

A PROBLEM WITH ARISTOTLE'S ETHICAL ESSENTIALISM

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THIS DISCUSSION IS MOTIVATED BY both my sympathy with Aristotle's meta-ethics and my problems with certain elements of his ethics. I consider naturalist cognitivism sound. Ethics has to do with the nature of the being to which the principles, virtues, guidelines to action or what have you, apply. When we judge something good, we do so because we know what kind of thing it is and then check whether it is fully consistent with the implications of its nature. So a tomato is a good one if it is as fully developed in its essential respects as possible. With human beings, too, they are good ones of their kind if their essential or central potentialities are fully realized in their particular circumstances. That seems like a very promising way to tell whether something is good or bad or mediocre, despite a good deal of derision the approach has received throughout the history of ideas.

Though Aristotle's meta-ethics has much going for it, there are some liabilities that arise from how he establishes the nature of the human good, namely, by reference to the distinctive human essence, not human nature itself. Because of this Aristotle stresses rationality, not being a rational animal, as normatively central in his philosophy. In consequence, he can favor at least a certain type of slavery and entertains certain misguided notions about the proper place of women. And there is also his conception of wealth seeking as of merely instrumental value, not capable of being a virtuous pursuit.

So I am trying to figure out if there is some way to rescue the naturalism without throwing out the baby with the bath water, as it were. I believe the problems in Aristotle can be fixed and that's what I want to address.

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To start with, even though naturalism may well be sound, essentialism might not be, given a certain way of understanding the essence of something—namely what differentiates it from its genus. It is quite possible for one to arrive at a misconception of the nature of something by focusing only on the differentia and neglecting the genus. Such a misunderstanding can result in the distortion of standards, very likely leading to misjudgments as to what is good or bad, right or wrong.

This discussion is motivated, as noted before, by my concern with another area, namely, professional—in particular business—ethics. I am very concerned, in my scholarship and teaching of business ethics over the years, that there is a basic bias against the professional of business. There has always been this problem of where the idea comes from that business somehow does not manage to be as honorable a profession, akin to education, medicine or even law. In my view some elements in Aristotle's ethics contribute to this bias and I think that some corrective adjustment in Aristotle's conception of human nature would also help to see business as every bit as honorable a profession as many of these others are. One often hears the response when one tells of teaching *business ethics*, "Well, isn't that an oxymoron?" Nobody says that with medical ethics. They do say that with *military intelligence*, and people in the business world are often denigrated in literature. In works such as *Death of a Salesman* people who are in sales and marketing and business in general, from top to bottom, come out looking pretty bad.

Generally, the culture is ambivalent about business so that as much as we depend upon the works of people in this profession, they are morally evaluated mainly on the pro bono work they do or do not do. In short, whether they are socially responsible. While few ask a teacher, "Have you taught the poor lately?" because teachers are morally upstanding by virtue of being teachers, that's not so with people in business.

Where does the intellectual support for this come from? You can find it certainly, first of all, in Plato's Socrates—or, let me say in deference to certain specialists in Plato's philosophy, a certain prominent rendition of Plato's Socrates. The idea that the good life consists in living in light of a *full and final* understanding of the nature of things pretty much locks out of such a life everyone but theorists, especially philosophers, and even they ultimately haven't a real chance of achieving it. In contrast, the trader is a lowly creature who cannot even aspire to living a noble human life, not at least in his or her central role of a trader. This is arguably related to a certain reading of Plato's Socrates. It has to do with the fact that the higher things, the perfect eternal things, are in the realm other than where practical people operate and gain their skills. So, those who are specifically, as a matter of their place in the

division of labor, devoted to grasping these higher things are more likely to aspire, if not entirely reach, a life of nobility, virtue and honor.

A certain reading of Plato's Socrates and the metaphysics he lays out for us suggests such a view. There are, however, many who contend that this metaphysics is only there to provide a convenient myth and it's not to be taken literally. Socrates didn't really believe in another world, or a higher realm of being, it's all advanced so as to provide an admittedly impossible ideal, akin to the models on magazine covers. Nobody believes that there are any such creatures, they are only there to assist us when we try to dress ourselves and go out on a date. Women actually don't stand or sit or lie as they do in *Vogue*. But these mythical creatures serve the purpose of suggesting to us certain standards.

Similarly, the Platonic metaphysics is taken to be like a model type image that is not to be taken literally and, it is argued, Plato and Socrates did not really mean the Republic to be a blueprint, only a kind of artistic conception, an image. Unfortunately, they are widely taught as if they were advancing such a blue print. And this has come to have an influence in the world by reinforcing certain non-philosophical ideas about this world and those who do work in it. So what we have through much of western civilization, granted that there are lots of other influences as well, is this notion that those who occupy themselves with intellectual things (writers, philosophers, theoretical scientists) are all dealing with more important things and thus are due a more honorable status and are more respectable than those of us who drive streetcars or trucks, conduct trains and run business firms in the actual visible world.

Just a little more intellectual history here: For a long time, Plato's Socrates—through the hands of, mainly Plotinus and then later on through a certain reworking of Augustine—was the major intellectual background to certain of the philosophical underpinnings of Christianity. It's only in the 13th century that Aristotle was brought back to make his impact on Christianity, by Aquinas when he had Aristotle translated from the Arabic into Latin. At that time Christianity became more tolerant and serious about addressing matters of this world via the natural sciences. While there remained conflicts, as in the case of Galileo, it needs to be considered that he was well accepted by the church as a scientist, never mind some disagreements about the issue of heliocentricity.

Up until this point of Western intellectual history most of the attention paid to the actual, natural world was not deemed to be worthwhile, not until after Aristotle comes back into the picture. Let's grant for just the sake of argument that the Platonic, Socratic influence is dualistic and is idealistic and

so the realm of ideas and those who deal with the realm of ideas automatically get more kudos than people who deal in the practical world. This is almost explicit in reading *The Republic*. Exactly what it's meaning is may be left to the side, but the position there is explicit enough so that it's often taught as the Platonic or Socratic doctrine. It is that doctrine that has left us the legacy of construing people who are focused in their work on this actual rather than the perfectly intelligible world as not really worthwhile.

But what does all this have to do with Aristotle, given how he seems to have contributed to an eventual turning away from the Platonic dualistic influence?

Aristotle, by a certain reading of his metaphysics, is a monist. The gist of this view comes out as follows: The world has different kinds and types of things comprising it; there are many different categories of being. Yet, they are all of one piece, they are part of this one, integrated system and are all subject to the same basic principles of existence or being. This is what might be considered the metaphysics of pluralistic monism.

One could, of course, recall the unmoved mover and perhaps that would introduce a dualistic element into Aristotle's position, but even that would not make a great deal of difference since, by definition, Aristotle's unmoved mover is not doing anything and there's nothing that its reality implies for practical living purposes. (In the hands of Aquinas, of course, this changes somewhat.) So we can take it that Aristotle is largely or basically a monist and there is no higher realm of being to speak of in his metaphysics. The natures of things aren't entities separate from what is being defined, as perhaps would be suggested in the discipline of geometry wherein, for example, the perfect circle is an entity in a different realm of being versus the circular things that we draw or we see around us. In Aristotle, the nature of things are abstractions that emerge out of our own mental activity of contrasting and comparing things we are aware of in the actual world. We develop, based on this activity, a mental construct that are optimally (but only if we do work properly) based on these observations and our analysis of these observations. So, the natures of things are not outside of this world but are also of this world. They are different from what they are the natures of but not apart from the same world in which those things are part. Yes, the given chair is different from *chairness* or the nature of chairs, but *chairness* is very intimately related to chairs, having been based, optimally, on our awareness of what all chairs have in common. The actual chairs and the definition of them are epistemologically and metaphysically connected by a natural act of intentionally cognition.

So, then, why is it still the case that we get in Aristotle a relatively intellectualized ethics? The following passage relates to this. It provides us with Aristotle's attitude about ethics having as its goal happiness.

If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be reason or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper virtue will be perfect happiness. That this activity is contemplative we have already said. [NE X.7]

The second passage is:

... this activity is the best (since not only is reason the best thing in us, but the objects of reason are the best of knowable objects); and secondly, it is the most continuous, since we can contemplate truth more continuously than we can do anything. [NE X.7]

The first portion sounds very much like what we understand Plato to have argued. The second seems to reinforce the Platonic understanding by identifying the object of intellect as timeless.

Most crucially for my purposes, there is a hint here that what Aristotle does is take not so much human nature as his guide for his ethics but the distinctive element in human nature. He picks intellect as the most important thing about us to heed and honor, failing to acknowledge that intellect is impossible without the biological infrastructure needed to sustain it. So, while in the one sense we know him to be a naturalist, deriving his standards or excellence based on an understanding of *what human beings must be in order to be human*, when it comes to developing the substance of his ethics, it looks like he picks not human nature, but only *the distinctive aspects of human nature*.

Now, a naturalist, in my view, would take this bundle (rationality and animality) and try to develop an ethics, which takes both as necessary to the development of a proper code of excellence. But, what Aristotle does is he drops the animal aspect—or at least demeans its significance. That is not the distinctive part of our nature. We are like most other animals in that we bleed, need food, and enjoy pleasures and dread pains. We can, accordingly, strive to succeed reasonably well as, among other things, animals in this world, but for Aristotle that becomes somehow ethically secondary, almost irrelevant because happiness seems to depend primarily, and sometimes the suggestion is exclusively, on the exercise of this distinctive element of our nature, namely our intellect.

There is something amiss here, namely, that instead of taking the entire being and then developing a standard of excellence based on the nature of this being, you get only a part of it. And that tends to leave a lot of people out of the moral enterprise, naturally. There is an aristocratic, intellectualized conception of the good human life if pure contemplation is the road to happiness. I may be simplifying somewhat, but it does look like we get this idea from Aristotle that of all the human beings, those who are capable of contemplation are the only ones who can really be ethically successful, the only ones who can live a good, morally or ethically excellent or upstanding, a noble life.

Now this is not quite the dualism associated prominently with Plato's Socrates, but it is a type of hierarchicalism or elitism. Those of us who have careers in education are automatically deemed to be honorable, respectable. (In Germany they're called "Her Doktor, Doktor"—mentioning their credentials twice. The Nobel Prize is given to theoretical but not to applied natural and social scientists. In much of vulgar or refined literature those who produce prosperity are demeaned while those delving in ideas revered.)

These sorts of little hints just suggest how much of a difference between those who manage to dabble or become professional in the intellectual realms of human concerns and others with more practical concerns. And it tends to leave the latter out of the game of getting a chance at a noble life. It confines them to an inferior position. Maybe not as much as in Plato's ideal city, where the trader is not, for example, capable of living any kind of morally good life. Still, in Aristotle the trader can only be instrumentally contributory to a good life. The retail trader is human but can never relish and be proud of being a retail trader. It just cannot aspire to being a morally upstanding position or profession. Aristotle's belittling of making money ties in with this, which in turn, relates to his view that money isn't specific enough, hasn't a determinate enough nature, thus there is no way to tell what amount of it is sufficient or proper to make.

This is something that is beefed up by the Christian metaphysical input wherein the superior other world that's laid out in Plato as a myth becomes a literal realm. In it the spiritual is far more important than the natural life. Accordingly, one should live by preparing for everlasting salvation, that takes place in the spiritual realm, and anything that one is devoted to in the natural world is obstructive, negligible or at best merely a means to that spiritual existence. By this view a great many people who operate productively and creatively in the natural world, making living in that world successful and joyful via their focus on doing well in the practical professions are consigned to an inferior status.

The themes most widely promulgated in our general culture—via books, magazines, humor, pulp fiction, or high drama—seem to confirm this. People, for instance, when they are choosing on a TV sitcom between embarking on a career in education or in business, are praised for the former and condemned for the latter. Education is regarded as an honorable, deep, respectable undertaking but when one embarks upon a career in business, one is a greedy, ambitious, selfish and money-grubbing vulgarian. This recalls the disdain extended toward the *nuevo ricbe* in earlier times when inherited wealth was clean since it didn't require work in this actual world, while wealth earned from practical know-how was deemed morally tainted. And, of course, making money off money itself, interest, was deemed sinful, usurious. Being in business is not exactly what one can be proud of as a human being, at least not if one is wedded to conventional morality. Although, one might be clever and shrewd at it and it might test one's practical intelligence in a sort of instrumental, utilitarian way, it does not confer upon one a real possibility of an honorable life. At least not in one's professional role in life.

Now, clearly, because most of us don't just have professions but we're also friends and citizens and family members and so on, this doesn't completely exclude us from the possibility of a reasonably honorable life, but certainly professionally it's much more difficult. Professions do matter a great deal because whenever you meet somebody they always say, "What do you do?" They don't mean, "Well, I wash dishes sometimes. I brush my teeth." That's not what they're interested in. They're interested in what you do as a matter of your devotion, your professions, your oath of office, so to speak. If your oath happens to be, "I shall create prosperity, that's what I will do," you don't count for much. But, if you are a scientist and seek truth, or if you disseminate knowledge as a teacher, that counts for quite a lot.

There are these elements in our culture that seem to discriminate in favor of those who devote themselves mainly to an intellectual profession. This is my basic concern here. I think that the reason for that is, first of all, the dualism in Plato's Socrates, then the Christian division of the world into the higher and the lower or the spiritual vs. the material, and finally, even in Aristotle—who might have come in as a very, very powerful rescuer and liberate us from this view. Aristotle concedes too much to those who discriminate in favor of a purely intellectual and tend to denigrate the practical life.