The Historical Context of Aristotle's Ethics

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Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is one of the greatest classical texts in the Western world and is still studied by students thousands of years after its writing. It has earned the appreciation of not only philosophers, but also all students educated in western civilization.[1] Though Aristotle's arguments impress students even now, and his conclusions continue to stir present-day readers, one must understand the readers of Aristotle's day before truly realizing the magnificence of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle's work is so convincing to contemporary readers because it was meant for a much tougher audience. While today's readers approach Aristotle's work with a fairly neutral attitude, this was not the case for the original audience of the *Nicomachean Ethics*; they were extremely critical of Aristotle's ideas, as well as the concept of having a philosopher teach them anything at all.[2] Therefore, Aristotle had to maneuver around a culture of bias to make his point. By discussion how the original audience of the *Nicomachean Ethics* was biased against both the philosophical message and philosophy in general, Aristotle's talent as an effective philosopher and writer will be revealed.

Aristotle's audience consisted of young, Athenian men. These men were well reared, and all had the capability to be the movers and shakers of Athens. Some scholars believe that the primary audiences of the *Nicomachean Ethics* were these men destined for political service, though Aristide Tessitore asserts that the audience was broader and included future philosophers.[3] Since the young men were so well educated, they were at least exposed to some instruction in ethics and accepted that being virtuous was a good thing.[4] Therefore, Aristotle

began with the assumption that his students accepted the common standards of goodness. But, while Aristotle's starting point was the ethics of the Athenian mainstream, he had no intention of staying there. His students had a wide variety of views regarding ethics, and some of them contradicted each other.[5] In addition, what the mainstream considered virtuous and ethical was far from what Aristotle considered to be the same.

Athens was an honor-loving culture. For Athenians, honor was a virtue that lay in achieving power, glory, and fame–especially, when these traits were recognized by one's equals. The history of this honor-loving culture can be traced to Homer and his epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, since both are about heroes who desire honor. For instance, his hero Achilles embodies the young politicians' pursuit of glory. Achilles would rather die in battle, knowing that people will remember his name, than to live a comfortable but mediocre life back home. He is driven by the quest for fame and glory. Also, Odysseus embodies the young politicians' desire for an exciting, full life; when he is given the option of becoming immortal if he will stay with Calypso, Odysseus decides that a mortal life–full of opportunities for excellence that will gain him renown–is better than an immortal life where everyone will consider him dead.[6]

This desire for glory and honor at incredible cost extended into the Athenian social structure. "Honor at all cost" became the motto for the polis. "All cost" especially applied to the cost that must be paid by others. Honor was, at its core, fiercely competitive, since any honor that one achieved had to be wrestled from someone else. Honor was no good if everyone was honored, as it lost its value when shared. Therefore, squashing others tended to become the point. Aristotle himself emphasized that it sometimes seemed best to disregard all ties with friends and family for the sake of honor.[7]

Since the young men who sought honor fulfilled this by gaining political power, the characteristics of the polis were affected by the love of honor.[8] Those in political positions began to use their political power to gain honor and glory and to stop others from doing the same. But, because honor is a relative term, the temptation to achieve absolute dominion over everyone was more of a dream than an actual possibility.

Aristotle noted that this desire for dominion had two main motives. First, total power allowed one to acquire great resources with which to increase his honor. Second, honor could easily be gained at the expense of others. Together, this allowed him to effectively attack others who might try to steal his honor before they had a chance to act. This view of domination over others became almost commonplace in ancient Athens and was considered a natural part of life.[9] This helps to explain the Athenian view of women and slaves and their use of law to gain an upper hand.

The political effect of this quest for glory did not stop at the level of the individual rulers of the polis or the relations between people. Athenian culture affected the relations between Athens and other city-states. Athens was an example of how foreign policy could be subordinated to the desire for honor. For instance, when the Athenians arrived with a great army to force the Melians into submission, the Melians replied with an offer of neutrality and friendship. The Athenians refused the olive branch, however, because, if they became friends, their subjects would consider this a sign of weakness. Further, if the Athenian forces did not attack independent people, the citizens of Athens would view the leaders as weak cowards and would be tempted to rebel. The Athenians believed that by attacking and conquering other people, they increased their security. Essentially, this is the same argument an individual ruler used in defense of his despotism. Although the Melians retorted that they would put their hope in

the gods, the Athenians were not afraid. In response, they stated their belief that the gods would agree with them because it was natural law to rule whatever one could.[10] Thus, the Athenians made clear their culture of domination.

However, the Athenians knew that having a culture that valued absolute power presented some problems. This led to what some scholars consider a paradox.[11] While the Athenians were extremely protective of their own political freedom and critical of power, they simultaneously sought absolute power for themselves. This is no more a paradox than situations commonly found in human nature. For instance, all persons want rules to ensure that everyone plays fairly; but, those rules are for everyone else. Since everyone believes that he is just and honest, of course, the rules can be a hindrance to him. It was the same for the Greeks. Each politically ambitious young man trusted himself with power, but did not trust others. The result was a political system that tried to hold power in check. Athens is a fine example because freedom of speech, fair juries, and direct voting on proposed laws were all designed to stop the few from oppressing the many.[12]

These political contradictions involving power and honor show a major flaw in a life devoted to honor. Such an existence is motivated by fear. At the political level, fear shows itself in the aforementioned contradictions of Athenian democratic checks on power. The checks went against their deepest desires for power and honor so that order and justice would prevail. But, the Athenians could never truly attain the honor they wanted because they had to deliberately hold back the power and glory that was necessary for the life of honor. The closer their political climate moved to fulfillment of an individual's desire for honor, the more everyone else feared tyranny. The more the people's fear of oppression was assuaged, the further away each individual became from fulfillment of his dreams.

Fear overshadowed the life of honor on an individual basis, as well. This fear did not oppose the life of honor, however, but supported it, as the life of honor was based on the fear of death.[13] Because Homer's epics painted Hades as an empty void that stood in opposition to the life of excellency Athenians pursued,[14] Athenians sought to transcend death by immortalizing themselves through great works and wide renown. A death without any honor to nullify its effects was a horrible idea to the Greeks. Therefore, an honor-seeking Athenian believed that he could gain enough honor to win recognition not only from the people of his time, but also from others who lived long after he was dead. Athenians understood that the competition of honor was not bound by mortality. If one's honor was greater than someone else's honor, the person with the most honor won. It did not matter who was dead. In most cases, being alive helped because a person could add to his honor. But, it was possible to do something dishonorable that would subtract from that honor. In addition, there were some instances where death added to honor more than an act that could be survived. Honor even could be increased after one's death. For instance, people who admire someone will forget the bad he has done in his life and remember, or exaggerate, the good. The Athenians knew this firsthand. For example, they recognized that Achilles and Odysseus chose lives of honor, and all knew who these heroes were. The quest for honor was similar to a religion for the Athenians because of its almost supernatural ability to grant a type of immortality. The fear of death drove Athenians to pursue honor at all cost.

In addition to being based on fear, the life of honor had another flaw. The seriousness that Greeks attached to the pursuit of honor and the way their culture reinforced this quest led to a life that was completely contrary to Aristotle's ethics.[15] Namely, the life devoted to honor and glory at all cost was fundamentally at odds with a life of sacrifice, which was required, to some degree, by the ethical life proposed by Aristotle. This view of honor was an extremist view and certainly

did not fit into Aristotle's view of the "Mean," which is the guideline for living a life of moderation, fairness, and charity. A virtuous person takes, at most, what was fair. In many cases, the virtuous person takes less if doing so promotes a greater good. But, the person devoted to honor at all cost takes all that can be taken by using his power. Such a person would view himself as the greatest good.

The members of Aristotle's audience would have heard his arguments for moral virtue, but would not have favored his views because virtue rarely helped them achieve the honor they so desired. The honor-seeking people actually saw moral virtue not only as unproductive, but also foolish because it left them open to being taken advantage of by those who did not live by the same standards of ethical virtue.[16] The vast majority of ambitious, honor-loving men considered ethical actions only when it increased their honor. This contradicted Aristotle's notion of virtue for its own sake, but that was the least of Aristotle's worries.

Plato's thoughts on the subject of honor versus virtue illustrated one popular viewpoint for the ambitious honor lovers.[17] Some believed that the life of morality and virtue was promoted by the weak to stop the strong from ruling over them. They believed that the weak constantly tried to enforce moral arguments and laws so that a strong man would not ascend to power above them. Supporters of this view cited nature itself. They pointed to the fact that it was so easy and satisfying to do acts of injustice, but hard to do acts of ethical worth. Adopting the view that moral codes and laws were merely conventions set up by the consensus of the weak, they believed that the strong should appear to follow the conventions to gain honor, but secretly get away with everything they could. Using this technique, the honor-loving Athenians added to their honor through the appearance of morality, but the reality of immorality; in other words, they could have their cake and eat it, too. Of course, this required a life of deception, which the

weak considered to be negative. According to the strong, the weak had this perception only because they were not cunning enough to avoid getting caught when they tried to deceive.

However, this view presented serious problems for individuals, as well as for Athenian political culture. Though the majority of Aristotle's audience likely did not view moral virtue as a conspiracy theory, most envisioned the life of honor at all costs as superior to the sacrifices of virtue. Competition for tyranny was viewed much more favorably than cooperation with fellow citizens.[18] This led to civil strife and tension in Greek society. The reason Aristotle devoted so much energy to discussing the political life of honor likely was because it was influential and was the source of countless problems in Athenian culture.

Aristotle was faced with the challenge of teaching a very unpopular, but infinitely important, message. He had to teach the leaders that the honor to which they devoted their lives was not worthy of their devotion. His message not only helped his Athenian audience, but also Athenian culture. His work was extremely difficult, however, because Athenian culture was predisposed against both his message and his authority to deliver it. Greek political circles did not view philosophers fondly at all.[19] The trial and death of Socrates are an example of this; his criticism of the Athenian way of life was viewed as such a great hindrance to the young, future leaders of Athens that it cost him his life. Aristophanes' play, *Clouds*, also made some satirical points about Socrates that illustrated public sentiment.[20] In the play, Socrates is portrayed as a fool who sits high above Athens on a throne of thought and, from his superior viewpoint, criticizes all that Athens holds sacred. One of the characters in the play hands his son over to study under Socrates in an act of desperation. The son eventually turns away from his father and from conventional parent-child relations, in general.

Aristotle was faced with the task of maneuvering through this landscape. Though the students respected their teacher, at any moment, Aristotle could have said something that would have thrown him into the category of being a so-called insane philosopher, like Socrates. Understanding this, Aristotle started with his students' opinions and worked from there. As this shows, he recognized the importance of using the right arguments for the right people and often pointed this out to others.[21] Aristotle's purpose was to teach his students, not simply to throw out his philosophy and hope that someone, somewhere learned from it. Many of Aristotle's inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies can be explained by the fact that Aristotle was not using the best points that he could understand, but was using the best arguments that his audience could comprehend.

Aristotle utilized many skillful teaching tricks to help his audience understand his points. For instance, he began with a standard principle and proceeded with an argument that moved the subject where he wanted it to go until, eventually, his audience had to deal with the consequences of their own ideas.[22] If there was a commonly-held point that Aristotle wanted to attack, he would not launch a direct assault. Aristotle would slowly undermine it by initially agreeing to it, but then showing how its premises led its followers where they did not intend to go. An example would be the way Aristotle began with the strengths of a life of honor, but then pointed out that this life depended on receiving the honor from other people. He was basically creating arguments for his case by using premises on which he knew his audience would agree. Aristotle also connected what he held to be important to what his audience held to be significant. Yet another tool Aristotle used was his own concept of balance and the strength of the mean. Lee Ward, an academic scholar, asserts that Aristotle's concept of courage required finding a balance between the need for praise from other people and a life devoted to honor at all cost.[23]

With this new knowledge of the atmosphere in which Aristotle was working, we find that this great teacher is even greater than first thought. Over time, people have pointed out flaws in Aristotle's works and have used these to diminish some of his greatness. In reality, however, Aristotle was not trying to create air-tight arguments that would stand the test of time. He was simply trying to teach. His arguments were meant for the audience immediately in front of him and were effective means of convincing his biased public. As such, the true genius of his *Nicomachean Ethics* can be better understood.

Endnotes

1 Aristide Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle's Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric, and Political Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 2.

2 Tessitore.

3 Tessitore, 54.

4 Tessitore, 16.

5 Thomas W. Smith, *Revaluing Ethics: Aristotle's Dialectical Pedagogy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 54.

6 Smith, 43.

7 Smith, 48.

8 Smith, 45-46.

9 Smith, 48.

10 Smith, 48-49.

11 Smith, 47.

12 Smith, 47-48.

13 Smith, 42.

14 Smith.

15 Smith, 50.

16 Smith.

17 Smith, 51-52.

18 Smith, 54.

19 Tessitore, 2.

20 Tessitore.

21 Smith, 11.

22 Smith, 36.

23 Lee Ward, "Nobility and Necessity: The Problem of Courage in Aristotle's 'Nicomachean Ethics'," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 1 (March 2001): 71.

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Dr. Forrest's Comments: *Even though my students are always required to do library research for their term papers, Layton truly read and comprehended the scholarly literature that he used.*