

The concepts of art in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: from *mimesis* to communication

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Abstract

In his Friedrich Nietzsche lectures, Martin Heidegger's attempt to define art with terms such as technical knowledge, care, carefulness of concern, poetry, seems to be directly inspired by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Apparently Heidegger's desire was to reconsider art after modernism and think of it in a new and non fundamentalist way which was all too common in aesthetics until his time. First, I follow, analyse and extend Heidegger's original gesture of going back to Aristotle in order to solve the extremely modern problems of art in his time. Then, I assemble the different concepts of art in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and the different tasks these concepts perform in the contexts in which they appear and question the prevalence of *mimesis* in understanding art. Finally, my aim is to propose an alternative to *mimesis* concept of art as a communicative practice in which terms such as influence, experience and communication play a strategic role, in order to bring to the fore neglected issues in the Aristotelean text like artistic truth, prudence and wisdom.

Introduction

It is usually permitted for a thinker of Alasdair MacIntyre's caliber to pronounce such general and strong judgments like the one contained in the preface of his famous book *After Virtue*: "...we have largely, if not entirely-lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality."¹ MacIntyre proceeds to explain his judgment by arguing that modernity has severed our world from its foundation in the Aristotelian tradition of moral thought and action.² The Aristotelian moral tradition has been the dominant mode of thought and

action in the premodern world of the Greeks, the Jews, Islam and Christianity. Nowadays, MacIntyre maintains, the Aristotelian tradition survives only as a set of fragments and can thus no longer justify (let alone legitimize) our social behaviour and commitments.³ According to MacIntyre, the fiercest and most drastic opponent of the Aristotelian tradition was Friedrich Nietzsche who not only discovered the hidden and irrational phenomena of the will to power behind the seemingly objective and rational categories of Aristotelian morality but also made apparent the inability of modern philosophers to find an alternative model of morality to the Aristotelian one.⁴

Today, we have more than one indication that the state of moral disorder in which we live and which MacIntyre describes so succinctly, has its equivalent in the domain of art. Diverse art historians and theorists like Peter Berger, Jean Clair and Niki Loizidis have intimated the state of disorder which characterizes the artworld and which practically means its lack of orientation and its fragmentariness.⁵ Berger shows the failure of the historic, early twentieth century avant-gardes to bridge the gap between art and life while he has a derogatory view of artistic avant-gardes after the second world war.⁶ Clair writes about the relations of uncertainty which torment

contemporary artistic creation and the poverty characterizing the recent artworld.⁷ Last but not least, Loizidis writes about contemporary art between avant-garde and rearguard reflecting contradictions and problems like the commercialization of art, the lack of originality and others.⁸

Should one wish to make sense of the chaos and anarchy in contemporary morality and art and insert some kind of order, one should necessarily need to disengage from present time or rather adopt a historical point of view and consequently view present time on the basis of its past. As the Aristotelian philosophy had always been at its peak before the advent of modernity, in order to understand the modern times in which we live we ought to go back to Aristotle's thought since we may find there the terms to critically view modern times and make sense of whatever nowadays seems nonsense. In this paper we will search and group together the concepts of art in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which much in contrast to the *Poetics*, art is examined in a broad context and in relation to virtues like *phronesis*, prudence and *sophia*, wisdom. Our task is double: on the one hand we would like to retrieve forgotten concepts of art which might facilitate us to understand its contemporary so called postmodern state, on the other hand, we would like to consider the burning issue of art's moral orientation, its relation to wisdom and finally its identity as a communicative practice.

Art as creation, prudence and wisdom

We shall first go through the concepts of art in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle gives art a broad sense as a *dynamis*, an ability, a capacity for something, a certain aptitude (1153 a 25).⁹ Martin Heidegger indicates how we ought to

understand this first primary definition of art by Aristotle:

techne is know-how in taking care, manipulating and producing, which can develop in different degrees, as for example with the shoemaker and the tailor; it is not the manipulating and producing itself but is a mode of knowledge, precisely the know-how which guides the *poiesis*.¹⁰

In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle deals extensively with art to the extent to which the latter leads to *poiesis*, creation, while trying to distinguish creation from *praxis*, action (1140 a 5-20). Creation is always creation of something by somebody, the creator. Art seems to be the manner in which creation takes place, the "how" of creation. Aristotle characteristically maintains that:

Art then, as has been said, is a certain productive state of mind under the guidance of true reason, and its opposite, viz. the absence of art, is a productive state of mind under the guidance of false reason, and both are concerned with the variable or contingent (Ibid., Weldon 191).

Therefore it is truth which distinguishes art from the absence of art. However as much as artistic truth seems to be the dominant trait of art, this truth is not the product of any necessity. The artwork is not submitted to the rule of any necessity, natural or not, since its reason escapes it or does not properly belong to it, as art is always brought forth by a creator (Ibid.) This is the reason why, Aristotle maintains, "chance and art have the same sphere, as Agathon says "(Ibid.). Aristotle gives ample

indication of the artists, creators he refers to: sculptors (1141 a 10-15), painters, musicians (1105 a 21) but also house constructors, shoe makers (1133 a 5-15), perfume makers, cooks (1154 a 20-30), ship engineers, horse groomers and army generals (1094 a 5-15).

Art also approximates *phronesis*, prudence¹¹ since all good things are creations of some art (1152 b 18-20). Art is again synonymous to ability, *dynamis*, without which prudence cannot be achieved (1144 a 25-30). Nevertheless, prudence is not an ability much in contrast to art (1140 b 20). Prudence is defined as "a true rational state of mind which is active in the field of human goods" (1140 b 20-25, Welldon 193) or the capacity "to deliberate well in some particular line ... when their calculations are successfully directed to some good end, if it is such as does not fall within the scope of art." (1140 a 24-36, Welldon 191). Virtue is defined as "such a moral state as makes a man good and able to perform his proper function well" or as "a state of deliberate moral purpose consisting in a mean which is relative to ourselves, the mean being determined by reason, or as a prudent man would determine it" (1106 a 20-35, 1106 b 5-10, Welldon 52, 55). The good artist is the virtuous (1098 a 8-13). There is therefore virtue in art consisting in performing well this art and contrariwise every art is practised well when it is in agreement with the corresponding virtue (1098 a 13-19). From the very beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle informs his reader that all things aim to the good and the same is of course true for every art, method, practice or preference (1094 a 5). However, each art has its own goodness without undermining the supreme good to which all arts are ultimately aiming and which is happiness (1097 a 15-35, 1097 b 1-25). Art like virtue needs

practice since the one like the other are born and destroyed in exactly the same way (1103 a 30-34, 1103 b 2-15). It would indeed be very tempting to infer that art and virtue come so close in Aristotle's analysis that they almost seem to coincide. As if anticipating such an inference, Aristotle informs his reader that "virtue, like Nature herself, is more accurate and better than any art" (1106 b 15, Welldon 54). As much as virtue and prudence come close to being identified with art, Aristotle as well as most of his commentators insist that virtue, prudence and art are not identical (1140 a 30-36, 1140 b 1-6).¹²

Finally art also comes close to wisdom. Wisdom is defined as the great artistic ability or artistic virtue (1141 a 10-15). Wise are those men like Phidias and Polyclitus who excelled in their respective arts. Besides its relevance to art, virtue is also defined as the most exact way of scientific knowledge and the science of the most valuable things (1141 a 15-21). Typical examples are Thalys and Anaksagoras (1141 b 1-3). Art is one of the five means "by which the soul arrives at truth in affirmation or denial" (1139 b 15, Welldon 189). The other four are science, prudence, wisdom and intuitive reason.

From this brief account of the concepts of art we went through, we may conclude that Aristotle examines art in itself as creation and to the extent that it relates with prudence and with wisdom. Both prudence and wisdom are intellectual virtues (1103 a 1-5, Welldon 41) and presuppose art. Pavlos Kontos in his excellent work on Aristotelian morality published under the title *Aristotelian Ethics as Ontology. Prudence, Art, Wisdom* claims that prudence is independent from both art and wisdom and thus maintains the autonomy of ethical discourse in Aristotle. Kontos argues that such discourse "depends neither

on technical creation nor on scientific knowledge and wisdom."¹³

At the same time, however, Kontos acknowledges that while art and wisdom "are in themselves morally indifferent they acquire moral content and delimit action and prudence."¹⁴ We may supplement Kontos' conclusions by stating that wisdom, art and prudence are indeed independent one from the other but they simultaneously pervade one another and each presupposes the other. Art has therefore a moral and scientific content without becoming either morality or science. Art does presuppose not only practising an ability in which one is well versed, but also knowing this ability (through science and wisdom) and having the prudence to practice this ability well, in the right and proper manner (through prudence) (1180 b 12-15, 30-36 1181 a 19-24). The right combination between wisdom and prudence in practising an art is provided by experience, according to Aristotle (1181 a 10-12, 19-24). This is precisely why those who are good in some art, usually have some experience.

The role of experience in art

Experience is not solely important before practising some art but also while practising it. For practising an art depends on the circumstances; art is the experiential outcome of the concrete circumstance in the context of which it is practised. Aristotle gives the example of the army general and the shoe maker who are always obliged to do their best in the specific circumstance they are placed in, with whatever army or leather they dispose (1101 a 1-6). He goes on to add that it is typical for the prudent and rational man to do his best in the context of any given circumstance (Ibid.). Precisely because art depends so much on the given circumstance, possible failure in practising it, is not

that important especially when it happens to somebody who knowingly practices his art in a very risky manner (1140 b 22-25).¹⁵ Failure in the final outcome of an art is one more experience in a difficult and risky circumstance (Ibid.). When taking a decision or when pursuing science, failure is of greater importance than when practising art. Exactitude is anyway not the final task of art. The final task of art, its *telos* is some form of goodness which is determined by the specific virtue aimed at and by doing one's best in the context of a given material and method (1098 a 22-32, Welldon 25). Each one who practices an art usually takes under consideration what his peers and fellow artists have achieved before him. Thus by practising his art, he adds what is precisely missing in what has already been achieved in the history of this art (1098 a 20-25). This is the reason why Aristotle mentions that time is an ally of art and a good indication for the artist; all art advances in and because of time (Ibid.).

The artist has a complimentary relationship to those before him, to his fellows and peers as well as to people in general. For his art is being solicited by people's desires and needs and by practising his art he enters into some kind of an exchange or commerce with people (1133 a 26-32). Without these exchanges which have to be fair from a quantitative and qualitative point of view the arts would disappear (1133 a 12-15). The final outcome of the arts is not as important as the manner in which they are practised and the way in which they relate to the concrete circumstance.¹⁶ What counts in the arts is the commerce with the world and the exchange with people. Due to the fact that the final outcome of art is less important than the exchange that art entails, we may explain Aristotle's rumination that "we reflect more upon

matters of art than of science since we have more doubts about the former than about the latter" (1112 b 7-10). The reason then why we have so many doubts about the final outcome of art and we are in great difficulty judging its quality, is because this final outcome is not as important as the artistic practice.

Art and history

If experience is what is central in art and what we value art for, it is historical circumstance which posits the criteria of evaluating art as it determines both the artistic experience and the exchange between the artist and the people. The historical circumstance determines the concrete good at which the specific art aims as well as the content of the ultimate or supreme good, happiness, towards which all human activity is geared. The importance of history has properly been accounted for in the best moments of art history. For example, in his classic work *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie*, published in Vienna in 1901, Alois Riegl, one of the founders of the discipline of art history, proceeds to a study which demonstrates how the criteria of artistic judgment are and should be a unique product of the historical circumstance. The right criteria to judge Roman art are not to be found in classical Greek antiquity because in such a case one inevitably tends to understand Roman art as decadent and inferior in comparison to the Greek. The right criteria, among which Riegl placed political rhetoric, should spring from proper consideration of the historical times in which Roman art was born and flourished.

Therefore art is almost never eternal. In the rare occasions when art creates this feeling of being eternal, it can usually mean one of the following two things: Either art manages to change its reception in time, and the same body of work means different things, entails different experiences and a different commerce with the

world in the different and changing historical circumstances (e.g. Roman art); or, a second alternative which is practically a different version of the first, is that artistic form has become a "first principle", existing by necessity and therefore existing in eternity (1139 b 20-37). Such an artistic form is, in this second case, so inextricably part of the civilization in which we live that it is beyond quality judgment (e.g. classical art of Greek antiquity).

If it has become clear that art is radically determined by historical time and space, it can no longer simply be defined as *mimesis*, imitation, in the way that Aristotle defined tragedy in the *Poetics* and similarly to how the majority of people understand art nowadays. Art may have had an imitative role in very significant periods of its past but art as imitation reflects only these periods and not the entire history of art. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle offers enough indications to conceive of art as a communicative practice, provided that we give the right emphasis to his idea of art as an ability or capacity for something, to the ethical-scientific aspects of art, to its experiential and circumstantial historical character and to its exchange value. Conceiving of art as a communicative practice means that art is practised through the consolidation, articulation, exchange, transmission and reception of experience. As has already been mentioned, according to Aristotle, art is not the product of any necessity and thus cannot either be the product of the necessity of imitation. Art's *arche*, its origin and principle of authority does not belong to it but rather belongs to its creator and to chance, in other words to history. As the final outcome of art counts less than the experience of creation and the commerce with the world, the artist's profession is this commerce or exchange with the world; when this exchange takes place, then the artist becomes what he is, i.e. he manages to give form to the needs, desires and

experiences of the people with whom he is in dialogue and contact. In order to articulate this form he must first come to know these desires, needs and experiences (science and wisdom) and then decide how to go about them (prudence) and both prudence and wisdom are finally reflected in the outcome of his work. The people receiving the artistic work, the final product of the artist also receive a certain view of this world and engage in a certain attitude towards it which depends on how the work articulates their needs and desires and how it encompasses their experience in each specific historical circumstance. It is rare that the relationship between the artist and the world is fair from a quantitative and qualitative point of view, as Aristotle wished it. The reason why the final outcome of the work is rarely exact is because the artist's commerce with the world is almost never fair and thus always leaves space for new artists to emerge and add what is missing in this commerce.

Concluding remarks

The diagnostic suggestion of the disorder characterizing the state of affairs in the artworld which articulated at the beginning of this paper the views of several famous art historians is only partially correct. This suggestion is not however meaningless. Those who still, consciously or unconsciously, cherish art as an imitative practice cannot but see today's art as decadent and degenerate for they apply in today's art the wrong criteria to judge it. What they perceive as disorderly is rather the very fast change of a world where needs and desires are so quickly mutated that no artistic practice manages to consolidate them into experience.

We need new criteria to judge and understand art nowadays and Aristotelian thought in the *Nicomachean Ethics* can provide them for it furnishes with a non mimetic

model of art contradicting the most fundamental tenets of art reception and interpretation until late modernism. Aristotle must be read anew in order to prepare for what is to come from what has irrevocably gone through. The recent fashionable aphorisms for the degenerate state of the arts by numerous art historians are only partially correct. For there is historical continuity in the world but the effort consumed for its discovery is taken up by philosophy.

Notes

1. Alasdair Mac Intyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) p. 2.
2. Ibid. pp. 117, 118. By the term modernity I refer to the industrial and post-industrial era since the middle of the nineteenth century. Modernity is admittedly a very problematic term to be precisely and unanimously defined and agreed upon. However it was Michel Foucault who gave it the most successful account in a small essay he wrote with the title "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow.
3. Mac Intyre, op. cit. pp. 257, 259.
4. Ibid. pp. 113, 256, 259.
5. See Peter Berger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) and Jean Clair, *Considarations sur l'état des beaux-arts. Critique de la modernité*, Niki Loizidis, *Apogee and Crisis of the Avant-Garde Ideology* (Athens: Nefeli, 1992).
6. See Berger, op.cit. pp. 55-59.
7. See Clair, op. cit. pp. 11-26.
8. See Loizidis, op. cit. pp. 105-112.
9. All references to the Nicomachean Ethics are from Aristotle's collected works, an edition comprising the ancient text and its translation to modern Greek. See *Collected Works, The Nicomachean Ethics*, volumes 7, 8, 9, edited by Vasilios Mandilaras, (Athens: Kaktos, 1992). The English translation to which we refer is J. E. C. Weldon's in Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1987). The English translation will be referred to by the translator's last name along with the page number.
10. Martin Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist* Trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer

(Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) p. 15.

11. Elldon translates *phronesis* as prudence which is not accurate but for lack of a better term we adopt it.
12. Heidegger, op. cit. p. 38.
13. Pavlos Kontos, *Aristotelian Ethics as Ontology: Prudence, Art, Wisdom* (Athens: Kritiki, 2000) p. 14.
14. Ibid. p. 168.
15. Heidegger emphasizes this point of the Aristotelian text. *Techne* constitutionally involves the possibility of failure or the possibility of failure is constitutive for the development of *techne*. Op. cit. pp. 37, 38. This is a very radical argument indeed for it entails reflection on the dominant criteria for evaluating art.
16. W. K. C. Guthrie argues that according to Aristotle “in technai we do not deliberate at all about ends but only about means. The “whether” is not as important as the “how”” See his *A History of Greek Philosophy. Aristotle: An Encounter* vol. VI, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp. 114, 115.