THE MODERNITY OF ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

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Abstract

Aristotle understood ethics to be a practical rather than a theoretical science. It is a pragmatics, if you will, concerned with bringing about a good life. But the problem and the question from which Aristotle's ethics begins and to which it constantly returns concerns the relation of the theoretical to the practical: his concern is for the type or mode of discourse one could use in providing an account of the good life (Eudaimonia). Is this a propositional, apophantic discourse, a discourse claiming to represent the truth and what is true and from which one could then go on to prescribe a course of action, or, and this may be closer to Aristotle, is the philosophical discourse on ethics rather a descriptive one which takes humankind for what it is, not what it ought to be? This relation between theory and practice, between description and prescription, between science and action, is a question and a problem for Aristotle. It is my purpose to take up this question in connection with Aristotle's texts on Eudaimonia. Another question shall be raised here: What is the relevance of Aristotle's treatment of Eudaimonia to our contemporary, "modern" concern for ethics and the good life? I would assume, naively perhaps, that even today we are not indifferent to this question of what is a good life, and that we are not indifferent to the many ways in which the "good life" has been described. It would seem, then, that Aristotle's texts have a particularly striking importance for us today insofar as we prolong the philosophical questioning of the possibilities for ethical and political discourse today and continue to ask who and what we are as human beings.

My purpose in what follows shall be two-fold: not only to present an account of Aristotle's ethics, but to show how Aristotle's ethics is of importance for contemporary philosophy, especially for the pragmatism of Richard Rorty, the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the 'post-structuralism' of J-F Lyotard. Accordingly, there will be two overall divisions in the following essay: First, I shall treat Aristotle's doctrine, especially in its relation to and distinction from Plato, and in the second, I shall sketch three directions in contemporary philosophy for which Aristotle's thought is significant.

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I.

How can a classic be modern?[2] Even the very term 'classic' designates something essentially belonging to the past, to what is done and gone. To say a work is classic is both to venerate and to distance it. Like dead languages, 'classics' belong to scholars, pedants, and schoolmasters. On the other hand, of course, the term 'classic' can designate what still speaks to us and what is still valuable and important to us. In this sense, to say that a work is a 'classic' is to see and to hear, perhaps, a question, a provocation, a mode of discourse that must be heeded, not ignored or forgotten. It shall be my position that Aristotle's ethics is such a classic. In many ways, it is strikingly modern. Such a statement suggests, as we find J-F Lyotard doing in his text Just Gaming,[3] that the terms 'modern' and 'classic' designate more than sequences

[2] Note on the term "modern": Readers of this paper have asked about my use of the term "modern": How am I using this term? Should I not use the term "post-modern"? Am I proposing a new "sophism" in relation to the ancients? To these questions I would say:

1.) The term "modern" is here being used to mean "contemporary", or "the present", or as distinguished from "ancient". I am proposing a dialogue between "ancients" and "moderns" in this sense. I resist the term "post-modern" for I do not like the historizing or periodizing that this term implies. Nor am I partaking of the use of this term which implies a rejection of the past or an attempt to do away with the traditions of philosophy and ethics, a kind of "anything goes" or "anything is now possible" attitude that all too often ends in shallowness and superficiality. So, the term "modern" does not have a technical sense in my paper, nor is it freighted with the alleged radicality of the so-called "post-modern", although I know that at least one of the authors I refer to in this paper, J-F Lyotard, is one of the principal contributors to the debates concerning the "post-modern"

2.) Concerning the question of a new "sophism", posed by yet another reader, I would say that if by "sophist", one might mean or suggest what Plato said of the Sophist in his dialogue Sophist (231 D), to wit, that the sophist is a "mercenary hunter", a "sort of wholesaler of learning for the soul, a "salesman of his own products of learning," a "master in the art of combat about words," then I am not proposing a "sophism". But if, to quote Plato's Sophist once again, the term "sophist" refers to one who questions opinions, or one who, as Plato put it, "purifies the soul of opinions that obstruct learning," then perhaps I am a sophist. But Aristotle thought of the sophist as one who purveys "apparent wisdom but not a real one, the sophist is a money-maker by apparent but not real wisdom" (On Sophistical Refutations, I 165a21) and I am not proposing a sophism in this sense. Rather, I am proposing a dialogue between the ancients and the moderns so as to show how an ancient text like Aristotle's Nichosmachean Ethics does still speak to us and does still address concerns of great importance to the contemporary debates concerning the classical question of the relation between thought and action, between wisdom and happiness. In this respect, my paper is concerned with what Gadamer calls the "facts of the matter", the Sache (Plato's Dialectical Ethics, translated by Robert M. Wallace, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1991, p. 56)

[3] J-F Lyotard. *Just Gaming*, Wlad Godzuh, trans, University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

on a line of temporal succession. The classic, the 'ancient', can be 'modern'.

So how or why is Aristotle's ethics modern? It is so because of the way Aristotle takes the 'science' of ethics (the science of human action) to be a problem, and for his attempt to distance ethics from the theoretical sciences, to withdraw the discourses on human action from Platonic metaphysics. It is in the relation of Aristotle's ethics to Plato's idealistic metaphysics (and this is a critical relation) that Aristotle's 'modernity' is most striking. One can see this not only in the commonplace idea that whereas Plato took human beings as they ought to be, Aristotle took them as they are, but, and this seems even more fundamental, in the way Aristotle asked as to the very possibility of a philosophical discourse on the ethical life. What are the scope, status, and limit (s) of such a discourse that, because of its very subject matter, can be neither an exact science nor a techne, a craft-like mode of knowledge? Thus, Aristotle, in his critique of Plato, problematizes the philosophical discourse on 'ethics', puts it into question in a way that had not been done before, a way still pertinent to us, today, in this, our 'modernity'.

But there is something more: namely, the question from which he begins: "What is the good for a human being?" In posing this question, Aristotle is asking something that is still of importance to us today. After all, who can be indifferent to the question of the good, which is the question of the ultimate goal and purpose of human life? But in the way he asks this question and ceaselessly returns to it, he suggests that perhaps there can be no real knowledge claims concerning the good. The good is not, for Aristotle, an object of theoretical knowledge (noeisis, episteme). The question cannot be answered or removed by providing a true, universalizable account. Concerning human good, one does not speak of something true, unequivocal, immutable, and true for everyone. There are many ways of talking about the good. Thus, our knowledge of the good is not propositional. Its truth is neither conceptual nor transcendental: it shows itself in the many ways human beings talk about the good and in the many different lives human beings actually live. Aristotle's approach to ethics, as we shall see, is striking in the way it attempts to withdraw the question of the good from Platonic metaphysics and to show that what is good for a human being is not the Good of metaphysics, a distant, unapproachable, immutable Good, the Good of the laws of nature and of cities, a Good beyond them, a Good beyond all beings. No, for Aristotle, the good is in history and in the dealings of human beings with the world around them. Not a good of nature or the laws of nature, (physis), Aristotle's conception of the good is worked out in the domain of contingencies, of matters that could always be different, or otherwise. This is, thus, a practical, pragmatic good, not a theoretical one. Aristotle did not follow the Parmenidean course in Plato's thought, the one that carries us beyond the cities and beyond the two-headed opinions of mortals through the stalwart gates of justice into a sacred sanctum of truth. For Aristotle, one must take the lessons of Plato's famous "Allegory of the Cave" seriously. The philosopher cannot remain above ground among the Blessed Isles of pure truth and wisdom. He must return, he must go back down into those troubled

domains of history and human experience and listen to the way human beings talk about the good, and begin there, begin with that there are these ways. But not to liberate or save us for the truth, or the promise of the truth, which awaits beyond the cave and beyond the city, but perhaps to teach us how to realize the good in this life. After all, that truth which has been merely promised may turn out to be but a fable.

Let us turn now to some specifics concerning the differences between Plato and Aristotle and the question and the problem of the science of ethics.

1. Eidos

Like Plato, Aristotle is a philosopher of the eidos, of the Idea or "Form", as the Greek term is often translated. But, as Jacob Klein[4] and others have shown, Plato and Aristotle differ in their conception of the manner of being of the Eidos. The word Eidos is a "sight word"; it designates an appearing or the way something appears. For Plato, the highest and most 'real' appearings are the appearings of an essence to an intellect. Eidos, in Plato, has a predominately intellectual character. The Form, the true idea and reality of a particular thing, is not itself a particular thing but a universal concept true of all such particulars. So, for Plato, the Eidos is separate. There are two worlds: a world of particulars, particular acts of courage, and there is the Form, True Courage, the Idea of Courage itself. Any particular action praised as courageous is recognized to be such because it is a copy, or mimesis, of true courage. To be courageous, to be just, to be truly virtuous requires that one know the truth of virtue. Virtue is knowledge, and action, the virtuous deed, is a consequent of such antecedent knowledge. The Form, the eidos, thus supplies the necessary measure by which one can make a clear distinction between justice and its opposite. Indeed, for Plato, this seems an urgent matter for, after all, he was concerned with answering the moral and intellectual confusion he thought was being introduced by the Sophistic paideia, (teaching, education). Plato sought a true paideia based on knowledge of the truth, something that, when all is said and done, is an impossible or paradoxical task in that the first affirmation of this doctrine is that human beings by nature cannot attain ultimate knowledge. We must settle for, indeed strive for, something a bit less: "true opinion". Nonetheless, the metaphysical conception of the Eidos remains. True knowledge, the sort of knowledge one seems to find in geometry and mathematics, is the ideal. Perfection, clarity, harmony of relations, balance, symmetry, the immutable Eidos, these are stars upon which we fix our compass in life. If one misses the journey, if one falls off the track, it is due to ignorance.

Aristotle has a different way of phrasing the discourse on the good. For him, there is no one immutable Good. Rather, the good is said in many ways. For Aristotle, form, eidos, is not separate from the particular of which it is the form. It is not an intelligible concept distinguished from the material particular. The form, for Aristotle, is embodied: it is the form of the matter. The form, as the being of a thing, is identified with it; it is its look and

[4] Jacob Klein. *Lectures and Essays*, R. Williams, editor. Annapolis, Maryland: St. John's College Press, 1985.

its definition. The form is what a thing is. Moreover, form is act, actuality. Form, as act, is energeia. Being is energeia, for Aristotle. This is how he defines substance (Eidos) as activity. The being, that is to say, the substance of a thing is nothing set over and against it, nor is it 'under' it (a hypo-keimenon) but is the way that thing is 'a being-at-work'. That is to say, Aristotle looks to what a thing does, to how it is "at-work" in this world. Aristotle thus displaces the Platonic, metaphysical distinction between the intelligible and the sensible. He conceives this distinction and this relation in a new way. The intelligible is the intelligible of a sensible. It is its ergon, its 'function', its way of being-at-work. It follows from this, then, that virtue is the eidos, the Form, of action, a characteristic way of doing something, and not a transcendental measure, idea, or fixed guide. Virtue does not just mean knowledge for Aristotle, at least not the kind of knowledge one could have apriori, nor the kind of knowledge that could be taught as a formula, rule, or duty. Nor is virtue the object of a theoretical knowing, nor is ethics a theoretical science. For Aristotle, ethics is practical. It is a science of human action. It finds human beings always and already engaged in situations, always and already at work, always and already desiring certain ends, purposes, goods, the goods of health and beauty, the goods of wealth and honor, the goods of pleasure, and the theoretical goods. Hence, Plato's account of the Good counts for Aristotle not as an absolute, but as but one of the ways in which the good has been said. Plato's account takes its place, an important one, within the history of the ways of talking about the good. But Aristotle's task is to "save the phenomena" of ethical life, to save the concrete, living human situation from being either absorbed, reduced or elided by the intellectualism Plato's theory of Forms. So Plato's account can be heeded only in part. It remains aporetic, full of difficulties and obstacles, and must be surpassed.

2. Techne

What are the consequences of this? First, if ethics is a practical rather than theoretical science, in what sense is it practical? Is it a techne, a technical skill? Is it productive, the way, say, carpentry is a productive technical skill? Socrates, it shall be recalled, had respect for craftsmen. Unlike poets and politicians, the craftsmen alone not only produced something that works, but had a real knowledge of how to do it and how to teach this skill to others. They knew how to build, how to produce identical things, and in this activity, they began with a concept such that the thing produced was a copy of an original model, form, or idea seen first by the intellect. Now it might seem that ethics could be a productive science like this in which one produced 'good human beings,' 'good lives'. Ethics would have to be a precise practical science. This would characterize a true paideia. Plato (Socrates) himself expresses reservations about the possibility of this in the Republic,[5] for example, where Socrates notes the place and necessity of habit in acquiring moral knowledge. But Aristotle is stronger in his questioning and uncertainty. Ethical knowledge is not the sort of thing one learns as one learns to build tables and

[5] I refer to the roles of 'gymnastics' and music in the educational program of the 'guardians' cr *Republic*, Bk 11 376d-e.

chairs. It is not acquired by first learning principles and then applying them to experience. Moreover, in 'building' a virtuous life, one has no blueprint to follow. One is never an apprentice such that one's mistakes can be undone and forgotten. Botched jobs count for more in moral than in technical life. Nor is ethical knowledge the sort of thing one 'forgets' , the way one can forget a technical procedure. Thus, for Aristotle, the status of this knowledge and whether it is a techne is very much a problem. Again, what is the relation of philosophical knowledge to action? A practical science, like ethics, is not precise, Aristotle says. It cannot be 'rigourous'. This is due to its object, human action and human affairs, for these do not entirely follow from fixed laws of nature but obtain in a realm of conventions, of comings and goings of matters that could be otherwise. Virtues, ethical knowledge, belong to a dimension human beings make for themselves; they belong to history, to specific linguistic communities, particular sets of evaluations and ways of getting things done. Thus, a second consequence: ethics is not a true paideia but a rough guide; ethical knowledge and a virtuous life are not acquired through theoretical study but through the formation of habits. Third, there are the consequences of Aristotle's critique of Plato for methodology. This is a special problem for Aristotle; to pronounce the methodology that suits the subject matter, and that best "saves the phenomena." Far from rejecting the opinions of man regarding the good, Aristotle takes them seriously. Aristotle's method is not a way of going beyond opinions toward a true account, but a way of bringing clarity to them, a way of bringing order to them to show they are already true.

3. (Method)

Let me develop this by referring to a passage from the Nicomachean Ethics (Bk VII, C1, 1145b1ff):

> Here, as in all other cases, we must set out the appearings (phainomena), and first of all go through the puzzles. In this way we must prove the common beliefs (ta endoxa) about experience, about the ways of being affected – ideally, all the common beliefs, but if not all, then most of them, and the most important. For if the objections/ difficulties (concerning the phainomena) are solved, and the common beliefs left, (ie., "saved"), it will be an adequate proof.

Thus, Aristotle's ethical theory seeks a comprehensive account that will take up the ways in which human beings experience and describe the world and that will not clash with these ways. Aristotle attempts to preserve them in an economical account, unlike the metaphysicians who start with the phenomena but depart from them because they become more concerned with the logical course of an argument than with the appearing and sayings of experience. The philosopher's task is to work out the puzzles, the difficulties of the phenomena, setting out the difficulties and conflicts so that we can articulate a satisfactory resolution. Until this is done, we can make no progress, and seeing the difficulties amounts to seeing how we

are bound and how progress is blocked. Thus, the phenomena are not only Baconian sense datum, but they are the ta endoxa, the way things are said; they are, as studies by G.E.L. Owens and Martha Nussbaum[6] have affirmed, our beliefs and interpretations of experience as expressed in linguistic usages. We must never pass over these 'phenomena' but always return to them and make sure that our account, our ethical account of human action, does not clash with them, reduce them, or forget them. Thus, theory is committed to the way human beings actually live. The truths of ethical knowledge are not the abstract universal truths of metaphysics, nor are they the operational truths of techne, calculative truths, truths applied to materials. Rather, we will see how human beings in a given linguistic community talk about the good, the kinds of actions praised and blamed, how these are right, which among them are best, and which can be set aside as secondary or unsuitable. At best, ethical knowledge amounts to guidelines. In this, we are guided not only by reason, or a rational principle, but by those persons deemed "wise". Ethical knowledge amounts to 'counsels' of the prudent individuals in our communities, those deemed good judges. And how do we decide who is a 'good judge' in ethical problems and practices? As Nussbaum phrases it, "The judgement about whom to trust and when seems to come, like the appearances, from us. We turn to doctors because we do, in fact, rely on doctors..... The expert, and our reasons for choosing him, are not behind our practices, they are inside them." (Nussbaum , The Fragility of Goodness, Cambridge, 1986, p. 248).[7]

Thus, when Aristotle compares the actual living of a good life to an archer hitting a target, ethical knowledge can only help us be better archers. It can only tell us what others have done in order to 'hit the target'. It cannot teach us everything and cannot provide us with foolproof techniques by which it would be possible for us to hit the target more times than not. It is we who must plant our feet and pull the bow. We may follow the guidelines but what we actually know can be difficult to formulate or to define for it comes in the moment we decide and act and it always arises in the situations in which we are always and already engaged as human beings. There are no guarantees, obviously. Aristotle is only describing what works in most cases, given typical human functioning, in order to fulfill human potentiality and actually live a good life. One would have to say that the virtues of which Aristotle speaks, the good, which he terms eudaimonia, are not nouns but verbs. They are ways of acting, ways of working through difficulties, ways of being affected. They do not follow from nor are they produced by knowledge the way tables, chairs, and houses can be produced by following a blueprint or a conception in the mind. They are in the world; they are inside human practices, not behind them.

4. Eudaimonia

Of all the many ways human beings talk about the good, and of all the ways in which they use the word, the most prominent and the most important is that good which is said to be eudaimonia ("well being"). This is the focal sense, the "toward-which" all other senses of the word good seem to tend: Heath, wealth,

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[6] Martna Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness*. Cambridge, 1986.

[7] Ibid, p. 248.

technical skill, beauty, friends, even the virtues may be said to be good and said to be good in different ways; they may be valuable and desirable in themselves, but they are also good in that they lead to or are conducive of the best and highest of recognized human goods, eudaimonia, which means 'well-being' or living well, "happiness" as the more or less incorrect English translation phrases it. I should like now to turn to a brief discussion of eudaimonia for this is not only a key concept in Aristotle's ethics but one of the ways of showing just how he differs from Plato and how his account hopes to elude the problems and limitations of a metaphysical account of the good.

Thomas Nagel has shown[8] ("Aristotle on Eudaimonia", collected in Essays on Aristotle's Ethics, A. Rorty, ed., Univ. of Calif. Press, 1980) that there seems to be an "indecision" in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics between two accounts of eudaimonia: the "intellectualist" account (the best life is the contemplative life, Book 10, c. vii) and a comprehensive account (cf. 1178 a9) in which contemplation, though still privileged as best, is yet situated in a fuller range of human life and action, in accordance with the broader excellences of moral virtue and prudence or practical wisdom. As Nagel says, the comprehensive account is situated in an effort to understand the characteristic human ergon (function, work) first in terms of a psychology by which the human activities can be distinguished from the animal and the divine. Contemplation seems divine, yet as everyone knows, human beings are far from being divinities. Thus, a more comprehensive account of the good (s) of human action is required. Human beings have fears, passions, and appetites; they are ensouled bodies and the human soul has capacities that link it with both spheres, the animal and the divine. Plato's ethics, like Aristotle's, was well aware of this divided, complex character of the human situation, caught as it is between the animal and the divine. Accordingly, Aristotle's comprehensive account would concern itself with the overall good government of the soul, bringing it comprehensively into good condition such that a human being can best do a human being's work (ergon). Now an entity, be it natural or artificial, is defined by its ergon – what it does. This shall be the measure not only of man – in the sense in which man is the "measure of all things" insofar as human activity is somehow best or most excellent, at least when compared to plants or animals – but the ergon shall here also be the measure of human excellence, virtue, and ultimately its eudaimonia. The ergon is the key to the good and the good life (eudaimonia) for what is the good life but the human work done in the best manner, or according to the highest and fullest sense of excellence.

It follows that the word 'happiness' is not a satisfactory translation of either the word or the concept of eudaimonia. Too often, happiness names a state of mind, whereas Aristotle has a state of character (hexis) in mind when he uses the term eudaimonia. Happiness in the former sense is a passing mood, although in some usages the English word 'happiness' can mean a general condition of life. Only in the latter sense does the word approach the meaning of eudaimonia. Eudaimonia

[8] Thomas Nagel. "Aristotle on Eudaimonia". IN:A Rorty, ed. *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

is the human being-at-work at its fullest realization and in accordance with the highest of excellences. Eudaimonia is energeia. It is the excellence of human activity comprehensively understood to embrace the work of all levels and dimensions of human life. As such, eudaimonia is telos, the end and purpose of life; it is the actualization toward which all human potentiality is directed as though toward its target. Thus, the good, for Aristotle, is first (proton), and without it, nothing else properly human could be, for every art and every enquiry tends toward the good. So the good is first in a human rather than metaphysical sense; it is the good for a human life and not a Platonic good, remote and inaccessible from human life. This is why Aristotle can look and see the good in action and can hear the doxa concerning it: the good appears in the space and time of human action, whereas Plato must resort to analogy and myth to approach a highest good as source of all being and intelligibility. The good for Aristotle is proper to the human being; for Plato, it is a "beyond all beings."

Aristotle acknowledges that the good is said in many ways (the goods of the body, material goods, and goods of the soul are general classes of goods), but there is the good that is first, that is the target, the "toward which" of all of these and this is said to be the goods of the soul, the virtues, excellences, and well-being, eudaimonia. Goods may be analogous but there is a focal sense of the good which is not a concept or metaphysical good, but a best or most excellent way of living. This is the human telos. All else, money, honors, health, beauty, virtue and friendship are means toward the good. Thus, in this means-end relationship, we cannot be indifferent for eudaimonia is not an object separated from its means, as one finds in techne. The means are active in the end (telos) and the end is defined by the means, and therefore, deliberation on means is itself ethical.

5. Ergon

Hence, Aristotle's conception of the eidos, his questioning of techne as a suitable characterization of the status of ethical knowledge, implies the conception of a distinctive human function, or ergon. What is this ergon and what is Aristotle's argument for the existence and character of such an ergon?

All things are defined by their function. This is true not only of tools and animals, but of human beings. The purpose of the hand is to grasp, the eye to see, and so on. Thus, because the parts have a function, so must the whole human being. The human function would be the specific difference by which human beings can be distinguished from all other beings. This is accounted for through a psychology, or theory of souls. Plants, animals, and humans all have souls. The soul is that by which they are animate rather than inanimate. The soul of plants has only basic functions: nutrition and growth. Animals are more complex. They also desire. Human beings have even greater complexity: they have intelligence: they think, they wonder, they deliberate and choose what they will do. The human realm is free, to some extent, from natural law. Humans are not bound by impulse. This is to say that human beings are free. The human function negates and surpasses nature. Human action is not

simply caused by natural law. There is no necessity in it. Thus, human beings are free and responsible for their actions. They could do otherwise; there are always choices, possibilities. Intelligence and societal factors are also causes for human action.

What is the standard by which one might say that a human being has acted justly or injustly and that he is worthy of praise or blame? Aristotle's account differs from Plato's. For Plato, there are standards of true justice and the man who knows them is just. Moral failures, for Plato, are intellectual failures. If a man is injust, it is due to ignorance. Education, not punishment is called for. But Aristotle has no transcendental measure, no absolutes, no True Justice. Justice, like all the virtues and like eudaimonia, the good itself, is visible in the actions of just, virtuous, and 'happy' human beings. Practical judgement – intelligence – plays a role, but habits, characteristic ways of living, are given special attention by Aristotle. Eudaimonia is living well in the sense of being the complete and most excellent way of exercizing the functions of body and intellect. It is the comprehensive order and harmony of the exercise of appetite, emotions, social relations, and intelligence, which in its highest form is theoria or contemplation. There is no 'what' or quiddity for human life, no universal Form, as in Plato. For Aristotle, there is the 'that' of human doings, the characteristically complex human ergon which combines the functions of body and intellect.

6. Let us return to the question of the relation of knowledge and intelligence in Aristotle's account of eudaimonia.

Aristotle does not seem to hesitate between an intellectualist and a comprehensive account of the good. He does not repeat Plato's two-world view. Aristotle's account is comprehensive of the sensible and the intelligible. Virtue is more than knowledge, or at least the role that knowledge plays in the good, in virtue and in eudaimonia is problematized. Virtue, the excellence of a function, implies or requires intelligence, but intelligence alone does not account for virtue. Virtue, and here we mean "moral virtue", is defined as a state of character involving decision/choice concerning the means relative to each of us, as determined by a rational principle or as a prudent man would counsel. (NE, Bk II c.6, 110/a) This is quite a loaded definition, for it really concerns the formation of good character, of characteristic ways of responding to situations, or characteristic ways of seeing or 'knowing' what is expected in a given situation. Thus, Aristotle's account tells us that there can be no prior knowledge in such cases and that ethical choices and eudaimonia are not matters in which one can simply apply a principle of knowledge to a particular situation. For sure, there is a strong Socratic dimension to Aristotle in that knowledge and good deliberation play essential roles in moral decisions. Nonetheless, for Aristotle, one cannot precisely know, before one acts, exactly what one should do in a given situation. A man does not

decide to be a coward, as though this were purely a matter of intellectual choice or principles. Rather, cowardice is a result of doing cowardly deeds, just as temperance and gluttony are different habitual ways in which one either governs or gives in to appetite. Habits, training and characteristic ways of choosing and acting come into play. The brave man 'knows' what to do, but exactly what he knows is difficult to say and even more difficult to teach to others. Virtue, for Aristotle, means choosing the right amount, seeing the right amount of fear, anger, desire. He says this is relative to each, each has a different way of being angry and different amounts and modalities of passion, yet there seems in each case to be an amount that would be generally recognized as right and proper. So, however the role of knowledge is delimited, rationality itself is not jettisoned, nor is the day given over to absolute relativism in which Johnny alone decides what is good for Johnny. We are conditioned by society and family, we are trained, we follow the counsel of those good judges (the phronismos), but it is each of us who must decide and act and insofar as we do, be responsible for our actions. But whatever prudence, or well-being we acquire as a result of our having chosen and acted, this cannot be transmitted to others as one would teach the skills of carpentery. Nor can virtue nor eudaimonia be learned and neither can they be forgotten. Moreover, ethical knowledge, prudence, virtue, are not the sort of 'knowledge' we can be indifferent to as one can decide to learn or not to learn carpentry. And however our action is guided by ideals of what one ought to be or would like to be, these never have the same character as a craftsman's plan, a kind of knowledge that one could apply to life. Finally, no matter how much we know, no matter how careful our deliberations, luck will always have a role to play right alongside skill and techne. "Techne loves Tuche, (luck,) and tuche loves techne," as Aristotle says, quoting the poets. Luck favors the one who knows, yet, the outcome is never necessitated in practical matters. Health, beauty, wealth, honors, and good family are amongst what Aristotle calls "the furniture of fortune," and the role of intelligence will always be tempered by that of luck.[9]

Thus, ethical knowledge is but general knowledge. To quote Hans-Georg Gadamer,

> A person who has to make moral decisions has always already learned something. He has been so formed by education and custom that he knows what is right. The task of making a moral decision is that of doing the right thing in a particular situation, ie. seeing what is right within the situation and laying hold of it. He too has to act, choosing the right means, and his action must be governed just as carefully as that of the craftsman. But it is a knowledge of a different kind.[10] (Truth and Method, p. 283.)

One would have to conclude that there is something special, something problematic about ethical knowledge and the precise

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[9] For a recent discussion of "moral luck", I refer the reader to Anthoney *Kenny, Aristotle on the Perfect Life*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 76-85.

[10] Hans - Georg Gadamer *Truth and Method.* New York: Seabury Press, 1975, p. 283.

role of intelligence in the formation of moral virtue and the good life. Intelligence plays a role in good deliberations which result in good choices, in "layings hold" of what is right in a given situation. But knowledge here can also mean self-knowledge and self-mastery. We may know what is best, we may know what is in our interest, we may know what is good, and yet still do otherwise. We may, as Aristotle says, lose our self-mastery and be overcome by passions such that we lose our "right orientations," as Gadamer calls them, and fail to see what would be best in a given situation. But all of this affirms once again how ethical knowledge is rooted in and inseparable from experience and how our every account of it must accord with experience. In our human lives, where eudaimonia is concerned, it is not enough to have only practical skills. Cunning and a knowledge of techniques will have no success here unless one has a right understanding and desires what is right. Self-knowledge and self-mastery imply a kind of friendship with oneself. Self-knowledge, moreover, is only possible through others. Thus, Aristotle's conception of virtue and eudaimonia entails a kind of knowledge that passes through others, through the friend taken not as a thing, instrument or object, but as another self. Something very distinctive in not only Aristotle but also Plato is the strong emphasis on the social, communal, community oriented character of ethical knowledge. Contrary to the stock criticism of so-called "Western ethics" as being centered on the individual at the expense of the community, self-knowledge, the highest and most essential mode of knowledge for Greek philosophy, is communal. It is the kind of knowledge one attains only in community with others thus, the centrality of the virtues of friendship and justice for both Plato and Aristotle. Again, quoting Gadamer on this point, "Once again, we discover that the person with understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected; but rather, as one united by a specific bond with the other, he thinks with the other and understands the situation with him."[11]

To sum up, eudaimonia seems to be the good at which every human art and every inquiry aims. It is the end, the for-the-of-which for every means. But, as an end, it includes the means such that there is a dialectical relation between means and ends that one finds in no other mode of life or knowledge. It is a complete end, self-sufficient and lacking in nothing. It is an end in itself, entelechia, and has nothing further that is more desirable for which it in turn would be but the means. As an end, it is a form of living; it is an activity and the exercise of the human function in accordance with excellence and if, as Aristotle says, there is more than one excellence, then it is an activity in accord with the highest and best of these. No doubt the use of the intellect is among the highest, and eudaimonia is perhaps best actualized in the contemplative life, which Aristotle says affords the best and longest lasting and most divine-like of human pleasures. But it is not what Epicurus would call catastematic pleasure, not the passive pleasure of contentment and peace of mind (ataraxia), but it is a mode of activity and an active pleasure. The best life is a form of activity in the world. However privileged contemplation and the use of the intellect may be, the actual role and character of intelligence and

[11] Ibid, p. 288.

knowledge in bringing about eudaimonia are problematic and the status of the practical science of ethical knowledge and the actual criteria of ethical decision and ethical judgement remain a difficulty to be worked out. Nothing is decided in advance or given in a realm of Ideas apart from this world of human affairs. There is only this world and the ways of being affected by it and taking it up or laying hold of it, ways which are said to be virtuous or vicious.

II.

In this concluding section of my paper I want only to suggest some of the ways in which Aristotle's ethics has been taken up by contemporary thought. There are three such ways to be briefly considered: the pragmatics of Rorty, the hermeneutics of Gadamer, and the post-structuralism of J-F Lyotard. Let us look first at the pragmatics of Rorty.

The ethical outlook sketched in section I of this paper would likely receive a sympathetic reception from the pragmatics of Richard Rorty. When, for example, in his recent essay "Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin,"[12] (collected in Rorty and Pragmatism, Vanderbilt, 1995,) Rorty sketches a pragmatic approach to ethics as essentially relativist, materialist, and "inevitably" teleological, he is distancing himself from a Platonic and metaphysical conception of ethics in which virtue is naturalized as a conceptual, ontological, and universal ground for judgement and action. According to Rorty, notions of right and good are subject to adjustments; they are historical, based on what is said and done; they are based on what "works" in concrete practices so that specific problems and ends can be achieved. Moral deliberation is not a matter of personal salvation of the soul but rather a function of the needs particular societies want to fulfill. Rorty is not offering a 'virtue' ethics, nor does he have a conception of a natural human function, nor does he posit a goal, end or purpose such as the notion of eudaimonia found in Aristotle. Nor is Aristotle's ethics historical in the same way as Rorty's. Aristotle is neither Darwin nor Hegel. Yet, for Rorty, Aristotle's ethics might be of interest in the way it relates to the insight that seems fundamental to European philosophy since Hegel, namely, the abandonment of a transcendental, metaphysical frame of orientation beyond linguistic differencing. For Rorty, there are no transcendental grounds for ethics, no horizon, no orientation beyond or outside the languages and practices of particular communities. We are already in a situation, already "at work". Concepts are tools, instruments, inventions; they are historical and pragmatic; they are concerned with the problems and matters at hand. Aristotle might well agree with the general outlines of such a perspective. Truth is what works. But works for what? We might ask this of Rorty and the answer he would give is that there is no answer, at least not in the sense of a final or ultimate answer. Ethics is situational at best. The ultimate "for what", the ultimate telos, e.g. eudaimonia, is missing. Here, we might well use Aristotle to criticize Rorty: does the latter distinguish between ethics as a mode of practical, pragmatic reasoning and doing and techne, calculative, instrumental reasoning? If truth is "what works", does it "work", is it "at work" in the same ways and in the same capacities

[12] Rorty, Richard "Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin".

regardless of whether the situation is one of technical or moral concern? For this reader, Rorty's conception of truth seems ontical and instrumental. Where Aristotle's ethics is often criticized for offering us very little in the way of rules, guidelines, and values sufficient to orient human action towards what is right, Rorty's seems even weaker in this regard. At least Aristotle offered, if only as a regulative ideal, a conprehensive account of "well being," eudaimonia. Rorty offers us only "what works". How can one really distinguish on this basis the value, the ethical worth, of "what works"? Again, for Rorty, instrumentalism seems the only answer in a system which consists of nothing but the grafting of Darwin and a Hegel stripped of Spirit, Truth, and System.

J-F Lyotard seems to have problematized ethical judgement along similar lines, yet his way of posing the question seems richer and more thought provoking than Rorty's. Here, I will restrict my comments to a set of interviews published in 1979 entitled Au Juste,[13] In this context, Aristotle is directly invoked. In fact the Nicomachean Ethics is quoted on the title page: "The rule of the undetermined is itself undetermined." (1137b29-30) The line is from Book V, where Aristotle is concerned with the question of justice and the legislation, application, and rectification of law. In the Irwin translation, the passage reads, "not everything is guided by law. For in some matters legislation is impossible, and so a decree is needed. For the standard allied to what is indefinite is itself indefinite, as the lead standard is in Lesbian building, where it is not fixed, but adapts itself to the shape of the stone." So, the comment comes in the context of a highly pragmatic meditation on justice, in particular regarding the necessary adjustments and rectifications that are required in any application of principles to particular situations. This is Lyotard's question: what do we do when we make ethical judgements? And this: what is the status of ethical discourse, is it descriptive or strongly prescriptive? If the latter is the case, what is the status of ethical principles?

In Just Gaming, (p. 14), Lyotard says that such judgements, as one finds in the cases of the application of a principle of justice, are not regulated by categories or abstract criteria. Since, for Lyotard, any time we lack criteria, we are in the modern, Aristotle would be modern. Aristotle is a "pagan" philosopher in the sense Lyotard lends this term as describing moral judgement in an age that has withstood the collapse of all "meta-narratives," all absolute sources of justification. Lyotard sees Aristotle as altering the relation between prescriptive and descriptive modes of discourse. The prescriptive is not a derivative of the descriptive, such that one could not say, "If P, then Q, then R," i.e., if P, (the theoretical discourse with its descriptive levels is true,) then Q is the case, then R, one ought to do such and such, or to realize eudaimonia. "If P, then Q" would be the descriptive level, and "then R" the prescriptive derived from the theoretical. As we have seen in section I above, the relation of theoretical knowledge, even in its practical applications, is a problem for Aristotle. This is what Lyotard focuses on. Aristotle does not wholly derive the discourses on the good from the

[13] J-F Lyotard, Just Au Juste, op. cit., English translation, *Just Gaming*, 1985, Minnesota.

theoretical. He begins and returns to the phenomena: the many ways of saying and doing the good. Aristotle offers but rough guidelines, not criteria, not categories imposed like blueprints. (cf. Lyotard, ibid, pp. 21-22.)[14] Lyotard hears Aristotle's concern for the resistances and incommensurability of the practical in relation to the theoretical, and of the shapes into which prescriptive discourses are formed as a result. This is the modernity of Aristotle, the way he addresses a problem that still concerns us in an age that has undergone the "flight of the gods," the splintering of the theoretical discourses, the collapse of any transcendental or substantial ground for moral judgement. What, then, are the status and role of reason in moral life today? Are there moral laws derived from the exercise of a pure reason, laws which would command respect and moral obligation? Lyotard, with Aristotle, would have to give voice to many reservations concerning this. It is a question we continue to confront and it is one about which conversation with Aristotle is instructive.

To conclude, I would like to turn to Gadamer's hermeneutics, for here, too, one finds a vaguely similar line of questioning. For Gadamer, Aristotle's ethics is a model for hermeneutics and the hermeneutic problems encountered in the interpretation of not only texts, but of law.

Hermeneutics, the theory and practice of the interpretation of texts, is a pragmatics not only in the sense that it is concerned with the pragma, the affairs of state and community, but also in the sense of treating the facts of history in their connection with each other. Thus, where ethics is concerned with the deliberations, choices, and actions of an individual always already engaged in a situation, and applying and adjusting principles to action, so the hermeneutician is concerned with the relation of an interpreter to tradition and with the application of philosophical principles to concrete interpretive situations. Ethics and hermeneutics are analogous in these ways. Thus, Gadamer's concern is for the epistemological status of hermeneutics. Is hermeneutics a techne? If the "human sciences" in general are modes of practical knowledge, if they are "pragmatic", do they invoke or apply principles of knowledge? Thus, Gadamer goes through especially three points[15] cf. Truth and Method. Section II, 2, of the Second Part, a section entitled, "The hermeneutic relevance of Aristotle" is relevant to the fundamental problem of hermeneutics: First, the question of situating hermeneutics in relation to techne. For many of the same reasons cited in section I of this paper, Gadamer places into question any hasty identification of hermeneutics with techne. There are no "norms," he writes, "that are to be found in the stars.. nor are they mere conventions, but really do correspond to the nature of the thing – only that the latter is always itself determined in each case by the use that the moral consciousness makes of them." (ibid, p. 286) Hence, whether the practice be moral or interpretive (hermeneutical), the principles that serve as guidelines and that are applied in a practice are not derived from a place above or beyond practices, but come

[14] cf. Lyotard, ibid, pp. 21-22.

[15] cf. *Truth and Method.* Section II, 2, of the Second Part, a section entitled, "The hermeneutic relevance of Aristotle".

from within the practices. Yet, nor are they merely the expediencies of mere convention, or simply "what works," however determined they may be by usage. Second, there is a modification of the relation of means and ends in hermeneutic practice, as there is in Aristotle's ethics. Gadamer endorses the undogmatic character of Aristotle's ethics: There is no dogmatic use of natural law in Aristotle. Because the ends toward which human action is directed cannot be objects of knowledge in the same way as truths of physics, no fixed programs for the realization of those ends can be prescribed. This brings us, rather quickly, to Gadamer's third point, which concerns the relation of moral reflection to itself and to the character of phronesis. Here, as in Aristotle, Gadamer emphasizes community and relation with others as a key component in the hermeneutic situation, which he discusses under the rubrics of "insight" and "fellow feeling." Insight means correct judgement regarding a situation or what is expected of us in a situation, but this implies the situation of the other person. Implying forebearance and forgiveness, Gadamer again clearly implies more than technical know how. Ethical choice means more than getting the most out of a situation and more than seizing one's own advantage. There is an orientation on moral ends, an orientation on community and communication and on working towards a shared understanding that Gadamer sees as fundamental in the human dialogue and, in particular, in the dialogue of the interpreter with the tradition. There is, as Gadamer writes, a relation to history in which one must do more than apply a pre-given universal to a particular situation. "The interpreter dealing with a traditional text seeks to apply it to himself." The interpreter does not, then, take a text as, first of all, something universal that can be understood as such and applied to particular situations. A text is not "a universal thing."[16] The task is rather to understand what a tradition says to us, and what constitutes the meaning and importance of texts and, "to understand that, he must not seek to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation..." Thus, Aristotle's ethics is a "sort of model" for Gadamer and for the problem of hermeneutics. We must yet be "hearers" for Aristotle's lectures, we must be among them, as in a community of those seeking better to question who and what we are as human beings; we must question and interpret the human situation in a way that is free from dogmatism and abstractions, and we must continue to learn to see and to think this situation anew. For this, for us, Aristotle is not only a classic a but modern.

Thus, Aristotle's texts on ethics, his questioning of the human good, eudaimonia, continue to speak to us in an age when one might suspect we had become deaf to classical tradition. They speak to us because they remain an open question, one lacking in final, conclusive definition, one that we take up again and again whenever we deliberate, decide, act, and take hold of the world in which we live as human beings.

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[16] Gadamer, op. - cit. p. 289.