
Ethics and Politics: Two Parts of a Single Inquiry in Aristotle

Thomas Marwa Monchena

Department of Philosophy, Jordan University College, Morogoro, Tanzania

Email address:

monchenatom@gmail.com, Thomas.marwa@juco.ac.tz

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Abstract: This article delves into examining how according to Aristotle's understanding Ethics and Politics, though, considered independent fields of study today, they are closely related as two parts or dimensions of a single inquiry. Our interest in this question of how Aristotle conceived these two fields of inquiry in their relatedness is drawn by our discovery that in his work *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle has given space to the discussion on the subject matter of politics. In Book 1 of *Nicomachean Ethics* some chapters are dedicated to examining the subject matter of politics, the aims of political science and the role of the political society is conceived to be the cultivation of virtuous life of the citizens. The foundation of this relationship lies on the fact that these two sciences are both practical sciences whose aim is the pursued and attainment of eudemonia, both individually and communally. Ethics and politics have a common method according to Aristotle. The practical truth that is proper to these practical sciences is achieved through the method called dialectic; which Aristotle conceives as an analytical instrument that facilitate by bringing clarity. Even the one who is an "amateur" to Aristotelian philosophy would realize that Aristotle has a conception according to which politics and ethics are related. This is a brief attempt to show the nature of that relationship. While the study of ethics shows the intrinsic requirements (virtues both moral and intellectual) for happiness, the study of politics seeks to show the best constitution (the best political climate) necessary for the cultivation of the life of virtues and consequently, the attainment of happiness.

Keywords: Ethics, Politics, Practical Knowledge, Happiness, Virtue

1. Introduction

Aristotle's position regarding the problem of the relations between ethics and morality represents a tenet that holds that politics and ethics stand to each other as two dimensions of a the same search for the well-being of human beings. The essential position of this "paradigm" is that, it views both ethics and politics as in quest of securing the flourishing of human beings (either as individuals or as community – an individual in private life is the same as in his social life) and they cannot conflict (not opposed) one another.

This tenet holds that among the roles and functions of politics are the spiritual nourishment of the citizens, making them sociable, teaching citizens on how to relate with others in their community, and observance of the rights of others. As we have said above, in holding this view, Aristotle is not alone. For example, Plato did not conceive of ethics as a separate branch of philosophy, and does not distinguish

ethics from politics. In fact, as Vittorio Hösle says, for Plato there is a correspondence between the soul and the state, and consequently the "individual ethics" corresponds to "political ethics" such that the "the virtue of the state proceeds from the virtue of its citizens". He further writes:

According to Plato the classes in the ideal state should correspond to the parts of the soul, and even the degenerate forms taken by the state, which are investigated in the eighth and ninth books of the Republic, are each correlated with a specific human type. [...]. The soul and the state not only correspond to each other, they are also in harmony with the cosmos [1].

For Plato, the foundation of the political state is human nature. Man is spontaneously social being; and given the differentiation of individuals and their division of work, there arise the need, in society, to ensure justice in mutual relations. Now, since man is social by nature, it follows that the state is not a result of convention, but a natural

association with a moral purpose of securing justice. Thus, politics is intimately connected with morality; the governing state should not be a game ruled by the interests of the few, nor the violent domination by one person, but should be for the well-being of all. Plato and Aristotle are in agreement concerning the unity of politics and morality.

Our choice of Aristotle as a representative of this “paradigm” (tenet) that holds the view that morality and politics stand at each other as two distinguishable parts of one and the same philosophical inquiry, and argue for the oneness of morality and politics is because in Aristotle’s philosophy the problem of the relationship between morality and politics is treated with more clarity for the first time. In fact, Aristotle is the first to think of these two fields as distinct domains of practical knowledge. However, it would be misleading to argue that because Aristotle wrote two separate treatises on politics and ethics, therefore the two subjects have nothing to do with each other. For Aristotle, ethics and politics both make a part of what he calls practical knowledge (‘science’). The relatedness between ethics and politics both as being practical knowledge is foundational and the basis of Aristotle’s view that the two are but, two sides of a single coin [2].

2. Politics and Ethics as Practical Knowledge

For Aristotle, knowledge is an essential quality of the mind that is involved in thinking. He divides knowledge in accordance with different modes or intellectual dispositions which include understanding, art, science (capacity to demonstrate), and philosophical wisdom. According to Aristotle different things have different causes and principles. For this same reason human knowledge is of various kinds, given the various intellectual dispositions or the kinds of thinking. The distinguishing element for those various sciences is the kind of thinking and the activities that the mind performs [3].

For Aristotle knowledge is threefold in its division: speculative knowledge, practical knowledge, and productive knowledge. Speculative knowledge is divided further into: first philosophy, philosophy of nature, and mathematics; while practical knowledge is divided further into ethics, politics, and a number of other human activities like economics. These sciences refer to the readiness or the disposition of mind and the intellectual inclination towards something. In arts that intellectual inclination is towards the production of things; while in practical sciences (politics and ethics) the intellectual inclination is towards the determination of some action. In the case of metaphysics, philosophy of nature and mathematics the disposition of mind is oriented towards the contemplation of something. The knowledge pursued for the sake of contemplation is theoretical; the knowledge pursued for the sake of actions is practical; and the knowledge pursued for the sake of making or producing something is productive [4].

By calling ethics and politics practical, Aristotle means that we do ethics and politics properly and sensibly when we question and rationally speculate for the sake of human action—that is, for the sake of directing our human activity and regulate our lives rightly and reasonably for the attainment of our well-being. Or it would be more appropriate to say that ethics and politics are practical science in the sense that it is knowledge about “what to be”, about the best that man can be, because in the strict sense both moral and political life do not merely consist in the determination of human actions, but rather in the alignment the human conduct in a ascertained manner, toward a ascertained human excellence. Ethics and politics as practical ‘sciences’ are not science in a platonic sense, that is, as knowledge of unchanging universals, the forms. To find knowledge that is something more than opinion, according to Plato, we must ascend to the world of numbers and Ideas or Forms. The physical world being one of movement and change, our knowledge of it is only opinion.

Another criterion for distinguishing between practical and speculative knowledge according to Aristotle, is the “level of precision” or exactness “that can be attained when studying them. Political and moral knowledge does not have the same degree of precision or certainty as mathematics [5].

In a sense practical science (politics and ethics) are the precision, the exactness and the certainty of scientific knowledge. This fact is vindicated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle says: “Our account will be adequate if its degree of perspicuity is in accord with its subject matter. For we must not look for the same degree of exactness in all accounts, any more than in all products of the crafts. Noble things and just things, which are what politics investigates, admit of so much difference and variability that they seem to exist by conventional law alone and not by nature. Good things seem to admit of variability in the same way too, because they result in harm in many cases, since some have in fact been destroyed because of wealth, others because of courage. So it should content us, in an account that concerns and is in accord with such things, to show the truth roughly and in outline, and—in an account that concerns things that hold for the most part and is in accord with them—to reach conclusions of the same sort too.” [6].

This means that political and ethical knowledge is not meant to supply us with a rigid and unchanging set of precepts meant to be used in directing the processes of ethical and political decision-making. This argument is shared by d. j. Allan who says that “Aristotle seldom preaches, and it is no part of his view to suppose that ethics will give men rules directing them how to behave in detail.” [7].

This is so because practical sciences deal not with what has a mathematical exactness and certitude, but rather with what is inexact, likely, and probable. Practical sciences involve sphere that is characterized by contingent and presumptive circumstances. The contingent sphere in which humans live and through their free agency to perform human activities they develop and shape their moral characters. Aristotle argues that the right course of action depends on

many factors which can only be estimated by intuition, such as the time, the circumstances, and the personality of the agent. According to him the kind of thinking or reasoning that one employs when enquiring into ethical and political issues is by its kind a practical knowledge, prudence (*phronēsis*) [8].

This type of thinking is aimed not at the attainment of incontestable and obvious truth but rather human action (praxis). In this sense, as a practical science, an ‘inexact’ science, ethics studies human character (*ēthos*) with the aim of discovering how despite the contingencies involved in the sphere of human activity, human beings are led to conduct themselves responsibly in search for their own well-being. In particular, ethical enquiry for example, involves the concern for the right praxis, that is, doing what is good and right in terms of contributing positively to the attainment of the well-being of oneself and the well-being of others.

Having shown that politics and ethics are both practical ‘sciences’ – for they are pursued for the sake of action, Aristotle goes on to argue that there cannot be a strict separation of kinds between practical sciences (i.e., between ethics and politics). A strict separation is possible only in theoretical sciences, such as metaphysics, philosophy of nature, and mathematics. This is so, because the rule “that there is a science for each genus of things does not apply to habits, actions, and institutions, which cannot be separated and defined like the substances and motions studied in physics.” This means that “ethics and politics are not separate sciences treating of independent subject matters, but are dialectically distinct approaches to common problems, and in each approach the effect of other must be taken into account.” And they both belong to practical knowledge, that is, they pursue knowledge for the sake of activity [9].

For Aristotle, ethics and politics as practical sciences have a common methodology. Dialectic, which is the method of analyzing the consistency of plausible arguments in general, is the method appropriate for the discussions of questions in the domains of ethics and politics. Dialectic is a mode of reasoning in which humans may be trained to engage in the critical and constructive study of common beliefs, proposed definitions, and its aim is to prove, as plausible and ‘true for the most part’, those beliefs. This analytic method begins by discussing the commonly accepted, currently held, reputable opinions, in an attempt to test them for non-contradiction [10].

Aristotle implies the same thing when he says: “But the truth in questions about action is judged from what we do and how we live, since it is there that the final decision lies. Hence we ought to examine what has been said by applying it to what we do and how we live; and if it harmonizes with what we do, we should accept it, but if it conflicts we should count it mere words.” [11].

Aristotle applies dialectical analysis in his ethical and political writings especially in *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*; and he does think that, with the help of dialectical analysis of various accepted and plausible premises, we can arrive at true opinion.

3. The Relation Between *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*

The connection between morality and politics in Aristotle is also apparent in the link between Aristotle’s more famous ethical and political writings – the *Nicomachean Ethics* (in Greek: *Ēthikōn Nikomacheiōn*) and the *Politics* (*Politikōn*). These works are thought to be two parts of a single inquiry in quest of ensuring the flourishing of human beings. Aristotle recognizes that happiness is the ultimate good—all other goods are intermediate, they are pursued to achieve happiness. In his famous ethical writing, the *Nicomachean Ethics* he presents the question of how to achieve happiness. After a dialectical analysis of various possible motivations for actions, he concludes that happiness is to be pursued and attained by means of attainment of virtue, and hence the purpose of human existence. Thus, the *Nicomachean Ethics* deals with two related topics: people’s dispositions of character and their practical thinking concerning their chosen means to the end of particular right actions. It deals with moral virtues (justice, bravery, temperance, etc) and the intellectual virtues (theoretical wisdom – *sophia*, and practical wisdom – *phronesis*) [12].

It is interesting to note that at the conclusion of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle discusses of the highest form of happiness. He says that a life of contemplation is the highest virtue and therefore the highest or the perfect form of happiness (*eudaimonia*) for man. He discusses five different modes of thinking or states of mind by which the mind is able to arrive at truth by affirmation or denial. His list of five modes of thought include: Productive art, prudence (*saggezza*), intelligence, epistemic (demonstrative) science, and wisdom (*sapienza*). According to Aristotle our capacity to exercise these intellectual virtues as different states of mind is not a consequence of any legislator or any constitution. However, for such a contemplative life there is need for an appropriate social-political environment, which in turn, needs an appropriate government. According to Enrico Berti, one of the most famous political theories of Aristotle is his view that a political state is necessary for a good life or for living well and the highest form of happiness of man [13].

This argument is also captured and well phrased by Janet Coleman in her treatise, *A History of Political Thought*. Coleman writes that, “wherever a human is, so long he is in some community, he can think productively, demonstratively, prudentially, intuitively. But as we shall see, certain polities give him the opportunity to engage and perfect certain of these intellectual capacities better than do others. Certain polities enable a man to integrate his moral and intellectual virtues so that he lives the kind of life that is suited to the kind of being he is.” [15].

An appropriate government is needed because for Aristotle, these intellectual virtues or different modes of thinking “develop, not through habituation, but rather through experience and instruction. As humans we are born with the relevant capacities to learn to think in “recognizably” human ways, but for Aristotle, it is only

through instruction and experience that we actualize the potential to think in different ways [14].

Thus, the end of *Nicomachean Ethics* provides the perfect flow into the *Politics* reasserting the close relationship between ethics and politics. The nature of the relation between *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* is such that while the former deals with the good life as it may be realized by a plurality of good men who share ways of evaluating and discussing the good life in a good city or 'state', the latter deals with those constitutive principles of the good city or 'state' itself as social environment necessary for the attainment of happiness or good life. This what Aristotle states in the introductory discussion in *Politics*: "when several villages are united in a single complete community, large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing, the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life." [15].

In other words, in *Politics* Aristotle treats the conditions in which men, with certain dispositions of character (virtues), choose means to their end in order to flourish, to be happy. Hence, the question is how individual beings require a good political society, ruled by a good government in order to attain happiness. If we are correct, it means Aristotle is aware of the interplay between his ethical and political theory. Richard Kraut in his treatise on Aristotle's political philosophy recognizes that Aristotle's political thought depends crucially on his ethical theory.

Kraut further contends that Aristotle conceives of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* as following a logical progression – which the former establishes the foundation of politics and the latter provides the further detail that allows his examination of human well-being to be put into practice. Aristotle is deeply aware of this interdependence between ethics and politics [16].

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that since politics is the science that controls all other practical disciplines, its proper concern it is to carry out an investigation of human well-being (happiness, or flourishing), and to regulate human affairs in the light of what it discovers. Though Aristotle speaks of politics as the science that controls all other disciplines in the practical order, his criterion is the use of knowledge to direct action. But on the level of analysis of the practical order (theoretical level of practical knowledge, as Yves Simon and Jacques Maritain call it), which is concerned with universal principles, definition and, analysis of end and means, politics is subordinate to ethics.

In this regard, Political life is considered to be the consummation of the ethical life because: the political activities are necessary for human fulfillment and happiness. But for Aristotle, the attainment of happiness requires virtue of character which is acquired by moral education. And again, it is the *polis* that has the task to make people live the virtuous life. So the proper aim of politics, according to Aristotle, is moral virtue. By coercion of the power of law, politics takes the greatest care in making the citizens to be of a certain sort, namely good and capable of noble actions [17].

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle discusses the nature of human being's happiness or well-being; he argues that all human activities aim at some good and that some goods are subordinate to others. But, that the science of good for man is politics. In the *politics* he considers the state as one of the chief means through which the individual attains the good life. By his famous declaration in the *Politics*, that "man is by nature a political animal" Aristotle means that it is only within a political community (city-state) that a human being can be himself, and live "the good life". Politics is therefore the an ethical activity concerned ultimately with creating a "just society" in the sense of a harmonious, ordered society in which the citizens have the possibility of realizing their natural potentiality [18].

4. Conclusion

One of the important features of the view that holds ethics and politics to be two parts of a single inquiry is that it acknowledges private life as well as human commonality. It means one human being may have interest in some matter that does not interest other human beings of a particular community. It also acknowledges the variety of means in which interests—private or common—can be satisfied. There is more than a single way for human beings to attain well-being; it would be implausible and against experience to hold the contrary. Since, man is by nature a political animal, living in a society is, therefore, a necessary condition of the attainment of his well-being. But, as we said above, for Aristotle, the attainment of well-being or happiness requires virtue of character which is acquired by moral education.

What is common among the protagonists of this view that retains that politics and ethics are connected is their understanding that the purpose of the state is dictated not by the individualistic desires and interests of particular individuals but by the nature of man and the end for which he is destined. The state exists to promote justice among men, to help men to become better human beings, to facilitate the development of their creative potentialities, and to restrain their propensity to do evil. And again, it is the State (*polis*) that has the task to make people live the virtuous life.

The main problem in view is how to impose a common moral discipline upon the younger members of society; assuming that it is convenient to each to look only to his interests. For Aristotle it is the political leader (legislator), if anyone, who provides for the common good.

In the above perspective, law—which is a statesman's instrument for governing, is related to virtue as means are related to end; since the goal of the law is to develop good character in the citizens. The state (or statesman), therefore, is concerned with ordering the souls of its citizens, that is, creating that order in the souls of its citizens which will make them good and just men. For this we agree with Pierre Manent, when he writes that: For Aristotle, looking properly at the city-state meant considering it according to its end: the city-state was the only framework within which man could fulfill his nature as a rational animal, by practicing the civic

end moral virtues that permitted him to demonstrate his excellence [19].

Thus, every political community does affect the character of its citizens; it does affect the order of their souls, by showing them what they should look up to. How politics affects the souls of citizens depends on the kind of that regime, according to Aristotle. Because it is probably true that right opinion (orthodoxy) is the firmest basis of right action (orthopraxy). The political concern to avoid unjust acts (immoral acts) by the citizens, leads inevitably, to the concern on how to make the citizens good and just citizen.

Now, the fact that the state has a moral function should not be understood as suggesting that morals are merely conventional. In Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that there are some correct, insightful conventional moral rules that enable humans to actualize their natural capacities as moral agents. Convention, according to Aristotle, must work with nature, not against it. Aristotle appears to believe that humans are born without any character or virtue, but with a capacity (yet unrealized) to think or act in different ways. Nature endows humans with potentialities which are later actualized. This means that no human is simply a social product and no one simply comes to know what is right by merely accepting unexamined social opinions.

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