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HAPPINESS, HUMAN NATURE AND TELEOLOGY IN ANCIENT AND MEDIAEVAL PHILOSOPHY

According to Aristotle in his ethical works, man *is* his intellect¹, by which he means that the best thing in man is his intellect². The intellect is the part of man which distinguishes him from plants and animals³. Since plants and animals cannot be happy, therefore - Aristotle concludes - happiness must arise from activity of the intellect⁴. The intellect, which is part of the soul, is subdivided into a contemplative part and a deliberative part, and the contemplative part is superior to the deliberative part⁵. Therefore, supreme happiness will arise from contemplation, which is the virtue of the contemplative part⁶, and second-rate happiness from moral virtue, which is the virtue of the deliberative part⁷.

¹ NE IX, iv, 1166 a 16-17, 22-23; viii, 1168 b 35; X, vii, 1178 b 2, 7; *Protrep.* B62. The *Protrepticus* is quoted on the basis of I. DÜRING, *Aristotle's Protrepticus*, Göteborg, 1961.

² NE X, vii, 1177 a 19-21, b 19-20, 26-31. On the meaning of *nous* cf. my book *Dio e Contemplazione in Aristotele, Il fondamento metafisico dell' Etica Nicomachea*, Milan, 1999, 53-59.

³ NE I, vii, 1097 b 33-1098 a 4.

⁴ NE I, vii, 1098 a 16-18; EE I, vii, 1217 a 26-28.

⁵ EE V (NE VI), i, 1139 a 5-15; *Pol.* VII, xiii, 1333 a 17-30; EE II, iv, 1221 b 30.

⁶ For a detailed examination of the meaning of contemplation for Aristotle cfr. my book *Dio e Contemplazione* [n.2 *supra*]...89-113. The contemplative part of the soul deals with the sciences of the unchanging areas of reality, namely metaphysics, physics and mathematics, whereas the deliberative part deals with the study of contingent areas of reality, such as ethics, politics, and rhetoric.

⁷ NE X, viii, 1178 a 5-9. For a critique of this scale of values cf. my article «Das betrachtende Leben (bios theoretikos) bei Platon und Aristoteles: ein kritischer Ansatz», in *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 37(1995), 20-40.

There is no question but that happiness is the aim of life. Aristotle says that both all men of culture and the man on the street are agreed about this⁸, and all philosophers since Aristotle's time have continued to repeat that the aim of human life and of ethics is happiness. This includes Kant and Mill and even such a pessimistic philosopher as Schopenhauer.

In mediaeval times there is no philosopher who questions Aristotle's view that the aim of life is happiness. There is also no philosopher who does not agree that intellect is the part of man that makes man different from all animals and makes it possible for man to be happy. However, there is major disagreement among the mediaeval philosophers in regard to Aristotle's thesis that contemplation is the highest source of happiness and moral virtue only a secondary and inferior source of happiness. For example, Thomas Aquinas argues that Aristotle is right, because the ultimate activity of human beings in heaven is contemplation of God, and he holds that the purpose of moral virtue is merely to control the passions in order to make the intellectual and contemplative life better⁹. However, the Franciscan school with St. Bonaventure holds that heaven consists essentially in the perfect love of God rather than the intellectual contemplation of God¹⁰.

In this paper I would like to point out that outside his two major ethical works Aristotle has a totally different view of human nature, and I would like to argue that this different view is the correct one and should lead us to a different understanding of happiness and of the role of intellect in human life.

In the *Protrepticus* Aristotle writes that man «needs many arts in order to survive»¹¹. Implicit in this phrase is the notion that the purpose of the intellect, which is the source of the arts, is to enable human beings to survive. In other words, the intellect in man is an instrument of self-

⁸ *NE* I, iv, 1095 a 18-19.

⁹ *S.C.G.* III, xxxvii, 2160: «ultima felicitas hominis non consistit nisi in contemplatione Dei». Ib. 2152 : «ultima felicitas hominis non consistit ... in bonis animae quantum ad ... intellectivam [sc. partem] secundum actum moralium virtutum...». Ib. 2158: «Ad perfectionem enim contemplationis... requiritur etiam quies a perturbationibus passionum, ad quam pervenitur per virtutes morales et per prudentiam...».

¹⁰ *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* 1,1: «Cum beatitudo nihil aliud sit, quam summi boni fruitio; et summum bonum sit super nos : nullus potest effici beatus, nisi supra semetipsum ascendat, non ascensu corporali, sed cordiali». Cfr. also ib. VII, 4; VI, 2.

¹¹ B13: *pollon deitai technon pros soterian*.

defence parallel to the horns of a bull or the prickles of a hedgehog or of a cactus. This viewpoint is expressed more fully by Aristotle in *Part. An.* IV, x, where he writes:

Now it must be wrong to say, as some do, that the structure of man is not good, in fact, that it is worse than that of any other animal. Their grounds are: that man is barefoot, unclothed and devoid of any weapon of force. Against this we may say that all the other animals have just one method of defence and cannot exchange it for another: they are forced to sleep and to perform all their actions with their shoes on all the time, as one might say; they can never take off this defensive equipment of theirs, nor can they change their weapon, whatever it may be. For man, on the other hand, many means of defence are available, and he can change them at any time, and above all he can choose what weapon he will have and where¹².

From this passage it is clear that Aristotle views intellect as the instrument which enables man to defend himself better than any of the animals. Intellect is the instrument which enables man to use different means of defence and change his means of defence and to choose which weapon he will use and where he will use it. Thus intellect is the human instrument of defence.

This view of intellect as an instrument of defence is very different from the view of intellect as being the very essence of man, as found in the ethical works. If intellect is the human instrument of defence, then it would be absurd to say that intellect is the essence of man, just as it would be absurd to say that the essence of a bee is its sting or the essence of a tortoise is its shell. If intellect is the human means of self-defence, then it is also absurd to hypostasize intellect and to say that God is intellect, as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas maintained. I would like to argue that Aristotle in *Part. An.* is correct in holding that intellect is not the essence of man, but the human means of self-defence.

In the passage quoted Aristotle also implies that all animals seek to defend themselves, in other words, that they all aim at survival. He expresses this view most clearly in *De An.* II, iv, where he writes:

For it is the most natural function in all living beings... to reproduce another individual similar to themselves – animal producing animal and plant plant -, in order that they may, so far as they can, share in the eternal and the divine. For it is that which all things strive for, and that is the aim of the activity of all natural beings. ... Since, then, individual living beings are incapable of participating continuously in the

¹² *Part. An.* IV, x, 687 a 23 – 687 b 2.

eternal and the divine, because nothing perishable can retain its individual unity and identity, they partake in the eternal and divine each in the only way it can, some more, some less. That is to say, each survives, not itself, but in a similar individual, which is one in species, not identically one with it¹³.

In this passage Aristotle writes that the aim of the activity of all living beings is to share in the eternal and the divine. Because the individual cannot survive, it seeks to survive by reproducing itself. When Aristotle says that all living beings seek «the eternal and the divine», it is to be understood that this is a dialectical way of saying that they seek the eternity of Aristotle's God, the Unmoved Mover¹⁴.

From Aristotle's metaphysics it is known also that all substances seek their perfection or the full development of their form¹⁵. The acorn seeks to grow into a fully-grown oak-tree. This is its highest good. The ultimate good of the universe is the Unmoved Mover¹⁶. Thus all living beings strive for their full development, which is their way of striving for the ultimate goodness of the Unmoved Mover, and because they cannot remain in a condition of full development, they reproduce, in order to reach the eternity of the Unmoved Mover in the species.

It is to be noted, however, that intellect is not required for these purposes. Aristotle holds that it is absurd to think that intellect or deliberation is a prerequisite of teleology¹⁷. Witness the bird that builds a nest, the spider that weaves a web and the plant that produces leaves to protect its fruit. All of these activities, which are manifestly teleological, because clearly parallel to human teleological activities, occur without the aid of intellect or deliberation¹⁸. Teleology is accordingly an intrinsic part or aspect of nature¹⁹. Thus for Aristotle the teleology in nature is primary,

¹³ *De An.* II, iv, 415 a 26 – 415 b 6; likewise *De Gen An.* II, i, 731 b 24 – 732 a 1.

¹⁴ On dialectical method in Aristotle cfr. my book *Dio e contemplazione...*[*supra* n.2] 12-17.

¹⁵ *Phys.* II, i, 193 b 11-18; ii, 194 a 27-33.

¹⁶ Cfr. my book *The Evolution of the Concept of Chance in the Physics and Ethics of Aristotle, A Commentary on Physics II, iv-vi*, Amersfoort, 1997, 254-6.

¹⁷ *Phys.* II, viii, 199 b 26-28. Cfr. D. CHARLES, «Teleological causation in the Physics», 101-128, in *Aristotle's Physics, A Collection of Essays*, L JUDSON (ed.), Oxford, 1991, 116.

¹⁸ *Phys.* II, viii, 199 a 20-30.

¹⁹ Cfr. CHARLES, «Teleological causation...»[*supra* n.17], 117: «At this point one reaches bedrock in Aristotle's defence of teleological causation: it must be a genuine form

and the teleology experienced and recognised by human beings when they consciously aim at goals is a secondary exemplification of the primary teleology in nature. As Aristotle writes in *Phys.* II, viii:

In general, art either imitates the works of nature or completes that which nature is unable to bring to completion. If, then, works of art [i.e. projects involving deliberate teleology] are for something, clearly so too are the works of nature²⁰.

For Aristotle, primary teleology, as found in nature, is a characteristic of that which is alive²¹ and is due to a principle in all living beings. This principle is soul, not intellect²². In other words, the pursuit of goals is caused by soul, which neither needs to calculate to achieve these goals, nor even requires the body which it inhabits to possess any nervous system, as in the case of plants.

The existence of soul follows from the difference in behaviour between that which is alive and that which is not alive. Teleology is explicable only in terms of a principle called soul, which makes all living beings strive to stay alive. The aim of life is life itself, i.e. survival in the best possible condition. But the reason why living beings strive to stay alive is because they are striving to attain the eternity and perfection of the Unmoved Mover. The existence of the Unmoved Mover is necessary to explain why living beings strive to stay alive.

The conclusion to be drawn from this evidence is that the aim of human life is not happiness, but survival in the best possible condition. Human beings, like all other living beings, desire the eternity and the perfection of the Unmoved Mover. Happiness is, therefore, no more than

of causation, because if it were not, the world would contain no natures and no natural processes».

²⁰ *Phys.* II, viii, 199 a 15-18.

²¹ Cfr. CHARLES, «Teleological causation...»[*supra* n.17], 122: «...what it is to be an organism of a given kind is to be something which is organized to achieve its goals (in favourable conditions). Indeed it is the organism it is because it is organized to achieve those goals in given conditions. The goals, and their implementation, make these organisms what they are». Id. 123: «... to remove the teleological cause is to dispense with natures altogether (199 b 15-18)».

²² Non-living realities, such as the four terrestrial elements, also act in a teleological manner due to the presence in them of soul principle (psychiche arche, cfr. *De Gen. An.* II, iii, 737 a 8-9; cfr. *Hist. An.* V, xxxii, 557 b 11-12). On hylozoism in Aristotle cfr. my book *The Evolution of the Concept of Chance* [*supra* n. 16]...148.

a feeling that arises in human beings when they are convinced that they are on the path towards their goal of survival in the best condition. Let us take a glance at the typical occasions when human beings feel happy, for example, when they pass an examination or win a competition or win a large sum of money or when they give birth to a child or when someone loves them. In each of these cases the feeling of happiness is caused in human beings by the realisation that they are on the path to survival in the best possible condition. However, the aim of life is not a feeling, but something more profound, namely the cause of the feeling, which is the reality of obtaining something that contributes to one's survival in the best condition.

Undoubtedly only human beings can feel happy, because they alone have intellect, which enables them to reflect and conclude that they are on the path to survival. However, intellect is no more than an instrument, and happiness is no more than a barometer reflecting progress towards survival. It may be concluded, therefore, that the cornerstone of Aristotle's ethical thought is incorrect, since the aim of life and of ethics is not happiness, but survival. This conclusion is, of course, in harmony with Darwinian evolutionary biology. Aristotle certainly saw more clearly the aim of life in his biological thought than in his major ethical works.

According to the evidence examined, Aristotle holds that there is in soul an inherent desire for the eternity and perfection of the Unmoved Mover, and that intellect is an instrument enabling human beings to survive. It may be added from an evolutionary point of view that intellect also unquestionably came to exist in human beings for this purpose. From this standpoint it would follow that human beings can use their intellect to survive in the same way as animals use their means of defence to survive without an intellect. But it also follows (from a philosophical point of view) that if there were to be a life after death only for human beings, then this would have to depend on human beings using their intellect to live in a different way to the way that animals live. But this different way of life cannot consist in the development or perfection of the intellect, since the intellect is no more than an instrument. Given that the body dies and that only soul could survive death, then life after death, from a philosophical point of view, could only be possible if human beings use their intellect (as an instrument) to transform their souls. For Aristotle intellect is a part of the human soul, and he could not accept that human beings could use part of the soul as an instrument to transform the soul in such a way that it

could survive death. Plato wished to use the body as an instrument to achieve the immortality of the soul, but viewed intellect as part of the soul, which also led him to an intellectualist ethics. The situation is quite different, if intellect is viewed as part of the body.

It would seem, accordingly, that intellectualism in the Middle Ages, particularly the intellectualism of Thomas Aquinas, is the outcome of the view of human nature found in Aristotle's ethical works. It is a view which Aristotle inherited from Plato's ideal of philosopher kings contemplating the Ideas in the other world. It is a vision which continued to exercise a dominating influence on Descartes and all of modern philosophy, especially Kant and German Idealism. It is also responsible for the unrestrained development of technology at the present time.

But if, as Aristotle holds in his biological thought, intellect is to be understood as the human means of self-defence, then it is absurd to hypostasize intellect and to hold that God is intellect. It is more logical to hypostasize soul and to hold that God is spirit. This in turn means that the question of divine foreknowledge and of predestination, which was much discussed by the Arabic and Latin authors of the Middle Ages, is a false question, since it depends on the idea of God as an intellect. If intellect is no longer regarded as the most important part of man, then it is no longer necessary to hold with Aristotle that intellect is the most important part of the soul. If intellect is the human means of self-defence, then intellect can be understood very well as part of the body. If it is soul in all living beings that makes them strive for the goodness and eternity of God, then it is more reasonable to understand God as spirit rather than as intellect. Finally, if intellect is the means which enables human beings to live differently from animals and is the only instrument by which human beings could achieve life after death, which animals cannot achieve, then it follows that the way of life required for life after death does not consist in developing science and technology or in perfecting the intellect, but rather in using the intellect to transform the soul.

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