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**Moral Explanation in Aristotle's  
Nichomachean Ethics**

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## **Moral Explanation in Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of moral theories is to present a justification of their philosophical views. I argue that in this sense, Aristotle's moral particularism does not present a moral or political theory to judge whether an act is right or wrong since there is no convincing justification available rather his concepts and the hierarchies within them exist as unquestioned premises to regard correctness to an already right conduct by appealing to his system of virtues. It specifically emerges from a certain system of values that socially condition us into performing certain acts regarded as correct or incorrect. But Aristotle's approach has no relevance in judging actions especially those actions that are outside the purview of values that society ingrains in us through moral education. I shall substantiate my argument by presenting a critique of Aristotle's concept of 'virtue' and the problems associated with the hierarchy within Aristotle's conceptualization of *praxis* versus *poesis*, and *phronesis* versus *Sophia* and the connection between ethics and politics in 'The Nichomachean Ethics'. In answer to my enquiry that what type of explanations the domain of ethics is susceptible to I argue that moral explanation need not appeal to unchallenged premises.

**Key Words:**

**Corresponding Author:**

The knowledge of 'good' and its practical application in life are the two parts of ethics according to Aristotle. For him philosophical knowledge of 'good' is a 'kind of political science' (Nichomachean Ethics, 10) and it is the responsibility of state to ensure the practice of virtues by its citizens. In 'Politics' he provides various categories of 'good' of each person depending on what one is by stature in social hierarchy like the good of a woman or that of a slave or a ruler which are all different from one another depending on role they play in the social structure. Most philosophers have disagreed from this view of Aristotle connecting ethics and politics wherein state is run by a pre decided hierarchy of virtues based on a role for everyone because given an unjust hierarchy even the most ideal state would fail to be moral.

In the first chapter of The Nichomachean Ethics, he describes happiness as 'living good or doing Good' (7) or 'the virtuous activity of the soul' (15). This practice of good life is based on first principles or commonly known 'facts' and in case of Aristotle's The Nichomachean Ethics, where he discusses virtues his first principles are the commonly known facts of his time about qualities that are considered virtuous and those that are counted as vices. He never questions them and the same applies to vices as well e.g. he takes for granted that adultery is a vice or courage is a virtue. In the first chapter of Nichomachean Ethics, he writes:

'We must start from what is known. But things are known in two senses: known to us and known absolutely. Presumably *we* must start from what is known to us. So if anyone wants to make a serious study of ethics, or of political science generally, he must have been well trained in his habits. For the starting point is the *fact*; and if this is sufficiently clear there will be no need to ascertain the reason why. Such a person can easily grasp the first principles if he is not in possession of them already..' (8).

Later on he quotes Hesiod to make it clear that learning of ethics is based on known facts about 'good' and 'beautiful', either acquired or known to us. There is no need to argue if things are known as common experiences but this leads to cultural relativism since value recognized in one time zone may not be true across all times and all places. His approach to ethics reduces it to mere conditioning of socially accepted virtuous 'habits' which he never tries to question but accepts it as a known 'fact' since in Greek times it was known to everyone who was virtuous and what constituted of virtue. But this does not hold consistent in the present times. Also since these known facts about 'good' are not accessible to many people like those who remain uneducated so there are no possibilities of being 'good' or moral for them. He excludes a large section of the human population from having a 'good' or 'moral' life except for the elite few who are educated in the facts about 'good' and who can practice them. Aristotle implies here a social hierarchy in his approach.

He further connects the practice of a virtuous life to three aspects of human body namely pleasure, action and contemplation. He regards pleasure and action to be inferior to the life of contemplation because they can be performed even by animals or gods but it is thought which makes human beings different from animals and gods. Now here Aristotle makes an

underlying distinction between labor of human body, work of limbs and the activity of human mind which he calls contemplation. He separates labor, work and thinking in water tight compartments without allowing any exchange from each other. For example there are some actions which involve ‘contemplation’, not just by the solitary individual (as in case of the creativity in the goal oriented work of a craftsman) but which are facilitated by exchange of thoughts of others through free speech and have no set goal but they are exceptional in that they are stepping stones to arriving at the unachieved by human beings like in case of scientific discoveries that are triggered by various such contributions. They cannot be judged by their consequences but by mere potential/courage of the doer for such exceptional actions. But Aristotle here does not give due importance to the fact that political actions are not acts of necessitation as the acts of work like those of craftsmen, painters, dancers etc. which can be judged by the aptness of their outcome. They are not purposive or creative in the sense of bringing out a finished product like writing a story or conducting elections or administration but they are unpredictable and free. A consequence following from such categorization by Aristotle is that the life of philosophers becomes superior to the inferior kind of life of those involved in political actions while the rest do not have a lived life at all.<sup>1</sup>

**Conflict between Philosophy and Politics (*vita contemplativa* versus *vita activa*)**

The Greek city states erroneously ‘essentialized’ political actions so that it was only thinking that could free human beings from the burdens of essential demands, both of body and society. But before that the meaning of Polis was not of an organization that mandated political actions rather it was one which facilitated political actions to ensure freedom. To enforce the performance political actions as compulsion is against the very meaning of political actions which ought to be free in their origin. Political actions can never be foretold before their performance. This was an error which was committed by Plato and Aristotle who imposed this hierarchy between thinking and political actions.

In this sense there is a conflict between philosophy and politics the same way as the conflict between eternity and immortality. By performing Political actions human beings strive for immortality in their exceptionality expressed either in language, speech or action, while eternity is the domain of thinking, an experience which cannot be described because description will take it into another realm which is contrary to it (Socratic school believed in this). Eternity is a domain of *theoria*. While immortality can be achieved by humans through remembrance of exceptional deeds performed in one’s life by future generations but eternity remains an unachievable realm of the ‘divine’. In the cave parable Plato proved that philosophers’ experience is akin to death and is

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<sup>1</sup>Hursthouse, Nussbaum, Rorty, Akrill, Kraut who have also expressed their disagreement on this issue.

eternal. He argued that the world of political actions is not enough but a higher principle was possible which stands above the formative principles of *polis* and this was the realm of *theoria* or contemplation where eternal experience was possible and every human act was subordinate to it. Contemplation is directed to itself and has no other purpose but likewise politics also does not have any purpose since it is not for achieving any goals but for itself. However Aristotle describes politics as directed to achieve 'public honor'. But this distinction is based on a false conception of *Polis* as essential while otherwise there is no hierarchy between politics and philosophy (*theoria* and *praxis*). It was erroneously imposed by Plato and Aristotle like Socrates too who chose a life of eternity and contemplation by refusing to write his books which would have ruined the experience of contemplation.

### **Arête, Ergon & Eudaimonia**

Aristotle gives a catalogue of virtues as a list of good behaviors without organizing them in a meaningful way of any justification as to why they should or should not be followed. Aristotle makes the fallacy of begging the question by arguing that virtues are needed for living well (he has already assumed what it is to live well as a given and not a conclusion) and not the other way round i.e. that life is lived well through virtues by giving any justification for the quality of life through virtues. He argues that virtues help in acquiring '*eudaimonia*' or the greatest 'good' often wrongly translated as 'happiness' but it means 'flourishing' or 'living well' according to one's potentialities using excellences which act as tools to achieve the purpose of flourishing, e.g. a mango seed has the potential to grow into a mango tree and it has some excellences (organs in the plant itself) that can help it to flourish into one so *arête* exists as tools to aid *ergon*. But neither does he describe what constitutes 'flourishing' (it is only a formal description) nor does he detach '*eudaimonia*' from its metaphysical connection when he says that (it is 'precious and perfect' and the first cause of it is 'divine') it is unachievable in life 'because we call the Gods 'happy' or 'blessed', a term which we apply also to such men as most closely resemble the gods.' (26). Besides Aristotle also insists on the social determinant of 'living well' or 'flourishing': 'Happiness [here it is a translation of *eudaimonia*] is such an end which is chosen for its own sake. This self sufficiency of happiness is 'not for oneself alone living a solitary life, but something that includes parents, wife, and children, friends and fellow-citizens in general; for man is by nature a social being' (13) For him knowledge of virtues is a pre-condition for living well. As he also writes that children and animals cannot be happy which suggests that he refers to only the regulation of socially accepted values/virtues by a process of consistently perfecting them in practice throughout the life of an individual only then one can create the possibilities of living well or '*eudaimonia*' which continues to be unachievable even after going through such a perfection in life.



His idea of ‘virtue’ is that of ‘a purposive disposition, lying in a mean that is relative to us and determined by a rational principle, and by that which a prudent man would use to determine it’ (42). It is prudence (*Phronesis*) that helps in deciding the mean i.e. what is extreme or deficit in regard to a particular virtue in context. So both rationality or intellect and prudence (practical wisdom) are at work here. The difference between rationality and prudence is that while rationality is based in reason, prudence is a kind of ‘perception’ which is not based on reason: ‘prudence ‘apprehends the ultimate particular, which cannot be apprehended by scientific knowledge, but only by perception-not that of objects peculiar to one’s sense but the sort by which we perceive that the ultimate figure in mathematics is a triangle’ (156). It directly perceives virtue rather than calculating it by reason. But Aristotle makes clear that prudence is necessary to control wisdom: All virtues are qualified ‘in accordance with the right principle’; and the right principle is that which accords with prudence’ (165). It is the virtue of the calculative part of the soul. It is not possible to be prudent without the possession of all other virtues. It is prudence that controls all wisdom. Aristotle further explains that all virtues not only conform to prudence but imply it. But if prudence is a ‘perception’ it cannot ‘subsume’ any general principles into a particular but it can only perceive correctly. The possession of all virtues is a precondition to have prudence so it cannot be possessed by everyone so it a very circular process to be virtuous in Aristotelian sense since to know the mean one needs prudence and in order to have prudence one must possess all virtues. So those who do not know of the facts about ‘good’ or are not already virtuous will never live well. Aristotle’s approach is very exclusive in this sense.

Further the concept of virtue is stated only in outline as a formal concept with no specific content which Aristotle writes is relative to context and also varies from time to time and it is always in relation to a particular person. He writes: The matters of conduct, ‘must be stated in outline and not in precise detail’ because it varies from one situation to another so we can only say about behavior in general terms: ‘the agents are compelled at every step to think out for themselves what the circumstances demand, just as happens in the art of medicine and navigation’ (33). One critique that follows from it is that if a person rationally calculates injustice or cowardice to be the mean then within Aristotle’s domain one is not able to resist it since there is no content to his concepts of happiness and virtue as he leaves it for every person to decide it on one’s own through rational calculation in reference to one’s character.

The concept of ‘virtue’ is further based on two assumptions 1) that of teleology i.e. human life has a function/purpose which he calls *ergon* (a noun with multiple connotations of function, task, work, tool, excellence) and

2) It is socially determined.

Aristotle writes, ‘the function of man is a kind of life, namely, an activity or series of actions of the soul implying a rational principle’ (16). So the function of man if there is one such function, it is to act in accordance with the rational principle (the rational part of the soul) using one’s excellences and it is socially determined.

In *Politics*, Aristotle describes that *ergon* varies according to one's *arete* (excellence) and if there are numerous *arete* (if one excels in many like a horse can run and also gallop) then according to the best and most complete. He explains that *arête* (*Agathos*) is the excellence or good of human being and such excellence is not of the body but of the soul. He writes: 'The goodness that we have to consider is human goodness, obviously; for it was the good *for man* or happiness *for man* that we set out to discover. But human goodness is meant goodness not of the body but of the soul, and happiness also we define as an activity of the soul.' (28). Some knowledge of the soul is needed in order to understand one's *arête* however the concept soul in Aristotle's writings pertains to a metaphysical biology which he explains in *De Anima* and his writings on *Metaphysics*.<sup>1</sup>

Since goodness is a metaphysical concept so it cannot be achieved by human beings but only by god. While the philosopher can live in company of thoughts in solitude but even a philosopher cannot be alone like the God who is alone in goodness because good deeds must be forgotten the moment they are performed so there is no body to accompany the god. Moreover goodness is always in the realm of the private or secret because when it is exposed in public it no longer remains good as its character changes with public expression of it (depending upon its usage) so it is anti-public. So goodness cannot be a part of politics.

Types of Virtues and the golden mean: Within Aristotle's analysis virtues mark a reference to potentiality and actuality: 'of all those faculties with which nature endows us we first acquire the potentialities, and only later effect their actualization' (31). Given the potentiality for a virtue, we acquire it by first exercising it. The behavior and actions make one of a particular disposition: 'like activities produce like dispositions' (31). Unlike the virtues of the body which nature has endowed in us, Aristotle here refers to the virtues of the soul which cannot be acquired unless they are put in practice even if one has the potential for them e.g. intelligence or courage does not contribute to one's development unless it is performed through actions, even though to have these excellences still counts virtuous for Aristotle. Virtues are like tools and by acquiring these tools human beings take on to the *ergon* or purpose in life which is to flourish in accordance with their soul.

Virtues are of two types:

- 1) Intellectual (wisdom, understanding and prudence)
- 2) Moral (Courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, magnanimity, proper ambition, patience, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, modesty, and righteous indignation).

Intellectual virtues refer to a virtuous state of mind whereas moral virtues describe a virtuous character. However Aristotle's classification between moral and intellectual virtues does not hold for virtues like wisdom which are both moral and intellectual. Besides, without acquiring prudence one cannot become

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<sup>1</sup>A.W.H. Adkins explains these concerns in his paper 'The connection between Aristotle's Ethics and Politics'

virtuous while prudence requires the possession of all virtues which has already been discussed as a circular argument used by him.

### **Phronesis and Sophia**

Aristotle puts contemplative life as superior to the life of action or politics. However, politics is governed by *phronesis* contemplation is ruled by *theoria* or wisdom (Sophia). While *Sophia* relates to the divine, it is *phronesis* or practical wisdom which concerns human beings. *Phronesis* constitutes *praxis* in agreement with *wisdom* (well thought out action), it is developed by plurality of perspectives in the realm of human actions unlike *Sophia* which is theoretical in nature.

A prudent man is one who can calculate ‘what is good and advantageous’ for him not in matters of any particular conduct but ‘to a serious end’ that is, ‘what is conducive to good life in general’ (150). Prudence cannot be science since it not possible to deliberate about necessary things that is the object of science. It is not art which concerns production as prudence relates to action or ‘doing well’. Prudence is a virtue that concerns the calculative part (one that forms opinions) of the rational soul. It is ‘a true state, reasoned and capable of action in the sphere of human goods’ (151) similar to temperance (self-control). There is no excellence in case of prudence whereas a man who mistakes in prudent action is rated lower.

On the other hand, to be wise or to possess *Sophia* one must possess both the knowledge of the first principles and ‘a true understanding of those principles. Therefore wisdom must be intuition and scientific knowledge: knowledge ‘complete with head’ (as it were) of the most precious truths’ (153). Wisdom is different from prudence (or what is beneficial for being) since there cannot be any one common good that applies to all beings on earth. What is prudent for a fish is distinct for what is beneficial for a human being. Unlike prudence which aims at ‘practical good’, the objects of search for the wise are not ‘objects of human good’ but it is precious knowledge that does not aim at usage (useless but of high importance). Prudence concerns both the knowledge of both universals and particulars in order to administer the conduct of practical affairs.

‘Politics is the fullest realization of prudence’ but ‘their essence is not the same’. Prudence concerning the state has two aspects: legislative science and political science. Legislative science relates to controlling and directive while political science which is practical and deliberative, relates to enactment. Besides, prudence is also identified with self and individual apart from all other forms like domestic, legislative, political science, juridical science. A prudent person seeks his/her own ‘good’ and confines to one’s own interests. But for Aristotle ‘it is impossible to secure one’s own good independently of domestic and political science’ (155). However, it is possible to achieve excellence in understanding universals at a young age but prudence also includes the knowledge of particulars which comes through experience.

Prudence is opposite to intuition. While intuition ‘apprehends the definitions which cannot be logically demonstrated’ prudence ‘apprehends the ultimate particular, which cannot be apprehended by scientific knowledge, but only by perception-not that of objects peculiar to one’s sense but the sort by which we perceive that the ultimate figure in mathematics is a triangle’ (156). This perception in case of intuition is not sense perception but intellectual.

Aristotle creates a rift and a hierarchy between *phronesis* and *Sophia* by attributing different domains to them. The domain of *Phronesis* is politics which is goal directed for Aristotle. However I have already argued that to reduce politics to administration and management is to negate politics itself thereby Aristotle’s hierarchy between *Sophia* and *Phronesis* on these grounds do not hold very convincing.

### **Praxis versus Poesis**

Within Greek philosophy there is a distinction between *praxis* or doing and *poesis* or making. Praxis is different from production so all the acts of workmanship or creating artifacts, skills are not praxis. Aristotle describes human life as that of ‘praxis’ that is self-referential and in order to reach disclosure of ‘who’ someone is it is not sufficient to know what someone has made in a life. In order to have this disclosure such individual actions must be witnessed by others and we must tell and retell stories about the ‘who’ in question from various perspectives or we may say praxis survives in stories as told by other people. The ‘who’ remains hidden from the person ‘like the daimon in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulders from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters’ (179-80) It is for the preservation of this praxis, polis was created as a protected space of good world/life (unlike the household which is the domain of necessity) where praxis can survive and can be performed and thereby overcome the transience of human life.

Aristotle assigns an end to *praxis* also as ‘itself’. It is akin to a ‘skill or *techne*’ whose end is ‘itself’ as opposed to the ends of production or making in case of *poesis*. Aristotle regarded political actions as acts of ‘making’ this is why he differentiated between *praxis* and *poesis*. Aristotle calls the life of contemplation as the supreme kind of life and this contemplation can be achieved even in solitude as theoretical wisdom or *theoria*.

What brings in political action is not deliberation on the part of the doer but the phenomenology of the rupture that resists ‘meaning’ in terms of existing stories for which a new story is born. One example of Greek heroes is Achilles who not only performed heroic political actions but also became the producer of his life story by choosing to die an early death in the performance of his actions and not otherwise. He was not just a beginner but also a maker.

## Conclusion

In his explanation Aristotle creates a flawed hierarchy between *praxis* and *poesis*; between *phronesis* and *Sophia* which remain unchallenged within his writings and obscures current understanding of these concepts. This hierarchy between politics and philosophy reinforces the understanding of politics as an inferior and subordinate enterprise in the modern society however the roots of this conflict lie in the form of nation building which recognize politics as essential and pre-decided set of actions/duties for administration and house keeping of the State and puts the erroneous arrogance of 'contemplation' in its stature as something higher. Nevertheless both nation building and the superiority of contemplation over acting are false. They are exclusive to any form of politics.

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