

THE INITIAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN ARISTOTLE'S *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*

Abstract

In the 'Foreword', I address some aspects of Academician Georg Brutian's philosophy. The Initial Anthropology paper follows.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle considers the relation of ethical theory to anthropology in a specific way. He sets out an initial anthropology that describes the human through its common and non-common elements to plants as well as to 'other animals'. The conclusion is that the human animal is the only living being that is endowed with reason and carries out 'practical life'. We may call this difference 'the anthropological difference'. In his ethical theory, Aristotle points to the limits of the anthropological difference. On the one hand, he holds that only practical theory can explain the 'practical life' as well as the 'human Good'. On the other hand, he highlights that the human is higher than the 'other animals', since the human is endowed with the divine element of intellect; nevertheless, there are beings that are 'more divine' than the human. Thus Aristotle corroborates the human and its practical life, without abandoning the Socratic-Platonic view of the Divine. In this aspect, the alleged anthropocentrism of Aristotle's ethics is to be reconsidered.

Keywords: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Ethics, Anthropology, 'other animals', anthropological difference, Anthropocentrism, the Divine.

Foreword:

In Honour of Academician Georg Brutian

Today we are coming together upon the invitation of the Armenian Pedagogical University after Khachatur Abovyan to participate in the International Conference dedicated to 90th anniversary of the late Academician George Brutian, that is the leading philosopher in Armenia in our times. The International Conference is organised by The Armenian State Pedagogical University after Khachatur Abovyan, by the International Academy of Philosophy, and by the Armenian Philosophical Society. In this International Con-

ference we remember and honour the distinguished philosopher Academician Georg Brutian, who was an eminent personality, highly recognised in his homeland Armenia and in the international philosophical community for his important philosophical research, for his initiatives concerning dialogue among persons and cultures, as well as for his contribution to the universal education of humanity. The issue of this International Conference is 'Life and Philosophy' and it expresses in an appropriate way Academician Georg Brutian's commitment to the work of philosophy, being namely to conceive the problems of life, to set out their conceptual analysis, and

to elevate them to the level of reasoned communication and of social consciousness as well.

Therefore, I express my gratitude to the institutions that have organised this Conference. I have to thank especially my distinguished colleague, Chairperson of the Philosophy Department, Professor Hasmik Hovannisyan for her excellent work concerning the organisation of the conference as well as for her kind efforts as regards my academic visit in Yerevan. Since I am a member of the International Academy for Philosophy founded by late Academician Georg Brutian, I have to stress that this Academy under his presidency has contributed through its conferences and its periodical 'News and Views' to widen the philosophical dialogue among philosophers from Armenia and other countries. Furthermore, Academician Georg Brutian encouraged the traditional ties of cultural exchange, of academic collaboration, and of friendship existing for centuries between the Armenian and the Greek people.

Logic, theory of argumentation, and methodology belong to the main issues of Academician George Brutian's philosophy. (Brutian, 1998; Djidjian, 2006, pp. 16-24; Djidjian, 2007, pp. 32-35; Hovhannisyan, 2006; van Eemeren, Garssen, Verheij, Krabbe, Snoeck Henkemans, & Wagemans, 2014, pp. 740-741, 868-869). Their distant roots are in ancient Greek philosophy, especially in Aristotle's philosophy and its tradition, to which Armenian philosophy is connected through the commentator David the Invincible. Academician Georg Brutian has contributed to promoting research on the work of Neo-Platonic Commentator David the Invincible as well as on the further development of Armenian philosophy (Brutian, 1998,

pp. 77-88). As he points out, the theory of argumentation has its distant origins in Socrates' search for the meaning of terms, in Plato's dialogues, as well as in Aristotle's dialectics as a theory of using arguments in a dispute. Aristotle set out his dialectics in his works 'Topics' and 'Sophistical Refutations' (Aristoteles, 1970b; Brutian, 1998, p. 91).

In fact, dialectics is related to the conception of philosophy itself and, in addition, it corresponds to the context of life of ancient Athens. While Plato's dialectics claims metaphysical truth, Aristotle's dialectics enquires the argumentative dealing with concrete opinions without intending the truth of Being. Aristotle, however, preserves dialectics as a philosophical exercise, as it had been performed in Plato's Academy (Ryle, 1968), and he promotes it to the method of his philosophical sciences. As it is known, Aristotle lived in Athens where the cultivation of public speech in poetry, in theater, in courts, in the marketplace or in the principal assembly was highly developed. Aristotle was impressed and inspired by the various aspects of this flourishing city (polis, πόλις), and his philosophy manifests his bond with the city (Solomou-Papanikolaou, 1989, pp. 95-98), even though he was no citizen of Athens.

Academician Georg Brutian sets out his theory of argumentation in a new perspective. First of all, he stresses that Aristotle's account of argumentation should be considered in the whole context of *Organon* as well as in its relation to *Rhetoric*. Further, he argues that, in dialectics, Aristotle pays attention to the topical forms of argumentation rather than to logical forms of thought (Brutian, 1998, p. 99). Moreover, he does not restrain his theory to an interpretation of Aristotle's dialectics. In-

stead, he sets out his theory of argumentation in the context of contemporary logic, methodology, and philosophy of language and connects it with the philosophy of life. In this regard, Academician Georg Brutian retains in his theory of argumentation Aristotle's connection of dialectics and life under new pre-suppositions. Thus, he emphasises the situational character of performed argumentation that is defined through social and historical conditions. In his view, performed argumentation is not only situated in the context of life but it has to promote decisions upon problems of life that are issues of the concrete argumentation (Brutian, 1998, pp. 94, 97, 103). While enquiring into the logical and linguistic aspects of argumentation and retaining their epistemological priority, his theory endorses almost the hermeneutic dimension of argumentation. Academician Georg Brutian's theory of argumentation has been appraised as an important contribution to this issue and makes up the leading research perspective for the Yerevan School of Argumentation (Hovhannisyan, 2006; Hovhannisyan, 2008; van Eemeren, Garssen, Verheij, Krabbe, Snoeck Henkemans, & Wagemans, 2014, pp. 740-741).

It is obvious that the full explication of academician Georg Brutian's philosophy goes beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the short account of his theory of argumentation indicates the broad orientation of his thinking and philosophical research. Considering the Aristotelian component of Academician Georg Brutian's philosophy, it is a good coincidence that this International Conference organised in his honour takes place this year, since 2016 is the 2400th anniversary of Aristotle's birth. Consequently, the theme of my paper on 'The Initial Anthropology in Aristotle's

Nicomachean Ethics' is in some way justified, since it belongs to this context of life and philosophy.

Introduction

The question whether ethical theory needs a philosophical conception of the human is still open in contemporary philosophy. If one argues for the separation of ethical theory from a philosophical theory of the human, one is opposed to alleged essentialism, since a philosophical theory of the human sets out the 'essence' of the human. If one maintains that ethical theory should take into account a philosophical conception of the human, one endorses a type of realistic ethical theory that can describe the human as an ethical agent and explain the relation of ethical theory to human reality as well. For the first argument, the essence of the human points to an obsolete metaphysics. For the second argument, ethical theory also needs some essential characteristics of the human; otherwise it remains on a high level of abstraction. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle deals with this problem in a specific way. He sets out an initial anthropology that describes the human in respect to other mortal living beings and serves as the way into his ethical theory. Aristotle, however, avoids the anthropocentric burdens of his ethical theory in terms of Protagoras' conception of the human and he retains the distinction between anthropology and ethical theory.

In what follows, I explore the main aspects of this theme. The first aspect is the relevance of Aristotle's initial anthropology for his ethical theory in terms of the dialectics of negation and affirmation. Subsequently, I consider the elements of this initial anthro-

pology with reference to the anthropological difference that introduces the human animal as the living being that is endowed with reason (logos, λόγος) and carries out ‘practical life’. Further, I explain that the anthropological difference has its limits, because it cannot point to the priority of the Divine with respect to the human being. Thus, the alleged anthropocentrism of Aristotle’s ethics is questioned. The concluding remarks point to the significance of anthropology for contemporary ethics.

The Relevance of Initial Anthropology

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle focuses on the human Good that can be realised through humans’ actions within the shared life of family, of friendship, and of the City (polis, πόλις) as well. In this context, the City has priority for humans’ life (Solomou-Papanikolaou, 1989; Moutsopoulos, 1994). Aristotle’s destructive critique of Plato’s idea of the Good as a principle is a decisive step towards his own ethical theory (Aristoteles 1970a, 1096a11-1097a13; cf. Santas, 1989; Pentzopoulou-Valalas, 1998, pp. 25-40). Certainly, critique is a main characteristic of philosophical theory. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s initial critique that aims to demarcate the field of the new theory from the field of the theory it refutes does not coincide with the new theory. For, the initial critique is a form of concrete negation, which only opens the new field of theorising. Then it indirectly requires an initial affirmative consideration functioning as the threshold to the new theory. The initial affirmative consideration has a formal character corresponding to the pragmatics of theory. Its content can be positive or negative in respect to concrete re-

ality. In this aspect, the initial affirmative consideration indicates that the philosopher does go beyond the critique of another theory, and he accepts an initial account promoting his own theory. In fact, it is this dialectics of negation and affirmation, which does not let theorising wither at the fringes of critique.

Its impact is also obvious in Aristotle’s ethical theory. At the beginning of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle does not only formulate a rigorous critique of Plato’s idea of the Good as a principle; he also sets out his elementary anthropology as the initial affirmation promoting the development of his ethical theory. He, however, retains Socrates’ and Plato’s question of the Good, and dedicates his own ethical theory to investigating this question primarily within the human scale. In this respect, *Nicomachean Ethics* does not only include a rigorous critique of Plato; it also remains a dialogue for and against Socrates’ conception of ethics (Burger, 2008). Furthermore, Aristotle proposes the relative autonomy of ethical theory towards anthropology and metaphysics as well.

It is worth mentioning that Aristotle neither uses the term ‘anthropology’ nor does he explore an independent theory of the human, which could be named ‘anthropology’. Nevertheless, he often sets out the essential characteristics of the human in such a systematic way, that his pertinent sentiments could be assumed to amount to a theory of the human being. Thus, it has been accepted that Aristotle’s philosophy includes a specific anthropology or philosophical anthropology (Kyrkos, 1971; Scheler, 1976, p. 126; Fleischer, 1976; Apostolopoulou, 1987, pp. 50-52). This view offers a significant interpretative possibility in dealing with Aristotle’s consideration of the human and, at the same time, it corre-

sponds to the fact that there is an 'anthropological tradition' in ancient Greece already before Aristotle. This tradition indeed includes an innovation, since the ancient Greeks invented the concept of the human, even though they did not establish a complete universalisation of this concept because of the social conditions of those times. Alongside the distinction between 'free' and 'slave', Aristotle has the insight of this universalisation, when he explains that the master and the slave can be friends, not because the master is the master and the slave is the slave, but because both are humans (Aristoteles 1970a, 1161b5-8; Apostolopoulou, 2006, pp. 111-112). However, he does not eliminate the particularity of his conception, since he argues that slavery is 'by nature'.

The Elements of Initial Anthropology

While explaining Aristotle's initial anthropology, I take into account one of the main arguments of Helmuth Plessner's philosophical anthropology about the human as a nature-bound and, at the same time, as an ethical being (Plessner, 1981, p. 64). Consequently, the philosophical description of the human as an ethical agent has to consider humans in relation to nature, to plants and animals. Nevertheless, this philosophical description is not sufficient for Aristotle, because Aristotle considers the human that is endowed with reason and with the divine element of intellect as well. These points can serve as a hermeneutic elucidation of what I mean by anthropology in this paper. It is obvious that it cannot be my intention to investigate now the divergence between Plessner's anthropology and that of Aristotle's.

In his initial anthropology, Aristotle describes the specific characteristics of humans'

life with respect to the realisations of life in plants, in 'other animals', and in human animals (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1097b33-1098a4; for the expression 'other animals' see 111a26, 1111b8, 1141a33-34, 1178b27-28 etc.). Thus, Aristotle describes the essential characteristics of the human 'from below', through following the scale of the realisations of life in nature from the lower level up to the higher one that is the level of the human animal. This way of theorising also expresses Aristotle's attempt to pose the problem of the Good in terms of the mundane and of the human scale as well. At the same time, this is contrary to Plato's account of the transcendent Good, which Aristotle has refuted at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle considers life as the common essential characteristic of plants, of other animals, and of human animals as well, since all of them participate in life and realise different types of it. In fact, life is an active field supported through the appropriate life activity of these living beings. In this aspect, life manifests its actual order as an essential interweaving of realisations.

Aristotle holds that every level includes the types realised in the lower level and, at the same time, it brings to the fore a further type of the realisation of life. Thus, every level is richer than the previous one. In plants, life consists in nutrition and growth. On the level of animals, life is not only nutritive and augmentative, but it is enriched through the sensitive-perceptive life. Then the human animals share with the other animals the nutritive, the augmentative, and the sensitive-perceptive life. Nevertheless, they realise another type of life, since they are the only living beings endowed with reason. Then their 'peculiar' life is the 'practical life' (praktikē zōē, πρακτικῆ

ζωῆ), namely a life of action (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1098a4-5).

Aristotle does not explain how the types of life are realised in every level. He takes them as given and develops an almost phenomenological description of them in terms of a realistic conceptual scheme. Therefore, his phenomenological account is close to what could be considered as a philosophical biology, since it describes animals on the basis of common and - where it is necessary- of differentiated characteristics. In this way, he retains the chain of life and, at the same time, he poses the difference between human animals and other animals as another realisation of life that is connected with the novel element of reason.

At first glance, reason and practical life could be seen as an addition to the other types of life. Nevertheless, Aristotle indicates that this form of life is supported though the common self-understanding of humans. While other animals live together in a place and look for their food, human animals are conscious of being members of their shared life and, at the same time, they support this shared life through their actions and values. However the shared life of humans has its basis in life as a natural reality, it makes up a novel level of life and corresponds to the essential characteristic of the human as a 'political animal' (zōon politikon, ζῷον πολιτικὸν) by nature, in terms of the institutional frame of 'polis' (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1097b11). In his relatively short initial anthropology, Aristotle summarises his affirmative account as that difference of the human animal from other animals, which consists in reason and practical life. For this conception of difference I shall use the expression 'anthropological difference'

that serves only as an interpretative signification for further investigation. Then it is a question whether Aristotle considers the anthropological difference as a sufficient account within the context of his ethical theory.

The conceptual field of reason and of practical life makes up the transition from initial anthropology to ethical theory. Aristotle introduces the crucial concept of the 'work of the human' (ergon anthrōrou, ἔργον ἀνθρώπου) in order to define the 'human Good' (anthrōpinon agathon, ἀνθρώπινον ἀγαθὸν) that is the core of his ethical theory (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1097b24-25, 1098a7-16; Dragona-Monachou, 1981, pp. 109-111; Cooper, 1986, especially 144ff.). The translation of Aristotle's term 'ergon' in modern languages is not so easy, and the English rendering 'function' does not solve the problem (Solomou-Papanikolaou 1989, pp. 65-66). In fact, the word 'ergon' exists in the Greek language from Homer's epic poems up to the present in a variety of meanings (Theodorakopoulos, 1981, pp. 72-73). It is obvious that the way from the semantics of everyday Greek language to Aristotle's theoretical elucidation is indispensable, if we wish to find out the meaning of 'ergon' in the context of his philosophy. Anyway, I prefer the English rendering 'work' for Aristotle's term 'ergon'.

Since the life of the human is the practicing of reason, the work of the human is an activity of soul in accordance with reason towards an optimal achievement. Aristotle elevates the work of the human to the peculiar human Good that is 'soul's activity (energeia, ἐνέργεια) in accordance with excellence (aretē, ἀρετή) (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1098a16-17). Since the peculiar life of the human is 'practical life', the human Good is what can be achieved in action (praktōn agathon, πρακτὸν

ἄγαθόν) (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1097a23). In this respect, the work is the activity presupposing potentiality and, at the same time, ability and effort to perform an activity causing an effect. And the work of the human is this activity guided through reason. Then the gradual transition from work to activity and to praxis, from the Good to the human Good, to the Good achieved through and in praxis opens the field of Aristotle's main ethical theory.

The Anthropological Difference in the Context of Ethical Theory

The initial anthropology in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* points to reason as the crucial difference of the human from non-human animals. It seems human life recapitulates the previous types of life and, at the same time, it transforms their characteristics because of reason. As mentioned above, the main issue of initial anthropology is life as a process and as an activity as well. Aristotle does not abandon the anthropological difference at the threshold of his ethical theory. Instead, he investigates its aspects in order to stress that reason is no gradual distinction but it is a real difference characterising the human in contrast to other animals. So, he argues other animals do not participate either in virtue or in malice because they lack reason (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1145a25-26, 1149b31-32; Steiner, 2005, pp. 61-62). While suggesting that they are not to be ethical agents, Aristotle ascribes them some virtue as regards the elementary care for life. When he considers animals in terms of parent-children relation, he notes that, in this case, the human as well as the animals have a natural kind of mutual friendship (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1155a16-20).

Yet, Aristotle admits that some animals are prudent, because they seem to have the natural ability to provide for their life (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1155a25-28). Whether naturalistic or anthropomorphic, these views indicate Aristotle's broad conception of life. On the one hand, Aristotle excludes animals from practical life; on the other hand, he attributes to them some elements of moral behaviour by arguing that they have some inclination to virtue only 'by nature'. Therefore other animals' behaviour has some glance of virtue, but this glance concerns only some cases and does not cover the whole of their life. In other words, only humans perform activities with reason and on the basis of ethical criteria, only humans communicate about good and just, only humans carry out their life as a whole of life with virtue. Even though Aristotle does not intend to set out an account of animals' ethics, his views foreshadow this version of ethics that has been developed in the twentieth century.

Further, the anthropological difference contributes to the critical self-understanding of the human as an ethical agent. Aristotle considers the difference between the human and the animal on the moral level not as opposition indicating that virtue belongs to the human, while malice characterises the animal, as it was usually maintained in everyday life. Moreover, his argumentation has different levels. First of all, Aristotle formulates a short critique of moral language. As he points out, metaphor is useful, but it does not express truth. Secondly, he denies that the human is good and that the animal is bad. He underlines that virtue and malice are human possibilities connected with reason. Therefore, he insists that malice characterises the human, since mal-

ice indicates the distortion of reason, namely the attitude of the human acting against its essential determination. So, he argues that the nature of animals is less than malice; a bad man is more frightful than an animal (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1150a1-8).

Aristotle admits that the human is sometimes so violent that its behaviour is ferocious. He takes into account disease as a cause (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1149a16-20). Nevertheless, he considers violence and brutality of human behaviour as the degradation of humanity. Since moral language does not have the appropriate term for these cases of human behaviour, Aristotle uses the expression 'the beast' or ferocious as a metaphor indicating a similarity to animals' behaviour. While brutality is a specific characteristic of animals' natural force, in the case of human behaviour brutality indicates the degradation of the human towards inhumanity because of the distortion of reason. It seems that Aristotle attempts to restrain the ethical downgrading of animals that was the consequence of the gradual humanisation of nature.

Anyway, it is a question whether Aristotle considering only the human as the ethical agent sets out an anthropocentric ethics. In fact, anthropocentrism has been introduced in modern times as the other side of secularisation (Chadwick, 1991, pp. 229-234). In this context, one may contend that morality should and could be separated from religion and ethics should and could be set out without theology. Regarding the alleged anthropocentrism of Aristotle's ethics various arguments have been developed. Thus, Martha C. Nussbaum asserts that Aristotle's ethics is anthropocentric, because the human sets normative elements within mundanity and the human scale

and it poses the Good as the Good only for human life and for no other (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 291-294). In this respect, Aristotle sets out his ethics without theological connotations, and he elevates humans' ethical life beyond the life of other mortal animals. In a different way, Gary Steiner considers anthropocentrism as the worldview ascribing to animals an inferior status in the cosmic order compared to humans (Steiner, 2005, p. 2). He assesses that Aristotle's ethics represents rather a moderate anthropocentrism, because Aristotle preserves the continuity between humans and other animals, while excluding animals from the polis. Therefore, there is a tension between Aristotle's 'anthropomorphic language' and his anthropocentrism (Steiner, 2005, p. 72).

In fact, Aristotle sets out his initial anthropology explaining the human through taking into account the characteristics of other animals that are essential for considering the human as a living being among other mortal living beings. Even though Aristotle underlines reason and speech as features of the difference of humans from other animals and he considers only humans as ethical agents, the anthropological prerequisites of his ethical theory indicate a moderate definition of a trace of ethical value for some other animals.

Suggesting that the human is higher than the other animals because the human is endowed with reason and speech, Aristotle's initial anthropology reaches its limit. At the same time, the anthropological difference characterising a determination from bottom up, from animal to human, gives place to the question about a determination from above, from the Divine (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1177b27-31). As Aristotle maintains, everything has a divine element, since it exists within the tel-

eological life interrelation that is connected with the Divine. Moreover, the human is endowed with intellect and has the ability of intellectual activity within the theoretical form of life performed in philosophy as a research of the principles of the order of Being. Since intellect is the most divine element of human existence, it opens a perspective of transcendence within immanence that is realised as rational contemplation (*theoria*, θεωρία) and makes up the highest level of the activity of ethical agents (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1177a13-17, 1178b2-9).

In this respect, Aristotle explores the main activities of ethical agents, and, at the same time, he points to the broad interweaving of life within which humans carry out their specific forms of life. While action as 'praxis' (πρᾶξις) introduces changes in human life, intellectual activity as 'theoria' (θεωρία) is an intrinsic activity (*energeia*, ἐνέργεια) of investigation and contemplation of the whole scale of life without intending some impact upon it. While friendship includes self-relation connected to the relation to other, to friend, intellectual activity as rational contemplation means the self-sufficient self-relation based upon the ontological specification of intellect as the divine element of the human (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1171b32-36, 1178b21-22; Apostolopoulou, 2006, pp. 107-112). Nevertheless, self-relation characterising intellectual activity never becomes absolute, since human intellect exists under conditions of finitude. Therefore, intellectual activity as rational contemplation is only similar to the continuous activity of the Divine (Aristoteles, 1970a, 1178b27; Apostolopoulou, 1999, 31). Thus, Aristotle corroborates the orientation of human life towards flourishing and values

without abandoning the Socratic-Platonic viewpoint that the Divine is the highest reference point of ethical life. In some way, he shares Protagoras' emphasis on the human, but he does not endorse Protagoras' radical anti-ontology. Instead his ethics corroborates the human as ethical agent, but it is not released from his metaphysics.

Conclusion

The initial anthropology in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* serves to describe the context of Aristotle's ethical theorising after his critique of Plato's comprehensive theory. From an almost meta-theoretical consideration, it has a strategic importance not only for developing a new theory but also for vindicating the place of this theory against another theory. While doing so, it also describes the human as the ethical agent within a life context. Besides, the anthropological difference, namely the difference between the human and the other mortal animals, allows some considerations about other living beings as inhabitants of this earth. Even though Aristotle considers humans as higher over other mortal animals, he does not adopt some aggressive attitude or emotional aversion towards the latter. He underlines the continuity of life that the human and the other mortal animals share, and, at the same time, he explains the difference and the convergence of the human towards them. It is still a question whether ethical theory does need an anthropological account as a prerequisite (Apostolopoulou, 1999; Apostolopoulou, 2008). Aristotle offers a reasonable justification of such a prerequisite that we should take into account nowadays, when the question of the human as a concrete living

being is put under conditions of uncertainty.

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