The Aristotelian Contribution to Development Ethics

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to associate elements of Aristotle's view of a "good society" with the development ethics standpoint of a "good society." For Aristotle, the vehicle to "eudaimonia" and to a "good society" is "politics." We argue that development ethics provides an ethical response to the question "what is good society" based on Aristotle's key concept of "eudaimonia." The Aristotelian vision for a "good life" can be perceived as a precursor and a contributor to development ethics perspective for a "good society."

Keywords: Aristotle, development ethics, eudaimonia, good society

JEL Classification Codes: B00, B40, B59, N00, P00

In this paper we examine Aristotle's ethical and political theory and the philosophical basis regarding the notion for a "good life" and how the Aristotelian vision of a "good society" influences the development ethics perspective for a "good society." To our knowledge there has been limited research in the development ethics literature regarding the philosophical origins of the concept of a "good society." Development ethics can be identified as a new branch in the sphere of social sciences; thus, there are controversies (Crocker 1998). The findings of this analysis can assist in identifying the foundation of development ethics regarding the end state of development, the "good society," and its philosophical underpinning. Moreover, the paper contributes to the fields of ethics and politics as well as economic philosophy.

For Aristotle the highest good of human life is "eudaimonia," which to some extent is synonymous to happiness. We argue that development ethicists adopt the Aristotelian concept of "eudaimonia" and advance it to the macro level of international development. "Man is by nature a political[1] [social] animal" (Aristotle 1959, 201). Therefore, the way of achieving "eudaimonia" and "a good life" can only

be via "politics" within an economic, social, and ethical base. Development ethics is consistent with the Aristotelian notion of "politics" as the means of accomplishing the aims of a "good society."

In the present paper, the next section discusses the basic elements of the Aristotelian ethical and political theory, the concept of "eudaimonia," and the relationship between "ethics" and "politics." The third section discusses the relationship of the Aristotelian vision for a "good life" with the development ethics approach of "a good society." Finally, in the last section, we present the concluding remarks.

Aristotelian Philosophy and the Concept of the Good Life

According to Aristotle's ethical philosophy, ethics examine and determine the rules of human behavior within society. In his works, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*,[2] Aristotle postulates his view of human ethical behavior, the stance of citizens to political affairs, and his proposal for a "good society." Hence, Aristotle could be considered one of the pioneers in elaborating the concept of a "good life" within its political and social context.

Aristotle begins in *Nicomachean Ethics* by posing the question why humans act, "[e]very skill and every inquiry, and similarly every action and rational choice, is thought to aim at some good; and so the good has been aptly described as that at which everything aims" (Aristotle 2004, 3). Human behavior consists of human actions based on the preferences of every individual. Thus, Aristotle examines humans' actions under the philosophical inquiry of "what do people aim at when they act?" For Aristotle, any human action aims at a goal. There are two types of goals: 1) those that constitute ends to themselves; and 2) those that are means to achieving other goals. In many cases both types of goals can occur simultaneously. For instance, doing exercise is an end in itself, as well as the means for a healthy body. In that sense, human actions can be perceived as an inextricable matrix with successive aims. Nevertheless, a philosophical question that can be raised is if there is any purpose in the entire course of actions? For Aristotle the "highest good" to which all human actions should aim is that of "eudaimonia." It is an end in itself: "[eudaimonia], then, is obviously something complete and self-sufficient, in that it is the end of what is done" (Aristotle 2004, 11). For Aristotle, eudaimonia consists in, and only in, virtuous activity, "[w]hat really matters for happiness [eudaimonia] are activities in accordance with virtue, and for the contrary of happiness [eudaimonia] the contrary kind of activities" (17).

Regarding the modern use of the term, as we have also mentioned in the introductory session, "eudaimonia" can be defined as synonymous to "happiness." However, a couple of alternative translations exist in the literature, e.g., "flourishing," "good living" and "well-being." Ross ([1923] 1995, 122) points out that "the conventional translation of 'happiness' is unsuitable in the *Ethics*[3] for whereas 'happiness' means a state of feeling, differing from 'pleasure' only by its suggestion of permanence, depth, and serenity. Aristotle insists that "*ευδαιμονία* [eudaimonia] is a

kind of activity; that it is not any kind of pleasure, though pleasure naturally accompanies it. The more non-committal translation 'well-being' is therefore better." To the discussion over the meaning of eudaimonia, Aristotle's use of the term could be "whatever makes a human life good for the person living it" (Grisp 2004, 206).

An important issue in Aristotelian ethical thinking could be that "good life" is not only discussed in an idealistic, mental context. In contrast to other ancient Greek philosophical schools of that era, e.g., Epicureanism,[4] Stoicism[5] and even his teacher Plato, Aristotle inserts a notion of realism in his philosophical thinking. Aristotle's eudaimonia can also be defined as "the state of having an objectively desirable human life" (Honderich 1995, 252 as cited in Clark 2002, 830). Meanwhile,

> [t]he objective character of eudaimonia distinguishes it from the ancient philosophies of the Epicureans and Stoics, who saw the good in terms of mental tranquility; and from modern concepts of utility, which are concerned with the achievement of a subjectively satisfactory life. (Clark 2002, 830)

For Aristotle, goods are classified in three categories: 1) external goods; 2) good of the soul; and 3) goods of the body (Aristotle 2004). Even Aristotle argues that the aim (the end) of human action is found in goods related with the soul, "it [eudaimonia] was a certain kind of activity of the soul in accordance with virtue; and of the other goods, some are necessary conditions of happiness [eudaimonia], and others are naturally helpful and serve as useful means to it" (Aristotle 2004, 16). Aristotle introduces a more materialistic approach toward the goal of a "good life." As Aristotle states "[eudaimonia] obviously needs the presence of external goods as well, since it is impossible, or at least no easy matter, to perform noble actions without resources" (15).

Aristotle incorporates the concept of the "good life" not only in his ethical work, but also in his work concerning "politics." In his view, "politics" is associated not only with the political, but also to the social and ethical affairs of a state. The individual as a citizen is placed in the center of the discussion of "politics" and the state (*polis* in Greek) in the center of "ethics." In "politics," Aristotle describes the "good life" as the virtuous life of every individual who, at the same time, is a member of the state. In Aristotelian ethics, the good of the state (polis) in its totality is perceived as superior than to the aim of a "good life" of any individual separately. Therefore, Ross ([1923] 1995, 120) accurately states that "Aristotle's ethics, no doubt, are social, and his politics are ethical."

For Aristotle, there are three reasons for the state's existence: first, to fulfill a human natural instinct, second to satisfy a "common interest" of its citizens and third to protect its members (Aristotle 1959). Aristotle believes that people establish societies not only because of need, but also because of their political (social) nature; "even when men [sic] have no need of assistance from each other they nonetheless desire to live together" (Aristotle 1959, 201). However, we must not overlook the fact that, for Aristotle, the state maximizes the mutual welfare of its members and it is the

means of achieving a "good life": "[a]t the same time they [people] are also brought together by common interest, so far as each achieves a share of the good life" (201). It is important to mention that in the Aristotelian view of a "good life" the "common interest" is not only an economic matter based on a materialistic conception of life. Even though the road to "eudaimonia" and a "good society" demands material prosperity to a great extent, nevertheless, the virtuous life of the members of the state is considered to be far more important (Aristotle 1959). In the discussion on institutions and development ethics, Marangos and Astroulakis (2009, 385) argued that "ethics appears to be strongly associated with societal conditions in conjunction with institutions." Institutions, such as justice are required for a "good life," due to the fact that the "common interest" can be satisfied only via a strong and stable social institutional framework. Therefore, the state and its institutional foundation serve the "common interest" and as a consequence the "good life" of the citizens.

Aristotle's Contribution to the Development Ethics Perspective of a Good Society

Development ethics can be depicted as the branch of the social sciences that investigates the conditions for a "good life" and a "good society" within a global dimension. Development ethics can be perceived as the ethical reflection of the ends and means for any purposeful social-economic activity toward development and the achievement of a "good society" on a local, national and global scale (see e.g., Goulet [1971] 1975; 1995; 1997; Crocker 1991; 1998; 2008; Clark 2002; Dower 1988; Gasper 2004). Development ethicists determine the end state of development, the concept of a "good society," within a three-dimension space: 1) how much is "enough" for consumption in order for people to enjoy a "good life"; 2) what are the foundations of justice in society; and 3) what position should humanity adopt toward the natural environment. In Goulet's (1997, 1161) words, "[d]evelopment ethics is that new discipline which deals *ex professo* with such normative issues."

To draw parallels between Aristotle's ethical and political philosophy and development ethics within a political economy context, we demonstrate that development ethicists acknowledge the Aristotelian concept of "politics" as the means of achieving the end state of development conceived of as "a good society." In Aristotle's notion of "politics," as we have mentioned, ethical, social and political affairs are entwined. For Aristotle, ethics determine the meaning of a "good life" by inquiring about what is good and acceptable in human actions along with the conditions for a virtuous life. At the same time, "politics" deals with norms, and institutions (e.g., family, education system, political system), as well as actions where people and societies are led to an organized and good way of life. Development ethicists espouse Aristotle's "politics" in its ethical and social form. By incorporating Aristotle's vision of a "good society" to the development agenda, development ethicists do not consider development as only an economic issue in terms of growth and material consumption. They describe development more broadly within an ethical, political, social, cultural, environmental and, of course, an economic

dimension. The meaning of development is given by the development economist Benjamin Higgins' phrase "human ascent," which encompasses "the ascent of all men [sic] in their integral humanity including the economic, biological, psychological, social, cultural, ideological, spiritual, mystical, and transcendental dimensions" (as cited in Goulet 2006a, 74). In addition, the ethicist approach to development maintains that "politics" is the means within a course of actions that leads to a "good life" and a "good society." Thus, the vehicle to "eudaimonia" and a "good society" is "politics" both for Aristotle and development ethicists. Moreover, for Aristotle "the good life then is the chief aim of society, both collectively for all its members and individually" (Aristotle 1959, 201). Accordingly, development ethics investigate the concept of a "good society" by taking into consideration the specific features of societies and individuals. In that sense, we find that the development ethics approach to a "good society" appears to have been strongly influenced by the Aristotelian perception for a "good life."

Along with justice (in terms of equality of all people and nations in the world), environmental conscience (in terms of individuals, nations and international organizations), a "good life" for all humans is at the core of the discussion of a "good society." Development ethicists, following an Aristotelian logic of an objectively and realistic way of defining "good life," assure that economic growth and material consumption are necessary elements toward a good life. In other words, the road to "eudaimonia" passes through material prosperity. They argue in favor of an abundance of goods in the sense that people need to have "enough" goods, so as to achieve a "good life." However, the hyper-consumption manner of life in developed nations has distorted the way that the "good life" is perceived: "having more" (material goods, wealth) leads to the impression of "being more" (successful, attractive, valuable) (Fromm 1999; 2005). Development ethicists stand against this perception. To this vein, Aristotle states that "the amount of property which is needed for a good life is not unlimited" and that "a man must have so much property as will enable him to live not only temperately but liberally; if the two are parted, liberality will combine with luxury; temperance will be associated with toil" and concludes that "it should not be thought that the man [sic] who is to be happy will need many or great possessions, merely because it is not possible to be blessed without external goods" (as cited in Goulet 2006b, 191). For development ethicists, the abundance of goods must be investigated under the notion of a humanistic approach on how much is "enough" in order for people to have a "good life." "[T]he notion of 'having enough' is not devoid of objective sense. To have enough means to have what one needs in order to be and to be well" (Goulet 2006c, 29). Even though there is no absolute answer to the question "what one needs in order to be and to be well" it is widely accepted that underdevelopment (poverty, misery, diseases, mass famine, etc.) diminishes humanity. Thereby, "enough" should be, at the minimum, all goods that lead to the satisfaction of biological needs, in addition to freeing part of human energy toward a wider range of life aspects beyond satisfying first order needs. As Aristotle, development ethicists point out that material prosperity, in a form of "enough," should work as a means to the end state of development: "eudaimonia."

To underline the significance of the development ethics perspective to a more humanistic approach of a "good society" and the understanding of economic growth as a means to the direction of a "good life," Gasper points out that development ethicist Denis Goulet,

> [w]ell before Sen, Haq and Nussbaum, he [Goulet] advocated that "authentic development aims toward the realization of human capabilities in all spheres" (Goulet 1971, 205) and that economic growth and technological modernity must be treated as, at best, potential means towards considered human values, not vice versa. (Gasper 2006, 2)

Thus, it is evident that development ethics adopts the Aristotelian vision for a "good life," believing that "eudaimonia" is something beyond material consumption and pleasure. The true indicator to the road of "eudaimonia" is the qualitative enrichment of human beings in all relevant aspects of human life.

Conclusion

The paper focuses on the argument that Aristotle's ethical and political philosophy has influenced modern social sciences, particularly development ethics. We present the Aristotelian vision of a "good life" and a "good society," concepts which appear to constitute the fundamental precursor and originator of the philosophical core of the view for a "good society" promoted by development ethics. Aristotle answers the philosophical inquiry "what should be the aim of human actions" by using the concept of "eudaimonia" within the narrow confines of the state (*polis*). Aristotle's "good society" poses rules and norms and discusses the concept of a "good life" in the micro-environment of the state so the "good society" could be conceived as a philosophical micro-model. Development ethics implicitly espouses "eudaimonia" as the end state of human actions and advances this concept to the macro level of the global world. Similar to development ethicists, Aristotle's notion of "politics," which encapsulates economic, social, cultural and ethical aspects, are perceived as the means to achieving the "good society." Development ethicists accept and embody Aristotle's notion of "politics," as the means to a "good society."

Notes

1. According to Ross ([1923] 1995, 152): "It has often been remarked that where Aristotle says man is a political animal we might prefer to say he is a social animal, needing his fellows in a variety of capacities and not merely as fellow citizens."
2. For Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* we used Grisp [ed.] (2004) in English and Hatzopoulos [ed.] (1993), Volumes 7, 8, and 9 in Greek (ancient and new). For Aristotles's *Politics* we used Page et al. [ed.], (1959) in English and Hatzopoulos [ed.] (1993), Volumes 1, 2 and 3 in Greek (ancient and new). In the text, we cite the English translations, Grisp [ed.] (2004) and Page et al. [ed.], (1959) respectively.
3. Aristotle investigates *Ethics* mainly in his works *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics* and *Great Ethics* (more known as *Magna Moralia)*. The engagement with ethical matters is also distinctive in his work of *Politics*.

4. Epicureanism is the school of philosophy founded by Epicurus (341-270 BC). Epicurus' philosophical pattern is known for his contribution to hedonism. He taught that the point of all one's actions was to attain pleasure and avoid pain for oneself.
5. Stoicism was a philosophical school founded by Zeno of Citium in the early 3rd century BC. Stoic philosophy can be summarized in the belief that true happiness could be achieved by living according to nature.

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