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Aristotle's *Politics* and The Charge of Egoism

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ABSTRACT

The recent revived interest in virtue ethics and, in particular, Aristotelian virtue ethics has also instigated a conversation between its proponents and opponents and while the criticisms against Aristotelian ethics are numerous and vary greatly, perhaps the most common is 'the charge of egoism'. This paper analyzes the 'charge of egoism' through Tom Angier's particular critique as well as Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove's general analysis of this criticism to show that the central objection in 'the charge of egoism' is that it is self-regarding, egotistic, and not other-regarding, altruistic. It then moves on to establish that Aristotle's *Politics* is a) a part of his ethical framework and b) the more foundational of his ethical treatises to demonstrate that, given the parameters of 'the charge of egoism', Aristotelian ethics is necessarily other-regarding and, therefore, not egotistic but altruistic. This paper concludes by considering whether this charge is less about what is self vs other regarding and more about the differences between the liberal and communitarian conceptions of human nature.

KEYWORDS

Ancient Greek, Aristotle, Egoism, Ethics, Mereology, Nicomachean Ethics, The *Politics*, Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics, after being on the decline for centuries, has seen an interesting revival since the mid-twentieth century (Baril et Hazelett 1894). And, in spite of the fact that virtue ethics can have various instantiations (Stoic, Epicurean, Platonic... etc.), it seems that this revived interest in virtue ethics is largely rooted in the Aristotelian tradition, particularly, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Unsurprisingly, this renewed interest in Aristotelian virtue ethics has also instigated a debate between supporters and detractors. Criticism related to the feasibility or application of Aristotelian virtue ethics, as well as concerns related to its purported relativism and subjectivism, are among some of the common objections. Arguably still more common, however, is, what is often referred to as, 'the charge of egoism'.

The so-called 'charge of egoism' argues, much like the name asserts, that virtue ethics is egotistical and should, on that ground, be renounced as an ethical framework. Of course, the claim that Aristotelian virtue ethics is egotistical naturally leads one to ask what 'egoism' is understood to be and whether or not Aristotelian virtue ethics is, in fact, 'egotistical'. Additionally, however, one may ask if perhaps, the 'charge of egoism' is within the same framework as that of Aristotelian virtue ethics and, if it is not, whether that criticism can hold any worth. This paper will deal with the former set of questions, that is, what egoism is, and whether Aristotle's ethical framework can be understood to be egotistical. The aim of this paper is to present 'the charge of egoism', as it is often related, in order to demonstrate that this charge fails even within its own parameters.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHARGE OF EGOISM

As it was stated earlier, 'the charge of egoism', is perhaps one of the more common criticisms against Aristotelian virtue ethics and, because of the prevalence of this criticism, it may be difficult to find what the charge is exactly. In light of this, this paper will utilize both T.P.S. Angier's paper "Aristotle and the Charge of Egoism" as well as Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove's analysis on the objection of egoism. The Angier paper provides both a concrete example of criticism against Aristotle, as well as a functioning definition of egoism directly from a philosopher who characterizes Aristotelian virtue ethics as egotistical. On the other hand, Hursthouse and Pettigrove are able to provide an analysis of the objections associated with egoism that are more general and can, therefore, serve

to demonstrate that the objections made by Angier are not outliers, uncommon, or uncharitable but are instead fairly common criticisms.

According to Angier “actions... desires and feelings” can all be categorized as “both ‘egotistic’ and ‘altruistic’” but, due to issues of scope, he focuses on egoism as it relates to “actions” (Angier 2018, 459). He goes on say that “the ‘holy grail of moral philosophy” is “finding an argument to defeat egoism, and [to] show the rational necessity of altruism” (Angier 2018, 459). Additionally, he states that “altruism [is] fundamentally other-regrading action... while egoism, [is] fundamentally self-regrading action” (Angier 2018, 459). If the objection against Aristotle is that his ethics is egotistical, and if egoism is “self-regarding action”, then, it would seem that the objection against Aristotle, as far as Angier is concerned, is that Aristotle’s ethics is focused on the self, instead of another or others (Angier 2018, 459). This understanding of Angier is further supported by his definition of egoism which he states is “the view that one is never justified in acting for others’ sake alone, and that the well-being of the self must constitute one’s ultimate or basic end” (Angier 2018, 460). He does qualify that egoism “is consistent with acting for the sake of others...[but] that the egoist will shun action that does not contribute to his own well-being” (Angier 2018, 460). From there the paper analyzes Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* in various ways to demonstrate how it is that this ethical theory is ‘egotistical’.¹ However, for our purposes it is enough to know that the issue at hand for Angier is that Aristotelian virtue ethics is *primarily* concerned with the self instead of others.

Hursthouse and Pettigrove’s analysis of common objections against virtue ethics appropriately includes a section on ‘egoism’ that coincides greatly with the objections raised by Angier. They note that the “egoism objection has a number of sources” and that among them is that “the virtuous agent... acts as she does because she believes that acting thus on this occasion will help her to achieve eudaimonia” (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018). This view seems to parallel Angier’s conception of egoism as someone who may concern herself with others, so long as it contributes to her own well-being. Hursthouse and Pettigrove go on to say that “a lingering suggestion of egoism may [also] be found in... [a] distinction between” what is “‘self-regarding’ and ‘other-regarding’” (Hursthouse

1. This is a very condensed summary of Angier’s paper, however, as can be easily discerned from Angier’s title the objection is that of egoism and so his conception of the problem itself and how it compares to Hursthouse and Pettigrove’s analysis is, for the purpose of this paper, more important than how he arrives at this view.

and Pettigrove 2018). Once again, Hursthouse and Pettigrove's analysis of common objections against virtue ethics has a readily apparent parallel in Angier's own objections. Given Angier's own characterization of the 'charge of egoism' as well as Hursthouse and Pettigrove's wider analysis of general objections we are able to ascertain that Angier's own objections have wider, and well enough established, implications to warrant consideration.

Of course, none of this is to say that this is the *only* way of understanding 'the charge of egoism'. Much like Hursthouse and Pettigrove state, 'the charge of egoism' "has a number of sources" (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018). Angier as well as Hursthouse and Pettigrove, for example, both mention the issue of 'self-effacement' as it relates to virtue ethics.² However, it seems that even that objection itself is rooted in a 'self vs other' concern. But, due to practical considerations, such as length and scope, the secondary objections will be placed aside in order to better address the central objection: self-regarding vs. other-regarding ethics.

ARISTOTLE'S POLITICS AS AN ETHICAL TREATISE

In the case of Angier's "Aristotle and the Charge of Egoism" the objection that Aristotle's ethics is egotistical is based on an analysis of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This is not that surprising, since much of the conversation concerning "whether Aristotle is an egoist or an altruist...has focused on the *Nicomachean Ethics*" (Ray, n.d.). Still, understanding that the *Politics* is not only a part of Aristotle's ethical theory but is also the more foundational text will allow us to better address the claim that Aristotelian ethics is 'egotistical'. This section will provide a brief argument in favor of understanding Aristotle's *Politics* as a part of Aristotle's ethical framework before moving on to argue that the *Politics* is 'other-regarding'. It is worth noting, that Aristotle's 'ethics' can also be found throughout other works, such as the *Eudemian Ethics*, but seeing as much of the scholarship on Aristotle's ethics is focused on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and since 'the charge of egoism' is often brought against the *Nicomachean Ethics* as well, this paper will only endeavor to show the connection between the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Understanding that the *Politics* is an ethical work may be difficult for contemporary thinkers for various reasons. The modern tendency, for example,

2. See Angier p.472 and Hursthouse and Pettigrove section (e) .

to separate ethical courses from political science courses, may perhaps be both a symptom and a cause for the conceptual separation between ethics and politics. Or perhaps, as Adkins notes, the issue may be rooted in languages themselves; "Greek ideas are transmitted from Greek words" and since "not all of [Greek terms] are readily translatable into English" (Adkins 1984,76-77) we may have some trouble understanding the philosophical concepts being relayed. Whatever the reason for this separation, an analysis of the structure and the word choice in the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* can serve to demonstrate that the *Politics* is a part of Aristotle's ethics.

The *Politics* opens with an inquiry into the *polis* itself.^{3 4} Aristotle notes that "every *polis*" is a "*koinonia*"⁵ and that "every *koinonia* aims at some good" (Aristotle et al. 1894, I.1252a1-2).⁶ This analysis continues on as he states that the highest good is that which pertains to "what is called the *polis* or the political *koinonia*" (Aristotle et al. 1894, I.1252a1-2).⁷ The ethical nature of the *Politics* can already be seen in the original text's repeated use of *agathos* a particularly value laden term, as Adkins notes in "*Aristotle's Ethics and Politics*". The *Nicomachean Ethics* opens in a similar fashion, with Aristotle arguing that every *praxis* is "for some good" (Aristotle, n.d.), for some *agathos*.^{8 9} Here, the similarities between the words being used becomes easily observed. In addition to the similarities between the words themselves, the structure between the two openings can

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3. *polis*, or πόλις, is often translated as city or city-state; however, due to some common connotations found in the English that are, arguably, not found in the original Greek I have opted to only to transliterate this word.
 4. All translations from Ancient Greek are my own.
 5. *koinonia*, or κοινωνία, is often translated as partnership or community; however, much like *polis*, these English translations often come with certain connotations that are not found in the Greek.
 6. "πᾶσαν πόλιν ὀρώμεν κοινωνίαν τινὰ οὔσαν καὶ πᾶσαν κοινωνίαν ἀγαθοῦ τινος ἔνεκεν συνεστηκυῖαν" (Pol.I.1252a1-2).
 7. "δῆλον ὡς πᾶσαι μὲν ἀγαθοῦ τινος στοχάζονται, μάλιστα δὲ καὶ τοῦ κυριωτάτου πάντων ἢ πασῶν κυριωτάτη καὶ πάσας περιέχουσα τὰς ἄλλας, αὕτη δ' ἐστὶν ἡ καλουμένη πόλις καὶ ἡ κοινωνία ἢ πολιτική" (Pol.I.1252a3-7).
 8. *Praxis*, or πράξις, is often translated as practical, but perhaps better understood as 'action'; for reasons discussed in the previous terms it has only been transliterated.
 9. "πᾶσα τέχνη καὶ πᾶσα μέθοδος, ὁμοίως δὲ πράξις τε καὶ προαίρεσις, ἀγαθοῦ τινὸς ἐφίεσθαι δοκεῖ" (NE.I.i.1094a1).

also be seen in that both texts open with an inquiry into “some good” before moving on to discussing various understandings of the ‘good’ being described. This analytic “method” is likewise explicitly referenced in the original Greek texts but may, otherwise, be lost in translation.¹⁰

The connection between the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* is perhaps most obvious in that Aristotle explicitly notes that the science of finding the supreme good is that which belongs to “politics” (Aristotle, n.d.). In fact, the *Nicomachean Ethics* makes explicit reference to the *Politics* numerous times throughout the text. He states “at the beginning of the Ethics that politikê” is “the science of the practical good” (Adkins 1984, 75) and mentions from I.1094a28-b3 that one should study political science since, as Mulgan notes, “political science is the ‘architectonic’ or master discipline” (Mulgan 1997, 3). Adkins goes further, noting not only the references to the *Politics* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* but the references to the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the *Politics* as well.

On the subject of the relationship between these two texts, Adkins notes that Aristotle, in the *Politics*, characterizes “the polis [as] an association [*koinonia*] of like people for the sake of the best life, or eudaimonia” which is “the same characterization of eudaimonia as in the ethics” (Adkins, 75-76). It is reasonable, then, given the similarities between the two texts with respect to style and content, to see that the *Politics* is an ethical treatise.

Now that we have established that the *Politics* is an ethical work, it is worth asking where the *Politics* stands in relation to Aristotle’s ethical theory. Namely, which is the more foundational text: the *Politics* or the *Nicomachean Ethics*? In the following section I will argue that, under an Aristotelian framework, the *Politics* is essentially prior to the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

ON THE PRIMACY OF THE POLITICS

Aristotle famously says in the *Politics* that “man is by nature political animal” (Aristotle et al., I.1253a2-3) .¹¹ Some have used this quote to argue that man “is or ought to be a being who is politically active” (Kullman 1991, 1) . However, this

10. See “δῆλον δ’ ἔσται τὸ λεγόμενον ἐπισκοποῦσι κατὰ τὴν ὑψηγγημένην μέθοδον” (Pol.I.iii.1252a17-18) and “πᾶσα τέχνη καὶ πᾶσα μέθοδος, ὁμοίως δὲ πράξις τε καὶ προαίρεσις, ἀγαθοῦ τινὸς ἐφίεσθαι δοκεῖ” (NE.I.1094a1).

11. “ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον” (Pol.I.ix.1253a2-3).

statement, read within the context of the subsequent statements leads one to understand that Aristotle means to say that the *polis*, the *koinonia*, is essentially prior, and therefore more foundational, than the individual man.

Following the declaration that “man is by nature political animal”, Aristotle notes that a man that is without a *polis* is like a draught without its game (Aristotle et al 1894, I.1253a2-3).¹² Understanding what this analogy could mean would prove somewhat elusive if it were not for the later section where he states that this is in the same way that the *polis/koinonia*, is prior to the house (Aristotle et al 1894, I.1253a13-19). He continues to say that this relationship is the same as that between whole and part: “the whole is necessarily prior to the part” (Aristotle et al 1894, 1253a20).¹³ The discussion of *polis* and mereology is brought to a close when he concludes that “the *polis* is prior to each person” (Aristotle et al 1894, I.1253a25).¹⁴ The analogy of the draught can then be completed in light of the last remark.

In the same manner that the draught is a part of the game, the individual is a part of the *polis*. If a pawn, for example, were to be without the game of chess, the pawn would be unable to exercise its characteristic function, the game on the other hand can continue without a pawn, or any given particular piece. Perhaps, however, it would be best to explain the analogy through fractions. One fourth, for example, can only exist if there is already a *whole* to be divided into that fraction. Even if one imagines that one may take four separate fourths and place them together to make a whole, it would still be necessary to take those separate fractions from *other* wholes.

Now that the priority of the whole over the part has been better explained, we can revisit the text and observe that, for Aristotle, the *polis* functions as the whole, while each person is the part. The statement “man is by nature political animal” (Aristotle et al 1894, I.1253a2-3), then, is not a statement of ‘being politically active’, but a statement of the foundational nature of human beings, where the *polis* takes priority, so that “the ‘political’ is the fundamental human characteristic from which the *Politics* proceeds” (Kullmann 1991, 112). Given that information, it would seem that the *Politics*, which “exists for the sake of ‘the good life’ [or *eudaimonia*] of the *polis/koinonia*, would have a necessary priority

12. “ἅμα γὰρ φύσει τοιοῦτος καὶ πολέμου ἐπιθυμητῆς, ἅτε περ ἄζυξ ὧν ὡσπερ ἐν πεττοῖς” (Pol I.1253a10-11).

13. “τὸ γὰρ ὅλον πρότερον ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι τοῦ μέρους” (Pol.1253a20).

14. “ὅτι μὲν οὖν ἡ πόλις καὶ φύσει πρότερον ἢ ἕκαστος, δῆλον” (Pol.I.1253a25).

over the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is concerned only with the *eudaimonia* of the individual.

ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE ETHICS AS 'OTHER-REGARDING'

Now that we have established that the *Politics* is not only an ethical work but is, necessarily, the foundational ethical text for Aristotle, we can revisit the charge that Aristotle's ethics is egotistic on the ground that it is self-regarding. If we recall, the charge of egoism is often understood as being foundationally 'self-regarding' as opposed to foundationally 'other-regarding'. As Angier states, for an ethics to be altruistic instead of egotistic there needs to be a starting point of others. An altruistic ethical framework could, however, "be consistent with acting for one's own sake" so long as "the altruist shun[s] action that is for no one's sake except his own" (Angier 2018, 460). As we have previously established, the *Politics* is the more foundational ethical text for Aristotle. And, given that the *Politics*, like the rest of Aristotle's ethical works, is a 'practical text' not a 'theoretical' one, the actions concerned with the *agathos* of the *polis/koinonia* would hold priority over the *agathos* of the individual. To restate this in a different manner, for Aristotle, the whole precedes the part so that the good of the whole would likewise, and necessarily, precede the good of the part.

The good of the *polis/koinonia*, however, is unambiguously other-regarding in that it is concerned with the community, with others, and not with the individual, the self. Since 'man is by nature a political animal' it would be impossible, under an Aristotelian view, for anyone to act merely for his "own sake" (although perhaps, one may *mistakenly* believe that one can act and affect solely one's self) in the same way that it would be impossible for a pawn to act as a pawn without a game, without others. Even if one assumes that the *eudaimonia* of the *polis/koinonia* would necessarily imply the *eudaimonia* of the individual, this would not make it egotistic since the altruistic person is able to act "for his own sake" so long as he is primarily other-regarding which, given the priority of the *Politics* over the *Nicomachean Ethics*, would necessarily be the case. And so, even within the parameters expressed by 'the charge of egoism' as related by Angier and generalized by Hursthouse and Pettigrove the Aristotelian ethical framework must be considered other-regarding, must be considered altruistic.

CONCLUSION

In the beginning of this paper, I stated that it would perhaps be worth investigating whether the concepts of egoism/altruism are at all applicable to Aristotle's ethical framework. I stated in the previous section that, if the priority of the *Politics* is to be taken seriously as an aspect of Aristotle's ethics, it would be impossible for any human to ever do anything without others. This view is perhaps what leads Aristotle to state that "a man without a polis" is either "a beast or a god" (Aristotle et al 1894, I.1253a28-29), the implication being that someone who is ever without others, without partnerships, without associations, without community, is something other than human; perhaps beast, perhaps god, but most definitely not human.¹⁵

This conception of what it is to be human may, potentially, strike those inclined toward a more liberal understanding of human beings as strange. Liberal thought does traditionally, after all, present an understanding of human beings that is more individualistic than perhaps the ancient mind could have conceived. Where Aristotle offers the naturalness of the *polis/koinonia* the liberal tradition offers the artifice of society, a view easily found in proponents of social contract theory. Perhaps it would very much be worth exploring whether 'the charge of egoism' is less about egoism vs altruism, self vs others, and more about liberalism vs communitarianism. At any rate, what does remain clear is, that if Aristotle's ethical theory is analyzed within the limits set by those who object to Aristotle's ethical theory on 'the charge of egoism' it is best categorized as altruistic.

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15. "ὁ δὲ μὴ δυνάμενος κοινωνεῖν ἢ μὴδὲν δεόμενος δι' αὐτάρκειαν οὐθὲν μέρος πόλεως, ὥστε ἢ θηρίον ἢ θεός" (Pol. I.1253a28-29).

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