LIFE FORMS AND DELIBERATE CHOICE IN ARISTOTLE'S TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS

FORMAS DE VIDA E ESCOLHA DELIBERADA NA ÉTICA TELEOLÓGICA DE ARISTÓTELES

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Abstract: By presenting happiness [ἀπόκιμονία] within the framework of a properly human philosophy [ἀνθρωπίνη φιλοσοφία], Aristotle also clarifies the extent to which any attempt to access a finalistic understanding of acting well [ἐν πράγματιν] in view of a well-living [ἐν ζῷα] will have to make its way through a compact tangle of fluid opinions and divergent perceptions as to its nature and extent. On the other hand, given the contingent cut-off of the action–not only because the possible course of its outcome is indeterminate [ἀδιάλειπτος] but also obscure [ἄνθρωπος] the possible outcome of its course - one can hardly conceal the praxeological impact of the glossed expression “we deliberate not about the ends, but about the means” [βουλεύομεν δ’ού περὶ τῶν τελῶν ἀλλὰ περὶ τὰ τέλη: EN III, 3, 1112b 11-12] On the assumption that Aristotelian practical philosophy compagines a double teleological routing - one more tied to the practice of virtue [ἀρετή], the other more rooted in the exercise of deliberation [βουλής], the notion of end [τέλος] acquires thickened ethical coloration in the multiple throws that bring into play the fundamental question that makes us wonder about the properly human good [τέλην ἀνθρώπον οὕτων]. Now, if in Plato the practice of virtue founded on a Good is what, at the end of the dialectical ascent, should finally make us happy [Res pub, 508 e], in Aristotle, on the other hand, it is important that happiness arises from the completion of a practical good [πράκτων ἀρετῆς] called supreme [μέγας τό] not because it is “above” or “beyond” all other goods, but because, in being “chosen-in-reason-of-itself” [χρεσκεῖται καθ’εὐθείαν] needs mediation [μεσοτέχνη] either of “goods-perceived-as-total” [πρωτόνεμα ἀγαθόν] according to which the elective appropriation of different modes of human life [ἀνθρώπινος βίος] takes place, or of prudential conditions by which a deliberate choice [προαιρεσις] is exercised on the basis of the judicious adjustment of a formal universalization of the norm to the contingent particularity of a limit situation.

Keywords: Aristotle. Life forms. Deliberate choice. Teleological Ethics.

Resumo: Ao apresentar a felicidade [συνιστονία] no quadro de uma filosofia propriamente humana [ανθρωπινή φιλοσοφία], Aristóteles esclarece igualmente até que ponto qualquer tentativa de aceder a uma compreensão finalística do agir bem [ἐν πράγματιν] em vista um bem-viver [ἐν ζῷα] terá de abrir caminho através de um emaranhado compacto de opiniões fluidas e de percepções divergentes quanto à sua natureza e extensão. Por outro lado, tendo em conta o recorte contingencial da acção - não só por ser indeterminado [ἀδιάλειπτος] o possível percurso do seu

desfecho, mas também obscuro [ἀδήλης] o possível desfecho do seu percurso – dificilmente se poderá escamotear o impacto praxiológico da glosada expressão “deliberamos não acerca dos fins, mas acerca dos meios” [βουλευόμεθα δ’οὐ περὶ τῶν τελῶν ἄλλα περὶ τῶν πρῶς τὰ τέλη: EN III, 3, 1112b 11-12]. No pressuposto de que a filosofia prática aristotélica compagina um duplo encaminhamento teleológico – um mais vinculado à prática da virtude [ἀγαθός], o outro mais enraizado no exercício da deliberação [βουλευσις] –, a noção de fim [τέλος] adquire adensada coloração ética nos múltiplos lances que colocam em jogo a questão fundamental que nos faz interrogar pelo bem propriamente humano [τὸν ἄγαθὸν]. Ora, se em Platão a prática da virtude fundada num Bem é o que, no termo da ascensão dialéctica, nos deve tornar finalmente felizes [Res pub., 508 e], já em Aristóteles, por seu turno, importa que a felicidade decorra da finalização de um bem prático [πράκτων ἄγαθόν] dito supremo [μέγιστος] não porque esteja “acima” ou para “além” de todos os outros bens, mas porque, ao ser “escohido-em-ração-de-si-mesmo” [καιρόν καθ’ὑμνον], necessita da mediação [μεσότης] quer de “bens-percebidos-como-tais” [φανόμενα ἄγαθά] em função dos quais se efectiva a apropição electiva dos diferentes modos de vida humana [ἀνθρώπον χώρον], quer de condições prudenciais mediante as quais uma escolha deliberada [προσφυγή] é exercida com base no criterioso ajustamento de uma universalização formal da norma à contingente particularidade de uma situação-limite.


Introduction

By presenting happiness [εὐδαιμονία] within the framework of a properly human philosophy [ἀνθρωπίνη φιλοσοφία]², Aristotle also clarifies the extent to which any attempt to access a finalistic understanding of acting well [εὖ πράττειν] in view of a well-living [εὖ ζήν] will have to make its way through a compact tangle of fluid opinions and divergent perceptions as to its nature and extent. On the other hand, given the contingent cut-off of the action-not only because the possible course of its outcome is indeterminate [ἀδιάφροστος] but also obscure [ἀδήλης] the possible outcome of its course - one can hardly conceal the praxiological impact of the glossed expression “we deliberate not about the ends, but about the means” [βουλευόμεθα δ’οὐ περὶ τῶν τελῶν ἄλλα περὶ τῶν πρῶς τὰ τέλη: EN III, 3, 1112b 11-12] On the assumption that Aristotelian practical philosophy compagina a twofold teleological routing-one more closely tied to the practice of virtue [ἀγαθός], the other more rooted in the exercise of deliberation [βουλευσις] - the notion of end [τέλος] acquires thickened ethical coloration in the multiple throws that put into play the fundamental question that makes us ask for the good properly human [τὸν ἄγαθὸν]. Now, if in Plato the practice of virtue founded on a Good is what, at the end of the dialectical ascent, should finally make us happy [Res pub., 508 e], already in Aristotle, for his turn, it matters that happiness arises from the completion of a practical good

² On the philosophical scope of the polyvalent meaning of the expression ἄγαθος ἄγαθον, cf. the masterful study by RODRIGO Pierre, Aristote et les “choses humaines”, Bruxelles: OUSIA, 1998
[πρεσετὸν ἀγαθὸν] said to be **supreme** [μέγιστος] not because it is “above” or “beyond” all other goods, but because, in being “chosen-for-itself” [διὸς καθ'αὑτό], needs **mediation** [μεσότης] either of “goods-perceived-as-total” [φαινόμενα ἀγαθά] according to which the elective appropriation of different **modes of human life** [ἀνθρώπινος βίος] takes place, or of prudential conditions by which a **deliberate choice** [προαίρεσις] is exercised on the basis of the judicious adjustment of a formal universalization of the norm to the contingent particularity of a limit situation.

I. The choice of life forms in view of Happiness

Although entangled in a compact mass of experiences as disparate as they are divergent, the Stagyricus makes the point that common sense views of what it means to be happy constitute meaningful perceptions of a specifically human lived text, or one pertaining to human things. There are three forms of human life [ἀνθρώπινος βίος] from which the perceptual field of opinions about happiness is polarized: 1. a **pleasurable life** [βίος ἀπολαυστικός] shaped by the enjoyment of **pleasure** [ἡδονή]; 2. a **political life** [βίος πολιτικός], nourished by the desire for **honor** [τιμή]; 3. a contemplative **life** [βίος θεωρητικός] embodied in the disinterested dedication to **knowledge** [σοφία]. In this regard, Manuel J. Carmo Ferreira states: “Life is the question par excellence of Aristotle’s ethical thought (...). The community of meaning of the triple formulation of what will always be at stake resides in the reiteration of the quality of “good” (xmlns) that each in its own way thematizes, and which is identified with the “end” (τέλος) that each thing pursues. The question that will govern the discursive course then gains a greater determination, for what becomes highly concerned is then the question of the **good properly human** (τάνθορωπινον ἀγαθόν: EN, 1094b 7), for its own purposes. But it is as a **vital question in the context of a given existence that** inquiry can begin (...) (EN, 1095b 15-16). Hence the inevitability of the confrontation of disparate answers, as diverse are the **ways of life**, only surmountable if we manage to go back to the most primitive questioning about the “office,” the “function,” the “exercise” (ἔργον) or the competence of **man as man**, transversal and transcending his status or profession, opening to the discussion of

3 Cf. ARIST, EE, I, 4, 1215a 32 - b 6
the inevitable plurality of ways of seeking to justify the meaning adopted for existence.”

What is important is offered between the lines in the opinionated perception of the ways of life contains, therefore, the pre-reflexive phenomenology of a lived ethics. The Aristotelian tripartition of ways of life seems to obey the intention of discarding three candidates for the judicious stabilization of a definition of happiness: pleasure, honor, and wealth.

As far as pleasure is concerned, and the same applies to wealth, they could hardly be equated with happiness, since the former, due to its impulsive dimension, and the latter due to its inflationary impetus, represent inhibiting forces contrary to the discernment of reason. As far as honor is concerned, the examination seems more favorable than that of pleasure. Even so, and despite its immediate link to the relational horizon of political life, its advantage is very fragile and uncertain, since it can camouflage an individual interest more interested in the recognition of conquered merits, than in the than properly committed to the diligent and heroic cultivation of a good life in itself. In fact, it is not enough to possess virtue to be virtuous, if this acquisition does not derive from an appropriation. And the reason is very simple: the individual in the process of “acquiring” virtue through the inductive effect of repeated and trained habit must “make it his own,” conforming his possession to the acts actually chosen, performed and experienced “by himself. As long as it is only “acquireable” as a potential possibility, but not activated as an actual capacity, the mere possession of virtue does not make anyone ethically virtuous. Aristotle explains why:

Perhaps one can suppose that it [subent. virtue] is the end of political life. But it still seems incomplete, for the one who possesses virtue may find himself asleep and inactive throughout his life, or even more than that: suffering evils and experiencing misfortunes. Now, no one will congratulate the one who lives this way, except to defend this thesis at all costs.

Following the excerpt, it should be noted that the Eudemonic determination of virtue relies on a subtle and usually neglected conceptual distinction between “perceived life” as ζωή and “aimed life” as βίος, a distinction well attested, incidentally, in a furtive incision of the Ethica Eudemia, where the Stagyricus, taking the pulse of the various conceptions of happiness, introduces a curious and unexpected conceptual cleavage.

5 ἄν τις τέλος τοῦ πολιτικοῦ βίου ταύτην ὑπολάβῃ, φαίνεται δὲ ἀτελεστέρα καὶ καθήκον έχοντα τὴν άρετὴν ἢ ἀφειτητεν διὰ βίου, καὶ πρὸς τοῦτος κακοπαθεῦνον ἀτυχεῖν τὰ μέγιστα: τὸν δ’ οὗτο ζῶντα οὔδεις ἐν εὐδαιμονίας, εἰ μὴ θέους διαφυλάττων: ARIST., EN, I, 5, 1095b 30 - 1096a 2
between a nobler form of life \([\betaιος \ κρατητής]\) and an excellent form of life \([ζωή \ ἀρίστη]\).\(^6\)

This is not a matter of ambiguous semantic handling. Aware of the oscillating way in which Aristotle employs one and the other in different latitudes of his textual corpus\(^7\), we are in the belief that, nevertheless, this fluctuation of meaning implicitly translates a double conception of “life.” To elide the crucial distinction that unfolds between the “vital experience” of having life \([ζην]\) and the “lived experience” of being alive \([βιώνα]\),\(^8\) would deprive us of a more dilated understanding of the praxeological scope of the proper and appropriate exercise of virtue.\(^9\)

II. The praxeological deconstruction of the Platonic idea of Good

By using the notion of universal good \([τὸ \ καθόλου \ ἄγαθόν]\) to subject the Platonic theory of the Good to a test of resistance\(^10\), it may be convenient not to give in to too much of the hermeneutic temptation of seeing in this resource an obscure pretext of the Stagyrian to launch a deadly attack on his master’s theory of ideas. More than obstructive or destructive, the Stagirite’s position is critical and deconstructive. It is not a question, therefore, of making “the” Good \([τάγαθον]\) unviable by subjecting it to a demolishing refutation, but rather to discern to what extent the idea of “supreme good”

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6 Cf. Idem, EE, 1215a 4-5
7 The linguistic conjecture that the term \(ζωή\) depends on an Attic usage which evolved from a primitive semantic nucleus associated with the term \(βίος\) is well established and consolidated: see, in this respect, the different points of view of LIDDELL Henry - SCOTT Robert, Greek-English Lexicon, rev. H.S. JONES, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996; BAILLY Anatole, Dictionnaire Grec-Français, Paris: Hachette, 1997; BOISACQ Émile, Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Grecque étudié dans ses rapports avec les autres langues indo-européennes, Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1950; CHANTRAINNE Pierre, Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots, vol. I-II, Paris: Ed. Klincksieck, 1968-80. This oscillating semantic fluctuation subsists quite patently in Aristotle’s philosophy: if, on the one hand, in certain steps, an almost monological employment of \(ζωή\) is kept stable in a textual triangulation that links the treatises Metaphysica [concerning the teleology of life in Metaph, IX, 6, 1048b 27 and of the life inherent in the divine substance in Ibid., XII, 7, 1072b 26-30], De anima [concerning the soul as a vital principle in De an, II, 2, 413a 21ff.] and Politica [concerning the existence of the polis from life and in view of the good life in Pol, I, 2, 1252b 29-30], on the other hand, changes terminological register, when in Ethica Nicomachea he uses \(βίος\) for the enunciation of the modes of pleasurable, political and contemplative life [in EN, I, 5, 1095b 15 - 1096a 11]; in three other steps, however, the employment of \(ζωή\) remains in the semantic immediacy of \(βίος\) [cf. EN, I, 7, 1097b 9; X, 6, 1176a 35; EE, I, 4, 1215a 35], which, although unusual and disconcerting, is symptomatic of the need for a non-univocal but differentiated approach to the notion of “life” in his philosophy: cf. KEYT David, “The meaning of bios in Aristotle’s Ethics and Politics”, in Ancient Philosophy 9 (1989) 1, 15-21
8 In this last case, more than a “go on living”, it is a matter of a conscious and self-appropriate “living life”, to which Rémi Brague, in his work Aristote et la question du monde, granted full relevance when defending the presence of a “phenomenology of life” in Aristotelian philosophy: cf. BRAGUE Rémi, Aristote et la question du monde. Essai sur le contenu cosmologique et anthropologique de l’ontologie, Paris: PUF, 1988, 474-481; 487-492
9 Cf. MANSION Suzanne, “Deux définitions différentes de la vie chez Aristote?”, in Revue Philosophique de Louvain 71 (1973) 11, 425-450
10 Cf. in this regard SANTAS Gerasimos, “The form of the Good in Plato’s Republic”, in Revue Internationale de Philosophie 40 (1986) 97-114
[ἀγαθός μέγιτος] can be perfectly compatible with the ethical notion of “a certain good” [ἀγαθόν τι] in relation to what appears to be “better” [βέλτιον]. This conception of good has an internal intelligibility of a distinctly hylomorphic cut, that is, it is endowed with

1. on the one hand, of a form [μορφή] sufficiently shaping to assume a universal extension [καθόλου], but not necessarily abstract to achieve a self-referential and separate status vis-à-vis the circumstances to which it connects;

2. on the other hand, of a matter [ὕλη] sufficiently moldable to secure a common [κοινός] bond, but not necessarily casuistic to find itself subject to the fortuitous and unstable drift of chance or of each individual bias.

Now, it is in the act of decision that the hylomorphic conception of good reaches its most eloquent ontological expression. In this sense, to choose always implies exercising (1) an intelligible determination in relation to what is formally available to reason, but also, and for this very reason, (2) an empirical delimitation in relation to what is materially available to reason within our reach, which is why the intuition that, in terms of ethical decision, “best” is always “possible” remains entirely valid, but that, even so, “the best possible” will always possibly be the best [τὸ βέλτιον].

Only under the sign of a “thinking” (or “given-to-think”) truth is the Platonic “Good” able to fully satisfy the eidetic and an-hypothetic demands of a purely intelligible design; However, in the light of a “making” (or “given-to-make”) truth in the contingent domain of facticity, Platonic ontology seems totally inoperative to meet the broader and unavoidable demands of Aristotelian praxeology. Now, what the Stagyrian practical philosophy seeks to clarify implies not only thinking “on” or “about” action, but above all experiencing it in the texture of the decisionary act itself. The first indication of this intention appears phenomenologically not so much in the fact that someone chooses this or that in the preferential framework of an option, but rather in the act of determining his or her dispositional state in the framework of the election of a way of life.

It happens that, in order to prove the inability of Platonic reflection to accommodate all the demands arising from an ethics inscribed at the heart of the decision, Aristotle would have to begin by confronting the “monistic” and “indeterminate” character of the Platonic notion of Good, without, with this, we must suppose Aristotle advocated a “substantialization” of action. Ethics, in effect, does not have to be subject to the

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12 Cf. ARIST, EN, I, 5, 1095b 15 - 1096th; EE, 1,4, 1215a 32 - b 6
13 Cf. BRAVO Francisco, “¿Es el bien indefinible? El punto de vista de Aristóteles en su crítica a la forma platónica del bien”, in Cuadernos Venezolanos de Filosofía 1 (1989) 2, 141-173
requirements of the substantialist metaphysics, even though we are willing to admit that the metaphysical field seems adequate to conceptually infra-structure Aristotle's praxeological reflection in some of its most decisive aspects. In fact, the metaphysical scope of substantialism seems rather restrictive, not to say inoperative, to account for a peculiar field of knowledge where the articulation between the contingency of factuality and the universality of principles requires not formal explanations or apodictic conclusions, but formulations of practical incidence, as is the case of the viability of decisions, in the field of ethics, politics and economics, or the efficacy of discourse, in the field of rhetoric.

Now, if, as the Stagirite admits, all knowledge and all deliberate choice aspire to a certain good, in pointing to research to the highest of the practicable goods, the impossibility of achieving a good whose supremacy is so high that it essentially makes the pursuit and realization of the other goods impossible. Instead, Aristotle validates a notion of a good whose supreme character can simultaneously fulfill two requirements: 1. that it be an index of “a certain” good and 2. that it come from the “practical” goods, that is of the goods capable of realization. Now, among the realizable goods, happiness appears as the one that is in a position to secure finalistically the highest status. Why? First, because happiness collects, as to name, a “general agreement of a large proportion of men” to be the bearer of a common agreement.

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15 The idea of rhetoric is not to make the discourse malleable to the passive listener in order to persuade him of a reality pre-determined in its substantial rigidity, as one might presume - and, in fact, the pre-Aristotelian rhetoric of the sophistic type proves it - but to make the receiver malleable to the operative efficacy of the discourse through the rhetorical mediation of argumentation. By molding the conditions of listening, rhetoric simultaneously shapes the listener (making him active) and the very world addressed by and in persuasion (making it performative); its pragmatic virtuality does not aim merely at producing a stylistic effect on expression, but at making it effective and actual, giving it a truly discursive (communication), cosmetic (world), and ontopoietic (being) reach; vide CROISSANT Jeanne, “La classification des sciences et la place de la rhétorique dans l'œuvre d'Aristote”, in Actes du XIème Congrès International de Philosophie, XIV, Amsterdam - Louvain: Ed. Béatrice Nauwelaerts, 1953, 269-275; CASSIN Barbara, “Dire ce qu'on voit, faire voire ce qu'on dit. La rhétorique d’Aristote et celle des sophistes,” in Cahiers de l’École des Sciences Philosophiques et Religieuses (Bruxelles) 5 (1989) 7-37; CHIESA Curzio, “Structure sémantique et forme logique d’après l’analyse aristotélicienne des phrases d’action,” in AA.VVV., Philosophie du langage et grammaire dans l’Antiquité, Cahiers de Philosophie Ancienne n° 5 / Cahiers du Groupe des Recherches sur la Philosophie et le Langage n° 6 et 7, Bruxelles: Ousia / Université de Sciences Sociales de Grénoile, 1986, 181-202
16 Cf. ARIST, EN, I, 4, 1095a 14-15
17 Cf. Ibid., I, 4, 1095a 16-17
18 Cf. Ibid., I, 4, 1095a 17-18
ὁ μολογία] implies, in Aristotelian guideline, that a term exhibits not the mark of an absolute (necessary and assertive) validity, but rather the texture of a common speech [κοινός λόγος] that only the mediating action of a consensus can ensure as a guiding and prospective criterion. Second, because, radiating semantically from this terminological consensus, the sense of “well-being” acquires a status of experiential preponderance that makes happiness the most preferable of goods. Being happy therefore implies a good acting [ἂν πράττειν] that culminates in a good-living [ζῆν] not in the hedonistic sense of the “easy life,” but in the challenging sense of a good life, in which action becomes dwelling [Ἠθός] and, due to this, eudaimonistic.

If we have to semantically relate the connatural idea of happiness with the meanings of an “achieved life” or a “good life”, the open possibilities seem to reach not a common focus of convergence, but to dissipate in a pulverized mass of meanings: it will reside for some in the enjoyment of pleasure, for others in the attainment of wealth, for still others in the mere conquest of honors. Pleasure, wealth and prestige function, apparently, as disintegrating elements and not as polarizing criteria of a common definition of happiness. Left, therefore, to the free examination of each individual, the notion of happiness varies not only from individual to individual, but also, within the same individual, it varies at different age stages or in different circumstances of his life. How, under these conditions, can we validate a common definition of happiness so as not to compromise the epistemological viability of ethical reflection?

The Platonic solution seems seductive. One can escape the subjective illusion of different sensible masks of happiness by seeking refuge in a perspective according to which happiness requires a good that, by existing by itself and in itself, rises above the multiplicity of particular goods. In this case, “the” Good would be responsible for the unifying and transcendent ballast of the different eudemonic meanings and experiences. The problem, for Aristotle, is to know to what extent the Platonic solution is compatible with the individual and concrete clipping of the goods apprehended as such.

To neglect the difference between “the” Good and “a certain” determinable good

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20 Cf. ARIST, Pol., I, 2, 1252b 30; II, 4, 1253b 25; III, 9, 1280a 32; b 33, 39; VII, 13, 1331b 39

in a plurivocal connection of “goods”22 is tantamount to forgetting the proverbial incision of the Ethica Eudemia according to which what is said of the substance can also be praxeologically transcribed to action, namely the good <is said> in many ways [<λέγεται> πολλαχῶς τὸ ἄγαθὸν]23. In this sense, Aristotelian reflection will take care of showing us to what extent science “about acting” revolves around a discourse in action, or rather discursive action, which, like being24, is said in many ways [λέγεται πολλά ἄγαθά]. More than a semaphore indicating multiple meanings “for” acting, the good imposes itself as an inducer of maximum practical differentiation25, allowing human action to be invested with a challenging semantic meaning [λόγος σημαντικός]. In Aristotle’s praxeological reflection there seems to be insinuated, therefore, what we could call a semantics of action26, more even than an explanation “for” the action, as if, in this case, the action was originally devoid and lacking causal meaning.

The polysemic discursiveness of good and action sometimes seems to go unnoticed in the folds of the most thorough exegesis; yet, understanding it is crucial to understanding the scope of a philosophy appropriately human [ἀνθρωπίνη φιλοσοφία]27 in two distinct but related strands, namely

1. on the other hand, on a physiognomic side, from which one conceives the practical good [πρακτὸν ἄγαθον] - an expression we auspiciously have news of in De anima28 - not as a substance or essence alongside the others or above them, but as a presence inscribed “in being” [ἐν τῷ <ὁντί>] whose categorical expression shifts from a figurative model [σχῆμα] of logical thinkability to a manifestation of the aspect [ἐίδος] of action;

2. on the other hand, an ergonomic aspect, on the basis of which an ontology of action is projected29 whose formulation is narrated not so much in the think of a truth.

23 ARIST, EE, I, 8, 1218b 4
26 We take this happy expression from the title of the work by RICOEUR Paul (et al.), La sémantique de l'action, ed. par Dorien TIFFENEAU, Paris: CNRS, 1977
28 Cf. ARIST, De an., III, 10, 433a 4
29 We glean this designation from AA.VV, “Aristote. Ontologie de l'action et savoir pratique”, in Philosophie 73 (2002) 1-95. The words of introduction to the issue seem, by the way, sufficiently enlightening to deserve
“about” acting, but in the **ontopoiesis** of a **truth-made-work**\(^{30}\), along the lines, moreover, of that discrete inciso of the Metaphysica, according to which the **work is the end of practical truth** \(\text{τέλος ἄληθεια πρακτικῆς δ’ ἔργου}\)\(^{31}\).

The articulation of this double physiognomic and ergonomic dimension is relevant to understand to what extent the exercise of the decisionary act relies precisely on a **hylomorphic capacity** to **model** each decisionary experience in its **material ubicacion** according to the **formal determination** of a universal propensity to **act rationally** not only with an “end in view” but also “to the end”. In fact, between a conception of the Good that is too condescending to the dispersive and erratic meanings attributed by **common speech** \(\kappaοινὸς λόγος\) and a conception of the Good that is too conniving with Plato’s eidetic theorizing\(^{32}\), Aristotle seems willing to adopt a **mediational** solution whose merit lies in the possibility of assuring human action a universal intelligibility of principles without, however, losing his hand and foot in the contingent world of facticity.

III. The Aristotelian reconstruction of the practical good: from the finalistic use of the means to the mediational realization of the ends

Rather than being empowered by the metaphysical requirement of an essential
perfection, human action is mobilized by the ergonomic tension of an open-ended perfection. According to the Stagyrian, honor [τιμή], pleasure [ἡδονή] and, to some extent, intelligence [νοῦς] and virtue itself [ἀρετή], do not constitute ends [τέλη] over-determined by a “Good itself” [ἀγαθόν], but rather “determined goods” [ἀγαθών τι] in view [το οὖν ἐνέκα] of a work [ἔργον] whose raison d’être is determined in the drive to happiness [σύνεξιμονία]³³, taken this as the best of things realizable by man [τὸν ἄνθρωπον προκεῖται ἀρετήν]⁳⁴. If in Plato it is practice founded on a Good that finally makes us happy, in Aristotle, in turn, it is happiness that must be converted finalistically into a practical good [προκεῖται ἀγαθόν] aimed at as an immanent purpose [ἐνυπάρχον]. In this teleological context, virtue arises not from an imitation [μίμησις] of the law of nature [φύσις], but from a creative realization [ποίησις] of action. Ontologically finalizable as a work [ἔργον], virtue elevates human action to the “over-excedence” of a perfecting. ³⁵

It is clear that the claim to view Aristotelian ethics from an ergonomic perspective raises some difficulties, both from a strictly etymological point of view and from the point of view of the respective philosophical exegesis. In fact, it would be foolhardy, to say the least, to ignore or reject outright this interpretative risk, a risk that, by the way, Aristotle himself exposed when he admitted the deep ambivalence that dilacerates the meaning of the term in question:

The term work can be referred to in a double sense; there are those cases in which a work exists independently of its use (e.g., the work of building construction is a house and not really the act of building; that of medicine is health and not the act of treating or curing); and there are, on the other hand, those cases in which the use coincides with the work (e.g., the work of the eye is the act of seeing; that of mathematical science is contemplation). Thus, in those cases where the use is identified with the work, the use is necessarily better than the state. Once these distinctions are established, we say that the work of a thing is equivalent

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34 Cf. ARIST, EE, I, 7, 1217a 39-40
35 It could not be more pertinent and incisive, in this regard, the observation of Paul Ricoeur according to which “(...) la transition entre les visées limitées des pratiques (métiers, genres de vie, etc...) et la visée de la vie bonne est assurée par le concept médiateur de l’ergon, de la tâche qui oriente une vie humaine considérée dans son intégralité. La tâche d’être homme déborde et enveloppe toutes les tâches partielles qui assignent une visée de bonté à chaque pratique. Quant au dénombrement de ces excelleances de l’action que sont les vertus, il ne doit pas barrer l’horizon de la méditation et de la réflexion; chacune de ces excelleances découpe sa visée du bien sur le fond d’une visée ouverte magnifiquement désignée par l’expression de la vie bonne ou mieux du vivre bien; cet horizon ouvert est peuplé par nos projets de vie, nos anticipations de bonheur, nos utopies, bref par toutes les figures mobiles de ce que nous tiendrions pour les signes d’une vie accomplie.(...)”: RICOEUR Paul, “Éthique. De la morale à l’éthique et aux éthiques,” in http://www.philo.umontreal.ca/documents/cahiers/Ricoeur_MORALE.pdf, 5 [vide Ibid., in Dictionnaire d’éthique et de philosophie morale, dir. par Monique CANTO-SPERBER, Paris: PUF, 2001, 580-584]: emphasis added.
to that of virtue, even if not in the same way; for example, a sandal is a work where the shoemaker’s art and its exercise converge. If there is, therefore, a certain virtue of the art of shoemaking and of the good shoemaker, his work is the good shoe. And the same applies to all other cases.36

Assuming, therefore, that the term ἔργον, although usually translated as “function,”37 can also aggregate the meanings “work” and “task,” we are justified in postulating an operative conception of ethics, from which human action is no longer seen as a “role” or “position” to be performed by way of assignment, but as a “task-to-perform” in response to the call of the λόγος.38 It is, in fact, in that “logosic” context that Aristotle will be able to clarify what the specific character of human work consists of [ἔργον ἀνθρώπου], by resorting to the well-known snippet “activity of the soul according to reason (= reflection)” [ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια κατὰ λόγον]39.

The determination of virtuous action is only attainable in the context of a transfiguration of natural virtue into ethical excellence, from the moment in which the
activity of the specific kind of life that each one has chosen is aimed at perfecting its own order. Such improvement is not so much obtained through the mechanical rigidity of a set of mimetically replicable attitudes or behaviors, nor through the more or less abstract enthronement of a discourse on action, but is installed at the heart of a **heuristic temporality** whose prospective horizon constitutes a **mediational vector of an** ethnicity embodied in **discursive action**. In teleological terms, the good for man will consist, this time, in a **certain activity of the soul in conformity with complete virtue** \(\psi\nu\chi\zeta\xi\varepsilon\varepsilon\nu\varepsilon\gamma\varepsilon\alpha \tau\zeta \kappa\alpha\iota \varepsilon\rho\varepsilon\tau\varepsilon\varsigma \tau\varepsilon\lambda\varepsilon\alpha\nu\) \(^40\) whose achievement consists in the completion of his natural perfection, or better said in the maximum and integral perfecting of the practical nature, since perfection designates, in relation to a given nature or faculty, a culmination that is reached both on the plane of being and on that of action. \(^41\) There are several possible activities and, in this sense, several virtues inherent to them. The definition of happiness is therefore finalistically co-implicated in the constant and progressive maturation of a **full life**, whose **work** \(\varepsilon\rho\gamma\omicron\nu\) essentially characterizes the human being not insofar as that he feels “full of life” or finds himself with a “stuffed life”, but because he aims at the **plentitude** of a **life-in-full**. \(^42\)

Avoiding the pitfalls of a merely hypothetical speculation, nominally pulverized in the unaccountable plurality of possible ends, Aristotle's teleological eudemonism configures an understanding of action whose end becomes ethically feasible in the **virtuous improvement**

Of a **life of integrity** \(\zeta\omicron\omicron\omicron \sigma\pi\omicron\omega\delta\alpha\iota\alpha\) realized as a **work** \(\varepsilon\rho\gamma\omicron\nu\):  

Therefore, since the virtue of the soul and its virtue are necessarily one and the same thing, the work of the virtue of the soul will consist in a life of integrity: this is, after all, the perfected good that corresponds to happiness. \(^43\)

In light of the excerpt, one now fully understands why it makes perfect sense to subject the definition of happiness to the confrontation of both the opinionated mainstream and the philosophical theses that support its discursive and practical appropriation. As the modus operandi employed in most of his treatises, Aristotle knows well the advantages of critical deconstruction. In the case of the Ethics, the Stagyricon

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\(^{40}\) Ibid., I, 13, 1102a 5-6


\(^{43}\) ἀνάγκη ἐν καλῷ ταύτῳ ἔλειν τῆς φύσεως καὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς, ἐξεύρεθαι ἢ ἐν ἄλλῃ τῇ ἀρετῇ ἡμιαθαρισσία. τούτῳ δέ ηὔχοσθαι τό τέλεον ἀριστον, ὡσεὶ ἢ ἐνεχειμονεία: ARIST., EE, II, 1, 1219a 26-28
subjects the “popular morality” of his time to critical scrutiny not to mark a neutral theoretical submission to the data gathered from the different levels of sociological perception of the problem, but to redefine a methodical program of unifying synthesis of the different elements at play, through of the conceptual intersection of the notions of happiness and the supreme good. In praxeological terms, this means that ethical virtue does not depend essentially on technical know-how, functional savoir-faire, or a scientific modus cognoscendi, but on a prudentially oriented will to act in “conformity” with what is known, seeking to see the truth in each situation within a deliberative act capable of articulating a consideration about ends and a consideration about means:

We do not deliberate about the ends, but about the means [liter. about what leads to the ends]. In fact, neither the doctor deliberates whether to cure, nor the orator whether to persuade, nor the politician whether to produce good legislation, nor in any other case about their end: instead, once the end is established, they consider how and by what means they will reach it. And if this seems to them to be achievable by many means, they will examine the easiest and most appropriate ones.

Now, unless no outside obstacle or external coercion intrudes itself into that operative circuit, subverting the final outcome of its the agent becomes the artificer of the connection between means and ends, on the assumption that, from the point of view of efficient cause, he is already master and progenitor of the action in progress. That which appears last in the order of logical analysis of an action, namely the consideration of the means, constitutes precisely that from which must begin, in the order of generation, the process of operationalization in view of ends whose rectitude has already been rationally established and the appropriation autonomously assimilated by the agent. This idea is reinforced in one of the most complex and aporetic steps in Aristotelian praxeology:

Sometimes we investigate the means, sometimes their use, and in the same way [sub. proceed] in other cases: sometimes [sub. investigate] the

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45 For a comprehensive overview of the “teleological” and “eudemonic” determination of the supreme good in Aristotelian praxeology, see position in the dense study by MÉTIVIER Pierre, L’éthique dans le projet moral d’Aristote. Une philosophie du bien sur le modèle des arts et techniques, op. cit.
46 Cf. ARIST, EN, II, 4, 1105a 26 ff.
47 Ibid., III, 4, 1113a 33
48 βουλευόμεθα δ’ οὖ παρ᾽ αυτῷ τελείων ἄλλα παρὰ τόν προς τά τέλη, οὐδὲ γὰρ ἡπείροις βουλεύεται εἰ υπάρχει, οὐδὲ ρήματα εἰ πείσει, οὐδὲ πολιτικά εἰ εὐνοούμενα ποιήσει, οὐδὲ τῶν λοιπῶν οὐδέποτε παρ᾽ αὐτῷ τά τέλη: ἄλλα θέμενοι τό τέλλος τό τῶς καὶ διὰ τῶν ἔτσι συνεποίησα: καὶ διὰ πλειόνων μὲν ψυχομονήσαν γίνεσθαι διὰ τίνος ρήματος καὶ κάλλιστα ἐπισκοποῦσι: Ibid., III, 3, 1112b 11-17
49 Cf. Ibid., III, 5, 1113b 18
means by which, sometimes the way or through whom (...). But if we deliberate always and always, we will advance to the unlimited. Now, what one deliberates about and what one chooses is the same, except if what one chooses is already determined, since, in that case, one chooses what has already been decided by deliberation. Indeed, each one ceases to seek how he will act whenever he brings the principle [subent. motive of the action] back to himself, and from there to the guiding part [= guideline = i.e. rational], since it is this that he chooses. 50

In light of this thorny excerpt, it seems clear that the decisionary outcome of the guided choice [προαιρούμεν] results from the conformity of a prior assessment [προβεβουλευμένον] of the means available to the agent to the tutelage of a driving element [τὸ ἡγούμενον] whose directive capacity - which we know is already contained in the part of the soul endowed with reason - enables one to perceive the “apparency/apppearance” [φαινόμενον] of the choice [αἵρεσις] as worthy of election or preference, preventing action from paralyzing and dissolving into a regressive and endless series of deliberations ad infinitum [εἰς ἄπειρον].

In this sense, an agent does not choose something because it “seems” good to him or because it “appears to be good” according to his volatile impressions or subjective tastes; quite the contrary, what appears to be good to the agent at the end of a thoughtful rational deliberation is what must fulfill as teleological content the imperative (one would almost say “deontological”) to choose well what can be eligible. That is, by choosing well what he can use following the guidance of reason [δοξοθῆς λόγος], the agent will realize well what he should aim at in finalistic terms.

Conclusion

The acquisition of virtue depends, therefore, on the answer to the central question of the conditions of access to happiness, the meaning of which is only attained not in this or that punctual moment of existence, but in the manifestative horizon of an entire life.

According to this phenomenological and teleological matrix, it becomes absolutely imperative to highlight two aspects correlated with the deliberative act, whose

50 ζητεῖται δ’ ὅτε μὲν τὸ ὄργανον ὁτὲ δ’ ἡ χρεία αὐτῶν: ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς λοιποῖς ὅτε μὲν δ’ οὖν ὅτε δὲ πῶς ἢ διὰ τίνος (...). εἰ δὲ ὡς βουλεύσεται, εἰς ὑπερών ἤτιτι, βουλευτών δὲ καὶ προαιρεῖτον τὸ αὐτό, εἰπή ἄφοβος ἡγούμενον ἢ ὅ τοι προαιρεῖτον: τὸ γὰρ ἐκ τῆς βουλῆς ἕκατον προαιρεῖτον ἔστιν. παύεται γὰρ ἐκαστὸς γύρον πῶς πρέπει, ὅταν εἰς αὐτὸν ἀναχάγῃ τὴν ἀρχήν, καὶ αὐτὸδ ἐκ τὸ ἡγούμενον ταῦτα γὰρ τὸ προαιρούμενον: Ibid., III, 3, 1112b 28-29; 1113a 2-7
implications have, in our view, a remarkable impact on Aristotle's practical philosophy:

1. the first aspect concerns the conviction that the poietic modeling of a human deliberation rationally engaged in the realization of the practical good [πρακτὸν ἀγαθὸν] has no from giving way to any kind of relativistic intrusion or subjective vehemence;

2. the second aspect attends to the need to distinguish between the Platonic “an'hypothetical” conception of Good [τὰ χαθόν] and the phenomenal conception of a certain good [ἀγαθὸν τι] visible [οὗ ἔνεκα] as supreme [ἀκρότατον], whose finalistic tension the Stagirite architecturally integrates into the civic and political horizon of a good life [εὖ ζῆν] performed in view of a properly human good [τὰνθρωπόν ἀγαθόν].
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