
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHICS (THEORY) AND MORALITY (PRACTICE)

G A Rauche

University of Durban-Westville

If a study is made of ethics in Western thought, a structure in moral theories as they have been constituted throughout the centuries in terms of changing, variable conditions of life, man's *contingent* life-experience, the universal experience of all men, will emerge. This structure, which illustrates the relationship between ethics (theory) and morality (practice), may be said to find its clear articulation for the first time in Plato's and Aristotle's ethics in terms of the triad; *moral ground* or *moral incentive*. The specific conflict-experience from which the practical need for a moral theory on the grounds of the given contextual conditions of life arises; the *moral norm* indicated by the specific moral theory constituted, by which man's action can be judged good or evil, morally right or wrong. In other words, the moral norm facilitates moral judgement, and the practical *moral act*, the act that is performed in observation of the moral norm.

As both Plato and Aristotle have clearly pointed out for the first time, the need for ethics (theory) and morality (practice) arises from man's imperfection, which manifests itself in his dynamics as a thinking and willing being. Both his thinking (theory) and willing (practice) affect the other man or fellow-man. This puts man in a paradoxical situation which has caused Kant to describe him as an "unsociable-sociable being"¹. On the one hand, he tries to assert himself as an individual at the expense of his fellow-man, on the other hand, he needs him and desires his company. It is evident that his fellow-man both limits, and expands him, hates and loves him, fights and supports him. It is in terms of the thinking and acting of his fellow-man that he experiences himself as an individual. In other words, this paradoxical relationship shows that, in his thinking and his willing - in theory and practice, therefore - man is referred to his fellow-man, who is affected by the former's thinking and acting. As both Plato and Aristotle point out: Man can fulfil himself only through the other. Hence, their conception of the state as the educator of the individual as a just and good citizen in terms of the moral norm of their moral theory, as they constitute it, on the grounds of their respective experience of the socio-political conflict in the *polis* of

their time. For Plato, this experience seems to be then conflict between aristocrats and democrats, and what was later called ochlocracy, a degeneration of democracy.² Both Plato's and Aristotle's ethics is ultimately constituted within the context of their philosophical truth - perspective as such. In Plato's axiological ethics, the triad of theory and practice manifests itself as follows:

Moral ground or moral incentive	=	The experience of man's and nature's imperfection through conflict.
Moral norm	=	Reason valued as Goodness.
Moral action	=	Action by rational insight into the cosmos, the human soul and society (principle of identity).

In Aristotle's eudaimonistic ethics, the triad of theory and practice presents itself as follows:

Moral ground or moral incentive	=	The experience of conflict between senses and reason in nature, the human mind and society.
Moral norm Happiness.	=	The Common Good, thus
Moral action	=	Self-Control or observation of the Golden mean through rational insight into nature, the human mind and society or the state (principle of identity).

In this way, human action is rendered reasonable.

The universal importance of Plato's and Aristotle's triad of theory and practice in their respective moral theory emerges, when, on a close analysis, this triad is detected in the various types of ethics as they are instituted in Western thought throughout the centuries on the grounds of man's contingent (changing, variable) life-experience, e.g.: Augustine's voluntaristic ethics; Kant's deontic ethics; Hegel's nomothetic ethics, Sartre's actional ethics, etc.³

A concise representation of Plato's and Aristotle's moral theories in terms of the triad = moral ground, moral norm, moral act.

Plato

In Plato's moral theory,⁴ the moral ground or moral incentive must be sought in man's imperfection, resulting in natural socio-political conflict.

It is from this basic experience that man's need for freedom from conflict and his aspiration for freedom and justice - in this sense for authentic existence - arises. In striving for perfection, he wrestles with the conflicts of nature, of which he is an integral part, the conflicts of his own soul, which mirror the conflicts of nature, and the conflicts of society, which conflicts have their origin in nature's and man's imperfection. From this, it becomes evident that man can fulfil himself only through his fellow-man. The state is thus assigned an educational role in the sense that it performs a moral function, guiding man to insight into the cardinal virtues that reign the cosmos; nature, the human soul and society (the state). These cardinal virtues are *sophrosune* (self control of the natural appetite), *andreia* (physical valour and fortitude of mind) and *sophia* (wisdom through rational insight into truth). In this tripartite structure of the cosmos: nature, the tripartite structure of the human soul, which mirrors nature; physical appetites, noble passions, rationality and the corresponding tripartite structure of society: workers, warriors or *phulakes*, rulers or *archontes*, the principle of identity is reflected, in terms of which Plato seeks to achieve the just (balanced, in this sense harmonious) society. It is by complying with *eros*, the love and rational striving for truth and justice; goodness or *agathon* that the *archontes* rule the state. It is in this sense that Plato's state may be called an aristocracy; for the *archontes* may be called aristocrats not in terms of birth, but in terms of their natural capacity for reflecting on and gaining rational insight into Truth. Since, according to Plato, Truth is valued as good, so that goodness or *agathon* becomes the moral norm, in terms of which human action (practice) is judged, Plato's ethics is designated as *axiological*.

Even if Plato's moral norm is utopian - as are all the moral norms of the various ethical types constituted through the centuries - in the sense that it transcends the conditions prevailing in the *polis* of his own time, as do the moral norms of the various ethical types in their own time and situation, and so points to an ideal society and form of state. Man's and the other's striving for the moral norm sets in motion the moral argument of freedom and justice in Western thought, an argument which continues unabated today, also in South Africa. It does so under changing, variable conditions of life, on the grounds of *contingent* experience, therefore, the experience of natural conflict by which man and the other are referred to one another in their thinking (theory) and acting (practice). It is interesting to note that if Plato's ethics assumes an axiological character of the *rational* type, axiological theories of ethics of a

material type have been conceived, such as Blaise Pascal's *Logic du Coeur* or Max Scheler's *Wertethik*.⁵

As has been shown, the practical dimension of Plato's moral theory emerges from the fact that it is postulated on the grounds of socio-political conflict, which experience is the motor of man's striving for truth and justice - goodness. Since the *polis* forms part of the *cosmos*, justice (*dikaiosune*) means natural balance in the scene of the harmonious *cosmos* governed by reason. Through reason, man and the state are harmoniously blended with the *cosmos* (principle of identity). Since this concept of the *polis* corresponds to the symmetry and beautiful form of a work of art, the aim of education is *kalokagathia*, the norm for the citizen to live the beautiful and good life, the life of harmony in justice and so lead an authentic (ethical) existence. Since this aim can be attained only through rational insight into the *cosmos*, obtaining such insight enables man to perform the moral act; acting in accordance with such insight.

Aristotle

Plato's theory, especially his theory of the forms (ideas)⁶ is, in turn, subject to Aristotle's criticism.

The latter rejects the former's dualism between the *doxa* world and the world of ideas. By sinking Plato's forms into the natural objects themselves, Aristotle arrives at an ethics of the *golden mean*⁷ in the sense of self-control or moderation as he observes it throughout the *cosmos*, where every natural object, including man, strives for fulfillment in terms of its inherent essence, which, through the actualization of matter, *entelecheia*, is visible in its form. Aristotle's universals are not pure perfect forms untainted by matter as with Plato, but are grounded in matter. They are *entia rationis cum fundamento in rebus*. They form the hierarchy of the *cosmos*. In terms of this hierarchy, Aristotle arrives at the essence of the strata of Being by predicative judgement, which denotes the logical aspect of his ontology. Rocks are inert, plants are vegetative, animals are impulsive, men are rational, fixed stars are ethereal, the Unmoved Mover is *actus purus* (self-sufficient and self-contemplative). The logical syllogistic hierarchy of forms yields the more or less comprehensive forms of Being, which elucidates its ontological dimension. Aristotle's world formula may be stated by the following syllogism, which is of both logical and ontological significance: Being

is; genera, species and particulars participate in Being; therefore they are.

So far as man is concerned, his form is rational. It is by his reason, therefore, that he is blended into the cosmos, thus into society or the state as part of the cosmos or nature. This shows the character of Aristotle's principle of identity. While Plato seeks to overcome socio-political conflict and reach natural balance (justice) between man and the other in terms of rational insight into truth, towards which man and the other strive (*eros*), so that "the state should be organized like the universe at large and the individual virtuous soul, that is reason, should be in the ascendancy",⁸ Aristotle attempts to overcome socio-political conflict by rational self-control or the golden mean in terms of the *common good* so as to attain *happiness*. "The state is possible only because men have common aspirations, but government and political power, the existence of officials who are given authority to act in the name of the state, are necessary because man's community is imperfect, because man's social nature expresses itself in conflicting ways, the clash of interests, the rivalry of parties, and the struggle of classes, instead of a united seeking after a common good".⁹ This quotation of A.D. Lindsay could have been written with reference to socio-political conflict today. It shows the universal importance of both Plato's and Aristotle's ethics. Both, according to their own specific approach, show man as what Aristotle terms a *zoon politicon*, as a social animal as determined by the socio-political conflict in the *polis* of their respective period.

Aristotle arrives at an ethics of the golden mean by structuring the triad of his ethics as follows: In general terms, his *moral ground* consists in the experience of the conflict between senses and reason, as it is experienced in nature, man and society. If *happiness*, the *moral norm*, is to be reached, the tension between senses and reason had to be mediated by self-control, the *moral act* as a reasonable act. Only by that act would man be in step with nature, his own nature and society.

In nature, the balance of the golden mean is manifest in the purposeful striving of the natural object towards self-fulfillment through its form; the actualization of matter in terms of the hierarchy of intelligible forms culminating in Being itself; the *Unmoved Mover*. Analogous to the balancing of matter and form was the balancing of senses and reason in man. In order to actualize his rational form, man would have to avoid any rash action or extreme indulgence in

sensuous desire, which would cause *uneasiness*. Self-control, which was advocated by a number of philosophers, is of great importance for our own age, when crass technological functionalist forces that testify to our greed and hunger for power dominate our thinking and acting and threaten mankind's destruction.

While with Plato, sensuous desires should be held in check by *sophrosune*, as one of the cardinal virtues that should be balanced with each other in order to facilitate the just state, with Aristotle the sensuous desires should be counterbalanced by moderating reason, so as to act in accordance with one's natural capacity. Through the moral act of self-control, man blends himself into the cosmos. Just as the striving of natural objects, in terms of their respective ideas expressed by their forms is purposeful, so man's striving in terms of his form, reason, is purposeful in that it facilitates self-fulfillment, in this sense *happiness*. Within society, too, man should live up to his natural capacity which determines his social status. For example, to be content and happy the slave should be a good slave and should not aspire to a higher social status. In the same way, the craftsman should be a good craftsman, the soldier a good soldier, the statesman a good statesman, so as to live up to his respective essence and fulfil himself. That this idea is controversial goes without saying. According to this conception man's most sublime activity is the pursuit of intellectual things. It is evident that Aristotle's *eudaimonistic* ethics, the type of which we find later with John Locke, conceived in terms of the then socio-political conditions, corresponds to his ideal of the *polis* governed by a monarch through reason. The restoration of order by monarchs such as Philip II of Macedonia and his son, Alexander the Great, may have served as examples.

With the pleasure and pain principle as a criterion, which principle was also a cornerstone in modern ethics, for example, that of Locke and Hume, Aristotle's *moral act* depends upon man's wisdom and prudence, which he designates as *dianoitic* virtues, as well as upon moderation or temperance, which he calls practical virtues. Again, to be virtuous is to exercise *moderation*, to observe the *golden mean*. Thus, bravery lies between cowardice and reckless boldness, generosity between avarice and waste, noble pride between humility and uppishness, etc. This yields the moderate aristocratic state, another form of state Aristotle calls good, meaning governance in terms of the virtue of *arête*, thus government by the best, not by birth, but by social performance according to natural capacity (in this respect also cf Plato).

In what sense is the structural triad in Plato's and Aristotle's ethics of relevance to contemporary democracy?

It is important to note that the observation of moderation or self-control is also the ethical (theoretical) and moral (practical) foundation of another form of state, which Aristotle designates as good, namely, *democracy*. Even if Plato considers democracy as a negative type of state, he, as has been shown, shares with Aristotle the importance of *sophrosune* as a fundamental cardinal virtue that balances the tripartite structure of the virtuous soul as well as the three social classes according to their natural capacity, so that reason is in the ascendancy. In this sense, Plato's moral theory is also important for democracy, which by definition is pluralistic. The universal importance of the concept of moderation or self-control lies in making possible rational insight into our rational capacities and limitations as finite men. This rational insight is particularly important and indispensable in our present age, which may be designated as the *age of democracy*. Open-ended democracy, which by definition is pluralistic, should be based on the acceptance of socio-political conflict as the *moral ground*. This means that it is on the grounds of this contingent experience, by which man and the other are referred to each other in their thinking (theory) and acting (practice), that the dialogue on truth, goodness and justice ought to be carried on. It is under the contingent (changing, variable) conditions of life that they keep constituting their truth-perspectives (theories), which, inevitably, enter into a critical relationship with one another. This critical relationship reflects the contingency (variability) of these truth-perspectives, which remain controversial and call each other in question, so that dialogue on the aforementioned questions continues - *philosophia perennis*.

The critical relationship into which theories enter with one another indicates man's epistemological limit, so that no theory gives the final answer and so remains inconclusive. At the same time, the epistemological limit constitutes a *moral ought*. This means that in his attitude towards his fellow-man and his action (practice), man ought to observe his epistemological limit, if his action is to be judged moral. His epistemological limit is therefore at the same time the *moral norm*, in terms of which man's action is judged *immoral* if violated by laying claim to the exclusivity of his truth-perspective, or moral if the epistemological limit is observed. In the former case, a human truth-perspective assumes the character of a closed dogmatic ideology, a monologue, so that open-ended dialogue ceases and self-righteousness, or what the ancient Greeks called

hubris, prevails. In the latter case, the open-ended dialogue on above mentioned vital questions continues in the spirit of mutual self-restraint, moderation, tolerance, open-mindedness, respect and goodwill, thus; *mutual responsibility*. It is on the grounds of *contingency*, man's and his fellow-man's changing, variable socio-political conflict-experience, that Plato's and Aristotle's ethical triad has been constituted and reconstituted in various forms. From the above, it is evident that the Platonic and Aristotelian virtues, as outlined above, assume new significance in our age of democracy. The exigencies of our time, when the world has shrunk and in many countries communities of diverse value systems live closely together, demand the acceptance as the *moral ground* of the natural socio-political conflict by people of whatever cultural and political persuasion. The observation of the epistemological limit (the experience of man's finiteness) as the *moral norm* and action in terms of the moral ought implicit in the epistemological limit as a beacon of man's *moral act*.

Notes

1. Fourth proposition in Kant's, "Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbdigerlicher Absicht". Akademie Ausgabe, Vol. VM.
2. When Plato (*Politicós* 302d7) defines lawless majority government as a degenerate form of government, this conforms to his conception of democracy as a third form of unjust constitutions, which are named among the five constitutions in the *Republic* (VIII: 10-13, 555 b 3ff.). Democracy emerges from oligarchy and changes into tyranny. In this regard, it is interesting to note Kant's rejection of democracy as a conflict-ridden form of government, in this sense a "degenerate form". Plato distinguishes two positive forms of government from the negative ones: aristocracy and monarchy. In terms of the principle of the golden mean, Aristotle recognises good forms *vis à vis* bad forms of government. As long as the state moves within reason, it matters little whether its form is that of a monarchy, aristocracy or democracy. What must be prevented is the degeneration of monarchy into tyranny, aristocracy into oligarchy and democracy into ochlocracy. Although the latter is not yet known to Aristotle, his critical passages about democracy (*Politeia* : 129 b 33, 1294 a 3 1), which discuss its possible degeneration into a rule of the masses, can be seen as a criticism of ochlocracy.
3. In G.A. Rauche's book *Theory and Practice in Philosophical Argument*, Durban: The Institute of Social Research University of Durban-Westville, 1986², pp. 98 - 100, the following types of ethics are listed: axiological ethics (Plato); volunturistic ethics (Augustine); eudaimonistic ethics (Locke) deontic ethics (Kant); operational ethics (Marx); actional ethics (Sartre). Also cf. the section "Examples of Moral Theories", pp. 225 - 25 1. It is shown that all these types of ethics are structured in terms of the triad: moral ground or moral incentive, moral norm and moral act.
4. Plato's ethics is an integral part of his philosophy, and moral themes are spread through a number of his works. It is in the *Republic* that the ethical character of Plato's philosophy is most coherent. Book I deals with the concept of justice. Books II - IV discuss the organization of the *polis*, pursue this subject and contain the doctrine of virtues. The educational programme in Books V - VII aims at justice and harmony (goodness) through rational insight into truth. The state is seen as a moral institution.
5. Of Blaise Pascal's "Pensées sur la religion" (with notes by N61taire), in: *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. By Brunschvicg, 14 vols. 1904 - 1914, and Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Ethik L Kants*, 19544.
6. There is no systematic representation of Plato's theory of forms (ideas). There is no specific dialogue that deals with it. The subject appears in various dialogues of Plato, e.g. the *Republic*, the *Symposium* the *Timaeus*, *Parmenides*.
7. Aristotle's ethics is outlined in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. In regard to the relation between ethics and politics in Aristotle's thought, A.D. Lindsay, in his "Introduction to Aristotle's Politics" in : *The Politics of Aristotle or A Treatise on Government*, London: Dent and Sons (Everyman's Library) 1952, writes: "The Politics of Aristotle is the second part of a treatise of which the Ethics is the first part. It looks back to the Ethics as the Ethics looks forward to the Politics.
8. F. Thilly. *A History of Philosophy*, p. 91 New York,: Henry Holt and Co..1957.
9. A.D. Lindsay. "Introduction to Aristotle's Politics", in : *The Politics of Aristotle or A Treatise on Government*, London: Dent and Sons (Everyman's Library), 1952.