

BASILIS SEVDALIS 5, IKARIAS 146 71 NEA ERITHREA, TEL: +30210-81 32 178, FAX:+210-81 33 732
mob.tel.: 6944 426180
e-mail:sebdalis@otenet.gr
Athen, 15.07.2008

ARISTOTELIAN VALUES IN A PLURARISTIC WORLD

|

A contibution to the 11TH Symi Symposium in Stageira on the 15.07.2008

By Basilis Sevdalis

Addressing to you, the participants of the xith Symi Symposium today, here in Stageira where Aristotle was born 2400 years ago, I have the feeling of sharing with you a Spiritual Memorial for the great Philosopher.

Why so, one would ask? The best answer to this question is given by Martha C. Nussbaum, Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, in her excellent contribution to the Philosophy Congress of the 'Kulturforum der Sozialdemokratie', on the 1st of February 2002 in Willy-Brandt-Haus, Berlin, which has the title:

„Aristotelian Social Democracy - The Defence of universal Values in a pluralistic World“.

Martha Nussbaum says that the Values of the Social Democracy are in our times under attack. To defend these values she proposes a form of Social Democracy based on Aristotle. Her approach, with close cooperation of Amartya Sen, Nobel price winner for Economy of the year 1998, has the title "capabilities approach" and is being used for mesuring the Life quality between various Nations by the UN.

This concept, is also influenced by Karl Marx's Humanism, as she admits. A necessary component of it is the list of life aspects to which capabilities relate. She asks an Aristotelian question, "What activities characteristically performed by human beings are so central that they seem definitive of a life that is truly human?". The list consists of 10 items, among which are: life, body health, body integrity, emotions, Control over one's environment etc. The list delivers a good basis for human rights, which every Nation must secure for the citizen. The capabilities of human beings should not be permitted to fall below a certain level.

This approach, according to Nussbaum and Sen, refers to Aristotelian Ideas and delivers a basis for a modern interpretation of the Social Democracy.

Before referring to Aristotelian works of specific interest to Socialists, I would like to say a few words of general interest:

Aristotle was born in Stageira, the place you are visiting today, in 384 BC and was the son of Nicomachus, physician of the Macedonian king Amyntas B. He was approximately of the same age with King Philip, who invited him to educate his son Alexander the Great.

Aristotle himself at the age of 18 became a student of Plato, the other Giant of the Greek philosophy, who lectured in his Academy in Athens. and remained there for 19 years up to the death of Plato.

Aristotle founded his own School of philosophy, the Peripatic School, and lectured in the Lyceum, which was discovered a few years ago, very close to the centre of Athens.

After the death of Alexander the Great, his life in Athens was in danger, so he left the city and went to Euboea, where he died in 322 BC.

He was both a scientist and a philosopher, he performed experimental works for nature's elements and phenomena for which he developed what we call today databases. With Plato and Socrates he is one of the most important founders of Western philosophy, influencing Christian, Islamic and Western Philosophy and Science.

Aristotle wrote, according to Ermiippos, about 400 works on many subjects, such Logic, Physics and Metaphysics, Biology and medicine, Ethics, Politics, Rhetoric and Poetics. In our time, there are catalogues including 143 titles of his works.

For us, politically aware people, his works Politics and Nicomachean Ethics, in which Aristotle deeply analyses political and ethical issues, are of particular interest.

Aristotle considers ethics as part of the political science.

It is evident that the state (POLIS) is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. The human being who is unable to live in society, or who has no need of it, because he is self-sufficient, must be either a beast or a god. Every state is a community and every community is established with the scope to achieve some good. The state, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at the highest good.

I will mention now a few of the many elements that characterise his political thinking:

1. Definition of the citizen (Politics, book three, 1275a1-25)

Firstly he asks, what is a state?

A state is composite, and, like any other whole, made up of many parts; these are the citizens, who compose it.

Who is the citizen, and what is the meaning of the term?

He concludes: .The citizen, whom we are seeking to define, is a citizen in the strictest sense,... and his special characteristic is that he shares in the administration of justice, and in offices.

2. The balance of power (Politics, book four, 1297b38-1301a16)

Any constitution must have the support of the strongest class in the state – the poor in a democracy, the rich in an oligarchy. The middle class must be included as partners in any constitution. A variety of devices is used to exclude one class or another from power. In framing a constitution, the legislator must consider three elements: the deliberatives, the executive and the judicial.

3. The various constitutions.(Politics, book three, 1278b24-1288b7 & book four 1289a29-1297b37)

A constitution is the organization of offices in a state, and determines what is to be the governing body, and what is the end of each community. But laws are not to be confounded with the principles of the constitution: they are the rules according to which the magistrates should administer the state, and proceed against offenders. So that we must know the number and varieties of the several forms of government, if only with a view to making laws. For the same laws cannot be equally suited to all oligarchies and to all democracies, and there is certainly more than one form both of democracy and of oligarchy.

He divides the constitutions into three forms: kingly rule, aristocracy, and constitutional government, and three corresponding perversions – tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy.

In this context, it is very interesting that Aristotle defines the “common interest”

(1282b15-25). He says:

In all sciences and arts the end scope is a good, and especially and above all -,that is the highest of all – is the political science of which the end scope, the good, is justice, in other words, the common interest.

4. Revolutionary changes and their causes (Politics, book five, E1301a19-1316b31)

Democracy and oligarchy are both prone to factional conflict between parties holding incompatible views on equality. In democracies revolutions can occur when demagogues attack the rich and compete for the favour of the people. In oligarchies the people may rebel against oppression, or section of the ruling class may feud amongst themselves. Aristocracies and constitutional governments are liable to collapse when the different elements of the society are not properly balanced.

In addition, Aristotle gives us in the seventh book of Politics a full concept for the ideal State (Politics. book 7, 1323a14-1337a4).

Firstly, he defines the goals of the state as follows:

He who would duly enquire about the best form of a state ought first to determine which is the most eligible life and then whether the same life is or is not best for the state and for individuals.

Certainly no one will dispute the propriety of that partition of goods, which separates them into three classes, external goods, goods of the body, and goods of the soul, or deny that the happy man must have all the three.

He assumes that the best life, both for individuals and the states, is the life of virtue, having external goods enough for the performance of good actions.

Secondly, he clarifies that certain conditions must be fulfilled in order to have the best state, and mentions the number of citizen and the size of the country.

The perfect state cannot exist without a due supply of the means of life. There will be a certain number of citizen and a country in which to place them. First to be considered is the population, the number and the character of the citizen, and then what should be the size and the character of the country. A state then only begins to exist when it has attained a population sufficient for a good life in the political community. The best limit of the population of a state is the largest number, which suffices for the purpose of life, and can be taken in a single view.

Thirdly, the substance of the state is determined by three elements:

1. The participation of the citizens

All the citizens must participate in the state affairs. And must be of excellent character, which is to be done through education. That education should be regulated by law and should be an affair of the state is not to be denied.

2. Equality

Since every political society is composed of rulers and subjects, let us consider whether the relation of one to other should interchange or be permanent. For the education of the citizens will necessarily vary with the answer given to this question. Now, if some men excelled others in the same degree in which gods and heroes are supposed to excel mankind in general having in the first place a great advantage even in their bodies, and secondly in their minds, so that the superiority of the governors over their subjects was patent and undisputed, it would clearly be better that once for all the one class should rule and the others serve. But since this is unattainable, and kings have no marked superiority over their subjects, such as Skylax affirms to be found among the Indians, it is obviously necessary on many grounds that all the citizens alike should take their turn of governing and being governed.

3. Legislation

Aristotle considers legislation for every important field of life.

For exable.

1. First care will be about marriage – at what age should his citizen marries, and who are fit to marry? In legislating on this subject he ought to consider the persons and their relative ages, and there may be no disproportion in them...act.

2. The legislator must consider the time at which the children will succeed to their parents. There ought not to be too great interval of age.

3. Birth-control

As to the exposure and rearing of children, let there be a law that no deformed child shall live, but where there are too many (for in our state population has a limit), when couples have children in excess, and the state of feeling is averse to the exposure of off sprigs, let abortion be procured before sense and life have begun; what may or may not be

lawfully done in these cases depends on the question of life and sensation.

In summary, we could say that Aristotle gives us a vision, of how the good human life is achieved, but also a vision for the means to enable it. And these means are political ethics.

I will finish this contribution by mentioning what Karl Marx and Green think about Aristotle.

Marx calls Aristotle a Giant. We stay on his shoulders in order to see far away. In his famous book Capital, in the section about Goods and Currency he refers to Aristotle saying that one can better understand the meaning by reading Aristotle and puts in his German work the original Greek text. It is meant the following extract of Nicomachian Ethics.(book 5, 1133b20-33):

" Currency, then acts like a measure, making things commensurable and so equalizing them; for there would be no association without exchange, no exchange without equality, and no equality without commensurability. Strictly speaking, of course, it is impossible that things so different in kind should become commensurable, but in relation to people's needs a sufficient degree of commensurability can be achieved. There must then be some single element involved in all cases, and this is called "currency" (nomisma), since it is this that makes everything commensurable, in so far as everything is measured in currency"

Green, an Oxford Professor for Ethics, was strong in the International Relations of the British Liberal Party evolved. For a lifetime he was an energetic fighter for free and state schools for all English children. In his theoretical works he proposed that, in order to find suitable concepts for contemporary politics, we have to go back to Aristotle