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*Aristotle and the Structure of Political Argumentation in Light of the Material Constraints of the Human Being*

The perspective which I am focusing on here is the premise originally assumed in my work for the investigation of the topic *The Origins of Refutation in Early Greek Philosophy*,which I am trying to work out in the research lead by Johan Tralau, *The Origins of Political Philosophy in Ancient Greece*. My aim is to analyse how it is possible to trace the form of the political arguing as already present in the Pre-Socratic thinking. With this expression “political arguing” I don’t mean a kind of a mere stylistic and “external” manner of discussing. On the contrary, it is a way of using reason (*nous*) which belongs to the politician in the exercising of his (or today also her) essential nature as politician. In my opinion, this aspect allows properly Aristotle to define politics, which is for him a part of the practical knowledge (*praxis*), as a science (*episteme*).

In fact, according to the Aristotelian technical philosophical use of such a word – science – it is possible to affirm that politics is a science in the sense that politics however remains a knowledge whose aim is truth or which has truth as result. We have one of Aristotle’s most precise localizations of politics as science in the second chapter of the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where the Stagirite affirms that politics has the same epistemic structure as every other science.[[1]](#footnote-1) Here politics is said to be the most important science since its object is the good (*to agathón*). At the same time politics is also said to be the “master” one (*malista architektoniké*) since it leads the other sciences giving the politicians the useful tools in order to establish the best systems of laws (constitution) and of administering the town for the best of everyone which lies in the possibility to express one’s own capacities.[[2]](#footnote-2)

If science means knowledge (i.e. grasping) of causes and principles and if politics is a science, then also politics is an epistemic form of knowledge of causes and principles. Causes and principles as such are always true in the epistemological vision of the classical ancient Greek philosophy, although some apparent exceptions like sophists.[[3]](#footnote-3) Nevertheless, the epistemic status of politics (i.e. politics is a science and therefore is knowledge of truth) implies in Aristotle the reference to a “mobile” model of science. The argumentations which are grounded on reasoning with a deductive character (*syllogismoi*) and which are used in the political field have not an apodictic nature. We find apodictic proceedings as demonstrations in the sphere of the theoretical sciences.[[4]](#footnote-4) An apodictic demonstration is based on a peculiar form of arguing which has as start-point the fact that the premises of this deductive reasoning are necessary, true and “first” in the sense that it is not possible to deduce or infer them from other statements or principles. Thus, the premises in a political arguing don’t need to be principles in that way. Therefore the political reasoning is dialectic and rhetorical. A practical syllogism uses premises which concern a contingent reality. Thus, the syllogism which occurs in the political debates has variable truth content. But this syllogism has not only this characteristic. In addition its purpose is to be persuasive so that it has also a rhetoric value. Further, the validity of its premises is often confirmed through the strategy of disproof (*elenchos*), which gives to this kind of syllogism a dialectical status.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the context of the present conference I continue to refer to Aristotle who plays an introductory role even if a posteriori in the aforementioned research centred carefully at Heraclitus and Democritus. But in the present conference it is more Aristotle than the Pre-Socratic philosophers who gives me the possibility to sketch a fruitful intersection between the topic of the research on which I am collaborating and the topic which we would like to develop in our conference, having its key concepts in the expressions “materiality” and “morality”, and aiming at providing an understanding of the relationship between “practices” and “performance”.

Actually the ancient Greek thought in general has the peculiarity to show us that there is always a hard ontological basis which works as justification for its elaborated theories, whether they concern the knowledge of the physical nature, the cosmos and the being as such (*theoria*) or the ethical field (*praxis*) or the artistic one (*poiesis*).[[6]](#footnote-6) It is a constant element which goes through the entire ancient Greek thinking. Greek ontology is not based on a purely formal or purely logical construction, namely on principles which are purely empty as concerns their content. In other words, the principles in Greek ontology are not considered universally valid from a formal point of view, deducted in a rational way a priori and, thus, independent from any empirical experience, like in Kant or in Hegel. On the contrary, Greek ontology has actually always an empirical ground. It is for example in this way also in the philosopher who according to the usual common reading of his thought is seen as the idealist *par excellence*, i.e. Plato. Hence, Greek ontology remains always bonded to an aspect or, rather, to a determination of reality which is not possible to transcend as simply inessential. This determination is matter. Reality – or at least the reality of this world and of the human existence – has a material trait which constitutes its own essential principle. In fact, ethics and politics are not only scientific regulative fields which give us rules in order to administer the life in a *polis* or in order to manage the human life. Ethics and politics are rather also ontological fields. It means that they are ontological spheres where a way of being for the human being appears. The so-called rules (moral laws or political laws) of the ethical or political action cannot properly be elaborated without considering the very nature of the human being, including all kinds of ways of being for him or for her which have their origin in the material constitution of the human being as a living being. This point is expressly stressed by Aristotle when he in the *Politics* affirms that there is a natural principle of the political investigation and it is necessary to begin from this.[[7]](#footnote-7) What Aristotle wants to preserve with this appealing to a natural principle is that a *polis* is a kind of community, but in this community the essential differences between the different members must be respected. These differences have to do with the condition of singularity and identity of every member written also in his/her specific matter.

Here a transcendental condition of morality and politics emerges. The condition for the existence of political and moral precepts which tell us what to do both in general and in the specific, concrete, individual circumstances of our daily live is that such precepts can never be formulated in an abstract way. Instead, they must refer to human beings in their “true” nature which is realized in whatever possible circumstance or experience, which still remains a circumstance or an experience of *this* world, namely a concrete circumstance or experience conditioned by the material structure of the world and also of the human being.

My thesis is, therefore, that the political premises which we can describe or also bring into play as premises of the political arguing or of the reasoning by the politician have more or less clearly an ontological trait which is bound to materiality. These premises have to do – or must have to do in order to be valid or to work as premises of reasoning – with the nature of human being. Human being is a living being “equipped” not merely with a soul (*psyché*), but with an embodied soul, a soul which exists as essential principle of existence for all living beings under material constraints. This material constraint of the *psyché* as the essence (form) of a living being is determining soul also as a sensitive soul and – very important – as a desiderative.[[8]](#footnote-8) In Aristotle this ontological structure is extremely clear. From that it follows that there is a material constraint also for the *praxis*. This fact is the condition for the *praxis* and an overcoming of this condition is not possible. Instead, this condition must be recognized and respected so that *praxis* (including politics) can be configured scientifically, namely a science of truth in the given different and variable circumstances.

This reason leads me to argue that it is methodically possible to investigate the structure of the political argumentation beginning from a recognition of the material constraints of human being as a living one. Since the human being is able to reason, he or she can also build argumentative processes, which are not only formally correct, but also true as concerns their contents or the contents of their conclusions assumed, thence, as precepts or laws and rules of acting. With this thesis Aristotle represents the acme of a parabola whose origins are already present in the Pre-Socratic thought, for example in Heraclitus and Democritus as I said at the beginning.

Now I am focusing here the specific Aristotelian case because of our common aim. In fact, Aristotle gives us the possibility of understanding in a fairly clear way 1) the connection between materiality and morality – and specifically politics as an ethical (i.e. practical) science – and 2) the criterion according to which we introduce a difference between “practice” and “performance”.

As concerns the first point, I stress again that the possibility of morality is written for Aristotle in the very nature of human being. An essential trait of this nature is determined by the Stagirite as the “*logistikon meron*” (the “calculating” part) in the soul which is provided also by a “scientific” part (*epistemonikon meron*). This distinction between a calculating faculty and a scientific faculty is based on a preliminary distinction between living beings whose soul is “*alogos*” (without *logos*) and living beings which are “equipped” with *logos*.[[9]](#footnote-9) These beings are the humans and in the humans the rational soul is, as said, in itself divided. It would be nonsensical to consider the difference between these two parts lying in *logos*. Also the scientific part of human reason needs *logos*, or exists as capacity of knowledge because reason exists as *logos*. Instead, the adjective *logistikon* indicates the human ability of deliberation and choice according to the volitional component of the human nature (*orexis*, desire). The fact is that nobody can exercise any right of choice and deliberation on that reality which never can be modified.

In *Politics* Aristotle gives us one of his most famous definitions of human being, namely as “political living being” (*zōon politikón*).[[10]](#footnote-10) This definition is ontologically justified through another:the definition of human being as a living being which has language.[[11]](#footnote-11) I have always found strange that this definition appears in the *Politics* and not in one of the works on reasoning and speech.[[12]](#footnote-12) This definition is the result of a diairetic method of definition concerning the human being that we can follow in *De anima* and that is a heritage from Plato’s dialectic proceeding. The criterion of distinction between the human being and the other animals is not the soul, but *logos* (and, hence, *nous*, or also vice versa *nous* and, hence, *logos*). Without considering the ontological question of the definitional element in the human being, my question remains why Aristotle underlines that the political essence in the human being as a living being arises from the linguistic essence. I think that the answer has in a way already emerged. There is an ontological destination which is written in the nature of every being – a nature which is a material nature in the case of the living being. This destination is the so-called *telos* (end). Reaching one’s own end means a full realizing of one’s own essence. In this sense the possibility to be honest or virtuous as the right modes in the social life is a result that comes out inside in the humans and not merely outside. This aspect is in my opinion relevant for our discussing on “practice” and “performance”.

If we assume that practice means a system of actions (or habits) while a performance (in ancient Greek: *ergon*) is the single action that takes place in such a system, then we can affirm that the qualitative value of the system derives from the modes of the performances. The fact is that the Aristotelian theory shows us that an action is done in a context like *praxis* (if the action has an ethical or political nature), *poiesis* (if it has an artistic status), *theoria* (if it is an act of knowledge). As said, these contexts are ontological fields in which the nature of human being expresses itself, namely a way of being which remains strictly dependent on the human material constraints. The limits of each system, but also its rules of “working” becomes the rules of the action written in that system. Practice as system appears here as the condition of possibility for a possible performance in the sense that it describes the appropriated end of each action. I come back here to the point in which I showed that both Plato and Aristotle consider the sophist not as an ignorant, but as a person who voluntarily, consciously and knowingly chooses wrong proceedings in the arguing procedure. We have here the case of that what is called “the paradox of the voluntary mistake.” What is determining a doctor as a good doctor or as a bad doctor? Or why can we say that his/her performance is right or wrong?[[13]](#footnote-13) We can express an evaluative judgment because of a series of rules and ends dictated by the system in which a performance is performed. Only if a performance respects those rules, it can take place in an appropriate or adequate way in that system. But this system of rules is not arbitrarily decided. Rather it is constituted by the essential, ontological determinations of the agent and consequently by the ways through which those ontological determinations can be fully realized. As said, these determinations and these ways are constrained by matter. Thus, an action is right or wrong in a practice if this action satisfies the conditions dictated by the systems and inferred from the ways of being of the humans. In this sense, the performances are not determining the quality of the system, while the system establishes the criteria of evaluation of the quality of the performances. In conclusion, my point is that any possible investigation of this topic must imply an ontology, and more specifically an anthropology. But this anthropology has not only to describe ontologically the human being, but also it must have phenomenologically a programmatic role showing what the proper manners are through which the human being is able to fulfil its essence. Nevertheless it means a re-opening of the question of the essence of the human being and in a way a taking up again the old debate of the jusnaturalism.

References

(I mention here only the editions of the *Corpus Aristotelicum* which I used)

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1. Cf. *Eth. N*ic. I, 1094a25 ff. Sometimes Aristotle considers the sciences which are actually “practical sciences” (*praktikai epistemai*) as “arts” (*technai*). Without justifying here the reason, it is important to remind that *techne* is for Aristotle a form of *scire per causas*, namely a science (cf. *Metaph.* I, chapter 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It belongs to politics the duty of searching for the best form of organizing the life in the *polis* so that everyone in the town can live his/her life in order to realise his own/her own ideal mode of living which corresponds to the development and actualizing of his/her own capacities (Cf. *Pol*. II, 1260b27 ff.). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Posterior Analytics* give us a clear determination of science as *scire per causas* and explain in what sense we can speak on “principle of science” as a truth content which is expression of a knowledge of truth and which works therefore as premise in the scientific (i.e. demonstrative) syllogism (on this cf. also *Metaph*. V, 1013a14-16). I would like to underline that both Plato and Aristotle don’t estimate the sophist as someone ignoring the rules of a correct use of reason, but as someone who is able to deceive the others just because he knows well those rules and knowingly makes a wrong use of them in order to reach his aims. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For Aristotle only theoretical sciences can arrange apodictic argumentations since they concern realities which cannot be otherwise as they are. Hence, their ontological content is always the same. Nevertheless it is also important to underline that the entire Aristotelian philosophy is actually aims at keeping in safe the contingency present in the necessary reality, as shown by Aristotle’s theory of four principles of generation: nature, spontaneity, art and luck, which we find as parallel of the theory of the four causes: matter, form, that for whose sake actions or changes take place and source of movement (cf. for example *Phys*. II). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In *Reth*. I Aristotle underlines the deep affinity between rhetoric and dialectic until he affirms that rhetoric is a part of dialectics and for that form of practical science which is politics (cf. *Reth*. I, 1356a30 ff.). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I am following here Aristotle’s distinction of sciences which we can find for example in *Metaph*. VI, chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. *Pol.* II, 1260b37-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There is no activity (theoretical, practical or artistic) for the Stagirite which is not originated by desire in the human being. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I am following here Aristotle’s doctrine exposed in *Eth. Nic*. VI, chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. *Pol*. I, 1253a2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This other definition follows in the book immediately later, cf. *ivi* 1253a9-19. The consequence of the social nature of the human being from its linguistic nature is explained by Aristotle in the following way: “The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to indicate those sensations to one another), but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state.” (cf. *ivi*, 1253a10-18; Engl. transl. H. Rackham, Harvard University Press-William Heinemann Ltd., Cambridge, Mass.-London 1944). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. As well-known, the word *logos* has a broad semantic range which today makes impossible a translation with one word only. *Logos* is reason, calculation, language, speech, ground. All these meanings are connected with each other. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Aristotle tells us that every science can be practised truly or wrongly, but the incorrect use doesn’t depend on the ignorance, but on the purpose (cf. *Eth. Eud.* VIII, 1246a 32 ff.) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)