

PERSPECTIVE

The individuality of each person in the Aristotelian philosophy

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Introduction

Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher of the 4th century B.C., is very well known as the founder of Logic, the propounder of Ethics and the carrier of new ideas in Metaphysics. He was a prolific writer leaving documents in almost every science and has been through the ages the guideline not only for the Greek, but also the Roman, the Byzantine, the Arabic and the Latin West civilization. In modern times he is studied extensively, but mainly from scholastic points of view [1-6].

For a psychiatrist or a psychologist of today, Aristotle is of interest because beyond being a philosopher. He proves to be a biologist and a psychologist. In his books *On the Soul*, *On Memory*, *On Sleep and Dreams* one can find views and theories which in many respects are very near modern psychological ideas, - mainly psychoanalytic and some behaviouristic. His approach was objective and realistic and at the same time very human and down-to-earth. Aristotle was a keen observer of interpersonal phenomena and studied the intrapsychic, as well as social dynamics (in his books *Rhetoric* and *Politics*).

A main characteristic of the philosopher was that he held no dogmatic ideas or theories and respected all human beings, - men and women, free citizens and slaves. Within this frame of thought, he accepted each person's individuality and special characteristics, without overgeneralizations. In spite of describing the qualities attributed to an individual because of his gender, age, profession *etc.*, he underlined the fact that each person is a distinct entity and biopsychosocial totality with particular traits, - a position very close to the person-centered approach of today [7-9].

Individuality and various situations

In his book *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle, while discussing the ethical values and activities leading to happiness, points to the different characteristics of each person, as well as their needs by bringing examples from various sectors of life.

His paradigm from medicine is actually an advice every therapist should follow: "As a general rule in medicine, rest and abstaining from food are good for a man in fever, but they may not be good for a particular person" (*Nic. Ethics, 1180b*). And a few lines below he specifically mentions that even for a well-educated and experienced doctor, the individuality of the person applying to him must be respected: "A physician can take the best care for a patient, when he knows the general rules of what is good for everyone, but also what is good for the particular individual".

Apart from medicine, Aristotle is of the opinion that in other activities of life success can be accomplished only if the efforts are person-oriented. For instance, his next example comes from sports: "An expert boxer does not teach all his pupils the same style of fighting; with private attention each person has greater opportunity to get what he needs" (*Nic. Ethics 1180b*). Also for education he notices: "Individual treatment is superior to group treatment in education, as it is in medicine" (*Nic. Ethics 1180b*).

Friendship is an interpersonal relationship which the philosopher studied extensively and he left for us many chapters dealing with different aspects of it. Again, there he underlines each person's separate identity and how that matches (or not) with another person. Aristotle believes that friendship is necessary for all, but for every individual according to his/her needs and problems. He describes how the rich and powerful need friends to safeguard their prosperity, the poor to find refuge, the young to avoid mistakes, while the old to get care and help. He distinguishes three kinds of friendship according to the motive and the target: for the good, for the pleasant and for the useful. In a book of ethics, of course, he shows his preference to the good, though he does not reject pleasure or usefulness as the beginning of a friendship under certain conditions.

What is significant for our discussion here are two phrases of Aristotle: "For each person 'good' is what is good to him/her" (*Nic. Ethics 1157b*) and "We wish for the good of our friend for the friend's sake" (*Nic. Ethics 1155b*). It becomes obvious that the philosopher fully respects the values and opinions of the other person as part of friendship, accepting his distinct individuality.

The determining conditions for a stable friendship mentioned in the text are mainly: mutual give-and-take, trust and common interests. Yet, above all, Aristotle considers that the personality of an individual plays the most important role. An epigrammatic phrase of the philosopher states: “When friendship is based on character (and not on transient emotions), it does last” (*Nic. Ethics 1164a*). On the contrary, he mentions cases of friendship between hypocrites, the wicked and other persons which are easily dissolved. Thus, in the Aristotelian philosophy, the topic of friendship becomes a field of discussion for an interpersonal relation, where the personality of the individual as a whole is the factor determining the possibility of 2 partners to establish a close bond.

Combining the above conclusion with the previously mentioned medical paradigm of a feverish person, one observes that Aristotle does not adhere to a category of a disease, nor the general rules for patients, but adopts a more person-centered approach. And he does that for many human activities and phenomena. For instance, for the reciprocity needed in friendship, he insists that it should be applied “for the friend’s sake”, that is, for the other person’s sake and in order to underline this the philosopher expresses the view that even between 2 unequal persons “if one gives to the other something equivalent in return” (and not equal or same, depending only on one’s possibilities), “equilibrium will be established” (*Eudemian Ethics 1243b*).

The median relative to us

Aristotle, in his books on *Ethics*, applies the theory of the ‘median’ (*meson*) and according to that and the everyday logic in life describes the qualities of what he considers ‘a virtuous man’. He portrays such a man as brave, calm, prudent, just, truthful and friendly, *etc.* The way he achieves those traits is clear for him: “The median of an entity is the point which is intermediate between two extremes, according to the right and ethical reason” (*Eud. Ethics 1221a*). The extremes are the excess and on the other side the deficiency, - for instance: brave between audacious and coward, calm between excitable and indifferent and so on.

Yet the philosopher, rejecting dogmatism, clarifies his position: “The median is not always equidistant from both extremes; the median in life does not always follow arithmetic proportions” (*Nic. Ethics 1106a*). And he brings an example: 6 is arithmetically the median between 2 and 10, but not in life. So he gives another and very convincing example: “A good trainer does not give six portions of food to everyone, because this may be too little for Milon (a gigantic wrestler of that period), but too much for somebody who has just begun gymnastics” (*Nic. Ethics 1106b*). He is even more explicit in another sentence of the same paragraph: “The median relative to us is not too large nor too small, and this is not the same for everyone”; so the median each individual chooses is personalized, it cannot be an extreme, but is different according to what is appropriate to him.

The relativity and subjectivity of human phenomena is repeatedly shown in the Aristotelian texts. Indeed, the philosopher remarks that the *epistemon*, the expert in his field (in modern Greek: the scientist) seeking for the median, avoids excess and deficiency and prefers the median relative to him. The subjective element is another parameter one should take into consideration, since judgement for each person depends on the particular characteristics of his; for instance, a coward calls a brave man audacious, while an audacious man calls the brave one a coward. Aristotle, respecting each person as a whole, goes as far as to accept that the term ‘good’ (*agathon*) - and consequently what is right or in the case of medicine what is best in treatment – “has many meanings depending on the quality (character of the person), quantity (intensity of the situation), usefulness, place, time *etc.*” (*Nic. Ethics 1096a*). In the same paragraph he states a clearly person-centered attitude: “Such a concept cannot be universal, common to all cases, but only for one”.

The origins of individuality

The individuality of each person is the result of a series of factors and processes affecting his/her personality. When one gathers Aristotle’s views from various parts of his books, one will be faced with (what today is called) a biopsychosocial approach [10].

The biological parameter lies mainly in the hereditary factor accepted by the philosopher. He refers to many such traits, such as intelligence which is bestowed by Nature. Also physical conditions which affect a person’s general wellbeing: others become tall and others remain short, some are born black and others white, *etc.* Aristotle also takes into consideration the constitutional factor. “Everyone is born with different inclinations”; he points out and advises that we should look “towards which we tend” (*Nic. Ethics 1109b*).

The psychological dimension is most important in the formation of individuality. Special characteristics are acquired by each person depending on the emotional influences he/she had during upbringing. Aristotle registers the fact that “children since birth are full of desires for pleasure, while logical thinking develops later with the passing of years” (*Politics 1334b*). The way he describes those desires – as impulsive, forceful, demanding immediate satisfaction – remind one of the instinctual drives of psychoanalysis and the conflict they have with reason. Indeed the philosopher remarks that: “Desires and logic run contrary to each other” (*On the Soul 433a*). The level of resistance to the desires for each individual depends on the psychological strength and values given by the parents. The father’s guidance and early education with justice and love are significant according to the philosopher, as well as the emotional support by the mother. Aristotle’s opinion that paternal words and habits prevail in households, because of the ties of kinship and the children’s requisite affection for their father, actually points to the identification between children and parents regarding some of their characteristics.

Education is another factor contributing to the formation of certain qualities of an individual's personality. The philosopher, of course, is in favour of "education which guides to virtue and not only what is useful in life" (*Politics 1337a*), – a dilemma existing even today between practical, technological knowledge and general education for higher moral and cultural standards. Drawing lessons promote the aesthetic criterion, gymnastics reinforces courage, initiative, persistence, *etc.*, while music is a calming agent "and a therapeutic one for catharsis" (*Politics 1342a*). Education can change some individual characteristics because, as the philosopher insists, – "If one has been directed and has done something many times, then his actions continue by habit" (*Rhetoric 1369b*).

The social origin of some qualities in man's life is evident in many texts of Aristotle. He is well known for his adjectives calling man *zoon koinonikon*, *zoon politikon*, – a social and political being (literally: social 'animal'). The philosopher was searching for the best State by studying the laws of many state-cities of his era, so that there could be an excellent way of "building good citizens". He says: "The lawgivers should prohibit vulgar language in public and the adolescents should not be allowed to see indecent theatrical scenes" (*Politics 1336b*).

The role one undertakes in Society at a certain phase in life defines his concerns and needs and may transform to some extent one's individuality. Aristotle investigated in detail the relationship of husband and wife and has observed that "the couple's love develops in useful communication" (*Eud. Ethics 1242a*), – *koinonia* is the Greek word which means both communication and community, society. Motherhood makes women more caring and affectionate and, as the philosopher explains, "mothers love their children more (than the fathers) since labour needs a greater effort" (*Nic. Ethics 1168a*).

The fact that the individuality of each person is unique is corroborated by Aristotle's belief in the freedom of Man's will. The philosopher explicitly expresses this when he says that even after deliberation: "At the end the (conscious) self is responsible for our choices and decisions" (*Nic. Ethics 1113a*) and also that "One's character can be determined from whether one makes good or bad choices" (*Nic. Ethics 1112a*). Taking into consideration these opinions, it becomes evident that for each person there is the possibility for a constellation of attitudes, views and values which form a unique totality for the particular person, very different in many respects from other people.

Epilogue

As a result of the Aristotelian argumentation presented here regarding the undeniable existence of each person's individuality, the best advice every therapist can receive is that he should focus on that person's particular concerns and needs. This is in accordance with the philosopher's admonition: "When a person has great issues at stake and he/she is not able to diagnose (*sic*) the situation, he/she

should ask others who can offer counseling" (*Nic. Ethics 1112b*).

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Aristotelian reading

(The numbers indicate the passage of the text according to Loeb's Classical Edition)

Eudemian Ethics 1221a, 1242a, 1243b

Nicomachean Ethics 1096a, 1106a, 1106b, 1109b, 1112a, 1112b, 1113a, 1155b, 1157b, 1164a, 1168a, 1180b

On the Soul 433a

Politics 1334b, 1336b, 1337a, 1342a

Rhetoric 1369b