

THE ARISTOTELIAN ‘MORAL EXCELLENCE’ AND THE KIERKEGAARDIAN SEARCH FOR THE GOOD

Anna MAKOLKIN¹

АРИСТОТЕЛЕВСКОЕ «НРАВСТВЕННОЕ СОВЕРШЕНСТВО» И КЬЕРКЕГОРОВСКИЙ ПОИСК ДОБРА Анна МАКОЛКИН

ABSTRACT. Modern scholarship has difficulty in dealing with the legacy of Søren Kierkegaard – either to place him in the camp of theologians, or philosophers. This paper attempts to contribute to solving this puzzle with the help of Aristotle’s ethics and his view of Man in the world. To Aristotle, man is a rational being who creates the map of his own existential voyage, including his guiding divine mythologies, the explanation of order in cosmos and way of conducting relationship with others.

Most modern philosophers inherited Aristotle’s philosophy and even those who disagreed with him had been familiar with his concepts and mode of analytical practice. We argue that even Søren Kierkegaard was not an exception, having appropriated Aristotle’s conceptual mode and ethics while pondering of the notions of the Good.

KEYWORDS : *Aristotle, Kierkegaard, ethics, the Good, Belief, existence, Christianity, secular, religious*

РЕЗЮМЕ. Современной науке трудно определить наследие Сёрена Кьеркегора – либо поместить его в лагерь теологов, либо философов. Эта статья пытается внести вклад в решение этой загадки с помощью этики Аристотеля и его взгляда на человека в мире. Для Аристотеля человек – это разумное существо, которое создает карту своего собственного экзистенциального путешествия, включая его руководящие божественные мифологии, объяснение порядка в космосе и способа отношений с другими.

Большинство современных философов унаследовали философию Аристотеля, и даже те, кто не соглашался с ним, были знакомы с его концепциями и способом аналитической практики. Мы утверждаем, что даже Сёрен Кьеркегор не был исключением, переняв концептуальный режим и этику Аристотеля, размышляя над понятиями добра.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: Аристотель, Кьеркегор, этика, добро, вера, существование, христианство, светское, религиозное

¹ University of Toronto, Canada.

All teaching and all intellectual learning come about
from the already existing knowledge.
Aristotle. *Posterior Analytics*.

Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) occupies a very special place in the history of philosophy and history of European ideas. A product of the Romantic rebellious century, this renowned Danish existentialist, part – theologian, and part denier of theology, and a truly modernist thinker, embodies not only the intellectual wanderings of his time, but is, in many aspects, also an “intellectual child” of Aristotle.

The grand edifice of the Aristotelian legacy is comprised not only of the fundamentals of analytical process in all areas of inquiry, but also of the most valuable model system of ethics. His pagan concept of “*moral excellence*”, constructed in the absence of god(s), would successfully stand for centuries, posing a challenge even to the later Judeo-Christian ethical norms. The millennia of the post-Aristotelian thought, since the adoption of Christianity, would experience the very extended, the most regrettable and problematic period of the *epistemic split* between the Secular and the Religious. The secular philosophers and theologians would be equally drawn to Aristotle.

In this sense, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), separated from Aristotle (384–322 BC) by millennia, is most representative of the modern *paradigmatic shift*, accompanying the dominance of Christianity in European civilization, on the one hand, and the permanent impact of Aristotle, a secular thinker, on the other.

This paper will reveal some of the paradoxes in the teaching of the renowned Danish existentialist, who had retained some of the Aristotelian values in new cultural circumstances of Victorian century, trying to reconcile in himself a doubting philosopher and a new reformed Christian theologian.

1. Aristotelian Ethics

“Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good,” – this is how Aristotle began his *Nicomachean Ethics*, summarizing the ultimate goal of all human actions and scientific inquiries which, first and foremost, and in essence should aim at improving human life (1984, vol.2: 1729). This way the pagan thinker of antiquity bequeathed his *ethical code* to most

modern thinkers and scientists, who often forget that all inquiries should improve human health and well-being. Moreover, the result of their activity has to be concrete and pragmatic – “in medicine this is health, in architecture a house,” preached Aristotle in his pagan ancient sermon (1984, vol.2: 1734). The essence of ethics, in Aristotle’s view, consisted in providing a guide to a complete and happy life “since happiness is complete and self-sufficient, and is at the end of action” (1984, vol.2: 1735). His idea of Happiness included self-fulfillment, realization of one’s talents and potential according to one’s inclination in any area of life – one could be a lyre-player, a physician, or a carpenter, but excellence in exercising one’s skills predetermines usefulness for society and personal contentment.

“Human good turns out to be the activity of soul in conformity with excellence,” claimed Aristotle, implying that excellence had been at some point defined by humans themselves, alone, rather than by gods (1984, vol.2: 1735). Aristotle had enormous belief in man and his ability to reason and identify the Good. According to him, the Ultimate Good was inside the human soul, striving on its own for noble actions, fulfillment of one’s talent and thus happiness that could be attained as a result of one’s acts “in conformity with complete excellence” (1984, vol.2: 1739). In his ethical code, Aristotle relied on the tested experience of previous civilizations, on the approved traditional notions of the Excellent and the Good, worked out in the pre-Hellenic times, having thus established the *ethical continuum* – the yardstick of goodness and excellence, applicable for his contemporaries in all spheres of life.

Aristotle distinguished two kinds of excellence: intellectual and moral, none of which “arise in us by nature”. The first one, he thought, could be acquired by training the mind, while the moral one may be attained by the established habit or pattern of repeated behavior, emulating others. A man of antiquity, Aristotle already appreciated the value of civilization, and the difference between the civilized and non-civilized beings. In his view, millennia of practicing moral behavior could form a habit, ultimately becoming *moral excellence*, a heritage transmitted within a society and family, superceeding even the intellectual one. The Aristotelian ethical man, thus, is primarily a byproduct of Culture and collective will of humans themselves, without the divine interference. However, the ethical code, in his view, is the work of the *zoon politicon/ the political man*, implying that a particular politics could determine the nature of a particular ethics. Aristotle defined politics as the “most authoritative art”, predetermining all the rest in society, including ethics, and no man could be

independent of a particular politics. The ethical codes thus could vary in view of different politics.

Aristotle subjects to criticism a society whose ethics is defined by the pursuit of wealth, sending the message to bankrupt modernity, “The life of money-making and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking” (1984, vol 2: 1732). A man of antiquity, he came to reject the pursuit of wealth as a part of ethical behavior, believing that wealth is never shared by others, and nothing could bring happiness, in his view, unless it is shared by the rest of society. Ethics to Aristotle was the *Grammar of Being* which should be observed by all. He leaves the room for the political will which could re-shape ethics differently. “Men are good in one way, but bad in many,” preached Aristotle (1984, vol.2: 1748). Aristotle advocated a principled ethics, with no room for relativism – adultery, for example, in his view, could never be justified, even “with the right woman, adultery was adultery,” he maintained. Crime was a crime, “to do any of them was to go wrong,” categorically stated Aristotle (1984, vol. 2: 1748).

Aristotle accepted differences of opinion and impressions in general, but as a far ethics was concerned, he insisted upon uniformity and clarity according to the *universal existential grammar*. This grammar dictated that ethical man respect and follow the communal shared values and live by them, presuming that those are the right rules which took millennia to arrive at, gradually, by trial and error. One has to remember that Aristotle arrived on the scene only a century after the pagan martyr Protagoras (483–410 BC) had been banished from Athens and whose books had been publicly burned because of the following blasphemous lines, “I am unable to arrive at any knowledge whether there are any Gods” (1988: 231). One hundred years, which separate Aristotle and Protagoras, mark the shift of the *epistemological paradigm* from the multideistic to the completely novel secular realm of antiquity, canonized by Aristotle in the presence of nearly 30 000 deities in collective Greek imagination.

2. Hymn to Aristotelianism

In the pagan Roman times, anticipating the regrettable *cultural detour* and virtual death of the Secular, Lucretius Titus Carus (99–55 BC) authored his most blasphemous and grand *De Rerum Natura*. This longest in European literature poem also represents the greatest poetic explication of Aristotelianism, his cosmology, theory of science, as well the passionate stand on religion in society and culture.

Centuries prior to the official adoption of Christianity, but in the midst of the discourse and real battles for the rule of the Religious, Lucretius re-affirmed the Aristotelian materialism, his ethical credo and his secularism. Sensing the coming destruction of the Roman pagan Empire and a complete departure from the Aristotelian *secular paradigm*, Lucretius managed to produce a prophetic warning to all Europeans. His *De Rerum Natura* is a Roman hymn to Aristotelianism, nearly four centuries prior to the official defeat of the Secular. Lucretius found enough courage to proclaim boldly and openly that:

*Religion breeds wickedness and
that [it] has given rise to wrongful deeds* (2007, BI:4).

*And so potent was religion in persuading to do wrong
Sooner or later, you will seek to break away from me* (2007, B. II: 47;77-79).

Lucretius, a Roman, stood on guard of the Secular Civilization whose possibility had been outlined by Aristotle centuries prior. He reiterated the Aristotelian basic premise of the non-divine origins of the universe and the significance of human intervention, or his idea that “Nature itself supplied with the paradigm of creating things” (2007, B. V: 152). Like Aristotle, Lucretius emphasized the role of man as a laborer in the universe:

*Nature herself would choke the thorns
Unless by toil and strife
Mankind fought back, groaning, over mattock for dear life* (2007, B. V: 154).

His poem openly denounces religion, celebrating Aristotle on the eve of the first *grand epistemological shift*, brought on by the official adoption of Christianity, the triumph of the religious mythology and regrettable defeat of secularism. Centuries after Lucretius, up to the post-modernity, would there continue the steady period of decline of the Secular.

3. Christian Flight away from the Secular

Aristotle recognized in his *Nicomachean Ethics* the power of the *Zeitgeist* and politics which could fundamentally change human perception of the world around and, what is more important, the notion of the Good. In the distant antiquity, he

already saw politics and political mythology as “the most authoritative of art forms,” capable to influence and shape ethics and common beliefs about the Good. Centuries afterwards, Christianity would become not simply a new dominant religion, but also a new politics, authoritative enough to dictate new public and private behavior, new goals in life. It re-defined the *existential grammar*, articulated by Aristotle. The new Christian man was not supposed to strive for intellectual excellence, perfection and professional pursuits. His existential goal, shaped by the religious mythology, was that of a passive individual, waiting for the other world, the existence beyond the present. The Aristotelian *grammar of ethics* and the concept of excellence had been exchanged for the dogma of martyrdom, inactivity, blind belief that stifle energy and intellect.

A society, with the church in the forefront, would re-write the rules of conduct, models of excellence and roads for perfection. Christianity, as a “most authoritative art” reversed the human pathway, outlined by Aristotle, away from the free pagan thinking and secular society, towards the rigid and dogmatic thinking, and stifling way of Being. It was the most political religion, expanding the utopian message and affecting all areas of life, the pursuit of knowledge and artistic expression. In order to survive, art would incorporate the religious myth and propaganda of Christian ideology. Art would survive, being substantially modified under the watchful and vigilant eye of the Christian censorship, only within the cowardly realm of the allegory and metaphor.

4. Kierkegaard’s Challenges

Kierkegaard appeared on the cultural scene in the most confused Romantic century, after nearly two millennia of the “theological dictatorship.” Philosophy begins with Doubt, “Kierkegaard would proclaim with the definite Aristotelian categoricity and clarity (1958:116). And yet Doubt was something which Christian church had been trying to stamp out, having imposed *Certainty and Belief*. The Kierkegaardian century was the epoch, the least conducive to Doubt and production of philosophy. The barbaric punishment of Giordano Bruno in 1600, having overshadowed the parade of free thinking which began during the early Renaissance, was still quite fresh in the collective memory of the Romantics, facing the second coming of a reactionary theology.

Kierkegaard had a difficult task of the latecomer to philosophy. Just as any other modern thinker, he had to consider simultaneously the Hellenic tradition, the Roman continuum, the recourse to Aristotle, the Abrahamic religions, Homer and Moses, St. Augustin, Aquinas, Dante and Machiavelli, Descartes, Hegel, Bacon, Lock, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Giambattista Vico and many, many others. He had to process all the major thoughts of others and yet be able to produce an independent original utterance of his own. The task was really overwhelming. “I fear no one, I fear myself,” Kierkegaard would write in his *Stages of Life* [1988, 267]. On the other hand, as a true philosopher, he doubted the precepts of religion, since “the religious seeks no foothold in the historical,” while the philosopher has to possess memory to properly analyze thoughts and events. Religion demanded from Kierkegaard to forget Homer, Hesiod, Xenophon and Aristotle, focusing instead on Moses and Christ, harnessing his Doubt. The religious dictated to forget the pagan secular memory of antiquity. It appealed to Reason, asking to forget for the sake of Belief, while Reason asked to remember – this was the critical bind which Kierkegaard, a late thinker, found himself in.

“Faith is a paradox of life and existence,” he concluded upon serious examination in *Fear and Trembling* and confessed, “I am unable to make the movement of Faith” [1968: 44; 58]. Thus, the doubting philosopher prevailed. Upon the comparative reading of the Bible and philosophical texts, he saw that “to understand Abraham was a trifle”, but it took much more to understand Hegel. The wisdom of the primitive ancient shepherds did not require much elucidation. With the Aristotelian ‘epistemic knife,’ Kierkegaard performed his surgery of the mind – he ridiculed the ambitions of religion in general and Christian theology in particular, divorcing it completely from philosophy: “Theology sits roughed at the window and courts its favor, offering to sell her charms to philosophy” [1968: 43]. (The metaphor is blunt, he likens theology to a female, selling her body to a few desperate customers) And yet it is unable to offer anything that could match or surpass Aristotle. This is the message that Kierkegaard sends with his metaphor, ranking philosophy and poetry higher than theology and Belief.

In the footsteps of Aristotle, Kierkegaard states that “ethics lays a prodigious responsibility upon the shoulders... it bids a man to believe in reality and have courage to fight against all afflictions of reality” [1968: 95]. This is precisely the diagnosis of the *paradigm split* which had occurred with the official adoption of

Christianity and its religious dictatorship, which Kierkegaard makes on his own, defining the burden of contradictions and the difficulty of producing culture and philosophy in the modern post-Christian era. To think in the presence of the official Christian censor, one has to oscillate between fantasy and the demands of reality, between myth and fact, the actual history and the imagined one. Here, there is an echo of Aristotle's semiotic approach, articulated in his *Rhetoric to Alexander* – about signs pointing to Fact, and those referring to Belief. As an Aristotelian, Kierkegaard remembers that there was a moment in cultural history when one could ignore myth, even in the presence of 30, 000 Greek gods and still elevate intellectual excellence and human reason. But as a post-Christian modern philosopher, Kierkegaard did not always find enough courage to stand up to theology and justification of Belief. But in this he is not different from the majority.

He had been living in the century when all European Universities had been either run by the Church, or under its supervision, and all cultural activities were conducted in the presence of the active religious censor (It is enough to recall the ban of Donizetti opera *Il Poliuto* for the alleged anti-Christian silent scenes). But in his Aristotelian moment, Kierkegaard was able to see the tragedy of the *epistemic split* and acknowledge the superior liberating role of the secular ethics vis-a-vis the religious. The ultimate good was in facing Reality, finding enough courage to reject the utopian thinking and pursue the Aristotelian excellence. Personally, Kierkegaard saw it in perfecting his own writings and thoughts, and realizing his own intellectual potential to the fullest. He understood that his existential mission had been realized at the expense of his personal life which he had sacrificed for his intellectual pursuits. To justify it, Kierkegaard invented the theory of new Christianity and the problematic image of a new Christian man, seeking the Aristotelian excellence.



References

- Aristotle. *Complete Works* Tr. By Jonathan Barnes. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Stages of Life*. Tr. Howard Wong & Edna Hong. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968.

- _____. *Fear and Trembling and Sickness Unto Death*. Tr by Walter Lowrie. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968.
- Lucretius. *The Nature of Things De Rerum Natura* Tr. By A.E. Dallings. London: Penguin Books, 2007.
- Makolkin, Anna. “Aristotle’s False and Dangerous Signs and their Revival in the Contemporary New Media,” in *Biocosmology – Neo-Aristotelianism*, Vol.3, No 1 (Winter, 2013): 50–68.
- _____. *Italian Librettist Re-Writing History*. Toronto: Anik Press, 2011.
- _____. “Aristotelian Cosmos and its Poetic Origins,” in E-LOGOS, 2008.
- _____. “Aristotelian Cosmos – the Source of Beauty, Pleasure and Knowledge,” in *Wisdom and Happiness, with or without God*, Toronto: Anik Press, 2009, 22–34.
- _____. “Going Beyond Faith: Kierkegaard’s Leap into Ultimate Reality” in the *URAM Journal*, 2005, vol.28, no.1 21–30.²



² Note: This paper was presented at the 2013 – Int’l Conference in Athens.