

## **Language of Ethics in Aristotle: Facets of Inexactness and Appearance**

### **In Books One – Four**

In the First Book of *Nicomachean Ethics* that can be considered as the introduction of Aristotle to this treatise, with different wordings but a shared tenet many times he mentions to the methodic points that should be taken into consideration by his students at the school and readers of this writing. For these points are materialized and manifested in the teaching, speaking and writing of its maker and introducer too and we should not take them at face value. As a result, having a precise conception and understanding of these points that function as guiding steps are very crucial for according to Aristotle, “well begun is half done” (1098b).

Initially, Aristotle depicts a panorama of what he wants to work on. His intended field of research/teaching has a specific subject; data; method and learner (for he is a master with specific school and students). These dimensions are repeated and scattered in Book One as his introduction but here in an organic way, we try to collect and bring them together in one place. These characteristics all together with their opposites should be understood in their Aristotelian meanings. For on the whole they necessitate a specific kind of reasoning, speaking and writing language that a reader should be aware of.

First of all, we are informed by Aristotle that ethics belongs to the “practical” field in distinction of “non-practical”. I think he means that in ethical field through practical reason by acting/nonacting (not with theory and technic) in this or that kind we become ethical or non-ethical human beings (1103b). Then in accordance with this specific field of knowledge, he considers its subject; data; method; and students in their own particular qualities.

The “subject” of ethics is good (s) from a “practical” point of view and as a result we can speak about the nature of it in “outline / περιλαβεῖν” that is a general description or plan of the essential features but not the detail. In other words, speaking about nature of such a realizable and attainable category cannot be done in detail and minutes. For example, in regard to giving a precise definition of happiness, he says in outline that it should have relation with the specific life or exercise of man that is assigned for him by nature and according to this guidance happiness “is the exercise of this faculty in accordance with excellence or virtue, ...” and then we can fill in the details with the available and extant items or by the items that will come up in the passage of time (1098a). The same idea is repeated in his introduction in regard to the prosperity and adversity of the descendants and friends of the dead(1101a); and nature of the soul for understanding human excellence (1102a).

Then with regard to this state of ethics subject we have to expect a specific kind of “accuracy/ἀκρίβεια” that is and should be distinct and different from accuracy in other disciplines. It means that in ethics we will not and cannot reach to the “theoretical truth” but to some approximation of it that is called “practical truth”. Thus, Aristotle does not negate truth but in ethics a specific kind of it is intended and it is not something good or bad for the nature of our subject-matter dictates it (1098a).

Beside this quality on the macro level, according to Aristotle there are ambivalences about the “moral virtues” on the micro level as necessary particulars on the way to happiness and it seems that there is not a homogeneity among people about them. These two characteristics constructs a specific state for the nature of ethics subject that is inexactness or “uncertainty / πλάνην”. Consequently, people are wandering and stray and there is no certainty and a given clear-cut direction.

Now with regard to his outline of ethics “subject”, we consider Aristotle understanding of ethical “data”. In him, ethical data is not limited to the concrete and objective aspects or facts and beliefs are considered data too. It means that what the people say and opine about ethics and ethical issues should be considered as ethical data (1098b).

Normally, we expect the mentioned characteristic of ethics subject spills over to its data too and it is so. For Aristotle numerates two qualities for ethical data which one of them is *πλάνην* or uncertainty (as he mentioned before and we are familiar with) and the added new one is “*Διαφοράν* / difference”. For some, the sum result of this uncertainty and differences leads to this conception that distinctions between ethical data are merely conventional / constructed and none of them are natural or essential. Besides, as a result of this situation ethical matters are not amenable to immutable laws for conventions bring changeability with themselves.

The next issue is the appropriate method of ethic. With regard to the distinctions and specifications among disciplines Aristotle suggest the plurality of methods instead of universality. As a result, ethics has specific subject, data and end it should have its own method too. According to him, there are two methods, one that begins from the *archai*; and one that works up to them (1094b), that the former is ethics method. But there are two kinds of *archai*, those that are “known in itself” and those that are “known to us” as human beings and ethics method has relation with the latter one. Accordingly, the suitable method of ethics is proceeding from our human principles.

And if these *archai*/principles be evident for those who are concerned, the question about their “whyness” will not arise but if it is not so, there will be questioners and learners and this issue shapes Aristotle fourth and last point. For him, those who are concerned with ethics are not homogenous and

accordingly he classifies them: those who know that they know the reasons and as a result in the precise meaning they are not learners; those who do not know but listen to those who knows; those who do not know that they do not know; those who do not know and do not heed the words of those who know; those who are young in years and lack the experience of the life affairs; and those who are young in character because of feelings influence over them. Thereby Aristotle delineates the limit of himself as the master of philosophical ethics and those who could come to his lyceum and considered as his learners (10951a,1095b).

Such a “complexity” necessitates a specific kind of differentiated “logos” – that consist of speaking/writing/logic - in order to reach to a coarse and rough, in opposition with exact, accurate, and precise, version of ethical truth and besides providing and processing certain kind of reasoning, premises; statements; and conclusions. In Aristotle, according to the natures and capacities of the subjects there are different grades of reasonings and it means that there is a direct proportion between them. Now what we have said before becomes relevant and functional in meaningful ways. According to our reading, Aristotle depicts subject of ethics in general terms, besides, its data are uncertain and different. Thus, he says that in distinctions of the other subjects/data it is “inexact” and reasoning about it is inexact too (1094b20).

According to Aristotle, argument, reasoning, speaking and making statements in ethics return to its subject-matter; data; method and learners that on the whole influence the ethical argument and its constituents. Ethical arguments are constructed in two general and particular levels in which the former pertains to the notions and actions in general; and the latter to the individual actions. It means that on the general level, there are no exact and fixed laws but there are sketchy arguments; and because the individual cases cannot be placed under any

established and defined cast, on the particular level the agent him-/her-self should decide what to do or not to do (1094a). It means that, in general terms that consists of the same occasions, the same means and the same circumstances, we can say that in ethical virtues to fall short and to exceed are alike fatal; or the pleasure or pain that accompanies the acts must be taken as a test of the formed habit or character because in general many factors establish and construct such a state (1104b); and this or that is the definition of virtue and vice (1107a). And when an individual wants to do an ethical act, he or she should act or not act with considering these general notions in connection with the specific time, place, manner, conditions, circumstances, occasions, and the like.

Thereby the “general/non-specific” guides will be realized by the “ethical agents” in individual cases and events in the form of “situational” guides and as a result, the ethical statement should be made in “general / not absolute” terms. It seems that for Aristotle this particularity has two aspects: one with regard to the specific qualities of the virtue that will manifest themselves through and in action; and the other with regard to the specific person / case that is the agent and those who are receiver – in this relation we can consider the table of virtues and vices at 1107b and afterwards. Interestingly, during thinking and speaking about the particulars sometimes we experience lexical shortcomings and the need of introducing new names and idioms are felt in order to capture the subtilities. And it can be assumed as a problem in making ethical particular statements when we have not the pertinent particular terms (1110b). For in thinking and speaking about the general we work rather easily with a few general terms and they are sufficient for us, but it is not the same in relation with particular micro cases and it is an issue that Aristotle indicates in some places of his discussion about the particular virtues and vices (see specially 1108a,15). As a result, it is very basic to know the names and contents of the particulars. On the whole, there are categories that in

accordance with the intended particular case should be specified: doer; deed; the patient; instrument; the way; for the sake of; and result (1110b). Thus, in any ethical event far from universality the particular content of each the mentioned categories should be specified in order that making a suitable and justifiable ethical statement becomes possible.

In this relation, I want to re-read Aristotle account of proairesis / preference (1111b5-1112a15). Initially, in a short phrase consists of logical terms he writes that it “appears” that the genus of preference is “will” and then begins his negative procedure in order to show that proairesis is not appetite; anger; wish; and opinion (both its general and particular versions). Then he reaches to this positive main question: “τί οὖν ἢ ποιόν τι ἐστίν, ἐπειδὴ τῶν εἰρημένων οὐθέν;/ Then how thing is it, when of the mentioned is not” (1112a10). We need a literal translation in order to see the quality of his answer to this kind of question. He does not make a pure theoretical question about the “what is preference?” But a practical one “how thing is preference?” Aristotle answer to his question consists of three interconnected elements: an appearance that at beginning he mentioned; a common sensical intuition; and a (folk) etymology of the Greek word proairesis. And we can say they are justifiable characteristics of a practical reasoning about an ethical subject in the form of premises that basic term in them is “seeming/dokei” and thereby it gives them general spirit and not universal /monolithic one.

This latter issue becomes salient in Aristotle account about βουλευσις/ deliberation that is also the cause of preference. Ethics is essentially the sphere of human actions in which human beings are actors. It means that apart from matters that are products of nature, necessity and chance in which they shape different and distinct branches of knowledge there is a specific exclusive human field that belongs to the reasonable actions of human beings. Matters of this sphere

are general, inexact, relative /non-absolute; uncertain, possible, nonsystematic, instrument (s)-oriented/ not end-oriented, conceptual/non-perceptual, and unpredictable (see the list of these in 1112b-1113a).

Up to here, I have shown that in the field of happiness and moral virtues, as a methodological point Aristotle mentions to the quality of reasoning about practical matters (1104a) in distinction from theoretical and technical ones. For him, when distinct disciplines have their own specific aim, subject and method then our way of speaking and writing in every branch of knowledge should be analogous with its pertinent complexity. Accordingly, if in Aristotle ethics has its own telos, subject-matter and method then somehow these specifications should be shown and presented in his oral and written too.

In other words, indefiniteness has a meaningful connection with ethics and ethical language. Even though Aristotle mentions to the different facets of indefiniteness/ οὐκ ἀκριβῶς but he expresses the results with one word that is **δοκεῖ** / seeming. More precisely, Aristotle implicitly considers different aspects of inexactness such as lack of detail, being for the most part, being true for the most part, and deficiencies in demonstrative rigor. But it seems that he uses one word in Books One to Four in order to represent the results and it is the problem of this paper. Now with regard to the four features that are extensions of indefiniteness, I want to suggest four lingual English options for the one and only Greek word **δοκεῖ** / **seeming** that Aristotle uses.

- 1- **“Lack of details”, and seeming with the meaning of “general consideration”**. In this relation, I want to suggest that in the Book II, 1117b Aristotle’s accounts of “courage” and “temperance”; and different kinds of pleasure and within it senses of touch and taste are without background details and as a result his account is very general and he himself is doubtful about them. From the beginning of the treatise, it is his presupposition that

ethical virtues belong to the irrational part of human nature and here once again repeats this supposition as an apparent notion and passes quickly.

Besides, when he wants to consider pleasures in order to explore and examine the temperate and profligate human beings he cites and applies the usual distinction between pleasures of the soul and body as an accepted idea without discussing them. And where Aristotle wants to consider pleasures of touch and taste in relation to temperance and profligacy, he has short accounts about both of them although according to his rationale they are the main terms of his discussion. Accordingly, these should be considered Aristotle general accounts about temperance and profligacy.

2 – **“Being true for the most part”, and seeming with meaning of “mostly held good”**. Another facet of inexactness and appearance is where Aristotle wants to mention to the result of a specific virtue/vice that a specific meaning of it is expected mostly. We can find such an issue in Book IV 1119b, 1121a about “prodigality”. For him, prodigality as an excess has three meanings: proper/usual; general /unusual; and short-term combination which includes giving-taking senses and uses. In the first sense, Prodigality denotes to a man who has one vice /α.σωτος, viz. that of wasting his substance that means wealth. In the second, it is used for a man who has a combination of vices. And in the last, for some time a combination of the two pertinent elements of prodigality coexist with each other. In the other words, if we take two elements for prodigality that are “giving” and “taking”, in its strict sense this vice exceeds in giving but falls short in taking (1121a). At the same time, it is possible that in young persons for a short time a combination of giving and taking coexist with each other but it is an exception. And lastly, sometimes it is possible that we use prodigality for a combination of vices. Therefore, we see



that the vice of prodigality is not monolithic and it is divided into three unequal parts as follows:

- proper/limited and usual meaning of giving.
- combination of giving-taking for a limited period.
- general/wide and unusual meaning as a combination of vices.

And by comparing these three parts, Aristotle thinks that the second combination seems much better than the illiberal vice and closer to the liberal man (1121a, in two places). His reasons for such a conclusion in the form of “it seems to be better” are as follows: he has not a bad character as he goes too far in giving, he has the essential quality of the liberal character that is giving; and he has the capacity of receiving training in order to come to moderation and right course.

- 3- **“Deficiencies in demonstrative rigor”, and seeming with the meaning of “it is the established and current opinion”**. Sometimes for many reasons when Aristotle wants to discuss about a specific virtue the demonstrative rigor is on a low level and this can have different result for his overall argument about that specific virtue. Within the range of my paper, I will consider the case of honor/ambition/ τιμος at 1125b in Book IV.

In Aristotle, there are four different reasons that make it impossible to have a rigorous demonstration about “honor”:

a-quality of ambition or ambitious man, for good reasons sometimes is praised and sometimes is reproached. And for good reasons we can repeat the same account in relation to unambitious man and quality. As a result, we can say that,

b- there are various senses in which a man is said to be fond of a thing, and that the term fond of honor has not always the same sense, for sometimes it is

praised and sometimes reproached. Consequently, we have the fighting and opposition of two extremes. Why is it so?

c- because the mean is not shaped and as a result has no name – for three times Aristotle repeats the absence of a name for the mean (1125b). And,

d- if we compare honor with ambition we observe a strange state, for when comparing it with ambition, it seems unambitious; comparing it with unambitious it seems to be ambitious; and comparing it with both at once, it seems in a way to be both at once.

The overall result of these reasons in regard to honor makes it a minor and trifle virtue in comparison with virtues such as courage, justice, high-mindedness and the like. Besides, the reader or student cannot figure out Aristotle normative guidance about this minor virtue and it seems better to refer to the general established beliefs of the classical Greek society.

Besides, Aristotle introduces a case at 1126a in which there are no recognized names for the “extremes” and the “mean”. Thus, we are facing with a strange category, and in general he says that we want to speak about “anger”. On the one hand, he has hesitation about the proper names for expressing excess and deficiency of anger and calls up our contribution with these sentences “the excess may be called wrathfulness, ....”; and “call it wrathlessness or what you will ....” - in relation to deficiency (Book III, 1126a). And on the other hand, he emphasizes that defining the pertinent factors in relation to anger is not easy and scarcely they can be defined for it depends upon the particular circumstances of each case and can only be decided by immediate perception (1126b).

With regard to and as result of such a situation, he reaches to a minimal and common sensical conclusion, that is, praising the habit that observes the mean; and censuring the habits of excess and deficiency.

Lastly, there is “being for the most part”, and seeming with the meaning of “mostly expected”. It seems that for Aristotle a normal social life includes “friendship” in social intercourse; “truthfulness” in the sayings and doings of the people toward each other; and “witness” in social amusements. In regard to “social intercourse”, Aristotle says that mostly in social relations people express and actualize two habits of pleasing and displeasing (1126b). And when he searches for the middle habit he says there is no specific name but mentions that we expect it resembles “friendship”. For when we speak of moderation in social intercourse we mean something that is analogous with and expectable of friendship, only with this exception that in society there is no place for affections and emotions (1126b).

Besides, in relation to “jest” as a kind of necessary social relaxation among people, he says that those who give prominence to ridiculous things call buffoon witty but it is not right and there is great difference between these two (1128a). It means that within a negative argument he says that although many jest-oriented people make a direct connection between being buffoon and witty but we should not expect it be right.

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