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Super
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Option: 2B – On the relationship between ethics and politics in Aristotle

INTRODUCTION

In the present paper attempts will be made to analyze the Aristotelian definition of *virtue* as presented in his work “Nicomachean Ethics”. In particular, this essay will comment on Aristotle’s definition of virtue as a natural predisposition inherent in human beings and will proceed by further dividing virtues into moral and intellectual. Finally, the notion of political responsibility will be investigated in an attempt to correlate Aristotelian ethics with the socio-cultural context to which human beings belong.

PART I: DEFINITION AND DIVISION OF ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUES

According to Aristotle, virtues are defined as a pre-existing concept which is present in human beings, but can be further processed and developed through the interaction of humans with the social surroundings and the political institutions. The philosopher describes virtue as a *hexis*, i.e. as a potential capacity which can be expressed and externalized only if provided with constructive stimuli. The raw materials that can be converted into virtue are human *passions*, such as pleasure, desire, anger and “*thumos*”. In a more detailed analysis, one could also pinpoint the distinctive feature of virtue which is its nature as a *mean* between two vices: the *excess* and the *deficiency*. Nevertheless, it is necessary to realize that Aristotle does not abide by the branch of *rule ethics* which provide strict guidelines as to how one can achieve virtue and avoid the *wrong-doing*. On these grounds, the philosopher maintains that finding the *mean* lies on the individual, given that the concept of virtue is a completely subjective one. It does not entail an arithmetic symmetry, simply because all individuals have different needs and are exposed to a wide spectrum of stimuli which can by no means be predicted beforehand.

Secondly, on the definition of virtue, Aristotle sets certain criteria or prerequisites which determine whether a person can be defined as virtuous or not. In particular, the philosopher maintains that “doing well” is not self-explanatory and by no means renders a person automatically virtuous. On the contrary, a righteous person ought to be well aware and conscious of the fact that he is virtuous; he should express his virtue in the context of a constant, unchanged virtuous behavior and, finally, ought to have chosen freely and without external influence the path of virtue. As it can be inferred from the aforementioned, the last criterion elaborates on the concept of free will. Aristotle vehemently advocates the idea that a righteous person acts based on *proairesis* i.e. based on voluntary actions, which reflect the ideas and morals of his own and are not blemished by ignorance or deceit. Only in this case does he deserve praise or blame as a moral agent by the society.

Having outlined Aristotle's general definition of virtues, this essay will proceed by examining the division between intellectual and moral virtues. On the one hand, Aristotle conceives human beings as "rational beings" and believes that their intellect is what determines their ability to process the received stimuli and use this information to make informed, essentially free choices. As a result, he recognizes what is known as "intellectual virtues" which can be acquired and further refined through human interaction with educational institutions. It is characteristic that the philosopher employs the term "didakti" i.e. teachable or learnable when he refers to intellectual virtue. On the other hand, human soul is best represented by the Aristotelian "moral virtues" which can be developed through constant, continuous practice which will, eventually, result in the addiction of human beings to righteous actions.

Overall, in this explanatory part of the essay, the concept of virtue was clearly defined and a first relationship between society and morality emerged. Furthermore, the Aristotelian division of virtues was addressed, in an attempt to clarify that both categories of virtue i.e. "intellectual" and "moral virtue" fall under the responsibility of a civilized and well-legislated city-state or "polis" as it will be further elaborated on in the second part of the present essay.

PART II: THE ROLE OF THE POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN CORRELATION WITH VIRTUE

In his work "Nicomachean Ethics", Aristotle emphasizes on the role of the politician as well as on the function of political science i.e. *politiki epistimi* as termed in the archetype. The philosopher believes that political science is an architectural science which falls under his division of practical sciences because its main objective is to promote and safeguard societal interest. The parallelism is interesting indeed: Aristotle claims that just as an architect carefully designs and plans all the actions and steps he will follow before the completion of a task, a politician should also cater for his community by planning his actions or *energeies* and carefully monitoring the function of the society. If he becomes aware of a disharmony, his position and duties charge him with the responsibility to reform the law i.e. to legislate as an intervening means aiming at correcting the societal imbalance.

Secondly, as described in the first part of the essay, both types of virtue are somehow related to the socio-political context in which a person survives and develops his *ethos* or character. To exemplify, intellectual virtues require intellectual guidance on behalf of an illuminated teacher or *didaskalos*, i.e. the contribution of educational institutions is critical in the acquisition and proper expression of intellectual virtues. Because education, in the Athenian city-state, is one of the primary spiritual equipments the state should offer to its citizens, one can easily understand that developing the intellectual capacity and critical judgment outside the boundaries of the political community is an unattainable prospect. In a further extension of this argument, it is purposeful to ponder upon the sophist movement. Sophists were severely criticised by their contemporaries because they supposedly "distorted" the primary sense of education and, hence, they ingrained wrong and unacceptable intellectual notions thus destroying the developmental potential of "intellectual virtues". Additionally, Socrates was condemned by the Athenian state on the basis of degenerating the youth by means of his philosophical theses and teaching. As one can easily understand, both the aforementioned examples provide an insight as to how important education is in the Athenian state as a responsibility and as means to achieve virtue. Hence, on these grounds, it is so far proven that the first type of Aristotelian virtues i.e. intellectual ones are intertwined with the socio-political context and can not be realized outside a political community.

Proceeding to the second category of virtues, termed as "moral virtues", it is essential to bear in mind that they constitute amorphous ideas, "hexes" which are developed and expressed

through addiction to virtuous actions. On these grounds, in this module, it is imperative to examine the question: "Can moral virtues be attained when no constructive moral stimulus is provided by the political community?" In an attempt to answer this question, it is important to list the primary responsibilities of an ideal political community, because, through this process one will immediately realize that, in essence, all political actions aim at developing moral virtues. Ethical education, music, aesthetics, legislation are some of the characteristic examples of services offered by a state. Evidently, the first three aim directly at illustrating to adolescents or even younger children what is right and what is wrong, they aim at *psychagogia*, an ancient Greek term which implies that their objective is to lead the soul, thus create the foundations for the development of *moral virtues*. Legislation, on the other hand, being a restrictive mechanism, does not intend to display the righteous or virtuous by means of mimics, but has the responsibility to display the *vices*, to restrict human *wrong-doing* through punishment and deterrence, thus indirectly helping to shape what is perceived as virtuous character.

Overall, in this part of the essay, the correlation between the political context and the realization of virtues was clarified. The arguments put forth concerned both intellectual and moral values and intended to demonstrate that, essentially, all political and state actions aim at providing the necessary stimuli for the formation and expression of virtue. If these stimuli are not present, which happens to be the case if one develops outside the boundaries of a political community, then Aristotelian virtues cannot be achieved in their full glory and, if they are, they will constitute but mere wrong replicas of Aristotle's initial theses.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, throughout this essay, the thesis of virtues being intrinsically related with the political community was supported. After an extensive layout of Aristotelian definitions, the essay discussed the argument of the role of politics, the argument of the actual functions of politics and illustrated them through the examples of Socrates condemnation and the criticism received by the sophist movement. In the end, it was clear that because all expressions of state responsibilities within a city-state are closely correlated with the attempt to create the conducive conditions necessary for the expression of virtue, the realization of Aristotelian virtues outside a political community is an unimaginable concept.

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