One more time:
Views on Aristotle's philosophy and Intercultural Philosophy

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Abstract

In my view a philosopher is a person of wisdom who produces a guide to life, providing us with some tools for dealing with practical problems and survival issues on at least five adaptation domains. These are a) metaphysics: man's relationship to the cosmos; b) politics: man's relationship with others; c) ethics: man's relationship with himself and his behaviour toward others; d) epistemology: man's relationship with his mind and his method of thinking; and e) aesthetics: man's relationship with and appreciation of beauty. This paper is destined to mainly present an unshackled response to the informed and well-versed papers by Anastasios Ladikos titled Revisiting the virtue of courage in Aristotle*; and Murray Hofmeyer:* The Promise and Problems of Intercultural Philosophy*; (Phronimon – Journal of the South African Society for Greek Philosophy and the Humanities –Volume 5(2) 2004). My concern with Aristotle's ideas stems from the fact that his propositions are connected to ancient battlefield circumstances and conditions, as well as the Spartan Culture of his time. If juxtaposed with scenes of violence in our time we can draw many parallel behavioral patterns that can pass as valid and reliable characteristics of modern-day soldiers in mortal, face-to-face combat or victims of crime in violent confrontation with rapists, murderers and assaulters.*

Introduction

My interest in philosophy stems from my undergraduate reading of practical philosophy and many subsequent self-initiated studies for empowerment and enlightenment. I view myself as a novice and an animal that has yet won neither a consolation, nor a major prize at a show. It follows that I am willing and ready for the slaughterhouse.

In my view a philosopher is a person of wisdom who produces a guide to life, providing us with some tools for dealing with practical problems and

survival issues on at least five adaptation domains. These are a) metaphysics: man's relationship to the cosmos; b) politics: man's relationship with others; c) ethics: man's relationship with himself and his behaviour toward others; d) epistemology: man's relationship with his mind and his method of thinking; and e) aesthetics: man's relationship with and appreciation of beauty (Runes et al 1964).

With the passing of time I have come to discover that every generation add something of value to man's philosophy and well being. This truism has been driven home by repetition when Anastasios Ladikos prompted me some time ago to contribute an article to *Phronimon.* Thus I came across two articles, one by Ladikos and one by Hofmeyer, which meet my expectations.

Hofmeyer's idea of contextual culture
(Phronimon, Vol 5(2) 2004: 61-74)

In his discussion of intercultural philosophy Hofmeyer highlights a number of sensational conclusions in respect of human frailty, interaction, and meaningfulness, some of which I would like to re-state here for the record:

a) nothingness belongs essentially to being human; the universal is lack, and thus open (p. 70)
b) what Kimmerle calls intercultural philosophy, Hofmeyer calls contextual philosophy (p. 71)
c) Contextual philosophy proceeds from the assumption that all philosophy is contextual (p. 71)
d) contextual philosophy takes the whole of its context into account, including culture (p. 72)
e) contextual philosophy has its roots squarely in critical theory (p. 72)
f) contextual philosophical dialogues are necessary to solve problems on a planetary scale and to know adequately (p. 72)
g) if any philosophy failed to seek dialogue it is a sign of aporia – a theoretical difficulty or puzzle; a lack and incompleteness that is universal (p. 74)
h) no philosophy is absolutely true; all are subject to modification or improvement (p. 61).

For the natural and social sciences Hofmeyer's propositions are fully acceptable and grounded. For one thing, they are compatible with the principle of uncertainty in science and reflect a belief in open systems of knowledge and a resolve to carry on and continue the hunt for truth.

For another, his proposed contextual philosophy lends a new dimension to culture, id est. the recognition that smaller contextual cultures are present within the expanse of ruling or powerful cultures. These 'parasite cultures' create their own time-space niches in order to meet their own unique cultural needs and eccentricities.

To illustrate this social phenomenon I quote from my Ms *I am because you are* which is due for publication, the following paragraphs under the heading 'Narrow, specific relations versus broad, diffuse ones'.

Narrow, specific relations versus broad, diffuse ones[2]

'In days gone by relationships were not as specialized as they are today. People performed many functions for one another, without expecting to be paid or to be rewarded. In modern times urban residents seem to enter mainly into contractual relations with their neighbors and those they come into contact with. They try to shun spontaneous shows of goodwill and love for others.'

'This is especially true of citizens who live in comfort within big cities. They are content to mind their own business and detest meddling in one another's affairs. This type of aloofness spurns cultural islands of indifferent cliques and snobs in the communities and in society at large, while some other islands are generated for many other reasons, to wit:

a) *young Turks* (at work we mix with all age groups, but tonight I want to be associating with my own kind);
b) *intellectuals* (during the day I have to suffer many a fool gladly, but in my own private time I am free to suffer none gladly);
c) *artists* (each day I take in the vibes of the people at large: I listen, look, smell, feel and observe what life is really all about; but at night I retire with other artists and great minds to rethink the blight and the plight of those who struggle, all in vain, against the blistering wind, with hungry bellies and dry mouths);
d) *holier-than-thou groups* (we are here to praise God, to pray for those in sinful bondage, unwilling to make amends and convert themselves. As surely as the day follows night, the end is nigh);
e) *sub-cultural cliques* (we love to relax with people who belong to our own race and creed, speaking the language we speak in my place of origin, singing the songs we sing, drinking the wine and beer we drink, and ...);
f) *professional/organized syndicates or gangs* (we do business for profit by entering into illegal enterprises, criminal transactions, fraudulent schemes, counterfeit operations, and racketeering); and
g) *pleasure hunters* (let's be happy and reap the nice benefits of the seven deadly sins before the dawn is due: **one**, partake and reward yourself with *pride* among your fellow drunkards – shout with joy that you are not like your 'holy' brothers who saint it in public and sin it in secret; **two**, *covet* your brother's wife or your father's new girlfriend because they will never split on your advances; **three**, openly show your *lust* for men or women and rape or sodomize them if they refuse to fall for your charm; **four**, strike out in *anger* at the one who has spilled a drink on your whoring girlfriend's evening gown; **five**, fill your *gluttonous* belly to the brink with liquor and food, and abuse the magic incense of cocaine and marijuana in tandem with the sweet injections of speed and LSD; **six**, *envy* the rich and hate their guts to the extent that you burgle their homes, ransacked their offices, rape their wives, and kidnap their children for ransom; and **seven**, rejoice in your *sloth*: be proud of your laziness,

indolence, reluctance to better yourself or to make an effort to help or support others; be indifferent to your family's or friend's needs; if they trip over their feet or stumble in life, do not hesitate to make their fall even harder by shoving them smartly.'

Ladikos on the virtue of courage in Aristotle

(Phronimon, Vol 5(2) 2004: 77-92)

In his glowing exposition and critique of the thoughts and teaching of Aristotle in regard to the virtue of courage, Ladikos records the following pertinent observations and thoughts of and on Aristotle and states his own interpretation of the philosopher's ideas that are forthwith *repeated for easy* reference.

a) 'Aristotle defines virtues (areta) in terms of the passions which they involve and the kind of context and conduct in which they are displayed' (p. 77)
b) 'Acts of virtue bring honour to an individual (but) acts of vice, dishonour' (p. 78)
c) 'Virtue, like nature, has the quality of hitting the mean' (p. 78)
d) 'Aristotle holds that every ethical virtue is located ... between states of excess and deficiency' (p. 79)
e) 'Courage is the mean between fearfulness and fearlessness' (p. 80)
f) 'Reckless people cannot be people of courage because they lack fear' (p. 81)
g) 'Aristotle distinguishes between moral/true courage on the one hand and five kinds of courage inappropriately so-called, on the other: i) political courage; 2) professional courage; 3) courage of passion; 4) courage of good hope; and 5) courage of ignorance.' (pp. 81-82)
h) 'Fear and confidence are apparently inversely correlated ...' (p. 83 and p. 88)
i) '...death is the most fearful of all things; for it is the end, and nothing is thought to be any longer either good or bad for the dead' (pp. 83-4)
j) 'It is only on the battlefield that the brave man is concerned with death – in the greatest and noblest danger' (p. 84)
k) 'if a person fears too much, he is a coward; if he fears too little, or not at all, he would be a sort of madman or insensitive to pain. The courageous person is the person who fears the right things, and from the right motive, in the right way and at the right time' (p. 83)
l) Socrates believed that ...'the virtue courage was a form of knowledge that could be taught and that '... nothing is so appalling as the prospect of losing one's integrity'; while Aristotle believed that courage was more of a disposition that each individual possessed and cultivated' (pp. 84-5)
m) '... he (the soldier on the battlefield) is knowingly losing the greatest goods, and this is painful. But he is none the brave, and perhaps all the more so, because he chooses noble deeds of war at that cost' (p. 85)
n) '... a distinction is drawn between a willingness to risk death in battle and a desire to seek death in battle.' (p. 87)
o) Urmson holds the view that Aristotle made two errors: he failed to distinguish (i) two kinds of fear and (ii) two triads: a) cowardice, bravery, and foolhardiness; and b) overconfidence, caution, and over-cautiousness. (p. 88)

Notes

The warning Ladikos sounds that different semantic fields are covered by different authors is valid.

In my dictionary . . .

- overconfidence equals arrogance, brashness, foolhardiness, as
- well as shortsightedness
- caution equals attention to safety, prudence, and carefulness
- over-cautiousness equals being vigilant, discreet, guarded, and
- excessively cautious

Before attempting to air some thoughts on Aristotle's ideas on the virtue of courage, his definition of the Spartan situation needs to be highlighted as well as my own reflections on it.

Some thoughts on the definition of battlefield situations

Aristotle's arguments as portrayed by Ladikos, center on the types of soldiers encountered in fatal warfare: experiencing severe stress, but nevertheless actively looking for or shunting death and displaying either a willingness to risk death, or a desire to seek death.

a) Eurytus represents the citizen soldier because, although totally blinded by severe eye infection, chose to enter the danger zone, knowingly and voluntarily. He was driven by noble thoughts of loyalty to his fellow soldiers and honour to defend the people of Spartan - come what may. So he died tragically with the rest of the army.

b) Aristodemus represents the cowards, the opposite pole of the citizen soldier, those who flee or abstain from entering the battlefield and to fight and emerge victorious. The fact that Aristodemus endured the scorn and humiliation heaped upon him by the Spartans and fought bravely in another battle not long after that fateful day of shame, did not move the Spartans to redefine their feelings of total rejection towards him.

The absolute way in which the Spartans defined the battlefield situation reflects a bifurcation that is in need of further division into secondary branches or sub-types. One such classification may divide the category *cowards* into i) correctly and ii) incorrectly labeled cowards. The correctly labeled cowards may feature those soldiers that stop *fighting* and *freeze,* or *flee* when confronted with death. Those who are labeled incorrectly do belong to the citizen soldier category and do not warrant a separate category.

Before attempting to portray the different types graphically, another attempt must be made to refine the proposed categories in the dendrogram.

Aristotle's philosophy of ethics
(Runes et al 1964: 20-24)

In the *Dictionary of Philosophy* (1964) by Dagobert D. Runes and 72 authorities, Glennn R. Morrow refers to Aristotle's philosophy of ethics and the principles he applied to solve the question of human good.

According to Morrow the ancient philosopher reckons that the good for man is a realization (awareness or actual experience) of the distinctive faculties of man/woman, as unique and characteristic only to homo sapiens. However, human excellence or supremacy shows itself bilaterally: on the front side man/woman displays 'habitual subordination ... to rational rule and principle'; and on the flipside, 'exercise of reason in the search for and contemplation of truth'.

The former type of virtue is expressed in moral virtues (ethos), as in law-abiding behavior and acts of compassion towards those in our communities and societies in need of care, serious attention, protection, and respect. The latter type of virtue is expressed in intellectual (dianoetic) virtues as applied for example in scientific research.

The highest good for man
(ibid: 22)

In *Politics* Aristotle defines the political community as the '... source and sustainer of the typically human life'. Nevertheless, he goes on to say that the highest form of life is neither to be found in political life, nor in any other form of practical activity. It is only to be found in 'theoretical inquiry and contemplation of truth.'

For him the reasons are obvious and definitive: a) theoretical inquiry into and contemplation of truth alone brings complete and continuous happiness; b) this activity constitutes the highest part of man's complex nature; c) it is least dependent on outside sources (externals); d) it empowers man to participate '... in that activity of pure thought which constitutes the eternal perfection of the divine nature'.

Comment

From these assertions made by Aristotle it follows that the Spartan soldier was subjected to a political definition of a situation that was finite and absolute – one which left no room for conjecture or deviance. It was so effective and binding that one of the blinded soldiers (Eurytus) entered the fray with 298 of his fellow soldiers to die an instant death. However, for the other one who stayed behind it didn't hold: he opted out to his shame and

detriment. Aristodemos was willing to risk death in 'normal' or run-of-the-mill conditions, but not in abnormal or in a state of deprived faculties, such as being blind and unable to protect himself or those around him. Thus he would have posed a risk for others as well as for himself. He took rational stock of the situation and made a rational decision.

A person's willingness to risk death in battle and his desire to seek death in battle are altogether two different issues which do not sit on polar positions on a continuum of opposite degrees. The act of risking death does not necessarily mean that the soldiers are having a desire or urge to seek death.

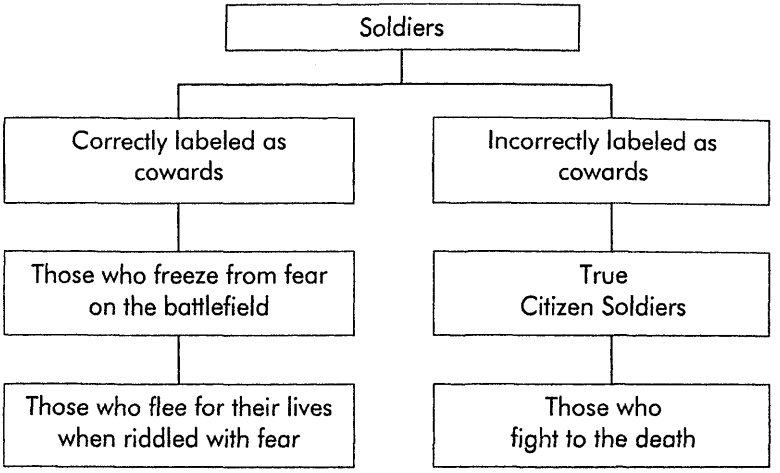
As a matter of professionalism, a soldier's job – to fight and defend his country – does not allow him to make the kind of decisions mentioned in the paper under review. The risk of going into battle and thus of taking the risk of losing his life in battle, is real when he joins up as a professional soldier; and subsequent thoughts of suicide or reckless subjection or exposure to sudden death only happen at some later stages.

It is fair to assume that the soldier's willingness to risk death in battle and his desire to seek death in battle – if present in the form of driving forces – are time-spaced divorced and totally unrelated as such.

On the other hand, a soldier's willingness to avoid death is dependent on his a) awareness of impending danger; b) propensity to take calculated risks; c) confidence in his own skills and capacity to ward off fatal attacks; d) confidence in his fellow soldiers to cover his unguarded flank; e) confidence in his section to win the battle; f) his ambition to achieve success and honour; and g) his determination to survive the onslaught.

However, Aristotle's philosophy that death is the most fearful of all things for a Spartan soldier is disputed by none other than Socrates who reckons that '... nothing is so appalling as the prospect of losing one's integrity'. My contention is to go along with this. The fear of nothingness, no eternal consciousness, or total extinction after death is the ultimate threat for human beings, despite their creed or craft; although I must admit that the majority trained Spartan soldiers would have willingly and gladly entered the great unknown abyss in exchange for glory and reverence after the final battle was over.

Aristotle's assertion in his *Rhetoric* that '... fear involves pain and disturbance aroused by the expectation of impending evil is naturally expressed in flight' (Ladikos 2004: 89) is not a complete picture of the reaction of man and beast to impending danger that threatens life and limb. The most immediate reaction is to freeze, made powerless and motionless through fear, adopting a physical state as though arrested in time, and/or immobilized and paralyzed with apprehension of an impending horrible death.



Graphic portrayal of the way in which soldiers may differ from each other in battlefield situations

One's next reactions would be to fight or to flee, depending on the perception one has of the situation at hand. If the odds are very slim to escape alive, flight would be the chosen option to take, otherwise one's professionalism, training and conditioning in warfare would prevail.

What strikes one here is that Aristotle is sometimes willing to recognize the principle of uncertainty that characterizes all science, but not throughout his writings, to wit a) '... a certain amount of fear is medial or right on one occasion but may not be medial or right on another occasion' and '... there is no uniform criterion of medial fear for all circumstances'. ibid: 89) and b) 'it is only upon the battlefield that a man faces and fears the terrible danger of having his own life taken from him by another man in mortal combat' (ibid: 84) (Cf. crime situations in which hundreds of residents are annually killed by burglars and robbers)

Aristotle on medial values

Aristotle propagates the idea of an ideal mean between two opposites: for example a) 'virtue, like nature, has the quality of hitting the mean'; b) '... every ethical virtue is located ... between states of excess and deficiency'; and (c) 'courage is the mean between fearfulness and fearlessness' (ibid: 78-80).

According to this set-up the mean is looked upon, not so much as an arithmetic mean, but a type of mode or median – thus a qualitative value or worth and desirability of the trait in question; in stead of a quantitative

assessment or valuation or the measurement of the magnitude of countable degrees or differences (Van der Westhuizen 1982: 87-109).

Then again in *Eudemian Ethics* 'fear and confidence are apparently inversely correlated so that there as just two vices: a coward feels more fear and less confidence while a reckless person feels less fear and more confidence, than is proper. This may suggest that fear and confidence are distinct emotions, but opposed poles of the same emotional range' (Ladikos 2004: 83).

With this assertion it becomes clear that Aristotle's mean could very well qualify as an arithmetic mean and not just as a balance point on the scale of natural emotions – a value that is quantifiable and measurable and therefore amenable to comparative studies and distribution analyses.

In conclusion

In conclusion I would like to stress that in my book Aristotle's philosophy (as opposed to Plato's) has laid the foundation of natural and social science and still guides us on our way to comprehension and understanding of our essential relationship with our own thoughts and feelings, our inner selves, other people, things of beauty and the cosmos that includes not only the universe but also the sum total of our experience and the ordered systems of our ideas.

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