

My Other Self: Discovering the Moral Foundation of Metaphysics in Aristotle

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Abstract: The dominant interpretation about the relation between metaphysics and morality in Aristotle's thought is the separative interpretation. According to this understanding, Aristotle distinguishes the piratical from the theoretical reason/ wisdom-hence a radical historical disassociation between metaphysics and morality. This division of the theoretical/ practical has brought about some crucial implications in the history of philosophy. During the recent decades, some philosophers have demonstrated the dangerous implications of this separation for the human world and criticized Aristotle for establishing this division. In this article, I argue that Aristotle's separative interpretation is not based on an accurate understanding of his texts. A close study of his writings in different fields would unravel that from his viewpoint, the birth of metaphysics is joined to the birth of morality. The possibility of metaphysics is based on an encounter with the other and being toward the other. Analyzing the different functions of 'nous' in the formation of metaphysics, I will discuss that nous underlies the possibility and objectivity of (Aristotelian) metaphysics and the unity of metaphysics with morality and practice. Discovering the unity within the strangeness of the other is the situation in which metaphysics begins. This situation is based on both ontological and epistemological functions of nous. According to this understanding, the separative interpretation of Aristotle's metaphysics is subject to serious doubt.

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Introduction: Separation of the theoretical and practical reason is one of the most famous clichés in the history of philosophical thought. This separation justifies much of the next divisions including the divisions among different areas or branches of philosophy. One important, if not the most significant, division based on this separation is the distinction of metaphysics from ethics in the philosophical tradition. It seems that Aristotle put the footstone of this distinction: he clearly distinguished the theoretical wisdom (*Sophia*) from the practical one, and simultaneously, developed this distinction with a hierarchical system giving the theoretical wisdom superiority above the practical one. This understanding of Aristotle's view has been the dominant interpretation of his works. I call this interpretation "the separative interpretation of Aristotle." According to this interpretation, metaphysics

doesn't have any result for or connection to the moral and the social. It is, rather, self-sufficient. In the metaphysical literature of Aristotelian thought, observing/contemplating (*theorein*) the primary causes (*aitia*) and the principles (*archai*) is exclusively for the sake of contemplation itself. In *theoria*, the observer (the philosopher) doesn't seek any external goal or benefit beyond the act of *theoria*. This fragment from *Nicomachean Ethics* (1177b) represents this idea clearly: "the activity of contemplation may be held to be the only activity that is loved for its own sake: it produces no result beyond the actual act of contemplation, whereas from practical pursuits we look to secure some advantage, greater or smaller, beyond the action itself." Besides, according to the separative view, the Aristotelian philosopher doesn't need any other person/thing in the process of contemplation. His activity is

self-sufficient without any external aim. In other words, according to the separative interpretation, the Aristotelian philosopher doesn't have any concern for the external world as he is contemplating the primary causes. Metaphysics in this sense is in a far distance from the moral and the social aspects.

This dualistic view continued to be the dominant (and prescriptive) approach in the history of philosophy, indicating that ethics should be studied and discussed regardless of metaphysics. Since the separation has been accompanied with a kind of value system that gives metaphysics superiority over ethics, the descriptive literature of metaphysics developed in terms of value-laden terminology in which the metaphysician is described as the master of other people. Aristotle applies the words inferior (*ἥττον*) and dominated (*ἐπιτάττειν*) for describing people other than metaphysicians. According to

some contemporary critics, this socio-political terminology permeated other disciplines and justified the oppressive systems of dominance in practice. Hereafter, Emmanuel Levinas, for example, criticizes metaphysics for ignoring the concrete reality and the human other. He believes that metaphysics established a suppressive and exclusive system where "the other" and "ethics" are sacrificed for the sake of the self and reason. Hence, he calls ontology as a philosophy of power that leads to imperialism and dictatorship (Lévinas, 1971: 46- 47). Contemporary criticisms against metaphysics as a violent discipline claim that the value-laden separation of the theoretical from the practical (or the rational from the moral) caused violence in the real life since it justifies oppression and injustice theoretically.

In all, these criticisms are based on the separative interpretation of Aristotle.

And I would claim that the separative interpretation is only one possible, if not a weak, reading of the Corpus Aristotelicum. While one can read Aristotle's works in a different line that shows the unity of metaphysics with ethics in a fundamental sense. This article attempts to give another interpretation of Aristotle's view on the relation between metaphysics and ethics according to which both have a unified birth moment and are interwoven.

Methodology: In this article, some different works of Aristotle have been selected. They include treatises and books that have indications about the origin and method of metaphysics such as the two famous works on ethics, *Parts of Animals*, and *Protrepticus*. Then the distinct fragments are being re-read in their connection to each other and for a consistent understanding of all in a meaningful and text-bounded way. So, the main idea of this study is to examine

the possibility of a different reading of the nature and origin of Aristotle's metaphysical thought. After that, this reading proceeds with leaving the separation cliché and its accompanied presuppositions in the parentheses.

Findings According to a reading free from the separative cliché, one can see that for Aristotle, metaphysics in its origin is a human situation, an emotional moment, rather than a science/knowledge to be studied. This special situation begins in a moment of encounter with an "other." In contrast to the separative view, it is demonstrated that metaphysics is not possible without meeting the other and without being engaged with its unknowable face. It is discussed that metaphysics begins with a moral engagement with the concrete world, with an "other" who can be an insect, a tree, or another human being. So,

metaphysics is in its essence and origin a moral situation and proceeds with morality in its way of development.

Discussion and Conclusion:

According to some arguments made in different Aristotelian works, metaphysics begins in a moment of encountering with something strange. The strangeness makes us astonished. But astonishment doesn't lead to any more step. The next step, or the way to get out of this situation, is observing/ discovering something similar in the strange other. Aristotle mentions that there is a fundamental and similar element in everything. This similar, or common element is called "nous" in Aristotle's works. "Nous" is what makes metaphysics possible and at the same time provides a basis for morality and love for the other. So, in a close reading of Aristotle, it is argued that metaphysics is fundamentally and necessarily bounded with ethics and is not separable

from the concrete "other." In the end, it has been suggested that the same reading can be examined in other metaphysical works to see if the separative cliché have influenced our understanding of metaphysical works, or those works have led to that cliché.

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