

ARISTOTLE'S VIRTUE ETHICS AS AN INSPIRATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract: KUZIOR, Aleksandra – MARSZAŁEK-KOTZUR, Izabela. *Aristotle's virtue ethics as an inspiration for contemporary ethical thought*. Issues related to ethics and morality are constantly the subject of reflection and discussion at many levels of life of contemporary man. In the era of rapid technological development, which is far ahead of the development of ethics, it is extremely important to define its modern version. The issue is which tools to use and models to draw from. The theory of moral action itself is nothing new. On the contrary, it has a centuries-old tradition, dating back to ancient times. Today this tradition has become forgotten, considered inadequate for modern times. Meanwhile, by delving into ancient texts, one can find again in them a wealth of thoughts that are timeless and can serve for contemporary ethical considerations. It is, therefore, useful to refer to the sources of reflection on morality provided by ancient ethics, especially Aristotle's texts. One of the key categories of Aristotelian ethics is virtue, i.e. excellence. Aristotle studies the good, how to live a happy life, how to achieve one's ends, and how to be just. He formulates his ethics by analysing various virtues that a man can work on and develop and presents the conditions they must meet in order to be judged morally. It seems that a return to the classical concept of ethics and a new look at Aristotle's virtue ethics may prove to be an inspiring proposal for contemporary ethical research.

Keywords: *Aristotle, ethics, virtues, morality, action, Good*

Introduction

When analysing texts on ancient ethics, it can be stated that ethics never took the form of a complete system or an ordered set of moral prohibitions and imperatives, which did not appear until the emergence of Christianity. Greek morality practically came down to formulating some kind of advice, which was not absolute in nature. Advice on how citizens should behave referred to a specific ideal, shaped by worldly values, especially with respect to happiness, which was the basic ethical category at the time. Instead of making a list of prohibitions and imperatives, the ethics of ancient Greece encouraged citizens to imitate socially valued figures: a warrior, a wise man, a politician, a philosopher, a magnanimous man, a friend, etc. The relationship between them and the advice formulated by ethics does not take on the form of submission to specific obligations but "shows similarity to the relationship between the model and the copy, between form and matter" (Środa 1992, 213).

Aristotle's ethics was also developed in this spirit even though it differed from other ethical concepts, such as the Platonic concept, Socratic ethical intellectualism, and the concept of Stoics or sceptics. Although originally Aristotle's ethics was supposed to be limited to the residents of Greece who had the status of a citizen, it appears to be timeless, realistic and practical because it is based on empirical grounds (Środa 1992, 213-221; Zozulak 2018, 8-15). Aristotle does not subordinate it to the highest Good understood as a transcendent, divine principle. The Good,

which is one of the key concepts of Aristotelian ethics, belongs to the category of ideas and, as such, it cannot perform real ethical functions (Aristotle 1980; Marszałek 2014).

Aristotle did not create a single, specific ethical system. His texts are full of various, often inconsistent, threads and diverse concepts. Despite this, Aristotle's ethical reflections may still be of interest to modern readers, and they may constitute an endless source of inspiration on this subject, especially the texts contained in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Kuzior – Zozułek 2019, 84-87; Skowroński 2011, 53-68). In it, Aristotle described the principles of human conduct, which should be in accordance with moral guidelines. He acknowledged that goodness and happiness are the highest values for man, which should be pursued through harmony, moderation and virtue (*arete*). The *Nicomachean Ethics* seems to be the most original and mature work among Aristotle's writings on ethics (Środa 1992, 213-221; Broadie 1991). Aristotle's ethics could be a proposal for ethics concerning the development of modern technologies. Ethical issues represent a certain gap in research related to the development of modern technologies, because they do not follow the pace of their development. By not stopping the technological development of the world, we are disrupting its order and crossing more boundaries in search of something new (Delsol 2002). The possibilities for development are so limitless that one even speaks of the tyranny of the possible (Bauman, 2000). The contradiction between what is possible for humans and what should become the limit of possibility shows us in a new light the necessity of using the achievements of ethics. The role of ethics is not only to put limits on the growing possibilities of technology, but also to show the differences between what is necessary, what is needed, and what is essential (Tischner 2000). In this context, one can speak of finding Aristotle's moderation and cultivating the virtues of reason and prudence and developing the ability to make the right judgment (*orthos logos*) of any situation. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to draw the reader's attention to the above aspects of Aristotle's ethics, which, if reread, could provide a starting point for opening a new perspective for further research in this area.

Category of happiness

Ethics is understood as autonomous from one's views and opinions on moral rules and principles. It consists of norms and values (Kudelska 2005). Among the basic concepts of ancient ethics is happiness, called by the Greeks *eudaimonia*. It is a moral norm defined in various ways, which orders an individual to pursue happiness as a central and "ultimate" value. *Eudaimonia* means prosperity and striving for perfection (Kot – Pogonowska – Zboron 2004, 261-276). Originally it was understood as the excellence of the individual, i.e. human action aimed at achieving a high degree of self-development. Later it defined the attitude that considers happiness as the most important goal and motive of a human being (Kalita 2001). Every human action has its end, and that end is some good desired by a specific individual at a given moment, understood not as an objective abstract good. Choosing goals and achieving them leads to happiness. Happiness is one of the fundamental concepts of ancient ethics. Happiness comprises a person's state of mind, spirit and body, shaped by their experiences. Aristotle called this effort to gain *eudaimonia* ethical courage, while he inferred the highest kind of ethical courage to be purely rational theoretical reflection, which consists in philosophical wisdom, and its attainment meant receiving the highest ethical good of man. It seems to be a common good that every human being can achieve by developing their knowledge and subordinating emotions that are necessary for action to reason. Aristotle, however, introduces limitations in its availability, saying that happiness can only be achieved by a few people, those who are free and mature and who devote a lot of time to their own spiritual development (Aristotle, 2017). The virtues possessed by a given person determine

whether the end achieved is good. This is due to the fact that happiness can only be achieved through action that is in harmony with virtue (Dryla 2005, 77-96). An action can be virtuous thanks to the rational choice. Moreover, a happy life seems to be in harmony with moral excellence. In general, life is about making serious efforts to achieve happiness. The happiest life is the one in which the essence of the human being, namely rationality, is present (Żelazna 1991, 139).

Intellectual and moral virtues

Virtue, or excellence (*arete*), which was one of the Greek ethical categories, was just as important as happiness. It was understood in a very broad sense: as physical fitness, as a psychological value (i.e. virtues of character), as a social and political value, and as wisdom. The perfection of human nature was believed to manifest itself through nothing else than virtuous actions (Aristotle 1980; Środa 1992, 213-221; Engberg-Pedersen 1983). Aristotle analyses and studies various virtues, including courage, justice, generosity, and temperance (Kuzior 2014). In Aristotle's view, virtue was a moral fitness, an established disposition, an attitude of man capable of morally good acts and ordering human emotions according to reason (*nous*). Virtue is the ability to choose a goal suitable for our good. Aristotle referred to this state as *eudaimonia*. Man's perfection stems from his capacity for theoretical contemplation (*théōria*), which is the most perfect type of intellectual activity, which means observing, considering, pondering and viewing reality (Korolec 1989). Also important is the ability to choose between good and evil (*proairesis*).

According to the philosopher, virtue is based on the relation of a man to the good. It is a stable disposition that enables a person to be good and to duly fulfil their functions. The highest good of a man is the activity of the soul that meets the requirements of excellence (Aristotle 1980).

Aristotle places his ethics in the sphere of human activity, and therefore it cannot be separated from emotions that are the driving force of human aspirations. Emotions include anger, desire, fear, courage, envy, love, hatred, longing, jealousy, pity, joy, etc. This means that ethics cannot only refer to reason and knowledge. All moral advice should, therefore, focus on organising emotions in accordance with general principles related to the functioning of a man as a rational being (Środa 1992, 213-221).

Aristotle's ethics is linked to the concept of a man who has a soul consisting of rational and irrational parts. Perfecting the rational part of the soul leads to dianoetic virtues. The irrational part of the soul consists of the vegetative part, which is independent of human will and reason, and the desiring part, which is responsible for our ethical or unethical actions. Perfecting it, i.e. subordinating it to reason, leads directly to moral virtues (Środa 1992, 213-221).

Therefore, Aristotle distinguishes two types of virtues mentioned above - dianoetic and moral ones (Kuzior – Zozul'ak 2019, 84-87). Dianoetic, or intellectual, virtues are not directly associated with actions but with the mind striving to know the truth. They include intellect, craftsmanship, knowledge, wisdom, reason (*phronesis*), understanding, art, knowledge (science), intuition, and prudence. They play a fundamental role due to the fact that they allow humans to identify moral good. However, they do not make a human life moral if action is not subordinated to reason and driven by the will. To be a virtuous person, it is not enough to know what is good. One also has to act in accordance with the recognised good, namely to act well. The development of intellectual virtues is the result of human learning and experience (Aristotle 1980).

Aristotle defines moral virtues as enduring dispositions to a certain type of reflection-based stipulations that characterize a reasonable person (Aristotle 1980). Moral virtues are associated with human will and expressed in action (Horowski 2012, 193). They are acquired through habituation. It is not so much about knowing them as it is about striving to possess them and

to be able to make use of them (Aristotle 2011; Szutta 2004; Szudra-Barszcz, 2010). Virtues characterised in such a way are not innate abilities, but special predispositions, which, however, cannot be considered from an ethical perspective.

Ethics of temperance, justice and friendship

In his considerations, Aristotle follows the practical principle based on empirical reflections, according to which it is the natural trait of things to perish both from deficiency and excess. Thus, in everyday life, virtue comes down to the ability to choose an attitude that lies between these two extremes in order to avoid both excess and deficiency. As a result of proper upbringing, which involves training the qualities of the mind and acquiring appropriate habits, combined with other moral virtues, it allows a person to achieve the desired moral attitude. For Aristotle, moral excellence must, therefore, be some kind of temperance since he aims at this means as his end (Środa 1992, 213-221).

Another important category of the Aristotelian virtue ethics is justice. As moral excellence, not only does it apply to a given person and their own actions but it is also directed towards other people (Aristotle 1980). Justice is closely associated with fairness, which is also a virtue, but these terms cannot be used interchangeably. Whatever is fair is always just, but not everything that is just will be considered to be fair due to the fact that fairness is a fundamental characteristic of natural law, which corrects positive law (Aristotle 2017). Aristotle related justice to both humans and the state. He understood it as a bond connecting people in communities, and associated its dimension with the basis of their order. Justice refers to such conduct towards others that can be considered right. He also attributed to justice the feature of a “permanent disposition” to act justly and to strive for what is just. Aristotle essentially distinguished between two types of justice. The first, called distributive, concerned the community and ensured that its members shared in the common good. The second, called equalizing justice, concerned the individual’s obligations to other people. Both should exist side by side in equal proportions (Aristotle 1980, 2012, 2017).

Friendship plays a special role in Aristotle’s ethics. As a result, the Stagirite devoted much attention to this sphere (Dreiner 2000). According to him, it surpasses all other virtues (Aristotle 1980). Without friendship, the other virtues would not have much value. It is more important than justice (Tatarkiewicz 1971). One could say that friendship plays a supporting role not only in the pursuit of happiness but also in the process of one’s own development (Kuzior 2017; Karamanolis 2011, 144).

Action and moral evil

For Aristotle, human action is an almost absolute basis of the ethical dimension. It is responsible for creating virtues, including the virtue of reason, which binds and harmonises the rational and irrational part of the soul, allowing a human being to achieve their specific function, namely action (Kuzior – Zozulak 2019, 84-87). Reason, as a virtue of reflection, i.e. a stable disposition to take a specific action, is developed precisely through action, which Aristotle calls intuition (Korobczak 2002, 107-122).

Human action is linked to the temperament of a given person. Therefore, Aristotle points out that it is necessary to distinguish between a bad action and a bad man, taking into account human motives for action. Depending on the motive, the involvement of consciousness and will, it is also necessary to distinguish a bad action from a mistake and an unfortunate accident.

According to Aristotle, there is a fundamental difference in evaluating actions and a person performing a given action. To be judged morally, a human being has to show a virtuous character acquired through habituation and self-development, i.e. exercises (Aristotle 1980). Repeated experiences and the related actions lead to the consolidation of dispositions, which provides the basis for the development of virtue (Aristotle 2012). The acquisition of virtues is therefore a lifelong process.

Moral excellence can be improved through action having a specific moral value (good or bad) and – depending on whether the moral value is good or bad - contributing to moral development (acquisition of virtues) or regression (acquisition of vices). Each action leaves a certain trace of moral evil in a person. Aristotle lists many examples of moral evil that is the opposite of virtue (Ziemiański 2017, 35-42). Natural, inborn and hereditary dispositions with which the irrational part of the soul is endowed are the main source of actions judged to be morally wrong. Unethical dispositions that must be strictly avoided include wickedness, lack of self-control, bestiality, and weak will. However, according to Aristotle, one cannot avoid doing evil because it is easy to make mistakes when making ethical choices. The mistake made when choosing good does not concern ends but means to an end (Aristotle 2012). Moreover, wrongdoing is easy, which is why it happens so often (Ziemiański 2017, 40). Man commits evil because he does not know what decision to make in a certain situation. The two main sources of evil in the world are the mind, the “bad state” of which leads to falsehood in place of truth, and the irrational part of the soul, the “bad state” of which turns virtue into a vice (Želazna 2019, 127-139).

Proper action must, therefore, choose one and only effective means to an end pursued. This means that the above-mentioned temperance is required in every situation (Aristotle 2012). A person who acts in accordance with the dictates of ethics can expect that their actions will produce the best results, that is they will achieve ethical excellence.

Conclusion

Aristotle's ethical writings constitute a concept that cannot be defined as ethics but rather as moral philosophy. Aristotelian ethics is widely regarded as a system that prescribes moderation both in action and in moral judgment.

By analysing moral virtues, Aristotle uses them to describe a general pattern of human actions. Due to the relationship between virtues and eudaimonia, it is understood as the deepest, comprehensible meaning and purpose of the entire human life. In defining human good and then describing its structure, Aristotle treated his ethics as an area of practical human activity. At the same time, he did not reflect on specific types of activities and avoided formulating specific principles and rules. Everyone is different and everyone encounters different situations, so there can be no single rule of proper conduct. Aristotle did not answer the questions of how to behave in specific situations related to ethical dilemmas; in fact, in his last lectures, he concluded that it is practically impossible to meet the requirements of ethics (Richter 2000). Good conduct should be based on reasoned reflection, which is the foundation of human functioning. The best way is to use common sense, avoid extremes, and control your passions. In Aristotle's conception, we will not find any concrete answers to the questions of how to solve moral dilemmas, or what rules to follow in such situations. Aristotle recognized the impossibility of putting normative ethics into a theoretical framework. Theoretical knowledge can only deal with general immutable principles, not with the infinite number of disparate situations we may face in real life. Ethical life belongs to the domain of art (Tischner 2002). Therefore, it seems that, on the one hand, the Aristotelian intuition about the impossibility of considering morality in terms of normative ethics

is consistent with some contemporary ethical concepts (Tischner 2002, 362). On the other hand, it is necessary to return to Aristotle's reflections on the category of good life, human perfection, moral disposition, and virtues (Zozulak 2018, 8-15; Zozulak 2021, 14-22; Szutta 2004, 70-84). It would be helpful especially in the area of creating ethics concerning the development of modern technologies.

The effects of human actions on the development of technology, today, are so radical that it is impossible to predict their consequences. They demand many answers concerning ethical issues. Unfortunately, also the growth of awareness of human moral responsibility does not go hand in hand with technological development and the growth of consumption. Great ethical problems, such as human rights, justice, coordination of the interests of the individual with the common good, have not lost their relevance, it is only necessary to deal with them in a new way (Bauman 2012, 4). In a similar direction runs the thought of Tischner, who tries anew to reach the sources of human ethical sensitivity (Tischner 2002). Moreover, delving carefully into Aristotle's texts, especially those of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, one finds that it is aimed at a narrow audience. This group is people who are comprehensively educated and experienced in matters of practical life. Such a group includes politicians and lawmakers, i.e. people who make important decisions about other people (Skowronski 2016, 168-182). Aristotle's thought is related to practical wisdom. Its objects, unlike theoretical wisdom, which is based on knowledge and concerns immutable, general truths, are concrete human actions. They refer to the totality of human life, not to its individual areas. It is the ability to act, based on accurate consideration of what is good or bad for a person, built through experience. Knowledge of general rules must be supplemented by personal experience, intuition based on life's experience and habits, as well as practical knowledge covering various fields (Tischner 2002). It seems that reaching back to Aristotle's concept could open new research horizons. This article does not claim to exhaust the topic of the relevance of Aristotle's ethics today. Its aim is to encourage the reader to further study Aristotelian analyses and especially in the field of ethics related to modern technologies to try to apply them to the present day, especially in the field of ethics related to modern technologies.

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