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ARISTOTLE'S CONCEPT ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ AND MORAL EDUCATION

Abstract

In the systematization of intellectual virtues, amongst which are knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), wisdom (σοφία), understanding (νοῦς) and craft (τέχνη), Aristotle enumerates the practical wisdom (φρόνησις) and defines it as: "to be able to deliberate correctly about what is good and advantageous ..., not partially... but about what sorts of things further living well as a whole (Arist. NE 1140a25-27, trans. Reeve). Aristotle distinguishes φρόνησις from the knowledge and from the crafts because under this notion he presupposes the ability not only to decide how to achieve a certain goal, but also the ability to deliberate and to determine good ends according to the aim of the individual in achieving its own happiness (εὐδαιμονία). In educational context, this presupposition entails the standpoint that education should not be understood only as a process of attaining knowledge and crafts, but also as a process of becoming a virtuous person through thinking embedded in context.

Without the pretension to give a consistent system of the principles of virtue ethics, concerning education, this article will inspect the possibility of laying out a different perspective concerning educational practices that are deduced from an ancient ethical theory, especially the specific notion that this theory introduces, the notion of φρόνησις.

Key words: *ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ, ARISTOTLE, VIRTUE ETHICS, MORAL EDUCATON*

Introduction

The different approaches within the contemporary discussions on moral education, which emphasize particular psychological or pedagogical issues, for example, parent's influence on moral values or construction of moral behaviour role models, are usually developed within psychological theories, especially the cognitive-developmental theory. Although these approaches give important input on particular directions towards certain moral phenomena, their conclusions are not grounded on broader epistemological, ethical and political foundations. The philosophical theory has to provide this foundation presupposing the moral agent's life situation in general. Philosophy has to establish the ultimate ends, psychology to explain the conditions how to attain those ends, and pedagogy to establish the means for attaining them. These three disciplines in the last quarter of the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty first century develop theories that are inspired by Aristotle's philosophy.

Contemporary principles of virtue ethics, which are inspired by Aristotle's ethics, attempt to give a background for moral education (Carr 1991; Carr and Steutel 1999; Curren 2000; Kristjánsson 2007). This approach presupposes the philosophical foundations of moral life and moral action from which educational ends are deduced. The primary goal of virtue ethics is development of moral agent's character which necessary leads to happy life.

Without the pretension to give a consistent system of the principles of virtue ethics concerning education, this article will inspect the possibility of laying out one different perspective concerning educational practices that are deduced from one ancient ethical theory, especially the specific notion that this theory introduces - the notion of φρόνησις.

Aristotle's ethics and φρόνησις

According to Aristotle, ethics, along with politics and economy, belongs in a sphere different from the theoretical.[1] Its object matter is good action and not metaphysical speculations on the supreme good which cannot be found in practice.

The teleological tendency in every aspect of Aristotle's thought can also be found in his ethical theory. The ethical efficient cause implies that every human creature tends towards good and that "every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought aim at some good" (*NE* 1094a1-3). Aristotle's primary task is to answer two questions: what the ultimate good consists of, the good that is pursued for its own sake, and how to achieve that good? The ultimate end of every action is achieving happiness (εὐδαιμονία), and every single man agrees on this, says Aristotle. Happiness is attained when we act according to virtue - is the answer to the second question. Happy life is reasoned life in action, namely that is the activity of the soul in accordance with reason.

Through the discussion of the ultimate good and virtues, Aristotle cannot stress the necessity of virtuous action enough. Unpracticed virtue is not happiness - not actualized virtue is not virtue. Only by practicing and exercising a virtuous action happiness can be attained and not by its defining and contemplating. Attaining the unity of virtues is a condition for a good life. Lacking one virtue means lacking every one of them – a view-point that corresponds to the one of Socrates and Plato.

Virtue is a state of character, *mean* in relation *to us* determined by reason that would determine *men of practical wisdom* (φρόνιμος) (*NE* 1106b36-1107a3), says Aristotle. There are three important points in this statement that are of great importance for understanding Aristotle's ethics: "mean", "in relation to us" and "men of practical wisdom". Regarding the "mean", Aristotle has largely promoted this Delphic wisdom of the "golden mean" that later became recognized as his. Virtue is a mean state between excess and defect – courage is a mean state between cowardice and rashness, temperance

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[1] The difference between the practical and productive sciences is not of interest here.

between self-indulgence and insensibility, and liberality between prodigality and mean-ness. However, Aristotle suggests that what is considered as an appropriate mean can vary from one person to another, just as the meal that suits the top athlete may not correspond to a beginner in athletic exercises (*NE* 1106b3–4). In order for the virtuous person to be able to decide what is best in each individual case, namely what is best "in relation to us", he should gain a lot of experience and to see through observation how excess and defect in our behaviour can be corrected since it cannot be calculated arithmetically. Sometimes the situation requires going into excess or defect, depending on the nature of the feeling or the action "in relation to us". In order to apply the gen-eral understanding for individual cases, one must first acquire, through appropriate education and acquired habits, the ability to assess in any situation what works most closely to reason. Therefore, practical wisdom (φρόνησις) cannot be achieved by learn-ing general rules of behaviour.

In Aristotle's system of virtues, φρόνησις has a dual role. Φρόνησις is part of the intellectual virtues, together with scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), intuitive reason (nous), wisdom (σοφία), and art (τέχνη). Φρόνησις, along with τέχνη belongs to the subgroup of practical intellectual virtues because they are associated with prac-tical life, while others are cognitive and deal with eternal truths. Apart from belonging to the intellectual sphere, Aristotle assigns φρόνησις the role of being a prerequisite for the existence of moral virtues - those virtues that belong to the desiring part of the soul. The source of our wishes and motives must be in correspondence with the ration-al verification if they are inclined to be virtuous. But, also, being virtuous is never a completely rational state, which is a position far different from that of Socrates. Know-ledge of virtues is not a virtue; only virtuous action is a virtue. In this sense, these two roles that Aristotle assigns to φρόνησις highlight the dual nature of moral action; it is a practice according to reason and reason has its source in practice. Precisely because the most characteristic elements of Aristotle's ethics can be seized through the concept of φρόνησις, its comprehension is of exceptional significance for understanding his entire ethical system or any other implications and disciplines related to his ethics.

What is φρόνησις? Φρόνησις is the ultimate actualization of the reasoning, and not the cognitive part of the rational soul; the ability to choose the optimal course of action, simultaneously taking into account the ultimate goal of this action, namely the achievement of εὐδαιμονία. Φρόνησις is not a practical reasoning in the same manner as τέχνη reasoning is. Τέχνη reasoning does not need broader perspective dif-ferent from the individual problem. In the case of courage, for example, one should know what is considered courage in each individual case, when to be fearless, when to be confident, what is considered an appropriate mixture of cowardice and rashness, for what goals it is justified to sacrifice a life, etc. According to Aristotle, the excellence in deliberation (εὐβουλία) should always consider three aspects of action: the end, the manner and the time (*NE* 1142b31), and φρόνησις is the ability to recognize the an-swers to these categories in any given situation, except in cases of adultery, theft and murder, in which the virtuous person cannot apply an algorithm for action.

How to develop φρόνησις? Given that the source of φρόνησις is experience, accumulation of empirical data is necessary in order to function properly. Until then, the agent should not omit to act virtuously. This action at the beginning cannot be autonomous, but through habit and learned principles given by parents, school and the environment, the agent will learn what is objectively accepted as a good action. The transition form a non-authentic moral choice that is borne out of habit to a fully authentic virtuous choice progresses gradually and is a long lasting process. As soon as the ability of autonomous deliberation is acquired, the choice of φρόνιμος will become routine. However, Aristotle did not give clear and decisive formal principles of practical reasoning[2] in the same manner he extensively provides for the theoretical one. The reason for this is found in the different subject matter of the two types of reasoning; practice cannot be subjected to exact and always unequivocal principles.

Moral education and φρόνησις

Education too has a teleological nature: advancement of human nature. Human well-being consists of the activity to achieve such an improvement, which entails that education is a lifelong process.

Aristotle did not write a book dedicated to education. Aristotle portrays more detailed views on education in chapter eight of "Politics". Whether it was by Aristotle or some other editor, the place of educational accounts was not randomly determined. According to him, education is necessary for all and thus the care for it is a collective decision of the whole community. In that sense, education, which affects the good of all, cannot belong to the decisions of the individual. "Training for communal matters should also be communal. At the same time, one should not consider any citizen as belonging to himself alone, but as all belonging to the city-state, since each is a part of the city-state. And it is natural for the supervision of each part to look to the supervision of the whole" (*Pol.* 1337a19-23).

Education should begin at the earliest age. Like Plato, Aristotle considers education to be in proportion to all dispositions of the soul. "Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; this is the right education" (*NE* 1104b11-14).

The division of moral and intellectual virtues leads Aristotle to a significant designation of ethical education. "Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for

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[2] From several places in the Corpus Aristotelicum (in *De An.* 434a19-2, *MA* VII, 701a6-13 and *NE* 1146a-1147a) a formal structure of the so-called practical syllogism can be reconstructed. Unlike the theoretical syllogism, where the conclusion is a proposition, the conclusion in practical syllogism, is an imperative and results in action. Due to the nature of the problem that is treated by practical syllogism, Aristotle cannot construct such a precise and systematic account of practical syllogism as he gives for the theoretical.

which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit..." (*NE* 1103a14-19). An important implication of this distinction for moral education of children is that moral virtue is not something that can be learned and that can be encouraged only by verbal teaching, but by providing conditions and guidelines for children to act in an appropriate manner. Habit develops when there is a consistency in the performance of virtuous actions. This action is always formed by acquainting with all the particulars that has to be reached in order to arrive to the designated goal. The habit, according to Aristotle, is the closest origin of moral virtue because virtues do not come by nature, but are improved by habit. However, the good habits created under the good judgment of others will not be an appropriate guide for an agent to face all life complexities. This requires φρόνησις. In that sense, there is a virtue of habit and a full or true virtue that is acquired by φρόνησις. The true virtue is the subject of ethical education, but this involves nurturing both types of virtues. One cannot be virtuous if he/she does not simultaneously possess both moral virtues and φρόνησις.

True education must take into account the unity of virtues. Like Plato, Aristotle thinks that the virtuous agent cannot achieve happiness if s/he does not possess all virtues. For example, someone who is temperate, magnificent, courageous and liberal, but is not righteous, cannot be a virtuous person. According to Aristotle, this unity is provided by φρόνησις (*NE* 1145a1). Virtues are in unity in the sense that φρόνησις directs all virtues in a properly manner and deliberates when and to what extent each of them should be used in a given situation.

Aristotle does not give a systematic account of moral development, such as Kohlberg does, but in many places in his works he describes people at a different degree of moral development. Regarding the order of the spheres education should refer to, Aristotle takes his psychology into account. First, the non-reasonable, then the intelligent part of the soul; first the appetite, and then the mind should be educated. "For spirit, wish, and also appetite are present in children right from birth, whereas reasoning and understanding naturally develop as they grow older" (*Pol*. 1334b25-28). The degree to which the non-reasonable part does or does not agree with reason, determines the degree of moral development. From several places in Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics", Kristjánsson reconstructs six degrees of moral development (Kristjánsson, 20-21). "The many" - young children and many of the adults who have failed to connect with their reasonable part are at the first level. The many are obedient to fear and "do not by nature obey the sense of shame, but only fear, and do not abstain from bad acts because of their baseness but through fear of punishment" (*NE* 1179b11-13). They live passionately and avoid opposite pains "and have not even a conception of what is noble and truly pleasant" (*NE* 1179b16-17). At this level, the only method of moral education is habit. "The soft" are at the second level. The non-reasonable part of the soft reacts to reason and is starting to become morally sensitive, but does not have a strong will and resilience to carry out the moral action. They often fail to realize the virtue because of suspicion of overcoming the feeling of anxiety, or pain (*NE* 1150a13–1150b7). The "resistant" are at the third level, those who have learned how to resist pleasures and desires,

but not to overcome them. With the help of reason, they can only partially control the painful passions, although they cannot overcome the pleasant ones, even when they lead to non-virtuous actions (*NE* 1150a13–37). The "incontinent" are at the fourth level who, although act virtuously most of the time because they know what is morally right and can resist the painful passions, can still be easily overwhelmed by counter-moral pleasures. "The continent" are on the fifth level. They are those who can overcome both the painful and pleasant pleasures, have a high self-control, and the non-reasonable part of their soul follows the reason. However, self-control is not considered as an exemplary state, and the "continent" person still has base passions and wants to act badly, even if s/he refrains from doing so. To the fully virtuous agent of the sixth degree, passions and feelings are in full alignment with reason. S/he is constantly in a state of desiring the right goal, with developed, and only for him, specific φρόνησις that can acquire the goal of the mean in each individual case, a condition that for Aristotle is a man's "second nature". This condition is not acquired counter naturally because each child has the natural aspiration to overcome the five degrees, but this demands a difficult educational process in which a qualitative change in character occurs.

This is also confirmed in "Politics" where Aristotle enumerates nature, habit, and reason as the things by which man becomes a good and serious citizen of the state. The first condition is acquired by the fact that the agent is born as a man, and the other two are at the task of education. "For some things are learned by habituation, others by instruction" (*Pol.* 1332b12-13). With this he points out that the achievement of man's "second nature" is a fully educative, and not a natural process, with the purpose of developing φρόνησις.

As mentioned above, Aristotle points out two categories that are extremely important for this moral development: time and experience. To achieve the sixth degree, and by starting from the first, namely acting virtually from habit, and then from φρόνησις, a great life experience is required. "Those who have just begun to learn a science can string together its phrases, but do not yet know it; for it has to become part of themselves, and that takes time" (*NE* 1147a20-2).

Φρόνησις-development is not a leaping one. Therefore, the motivation for a change from behaviour according to habit, to behaviour according to φρόνησις action is a gradual one. We gradually learn to look at things from a more nuanced perspective, building moral insights through experiences that are increasingly more and more dependent on us. It is a qualitative progression of the character which gradually changes the attitude of "*so and so* to act" towards "*why so and so* to act". Aristotle for φρόνησις often uses terms related to the process of seeing and vision, and the acquired φρόνησις skill with the skill of the archer, who needs to make the best estimate of *the end, the manner,* and *the time.*

Paradoxes of φρόνησις

The capacity that φρόνησις brings as a concept is appealing for research in the direction of developing new methodologies within moral education. In the last couple of decades it can be seen that this capacity takes an echo not only beyond the philosophical discussions, but also outside the academic, more practically oriented, circles.[3] Despite the attractiveness and opportunities that this concept brings, problematic aspects of the application of the entire φρόνησις project can be derived, which refer to different spheres: ethical, psychological and political, spheres that have very important ethical and educational implications.

In the framework of the discussions as to whether the role of φρόνησις is to set long-term moral plans or is limited to finding ways to meet the goals that are imposed by other non-reasonable abilities, scholars in the twentieth century developed the so-called Hume's interpretation of moral action. Some passages from "Nicomachean ethics" open the dilemma whether φρόνησις or desires are responsible for setting moral goals. According to Hume, reasoning cannot be autonomous because its starting point is not in the mind. The restriction of reasoning in Hume's philosophy generally refers to reason, in his famous statement that reason is, and should be, slave to passions (Hume, II, iii, 3. 4).

From a psychological and educational point of view, the question is whether all feelings can and should be controlled by reason, especially since Aristotle allows nurturing small amount of anger (*NE* 1125b32-35). Also, the psychological basis of the relationship between habit and φρόνησις still remains unclear. Here, the problem of moral motivation and the problem of ἀκρασία (incontinence) - to act contrary to reason as a result of the predominance of a feeling arise. Although Aristotle considers that this can be easily solved by reconciling feelings with reason, the psychological challenges for such reconcilement still exist.

Regarding moral-political paradoxes, the link between developing "social virtues", on the one hand, and the development of critical thinking of the individual on the other, is particularly problematic, because, as we have seen, according to Aristotle, education must not be left to the individual.

Curren, for example, considers six problems that arise from this tension: the problem of indoctrination, the problem of foreclosed options, the problem of force, the

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[3] Under the assumption that we do not live in Aristotle's world and that φρόνησις needs a new interpretation, there is a tendency to interpret this concept as practical wisdom in professional practice and education motivated by the idea that professional knowledge lacks a moral component. Thus, there is φρόνησις in medical practice and care, φρόνησις of pedagogical practice, etc. (see Kinsella and Pitman, 2012.) The understanding of φρόνησις as anti-theory and anti-methodology in pedagogical practice is developed by Karl and Dunne, as a contrast to the τέχνη-oriented pedagogical methodologies. (Carr 1995; Dunne, 1993)

problem of scepticism, the problem of local variations and the problem of freeriding.[4] The problem of indoctrination and the freerider problem, according to him, form the paradox of public morality (Curren, 73-6). Also, McIntyre, the greatest advocate of virtue ethics, draws pessimistic conclusions about the public system of moral education. Moral education, according to him, is impossible in a pluralistic society like ours (MacIntyre, 2007). Taking into account this type of remarks and the openness of the φρόνησις concept, educational policies can vary from ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges posed by the concept of φρόνησις, the contemporary virtue ethics is increasingly interested in this notion as a basis and inspiration for dealing with contemporary problems in moral education. However, the first attempts to develop character and virtue in moral education received mixed opinions. On the one hand, they were perceived as obsolete, too religious-oriented and conservative, and on the other hand, as attempts that develop too individualistic, relativistic and sceptically oriented individuals.

As we pointed out at the beginning, this text has no intention to outline the detailed implications of introducing the principles of virtue ethics in education, but rather to point out the necessity of following the general Aristotle's guidelines in any such future drafting, in particular in terms of developing φρόνιμος. We emphasize this point because in many of the attempts to introduce the principles of virtue ethics in education these guidelines were misapplied.

Φρόνησις emphasizes the need for agent-oriented, not action-oriented, ethics, the concern for developing the moral character, and not the consequences of actions, it emphasizes the far-reaching, and not the specific life goals, aspects that the proponents of virtue ethics consider are missing in moral education. As an antipode of the abstract mind of the Enlightenment and a turn from the transcendental universalistic ethics, this concept directs the focus towards the individual as the first (moral)

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[4] In general, the *problem of indoctrination* arises in every conception of moral education because it establishes opinions that are not unequivocally true and that could not be easily abandoned at a later time. Until the child develops his own rational powers, it will be susceptible to manipulation. Thus, the *problem of foreclosed options* is created, by which the child suppresses the options for alternative concepts of the good. Also, the practice of good behaviour often has to be established by *force* because it cannot yet be established by rational persuasion. On the other hand, by nurturing the culture of criticism which φρόνησις requires, the *problem of skepticism* arises. A cynical note that may appear in a child can be devastating for any form of established cultural, social or traditional norms. Developing critical thinking also fosters selfish behaviour that can "*freeride*" on public morality and take advantage of the restrictions of those who already accepted moral norms. A problem also arises with the emergence of local moral communities created under the influence of various local social problems, which has the effect of *moral local relativism.*

substance. The moral agent must, *in relation to himself*, develop the ultimate goals of attaining εὐδαιμονία. During this process, the agent never forgets to act virtuously, according to reason. However, in these lines, recommendation for extreme individualism should not be read. Ignorance in political matters means abandoning critical reflection on one's life in favour of another reflection. It means to abandon the task of φρόνησις – conscious and rational deliberation for our life in order to achieve happiness. The prospect of a good individual life must have, as far as possible, the prospect of a good life in the polis.

There are many challenges for proper implementation of the practical and educational implications of this theory, in particular how to provide φρόνιμοι teachers for teachers of φρόνησις, but these issues still remain to be examined.

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