading of Aristotle, to elaborate their picture of a deliberative political life. They are not hostile to Kant, and they may even desire a synthesis of Aristotle and Kant (Nussbaum 1999, 168). Along with herself, she posits scholars like John McDowell, Iris Murdoch, Nancy Sherman, David Wiggins into this camp. The second group, on the other hand, would be identified with anti-Kantianism. For Nussbaum, anti-Kantians like Annette Baier, Simon Blackburn, Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams “are hostile to universal theorizing in ethics, and they are likely to have some sympathy with cultural relativism, although they do not all endorse it”(Nussbaum 1999, 169).

After her detailed discussion of these trends, Nussbaum’s argument proceeds in the following way: along with Aristotelians, if both Kantians and Utilitarians appeal to a certain understanding of “virtue” in their ethical inquiries, then, there seems no need to employ a conceptual instrument like “virtue ethics” so as to differentiate these schools from each other. In the frame drawn by Nussbaum, that is to say, while “virtue ethics” turns out to be a misleading category, the old notions like “Neo-Humean,” “Neo-Aristotelian,” “anti-Utilitarian,” “anti-Kantian” would thus be sufficient to depict the significant common ground shared by and the dissimilarities between rival theories in ethics (Nussbaum 1999, 201).

Nonetheless, Nussbaum’ account of virtue ethics as a misconception appears to be excessively inclusive as Sean Mcaleer convincingly argues in his recent article “An Aristotelian Account of Virtue Ethics: An Essay in Moral

⁴ See Nussbaum (1999).

Taxonomy"(2007). One of the objections in Mcaleer's study is plainly directed against Nussbaum's categorical rejection of virtue ethics. Nussbaum's proposal introduced in her article entitled "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?" is, for him, absolutely derived from a false postulation that every ethical system that somehow mentions virtue, could plausibly be called as "virtue ethics." In other words, Nussbaum puts totally irrelevant attitudes into the same basket without explicitly defining what "virtue ethics" is or should be. Kant and Mill, no doubt, declared their ideas about the concept of virtue and even considerably grappled with it in their ethical writings, but this does not simply mean that they can safely be regarded as virtue theorists. In order to settle on the point that whether a theory of ethics can be subsumed under the category of virtue ethics or not, one should first answer the following question: within a theory's conceptual economy, "are the virtue concepts foundational or derivative, primary or secondary, *explicantia* or *explicanda*?" (Mcaleer 2007, 210). Without appealing to this or a similar set of criteria, one would certainly face a great difficulty in determining the crucial distinctive feature which makes a theory virtue ethics. But, for Nussbaum, employing a conception of "virtue" in this or that way seems to be the necessary and sufficient condition for a theory to be labeled as virtue ethics. That is why her understanding of virtue ethics may be seen as too inclusive as effectively argued in detail by Mcaleer.

Further, for Mcaleer, there exists another tendency in the relevant literature, which is engaged with defining virtue ethics in a deficiently inclusive way. For instance, in terms of Gary Watson's account of virtue ethics, even Aristotle cannot be counted as a virtue theorist. Mcaleer 2007, 210-215). The confusion regarding the meaning of virtue ethics, therefore, brings about an emergent need for further elaborations, rather than a clear meta-ethical taxonomy of the current theories of ethics. For instance, from a significantly disparate angle, Stephen Buckle in his recent article "Aristotle's *Republic* or, Why Aristotle's Ethics is Not Virtue Ethics," persuasively supports the assertion that Aristotle's practical philosophy cannot be appraised as a virtue theory in the modern sense. Buckle draws our attention to the point that if the relation between Aristotle's *Ethics* and his *Politics* is carefully inspected, one cannot equate Aristotelian ethics with the modern virtue ethics; for, Aristotle had always insisted on dealing with the question of virtue as part of much more broader

project like Plato's *Republic* (Buckle 2002). The contemporary virtue ethicists in sharply separating moral and political spheres from each other very much like the Kantians do, actually fail to realize the peculiarities of an Aristotelian way of inquiry. A similar view is suggested by Peter Simpson:

Viewed in the light of the *Politics*, Aristotle's ethical theory is inseparable not only from the opinions of gentlemen, but also from the politics of gentlemen. Virtue exists fully in aristocratic regimes, and elsewhere only in isolation. Since contemporary virtue ethicists have no intention whatsoever of trying their theory to gentlemanly opinions, let alone gentlemanly politics, their theory is not, and could never be, Aristotelian. The 'neo' in their title destroys the 'Aristotelian' to which it is attached (Simpson 1992, 523-524)

The views examined so far are sufficient to show that the meanings of notions like "Aristotelian," "Kantian," "virtue ethics" are in dispute. From one point of view, Kant might be a virtue ethicist, but seen from another, he is not. This is also the case for Aristotle. His practical philosophy could on the one side be interpreted as the well-known exemplar of virtue ethics without hesitation; but on the other side, it is likely to be in contrast to our modern conception of virtue ethics. That is to say, contemporary interpretations of Aristotle and Kant are so interwoven that the notions of "Aristotelian" and "Kantian" could even be regarded as misleading. This seems to be a natural result of the general tendency to undermine the validity of Aristotelian/Kantian distinction by accentuating the putative close affinities between their practical philosophies.⁵ Among all others, Otfried Höffe's argument exhibits one of the most passionate defenses of this position (Höffe 1997). In his article entitled as "Outlook: Aristotle or Kant-Against a Trivial Alternative," he argues that four types of re-aristotalisation of ethics in the current literature can be distinguished. Opposing Aristotle to Enlightenment thought and liberalism by means of highlighting the elements against universal conception of morality in Aristotle's political philosophy is, according to Höffe, the first kind of re-aristotalisation, generally known as "communitarianism." Drawing attention to the importance of Aristotelian "substantial morality," and at the same time contrasting it to the formality of Kantian ethics is the second version of re-aristotalisation. The third version is called by Höffe as "virtue ethics," the central concern of which is essentially the development of one's character excellences and human flourishing. The fourth

⁵ Some of well-known examples of the aforementioned tendency are: (Hursthouse 1999), (Korsgaard 1996), (Sherman, 1997), (O'Neill, 1989) and (Herman 1993).

one is founded upon the assumption that Kantian ethics is deontological and this is the reason why it gives a crucial importance to the concept of "duty." Aristotle's ethics, however, would rather concentrate on the concepts like happiness and practice instead of notions like *categorical imperative* and "duty."

All these versions of re-aristotelisation in the literature of ethics and political philosophy, for Höffe, primarily stem from reductive and misleading interpretations "which are carried out partly on Aristotle, partly on Kant and frequently even on both thinkers, permit rhetorically brilliant polemic and also prophetic exhortations to moral and moral philosophical *metanoia*"(Höffe 1997, 19). Against "re-aristotelisation," Höffe hence endorses the following claims:

- (1) In the intention of ethics as a practical philosophy Kant is an Aristotelian. (2) In the basic elements of his ethics Aristotle is a universalist. (3) Where Aristotle allegedly surpasses Kant, namely respecting judgment, he presents an analysis which Kant not only essentially acknowledges, but also continues moral philosophically. (4) With regard to the theory of acting some of the Aristotelian analyses have implications beyond their own theoretical point of departure, i.e. the principle of mere pursuit. And (5) with the theory of happiness Aristotle develops a concept, on which Kant's thesis of the conceptual indefiniteness expresses a skeptical opinion, but which is actually an objective, amazingly broad and also well-defined concept (Höffe 1997, 18).

Höffe's argument briefly reconstructed above, like many others, no doubt borders upon blurring the defining characteristic features of Aristotelian and Kantian ways of inquiry. Nevertheless, in reading Kant, one could hardly fail to see that his practical philosophy is essentially a strong challenge against Aristotelian political philosophy. This is simply why contrasting Aristotelian ethics and political philosophy to that of Kant seems to me a much more reasonable than laying stress on the common denominator shared by these competing perspectives. But this does not necessarily mean that there cannot in any case be some good reasons to compromise their practical philosophies. For instance, Nussbaum states that her "Aristotelianism has increasingly been influenced by the idea of John Rawls and of Kant" (Nussbaum 2001, xx). Let us note here that there exists an evident disparity between Höffe's argument and Nussbaum's statement above. Whereas Höffe endeavors to weaken the validity of Aristotelian/Kantian distinction categorically, Nussbaum, by referring the following facts for clarifying the motives behind her change of mind regarding the relation between Aristotelian and Kantian ways of thinking, states that the

supreme ideal of dignity of humanity is absent in Aristotle's practical philosophy. Aristotelian approach originally is also blind to the problem of gender, that is, subordination of women to men. Indeed, Aristotle justified slavery without hesitation. Second, Aristotle was always not ethically and politically interested in the people who lived outside his own city-state. Moreover, he did not recognize men as *kosmopolitai* (all human beings in the world). And lastly, in Nussbaum's words: "Aristotle lacks an essential element of a good modern political approach: a robust conception of protected areas of liberty, of activities with which it is wrong for the state to interfere." Nussbaum 2001, xxi).

One might agree in principle with Nussbaum. The Aristotelian standpoint must be revised in accordance with the novelties that we have been confronted. In our modern conception, it is plain to the eye that justification of slavery or of inequality between men and women are often regretfully condemned as backward ideas. This is the key lesson that we should learn from the Cynics or the Stoics. However, this does not mean that one is justified in harmonizing practical philosophies of Aristotle and Kant by presuming their methodological proximity. As exemplified in Höffe's argument, focusing on finding a common ground shared by these two distinct political philosophies could easily result in the ignorance of their radical differences that cannot be reconciled in principle. Further, methodological reconciliation of the two attitudes at first requires to be supported with a detailed meta-ethical assessment. But if one prefers to combine the strong sides of Aristotle and Kant without giving a detailed meta-ethical account, this picture easily turns out to be a patchwork. On the other hand, to be called an "Aristotelian" does not mean repeating and accepting every single word of Aristotle. Rather, if a survey is conducted by following Aristotelian methodology, this must mean that the uniqueness of Aristotle's methodology is to be pursued. That is to say, the research should start from the very peculiarities that make a research "Aristotelian" rather than "Kantian" or "Hegelian."

Therefore, it is clear that some scholars call themselves Aristotelians or are denominated by others as Aristotelians. But, what does Aristotelian really mean? In order to answer this question properly, let us try to underline two essential methodological characteristics of Aristotelian exploration.

2. Aristotelian Quest for Prudence in Political Philosophy

In the eighteenth century, inquiries conducted mostly under the umbrella of philosophy faculties, were frequently labeled as "science of man," "moral science," "moral physics," or "*sciences morales et politiques*." Mathematics and natural sciences in this epoch constituted crucial reference point for the research regarding politics and social sciences. Concerted efforts were made to unfold natural principles and laws of human nature in place of supernatural agencies' putative properties. This resulted in the development of elaborate systems of moral duty and political obligation. For example, natural law theories like that of Thomas Hobbes and Samuel Pufendorf were founded upon the postulation that social reality can only be explained in terms of permanent features of human nature, such as the concern for self-preservation. In order to explain how society is formed and functions, what nature of society or politics is, most of the moral and political treatises of that time usually employed mechanical metaphors, organic analogies and an image of the world as a well-ordered machine.

From about 1770 to 1830, especially in France, treatises on moral and political issues were denominated as "social mathematics," "social mechanics," "social physics," and "social physiology." Within this intellectual climate, philosophical inquires regarding the socio-historical realm in a sense intimated the methodologies of the natural sciences and mathematics. As Bernard le Bovier puts it, "the geometrical spirit is not so attached to geometry that it cannot be taken and applied to other knowledge. A work of morals, politics, and criticism, perhaps even of rhetoric, would be improved, other things being equal, if written by a geometer."⁶

This is an intellectual current that has been a subject of long-lasting dispute, in respect of which one might pose the following questions: is there a single methodology that encapsulates all facets of reality? Is it really plausible to presuppose that methodology of natural sciences or of mathematics can directly be applied for attaining the purpose of investigating moral and political issues?

On the one side of the debate, one can argue that the application of the methodology that belongs to mathematics and natural sciences into the social sciences or researches dealing with ethical and political issues would at least yield

⁶ Cited in (Gaukroger 2006, 12).

some misleading conclusions. As Alasdair MacIntyre holds, “[t]he eighteenth-century moral philosophers engaged in what was inevitably an *unsuccessful project*; for they did indeed attempt to find a rational basis for their moral beliefs in a particular understanding of human nature, while inheriting a set of moral injunctions on the one hand and a conception of human nature on the other” (MacIntyre 1984, 53) (italics mine). This is surely a charge that requires a rigorous justification. One still asserts that a certain conception of “laws” or “principles” peculiar to an unchanging human nature has more and more been adopted as an ultimate premise in the relevant philosophical texts. This is in effect consciously or unconsciously, implicitly or explicitly, usually coupled with the inquiries regarding ethics and politics. It seems that this trend has turned out to be a prevailing stream in the literature of moral and political philosophy after the 18th century.

One of the motivations behind the variety of the doctrines generally termed “contemporary (neo) Aristotelianism” becomes clear especially when this intellectual current is carefully taken into consideration. As a matter of fact, Aristotle himself would have raised the following questions with regard to aforementioned frantic efforts: do we have a guarantee that the laws of human nature can be defined exactly? Are they essentially similar to that of physics or of mathematics? Is morality or politics just consisting of a series of laws that should be obeyed in any given case? That is to say, following the strategy of “finding out the ultimate laws first and deriving the solutions of specific ethical and/or political problems” would yield no solution to the problem under consideration, and this might even be a vain hope.

Here we encounter a serious epistemological puzzle: is it really possible to identify ourselves and reveal the permanent laws inherent to our nature? If this is possible, is there a guarantee that we can resolve every single problem regarding ethics and politics by directly appealing to these laws? These challenges are quite vexing and always deserve a rigorous philosophical interrogation. But there seems to be a practical way out of this alleged dilemma. This is the Aristotelian solution: in order to investigate the relations between human beings as they are and would possibly be, we are not obliged to take anchor from the putative existence of the unconditional principles similar to mathematical or the

physical laws. It could be losing time to try to derive the ultimate principles regarding ethics and/or politics in a deductive manner either from the laws of human nature like Hobbes or from the "pure practical reason" like Kant. In short, what differentiates Kantian or a Hobbesian inquiry from the Aristotelian is their common presumption that there is a certain human nature, which they derive by observing an "abstract individual."

2.1. Aristotle's Challenge: From Abstract Metaphysical to the Concrete Social Individual

To evaluate a human being as an "abstract individual" means that there are some ontological properties, certain characteristics of human beings, which do not change over time and in altered circumstances. This conception, in other words, implicitly or explicitly refers to the putative existence of basic set of intrinsic characteristics of human behavior or of morality which do not change in time and place. It finds its root on the view that human beings are always governed by a set of objective laws. J. S. Mill typically exemplifies this viewpoint when he states that "all phenomena of society are phenomena of human nature, generated by the action outward circumstances upon masses of human beings; and if therefore, *the phenomena of human thought, feeling and action, are subject to fixed laws*, the phenomena of society cannot but conform to fixed laws" (Mill 1974, 835) (emphasis mine).

One can, however, raise the objection that this or that set of the properties ontologically attributed to a certain conception of individual are not as empirically obvious as claimed. Simple observation would not be sufficient to perceive, for example, man's natural tendency to engage in a war against every man as Hobbes depicts. If so, it would then be unnecessary even to talk about moral ideals, which would be beyond what is actually going on in social reality. On the other hand, as in Kant's challenge, it seems possible to hold that investigating only the content of "pure practical reason" enlightens the *a priori* ground of the human nature, which provides the real morality for all of us. Thus, there would be no need for looking at the empirical world, to our everyday life to know what we ought to do. Nevertheless, both approaches still hinge on an abstract description of what the human being is.

Seen from Aristotle's perspective, there are no essentially self-seeking, ontologically distinct (or isolated) individuals who come together by social contracts to give birth to a community as Locke or Hobbes argued. It is impossible to observe an autonomous individual exempt from all social relations who could also be endowed with "pure practical reason." What was discussed up to here is just a brief outline of the major ontological presumption of "methodological individualism."⁷ An Aristotelian way of inquiry radically deviates from the aforementioned apprehensions. In the Aristotelian approach, there is no *ontologically autarchic* individual. Instead, we always find ourselves as conditioned by and dissolved in the ensemble of social relations. That is the very reason why MacIntyre suggests that an Aristotelian exploration ought to grapple with questions like "of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" instead of the question "who really am I?" In his own words:

I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or possession; I belong to this or that clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be the good one who inhabits these roles. As such I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations (MacIntyre 1984, 220).

Thus, Aristotle did not take for granted an abstract conception of individual in its modern sense: "unlike moderns, [Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau] Aristotle ... does not use nature to establish the pre-condition and necessary conditions of politics. He treats human nature, instead, as both a measure of polity and as itself a question for politics" (Frank 2005, 19).⁸ The individual as such in Aristotle's conception is not, then, a given entity having a definite nature. He rather "seeks a richer vision of human experience by taking our own commitments seriously and inquiring into what they imply about the human condition" (Smith 2001, 19). The Aristotelian project, therefore, finds its ground on the following starting point: as we gain experience, and attain knowledge about our moral psychology, our history, biological nature and about politician constitutions, we can have further opportunities to think and act in accordance with the knowledge of *politike*.⁹

⁷ For a detailed support of the argument presented above see: (Ball 1978) and (Hinchman 1984).

⁸ Fred D. Miller also demonstrates how Aristotle's conception of natural rights differs from those of Hobbes and Locke. See his *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics* (1995, especially 117-123).

⁹ *Politike*, for Aristotle, is *he peri ta anthropeia philosophia*, which can be translated as "the philosophy of human affairs." Its range is much broader than what we understand from the term "political science." It covers the whole subjects of psychology, anthropology,

2.1.2. *Politike* as Inexact Practical Science.

Aristotle, in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, argues for the supremacy of *politike* over all other theoretical sciences and other practical disciplines (NE 1094a26-1094b6). Aristotle’s conception of *politike* as the most authoritative science is the one of the most striking indications of how he thinks practically rather than theoretically in his *Ethics* and *Politics*. When Aristotle hierarchically arranges types of knowledge in accordance with hierarchy of goods (1094a1-1094a26), and when he places *politike* at the apex, he appeals neither to epistemological nor to metaphysical criteria in the modern sense. He orders various kinds of knowledge with respect to practical concerns in a *polis*. This is a kind of taxonomy that is based on one single criterion, which is the value of knowledge in our lives.

Aristotle exposes three substantial reasons in defining *politike* as the most authoritative and cardinal science. First, he argues that *politike* rules and should administrate all other sciences, simply because it prescribes which sciences should be learned in a *polis*, by whom and to what extent (1094a29-1094b1). Mathematics, for instance, is the most exact theoretical science, though mathematics cannot decide whether it is better for every citizen to learn geometry or not. Medicine is definitely very beneficial and useful for all, but this does not mean that every citizen should be trained as a doctor. It is also necessary to have recourse to *politike* when one seeks answer to questions like “how many professional mathematicians, engineers, soldiers and doctors should be accommodated in a *polis*?” It is *politike* that should adjudicate to what extent and why sciences like mathematics and medicine are useful for us, not *vice versa*. There is no further need to emphasize the vital importance of medicine. Mathematics might supply the most exact and structural knowledge that we could ever reach, however, this does not mean that the mathematical method ought to be pursued in order to assess its own usefulness for achieving the goal of living happily in a *polis*. Mathematics cannot mathematically prove its own usefulness. Exactitude belongs to the sphere of theoretical sciences, which aspire to ascertain

economics, history, sociology, ethics, law and political science in our modern conception. All these are separate disciplines for us, subject matters of which are remarkably different from each other. But for Aristotle *politike* is the only discipline, an artful and practical science that encompasses all questions related with these modern academic disciplines. In the texts of Aristotle, in particular cases, it might also mean “practical philosophy” or “art of politics.” There is a danger that its meaning in Aristotle’s nomenclature can be confused with our contemporary understanding of the terms like “political science.” That is why I prefer not to use English “political science.” Cf. (Wallach 1992, 616-618).

the unconditional truth for its own sake. But, the significance of truth, the ways of its appropriation and its essential function in our life are all the subject matters of *politike*. If the life in a *polis* is fundamentally organized through politics and if we are “political animals,” then *politike* must be the master of all practical concerns, unlike mathematics, logic or physics.

Secondly, seen from Aristotelian point of view, reversing the hierarchical order of *politike* and other theoretical or practical disciplines means that knowledge partial in its scope is blindly put over a much more comprehensive one. That is why all practical disciplines like medicine or the art of commandership ought to be subordinated to *politike* (1094b2-3). In other words, the scope of *politike* is already much broader than all other sciences and disciplines. Reversing their positions in the frame that Aristotle has drawn would be both against Aristotle’s teleological orderliness and would also bring about putting an impediment to accomplish the most honorable purpose of life, namely *eudamonia* (1097a25-1097b27). For example, if the subordination of *politike* to a practical discipline such as generalship is accepted by people, then it can immediately lead us to justify the existence of an unjust social system, e.g. dictatorship in which most of the citizens do not have a chance to be happy as could be inferred from the *Politics*. The purpose of *politike* is rather to embrace and to govern all practical disciplines and theoretical sciences in accordance with Aristotle’s teleology.

Third, *politike* makes use of all types of knowledge obtained from all of the other sciences concerned with action and puts them into practice by laying down rules and laws. This again shows us what is right and what is wrong to do (1094b4-5). In today’s terminology, the task of *politike* is to collect the relevant data from psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, law, biology, etc. in order to adjust the required regulations properly and execute them within a society. Thus, *politike* is the discipline that appeals to all sorts of knowledge for specific purposes.

Aristotle, on these grounds, affirms that *politike* is and ought to be superior to all other sciences (1094b6). *Politike*, in short, aims to achieve the highest good of human being by employing all sciences. Let us note that when Aristotle speaks of the mastery of the *politike* over all other sciences, he does not appeal to the internal characteristics of knowledge, such as consistency or certainty. Similar to the practices in a society, for Aristotle, sciences are and must be ordered in accordance with the existing hierarchy of goods, and here *politike* occupies the highest place. This is also fulfillment of the human function (*ergon*) (1097b25), being happy and doing good, not to define what the virtue, happiness or the good in itself is (1097b11, 1095a4-6, 1103b26-30, 1179b1-4). As Salkever says:

[a] misleading approach to Aristotle is to read him as if he were attempting to establish some sort of Archimedean point, an absolute perspective from which the accuracy of ethical and political choices could be guaranteed by reference to some rule or system of rules. This kind of reading gets its plausibility from the way it reflects modern expectations about philosophy. We assume Aristotle is a 'philosopher,' and we expect philosophers to be in the business of replacing practical doubt with theoretical certainty - an expectation that seems adequately met by, say, Hobbes, Kant and J.S. Mill (Salkever 1990, 4).

We should here note again that when Aristotle sorts various kinds of sciences and practical disciplines, he does not try to extend his method developed in the *Metaphysics* into *politike*. Theoretical sciences have their own aim and principles:

But in each science the principles which are peculiar are most numerous. Consequently it is the business of experience to give principles which belong to each subject. I mean for example that astronomical experience supplies the principles of astronomical science: for once the phenomena were adequately apprehended; the demonstrations of astronomy were discovered (*Post. An.* 46a17-19).¹⁰

Yet, practical sciences have practical purposes. It is worth underlining the point that Aristotle's distinction between theory and practice does not resemble our modern understanding. In Aristotle's terminology, the distinction between theory and practice "is not a distinction between the general and the particular but between knowing what is right and wrong on the one hand, and actually doing the right and avoiding the wrong on the other. The modern distinction passes over Aristotle's distinction and ignores his practical concern." (Simpson 1992, 505). In one sense, practical sciences are essentially action-oriented and depend on the improvement of experience. Principles by themselves have no meaning in

¹⁰ Translation of "Prior Analytic" and other works of Aristotle not related with his practical philosophy are from (Aristotle 1984).

politike. The real difficulty is always to find out how to substantiate them. Arriving at the right judgment without executing is meaningless. The definitive purpose of *politike*, for this reason, is the act itself, not contemplation. This contention rests on the assumption that knowing the general principles about right acts is something different from committing the act in a particular context. In Aristotle's view, abstracted from the agent who commits an action in a particular context, an act itself has no meaning. For Aristotle, the essential problem is not to ascertain a procedure that secures arriving at the right moral judgment; rather it concerns constitution of the character in a certain manner and the context within which this character behaves. Aristotle does not see moral principles as universal recipes that can be applied in every situation; rather he prefers to seek a way to be, for instance, trying to be a generous person who acts generously in a spontaneous manner instead of performing the right act by obeying some higher principles. This confirms that *politike* is essentially inexact and necessitates prudence (*phronesis*). As Simpson states, Aristotle's theory of virtue or his *Ethics* and *Politics* in general

[d]oes not seem to be a moral theory at all, at least in the sense of moral theory that we standardly recognize. What we want from a moral theory is some over-all account of moral goodness and badness which we can then use to show why this or that particular act is right or wrong. So the Kantian explains the right and wrong in terms of agreement with the categorical imperative, and the utilitarian in terms of promotion of the general welfare. Aristotle indeed has a general account of virtue, that it is a mean between two extremes, and so on. This general account, however, cannot be used to show that something is an act of virtue or something else an act of vice. The truth about such particulars is not shown by theory; it is perceived by prudence (Simpson 1992, 512).

Hence, from the Aristotelian perspective, trying to approximate the level of certainty in mathematical knowledge in *politike* would be imprudence. Then, the first and the last task we should undertake in Aristotle's doctrine are to become skilled at how to think and act prudently.

2.1.3. Methodological Prudence as a Remedy for the Inevitable Inexactness of *Politike*

According to Aristotle, one should first of all be aware of the fact that it is impossible to reach the same level of exactness in *politike* as the one attained by mathematical proofs. This is one of the salient motives behind Aristotle's criticisms when concerning the incompatibility of Plato's theory of forms with *politike*. Since there is no single universal idea of the good for all sciences

(theoretical and practical), the search for it is futile (*NE* 1096b15-35). Further, even if one could reach a universal vision that encompasses all practical sciences, this would be irrelevant to action and useless for the purposes of *politike* (1096b30-1097a15).

Thus, seen from the Aristotelian point of view, Plato goes to an extreme when grounding his argument for the ideal state on axioms about the good similar to those of geometry. Plato was wrong, according to Aristotle, in following a mathematical method for the purpose of providing permanent solutions to the political problems of a *polis*, and in assuming the preexistence of some universal laws pertaining to all kinds of social practices. The Aristotelian way of inquiry does not ground ethics on such unshakable foundations. Its goal is not to characterize what morality is or is to find out indubitable facts about human nature.

Secondly, it should not be considered a mere coincidence that *Nicomachean Ethics* begins and ends with the theme of happiness (*eudaimonia*). For Aristotle, activities in political life, in general, may properly be defined as the pursuit of happiness, which is the highest good in human life. Since a life with happiness is that which is most complete, self-sufficient and choiceworthy (*hairetos*); happiness is and ought to be the primary life-goal governing all of our other (secondary) goals in life. Hence Aristotle seems to think that the task assigned to *politike* is to strive at attaining a kind of knowledge, which is by definition, or necessarily useful for happiness. Furthermore, Aristotle argues that genuine ethical arguments should "be useful for the conduct of life," "harmonize with facts of human life ... and so encourage those who comprehend them to live by them" (1172b5-8).¹¹

However, it would then be very difficult for us to uncover one single way for being happy. The search for happiness is a long and a resolute journey; and we should first be trained to be very careful in our steps. At the opening of *NE*, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of prudence in the search for truth in *politike*:

Our discussion will be adequate if its degree of clarity fits the subject-matter; for we should not seek the same degree of exactness in all sorts of arguments alike, any

¹¹ All quotations from *Nicomachean Ethics* is from the following translation: (Aristotle 1985).

more than in the products of different crafts. Moreover, what is fine and what is just, the topics of inquiry in political science, differ and vary so much that they seem to rest on convention only, not on nature ... Since these are the sorts of things we argue from and about, it will be satisfactory if we can indicate the truth roughly and in outline; since [that is to say] we argue from and about what holds good usually [but not universally], it will be satisfactory if we can draw conclusions of the same sort (1094b3-23).

This is evidently not an invitation to the pursuit of certainty. Aristotle here suggests that his objective is to discover “what holds good usually.” A student of *politike*, thus, should not expect to attain exact knowledge at the end of investigation. This is not his only remark; throughout *NE*, Aristotle continually to insists on the essential inexactness of *politike*:

Each of our claims, then, ought to be accepted in the same way [as claiming to hold good usually], since the educated person seeks exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of subject allows; for apparently it is just as mistaken to demand demonstrations from a rhetorician as to accept [merely] persuasive argument from a mathematician, each person judges well what he knows, and is a good judge about that; the judge in a particular area is the person educated in that area, and the unconditionally good judge is the person educated in every area (1094b23-1095a1).

What is indispensable for a student of *politike* is to be aware of the peculiar nature of the subject matter being investigated. While theoretical sciences are concerned with the nature of unchanging beings, *politike* deals with the sources and the products of human activity. Then, the nature of questioning life itself or illuminating questions like “how can we be happy?” should not be confused with the aim and subject-matter of scientific investigations:

What science is evident from the following, if we must speak exactly and not be guided by [mere] similarities. For we all suppose that what we know scientifically does not even admit of being otherwise; and whenever what admits of being otherwise escapes observation, we do not notice whether it is or it is not, [and hence we do not know about it]. Hence what is known scientifically is by necessity. Hence it is eternal; for the things that are by unconditional necessity are all eternal, and eternal things are ingenerable and indestructible (1139b19-24).

In contrast to theoretical sciences, then, *politike* is concerned with what is up to us, that is, what can be otherwise, not with necessities and essentially unchangeables. It is *de facto* associated with the deliberation which “[c]oncerns what is usually [one way rather than another], where the outcome is unclear and the right way to act is undefined. And we enlist partners in deliberation on large issues when we distrust our own ability to discern [the right answer]” (1112a8-11). In this sense, the subject matter of *politike* is always open to debate and further deliberation, for it is concerned with particular and contingent cases, namely

human actions and interactions, which belong to the field of what is up to us, not necessity.

Studying *politike* is therefore not merely a matter of attaining the most accurate knowledge that we can ever reach. The relations between numbers or physical objects cannot be treated in the same way with the relations between human beings:

[W]e must also remember our previous remarks, so that we do not look for the same degree of exactness in all areas, but the degree that fits the subject-matter in each area and is proper to investigation. For the carpenter's and the geometer's inquiries about the right angle are different also; the carpenter is confined to the right angle's usefulness for his work, whereas the geometer's concern what, or what sort of thing, the right angle is, since he studies the truth. We must do the same, then, in other areas too, [seeking the proper degree of exactness], so that digressions do not overwhelm our main task (*NE* 1098a27-35, see also 1103b34-1104a9).

What can reliably be inferred from these passages is that applying the method of mathematical investigation in *politike* (like Plato) would most probably yield results incompatible with its ultimate aim. An investigation regarding life has also an essential practical side and is in fact genuinely practical. On that account, all pursuits to attain accurate knowledge about what happiness is without ultimately striving at being happy seem to Aristotle to be nonsensical. For Aristotle, assuming the existence of a higher separate reality (like the world of *Ideas*), which governs or should control our actions, is not only a theoretically implausible assumption, but also practically futile. If one investigates life itself as it is and as it ought to be, then the subject matter of this study must both be the improvement of a single character, its acts, behaviors, and interactions among people living a *polis*, all of which are in the terrain of what is up to us, things that can be otherwise. Instead of these actions and interactions themselves, it would seem implausible for Aristotle to begin the investigation by suggesting the putative existence of some universal laws underlying every action of human beings. The *methodos*, the way of inquiry that ought to be followed in these incommensurable realms like mathematics and politics, should conform to their peculiar natures and characteristic aims. Sources of human actions and their results, the conventions and beliefs about them cannot be analyzed as if they were physical objects in front of us. From the very beginning, as students of *politike*, we find ourselves within a wide span of contradictory views about what is better for us, how we can achieve happiness and act in a right way in a particular context.

It is not a coincidence that the starting point of Aristotle's inquiry concerns conventional beliefs on happiness. The first and the last lesson that should be derived from Aristotle is to learn not to stick to an idea without questioning it. Aristotle warned against thinking imprudently, and advised prudence in the research concerning *politike*. One of the most striking peculiarities of Aristotle's methodology regarding *politike*, one essential aspect of his argument for the elimination of false beliefs and unhealthy desires from our souls, is the medical dialectic.

2.2. *Politike* as Medical Dialectic

To repeat, the ultimate purpose of *NE* is at least in one sense to present the general knowledge of what virtue and vice are in the realm of what is "up to us." Aristotle does not dictate us some general rules like "you should do X in the context of Y." To do so would contradict the nature of *politike*. It is very difficult to recognize, in particular contexts, the best way to act. For instance, people might get angry at their close friends when they think that they are treated by them unjustly. Anger in certain situations can be a mere expression of excessive love, as exemplified in the sayings "cruel is the strife of brethren" and "they who love in excess also hate in excess" (*Pol.* 1328a10-17).¹² An action, then, might be provoked by anger, but the problem is not to assess what the anger is as such. A Kantian is prone to reject anger categorically for the reason that a right action should not originate from an emotion. From this perspective, motivation behind an ethical judgment ought to be a rational decision making procedure. In contrast, Aristotle does not assign a particular meaning to anger. He neither categorically confirms nor rejects it as such. Rather, he analyzes the context within which anger emerges. Anger is a feeling that might also stem from incontinence. In this case, anger seems to be associated with the immaturity of a character. But in another case, anger could emerge as a response to an apparent form of injustice. Moreover, becoming angry in particular instances can be inevitable and even an expression of justice (*NE* 1135b25-30). In some other situations, to settle on "the way we should be angry, with whom, about what, for how long" would not be easy (1109b 14-18).

¹² All citations regarding Aristotle's *Politics* are taken from the following translations: (Aristotle 1995), (Aristotle 1997), (Aristotle 1999) and (Aristotle 2005).

The problem is, thus, to find out the right means, the most proper way to behave in certain circumstances. This is, for Aristotle, a puzzle that cannot be solved in a purely theoretical way. Aristotle deals with this problem by assigning himself the task of finding out the right means for the virtue of prudence. This virtue can be defined as a kind of eye that “operates in the here and now, for it decides what is the virtuous thing to do here and now; and judging the here and now is the work of perception ... In other words, prudence does not *reason* about virtue, it directly *intuits* it” (Simpson 1992, 510). This is why only students who have an inclination to be prudent can learn *politike*; it is by means that he improves his capability of being prudent and acting prudently. Openness to develop one’s own character in the manner of prudence is thus both a precondition and an ultimate aim for the student who wants to be trained in *politike*, and only he can benefit from this knowledge.¹³ This is associated with experience. But, learning to reason in mathematics, and learning how to respond to the peculiarities of the contexts in which we act are remarkably different from each other. Cleverness would be sufficient for learning theoretical sciences, in which young people can easily be successful:

[To understand the difficulty and importance of experience] we might consider why a boy can become accomplished in mathematics, but not in wisdom or natural science. Surely it is because mathematical objects are reached through abstraction, whereas the origins in these other cases are reached from experience. Young people, then, [lacking experience], have no real conviction in these other sciences, but only say the words, whereas the nature of mathematical objects is clear to them (1142a 16-21).

Here, for Aristotle, we should note that being experienced or mature does not solely depend on the age, but mainly refers to maturity of character (1095a6-7). Nonetheless, young people, who are generally inclined to give up anything that is not pleasant easily (*Pol.* 1340b15-16) are prone to be driven by their sensuous pursuits, not benefiting from *politike* (*NE* 1095a8-11).

Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes how important it is to eliminate false beliefs, prejudicial inclinations and dispositions from the constitution of a

¹³ For a detailed analysis of Aristotle conception of virtue, see (Bodéüs 1993, especially 27-38).

character. The variety of ways of life, what people generally do and why, are the chief problems that wait to be resolved by finding out what could be better for us to do and to be. At this stage, one must not start with principles taken for granted in political inquiry. A mathematician can base his inquiry on self-evident axioms. A student of *politike*, in contrast, should always be ready to face puzzles and obscurities throughout his investigation. There is no ready solution to a problem regarding what is better for us. Therefore, the outstanding task of a student of *politike* is (i) first, “to set out the appearances” [i.e., setting out what appears to people as right]; (ii) second, “to go through the puzzles [i.e., exposing the appearances to the test of reason for consistency and compatibility with the circumstances and requirements of human life]; (iii) to leave behind prejudices and take the rationally tested beliefs as basis for further investigation in political inquiry (1145b3-9).

That is to say, Aristotle’s method of inquiry aims at discovering the origins (*archai*) of human affairs by observing the very practice (*praxis*) embedded in a certain web of social relations and by critically evaluating the common-beliefs (*endoxa*) adopted by the majority of people. The paramount task of the Aristotelian inquiry is to assess significant philosophical views so as to teach how to live in a certain way rather than another. This inquiry, to repeat, should make use of the dialectical method by which one would perhaps arrive at general principles.¹⁴ At the end of the research, we can have an opportunity to formulate these principles that are correct usually, but not unconditionally. Furthermore, what is more important than formulating these principles is to be trained in how to be an excellent person:

who judges each sort of thing correctly and in each case what is true appears to him. For each state [of character] has its own special [view of] what is fine and pleasant, and presumably the excellent person is far superior because he sees what is true in each case, being a sort of standard and measure of what is fine and pleasant” (1113a30-35).¹⁵

This is a very important point that requires to be emphasized: modern readers who become accustomed to a Hobbesian or a Kantian methodology in searching for unconditional laws of morality or of politics should not expect to

¹⁴ For a detailed exposition of this argument, (Allard-Nelson, 2004).

¹⁵ Cf. *NE* 1176a16-20.

give a definite demonstration (*apodeixis*) of the Aristotelian dialectical inquiry.¹⁶ It is not a mere analogy that while Aristotle contrasts ethical inquiry with mathematics, he often resembles it to medicine. Along with scholars who conceive this "medical analogy"¹⁷ as a key to comprehend Aristotle's methodology, I think that this analogy really explicates the spirit of the Aristotelian way of inquiry in a lucid manner. If *politike* is a practical and an inexact science and if its primary goal is improvement of character in the manner of prudence, the medical analogy makes it clear that Aristotle's conception of *politike* is both context-sensitive and non-relativistic.

Let us note that there is no requirement for a mathematician to encounter a concrete case. For a physician, however, facing a tangible case, such as a disease, is inevitable. The task of the physician is both to grasp the general principles of medical science and to improve his medical experience. In this sense, a doctor's responsibility is not only to acquire theoretical knowledge of medicine, but also to be involved in the improvement of practicing it. Unlike mathematics, both medical and ethical knowledge have a practical goal, which is curing diseases. While medical treatment is the remedy for the illness of the body, *logos* (understood as speech and/or argument) is the treatment for illnesses of the soul. The function of *logos* is, in other words, to cure the soul, namely the diseases stemming from our false thoughts and unhealthy desires. So as to become happy, one should enhance his practical wisdom by eliminating his false beliefs and by constantly curing diseases stemming from his unhealthy desires. This process resembles how a physician gains his occupational experience. In short, both *politike* and medical science have theoretical (knowledge of general principles) and practical (experience of complex particular unique cases, having a practical goal, responsiveness to context, gaining experience, comparing several competing views to resolve a particular problem) dimensions.

Suppose that as a doctor, I prescribe a wrong medicine to a patient. There may be two reasons behind such an error: (i) the current knowledge of medical science might not have developed yet to cure this disease. The best way I can

16 Cf. *Top.* 100a27-30. For recent and lucid treatments about the dialectical nature of Aristotelian political inquiry, see also (Smith, 2000) and (Jacobs 2004, especially 26-34).

17 For detailed analysis of this analogy, see (Jager, 1957) and (Lloyd, 1968).

choose in this case is to trust my intuitions and experience. I may naturally do something wrong, and as in the case under consideration, there could be no other alternatives. (ii) I may not be experienced and/or educated enough to decide which medicine would be useful for curing this particular disease. Similarly, as someone who is confronted with a complicated situation, which requires giving an ethical judgment, if I deviate from the way of virtue and misjudge, this may stem from similar reasons: (i) current theoretical knowledge of ethics may not be sophisticated enough to cope with such a complexity. (2) I may not be experienced and/or educated enough to arrive at a proper ethical judgment when I am faced with such circumstances. Thus, very much like the medical science, improvement of ethical theory and experience are open-ended processes. By cultivating ethical theory alongside with gaining experience we can train ourselves in such a way as to immediately find the most virtuous way, even when we are encountered with complex situations.

The following seem to follow from the medical analogy: first of all, just like the medical science defines what health is and searches for the means for being healthy, ethical science or *politike* aims at attaining a clarified and articulated view of proper ethical life. Secondly, Nussbaum seems to be right when she argues that Aristotle was the first philosopher who has shown an explicit awareness to the fact that “while medical treatment is a form of *bia*, of external causal intervention, *argument* [on which ethical treatment based] is something apparently gentler, more self-governed, more mutual” (Nussbaum 1994, 69). Since the success of an ethical treatment depends on the adoption of the ethical ideal by the pupil, the “intellectual asymmetry” and the “authoritative and one-sided quality of *logoi*” on which medical treatment is based cannot be extended to ethical inquiry. Ethics is and should be “less one-sided, more ‘democratic’ than medicine: the benefits of its *logoi* require each person’s active intellectual engagement [on the sides of both the teacher and the pupil].” Nussbaum 1994, 70). Thirdly, it is one of the basic tenets of Aristotelian ethics that ethical treatment should conform to ethical and political experiences (or “appearances”). If the diversification of these experiences across different places and times is taken into account, the Aristotelian ethical treatment should consider relativity of values in the realm of human affairs. Yet, this does not mean that the Aristotelian view rests on a relativistic ground; rather, it has a non-relativistic

conception of good human functioning. In line with this, general ethical principles must not be considered as clear-cut recipes directly applicable to all actual situations, but as guidelines for recognizing what is actually there in order to determine what is the right thing to do in any particular context.

3. Concluding Remarks

Let us highlight Aristotle's genuine conception of ethics and politics by exposing some remarks concerning how one should read the *Politics*. In interpreting *Politics*, one should always keep in mind that Aristotle always derives a set of generalizations from the previous studies possibly made by his pupils, at least under his supervision. These studies were on the histories, constitutions and other main characteristics of 158 city cities or political organizations. This could be a reason why Aristotle gives abundantly many examples from histories of Greek city states to demonstrate a specific conclusion. Principles in Aristotle's practical philosophy can be conceived as the generalizations that had already or could in future have certain exceptions. In Aristotle's logics, the statement that "this proposition is false" amounts to saying that this proposition is unconditionally false. However, in *Politics* asserting that "this is false" means that "but perhaps this is not wholly correct" (*Pol.* 1282a14). This might be the reason why Aristotle frequently employs the word "might be" or "perhaps" in *Politics* (Robinson 2005, ix). Aristotle's inquiry in the *Politics*, in this sense, is consistent with context-sensitivity and non-relativism discussed in the previous section of the paper. Since the subject matter of *Politics* has not an unalterable nature like mathematics, one should always be cautious about the scope and degree of certainty of the statements regarding *politike*.

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