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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Aristotle's *hexis*, *phronesis*, and Prolific Politics: Through a Musicological Lens

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Abstract: This paper attempts to examine and interpret the idea of *phronesis*, which unfolds in book Six of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Emphasizing the role of politics, Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) involves the idea of habit (*hexis*) or cultivating moral virtues. It is thought that *phronesis* helps agents avoid extremes in their choices and finally achieve the thoughtfully desired good. Implications of these ideas lead us to ask – where do we get/cultivate *phronesis*? What is the nature of politics that cultivates active dispositions in us? In order to answer these questions, I interpret Aristotle's concepts of *phronesis* and politics through Indian Classical Music's principle of 'improvisation.' In the initial part, I discuss Aristotle's ethical framework to understand the role of habit (*hexis*) and *politics* in the cultivation of *phronesis*. I will then show problems in MacIntyre's interpretation of these ideas. Finally, I will argue that as a musician's 'new' imaginative creativity arises from 'given' patterns of melodic possibilities provided by a prolific teacher, practical wisdom is also cultivated by '*hexis* imparting' *politics*. However, *politics* must be qualified with prolificity, which will develop autonomous moral agency and evade any coercive influence of socio-customary morality.

Keywords: :Active disposition, *phronesis*, socio-customary morality, moral agency, the principle of improvisation (upaja or *manodharma*)

1 Introduction

[T]he Socratic question came with a rather unbelievably challenging assumption, namely, that no one knows what the good is. No one could seriously concede not knowing what the good is. Yet, this is precisely the foundation and presupposition of the whole

Socratic-Platonic dialectic. Everyone claims to know the good. We must therefore be able to draw it out from each other insofar as, by refuting opinions, we unmask false and hasty dogmatisms and assumptions. What is carried out in a dialogue is an act of awakening recollection, *anamnēsis* ['recollection']. No one can escape this, whether in metaphysics or out of metaphysics (Gadamer, 1986).

Thus, this inquiry is not about the good life for human beings or what exactly Aristotle said about human good. Can we accept the good Aristotle subscribed to? Some may do, but then why such preferential treatment for Aristotle only? We also have many figures in history and contemporary times ready to prescribe more attractive models of good at less cost than reading a two millenia-old complex philosophy text. The only reason we are reading Aristotle is to know the 'way' he dealt with the conceptualization of good, to participate with his text so that we can derive some meaning for ourselves and our times. As Hans Georg Gadamer said (in the epigraph), we neither know the good nor do we acknowledge not knowing it. This is purely the human situation, and at the same time, we cannot avoid inquiring about good. Therefore, we need to have a dialogue with Aristotle to unravel the 'ways' to conceptualize our good. However, to add to what Gadamer said, the resultant of this dialogue will be the "recollection," but that will not give us an answer to 'what good is?' But, in this enquiry, we will certainly get to know what *phronesis* (the wisdom to organize things in the fragile life) means to us.

So, this paper focuses on the central idea of *Nicomachean Ethics* (henceforth NE), i.e., *hexis*, which has been considered the ground on which Aristotle wants to make his edifice of flourishing life (achievable through *phronesis*, i.e., practical wisdom) stand. As *hexis* in individuals is suspended on being imparted by politics so that they do not remain mere "useless wight" (NE, 1095b1-10) this also invites us to enquire about the meaning of "politics" for us and the role of *hexis*, which is also the foundation of practical wisdom in our ethical conceptions. When such a contract of 'training human beings' is granted to some authority, it naturally makes us think about the influence 'trainees' are going to have from that authority. And because the training is on the good of life, will the trained humans have free moral agency? Will the socio-customary moral structure of that authority allow them to develop their own moral-reasonableness or practical wisdom? These questions are as significant for us as a society as they should be for an interpreter of Aristotle.

This paper will limit itself to book six of *Nicomachean Ethics* (for *phronesis*) in search of these answers. And for the notions of *hexis* and *politics* in Aristotelian works, I will rely on the works of some major interpreters. Scholars like Alasdair MacIntyre, Randall Curren, and Peter Simpson have already recognized the role of training by politics (which is understood in terms of 'best political regime' by Simpson (1992), 'local communities' by MacIntyre (1988), and 'public educational institutions' by Curren (2013)). However, while their ideas are in the right direction, they still face the question of the freedom of the individual moral agent in the socio-customary moral influence. And if the individual is not free in his moral choices, then there does not seem any point in being a human. Therefore, by employing a concept of Indian classical music, i.e., improvisation (also known as *upaja* or *manodharma*), I shall, in the initial part of this paper, discuss the essence of Aristotle's ethico-political framework. This will include a detailed discussion of what Aristotle means

by *hexis*, including the dynamics between *politics*, *hexis*, *phronesis*, and *eudaimonia* in NE. In the following section, I will analyze the views of MacIntyre on the issue of political context of ethics and his interpretation of *phronesis*. Highlighting complications therein, I will present the notion of prolific politics, which will facilitate the cultivation of *phronesis* with autonomous moral agency.

1.1 Aristotle's Ethical Framework and *hexis*

Aristotle's whole ethical framework (or at least in *Nicomachean Ethics*) is based on this idea of *hexis*. To know what is *hexis* and why it is important for us to give it a central position in his ethics, and in order to know his conceptualization of human good, consider his selected statements from NE:

"[W]hat it is that we claim politics aims at, and what, of all the goods aimed at by action, is the highest. In name, this is pretty much agreed about by the majority of people, for most people, as well as those who are more refined, say it is happiness" (Aristotle & Sachs, 2002, 1095a15-20).

"[H]appiness is an activity of soul in accordance with complete excellence... in a complete life" (Aristotle & Sachs, 2002, 1098a15-20, 1102a5).

"[E]xcellence of thinking is for the most part, both in its coming to be and in its growth, a result of teaching, for which reason it has need of experience and time, while excellence of character comes into being as a consequence of habit [*hexis*]" (Aristotle & Sachs, 2002, 1130a10-20).

These comments of Aristotle are in perfect line with his overall understanding of human beings. He considers that we are naturally meant for a *polis*, translated as a city (Aristotle & Sachs, 2002). And we always want to find order in a disorderly world. Here we may wonder about the perfect nature of his city; then we should see that in his context, it might be a small human community like that of the ancient Greek city-state, which had the essential characteristic of being able to provide a collective good life (see, e.g., *Politics*, 1275b 18-21, 1252b 29-30). Hence, this mention of *politics* indicates the human capability of organizing things for a good life, and when we specify the job of such humans, they become professionals in this art of organization (ruling). Therefore, here Aristotle says that the aim of politics is the highest good that is achievable by human actions. Moreover, this good necessarily comprises what we understand today as an 'ethical life.' Hence ethics for Aristotle is under the study of collective human good, i.e., *politics*, through the achievement of the individual good. Hence any reference of *politics* in the Aristotelian corpus can be understood in terms of our immediate community, which is not isolated from any form of global human community. And 'immediate' because what an average human child learns generally comes from that, but again this does not close the possibility of indirect influence of any other form of human community. Future mention of 'politics' in this paper will refer to this notion, which includes ethics in it, and that is what I am going to argue.

In the next few lines, after the ones quoted above, Aristotle speaks of the aim of politics and that it is an "activity of the soul in accordance with complete virtue," which are of two types: excellences of character and that of intellect. Now both of these excellences directly or indirectly are suspended on being imparted to a human being by something

other than her, i.e., her community, family, and every sort of politics. We are rushing to the idea of *hexis* because other notions of happiness, soul, excellence, etc., have already been explored in available literature. But *hexis* has attracted relatively less scholarship (see, e.g., Rodrigo, 2011; Aristotle & Sachs, 2002). So, right now, we can see how Aristotle's whole idea of well flourishing is founded on *hexis*. But just knowing this with the meaning of *hexis* does not appeal to the mind; therefore, let us move towards the import of *hexis*.

The word *hexis* is usually translated as 'habit' by W. D. Ross, as we can see above or sometimes as 'stable disposition,' or even 'state.' All of which convey a 'passive' tone. If we remind ourselves of the NE VI, then we will find that *hexis* is not only an ethical disposition; it is also all five of the intellectual virtues (Aristotle & Sachs, 2002, NE, 1106a12, 1139b31, 1140a10). It is either oriented towards truth or mean (in the case of intellectual virtues and moral virtues, respectively). But technically, this word occurs in, as Pierre Rodrigo (2011) found, *Metaphysics*, 20, which has its genus for Aristotle. There he discusses two senses of *hexis*: one, "an activity (or: an act) of that which possesses (or: has) and of that which is possessed (or: had)" which are like "having a garment on oneself as opposed to 'merely keeping it with'" (Rodrigo, 2011) This distinction of Aristotle is also linked to the distinction Socrates introduces in *Theaetetus* 197b between "having knowledge" like having a coat right now on the body and "having acquired knowledge" like having acquired the coat and not wearing it (Rodrigo, 2011; Aristotle & Sachs, 2002). The former case is an active *hexis*, which is different from merely having acquired knowledge and not using it, i.e., *ktesis*. Rodrigo suggests that:

Aristotle not only takes up the active meaning of the Platonic *hexis*, but further *underlines* it thematically by connecting it to the concept of *energeia*, " [hence, he "recognizes 'second potentiality' as that modality of *hexis* which *dynamically pre-disposes* to the act by means of what we might call a temporal retention of acquisitions or, more simply, an aptitude. This is why Aristotle remarks in *Nicomachean Ethics* V, 1 that, if *dunamis* is always a potentiality of two contraries when it is still undetermined, or primary, it is the opposite in cases where 'a *hexis* that produces a certain effect cannot also produce contrary effects: for example, on the basis of health one cannot produce things contrary to health, but only healthy things. (1129a14-17). (Rodrigo, 2011)

Therefore, *hexis* is an active state of being, which is very far from accepting it as mere passively acquired habit patterns which we may at times form unconsciously also. In other words, the essence of *hexis* lies in the agent's awareness of its own agency; it can never be subsumed under the control of any other authority.

Thus, what politics is supposed to impart is not a passive mechanical software with which humans are supposed to choose the intermediate monotonously. When Aristotle speaks of excellences being cultivated through *hexis*, it certainly involves an active state of being. Or, as Sachs would say, "Virtue manifests itself in action, but only when one acts while holding oneself in a certain way," for which the noun in Greek is "*hexis*" (2002). Hence, this *hexis*, as it is very clear, presupposes human action in a conscious state. Furthermore, in any training by any politics with any socio-customary morality, this human activity cannot be subsumed. If any socio-customary structure creates any hindrance in its actualization, then it ceases to be politics. And as Aristotle says, "virtues

come about in us neither by nor apart from nature" (Aristotle & Sachs, 2002); this suggests that we are natural but always aspire to become more than that by our actions. We cultivate this 'not given' part from the 'given part.' In other words, habituation by family members, community, school, etc., may start the process, but it must lead to *hexis* where we ourselves can participate in the cultivation of our soul. And that is the sign of being a human; as we create it through our actions, this should be understood in terms of creative power. Consider this as our first premise for the foundation of 'prolific' politics, which is supposed to facilitate this process of active disposition. Now let us move toward thinkers who have commented upon this prime facilitator.

2 How Politics Has Been Understood Yet, In Relation to *phronesis*

We are coming to *phronesis* because ultimately, being an intellectual virtue, it has to help us in deliberating means to human good aimed by excellences of character (NE, 1144a5-10). Hence the indirect aim of politics is to help us develop practical wisdom to choose the means to our goods. And it is interesting to note that when Aristotle says that human good is the end that can be otherwise and it is not the end that cannot be otherwise, it clearly shows the fragility of human good. That is to say, what we desire and act is not like a mechanical output, the world of human desire is very complex, and we cannot afford to ignore its uncertain nature. In other words, practical wisdom is concerned with acts that may lead to human good (if deliberated well) or otherwise to human bad. It is not so easy to achieve this state of 'human good' because this goal of *eudaimonia* is tough to achieve and to achieve this, we have a fragile means that is practical wisdom. It is fragile because, as Aristotle points out, the belief about what is to be done can be altered by pleasure or pain (Aristotle & Sachs, 2002, NE, 1140b10-15). If the agent is not firm on his decision about the end, she will not be able to deliberate well and choose the right means. Therefore, it shows that practical wisdom is a capacity that demands consistent efforts and external support from household and state or what we call politics. Consider it as premise two.

MacIntyre agrees to all the conditions of pre-*phronesis* training, like the need for external good due to vulnerability of life (MacIntyre, 1988). However, his view can be questioned on two major grounds. Thinkers have alleged that MacIntyre had a romantic idea of ancient communities, for which he argued that since the community life of those times does not exist now, we cannot find the relevance of the virtues. Hence, we should consider defending communal life against individualism (Turner, 2013; and MacIntyre, 1988). His idea, that we could identify our own good with that of community, is not possible with the modern state of bureaucracy and market ruling (Kim, 2006). Another problem with this view is that what if we establish a local community, which is not a rare thing to see in the villages of our country still, will that guarantee an autonomous agent? In fact, we often find such communities in the grips of dogmas (though it does not mean that such communities do not have autonomous phronetic people). Moreover, can we ever successfully find a local community where people are participating with a non-disputed common good? And then who will decide the common good? I suggest that, as Gadamer has shown us (in the epigraph), there cannot be one common good. Moreover, Aristotle also is not proposing an objective model of good. What he wants is proper

training of children by 'prolific' politics, which can cultivate free moral reasonableness in them. Just like every parent would want, 'prolific' politics also wants human beings to flourish themselves. Their individual good, will automatically form the collective good. Because initiating them or giving them wings should be the work of the community (more will be apparent in the next section). Neither the modern political state nor the ancient local community can be the ideal host for the cultivation of *phronesis* if they lack this just mentioned and only common goal (of cultivating *hexis*).

Secondly, MacIntyre supports *phronesis* as 'syllogistic reasoning' (see, e.g., MacIntyre, 1988) though, he also considers the possibility of many types of reasonings being involved here. He gives many arguments in support of his idea of practical syllogism with nuances which we do not consider in detail because, in the next section, I want to argue against this inherent idea of *phronesis* as any sort of syllogism. If we look at the concept of *hexis* we explicated above, then any sort of syllogism would not support it because there are no logical premises like certain facts in the fragile life of desires we live.

3 'Prolific' Politics Through Musicological Lens

I am not baselessly opposing MacIntyre's concept of *phronesis*; if it seems so, then let us think why Aristotle himself has not cleared the matter about the nature of practical wisdom. Gadamer tells us that "it was difficult for Aristotle to work out an adequate conceptualization for practical knowledge," which for him is reflected in the last parts of NE VI (Gadamer, 1990). Part of the reason lies in what Gadamer says that *phronesis* is:

"moral reasonableness, the sensitivity to what is binding, which we might call 'conscientiousness,' without thereby being able to offer an adequate concept. . . in 1923, Heidegger made a remark about this distinction of *phronēsis* and *lētē*, according to which *phronēsis* knows no oblivion. Heidegger said: 'this is conscience'" (Gadamer, 1990).

Many scholars, including Simpson (1992) and Aristotle & Sachs (2002), have argued that practical wisdom is like a capability of "perception"; the agent sees what is right due to his active *hexis* in which they always are. Now, let us try to make sense of this tautology of *phronesis* as perception with the help of the concept of 'improvisation'. Consider following observations about the principle of 'improvisation' by Mukund Lath:

"Pythagoras' 'musicological' vision sought a *nitya* and *apauruṣeya* logos, an unchanging 'given.' The logos of the raga is, on the contrary, essentially and strongly *pauruṣeya* or 'human' in intent, creatively seeking its own basis and an ever-new 'givenness', which it keeps modifying; striving for a meaningful ground rather than assuming it as fixed and 'given' once and for all. . . It is the logos of a *pauruṣārtha*, a human *seeking*, which looks beyond what is, namely, the given, even as it keeps formulating and reformulating it in an on-going process. The seed of the *pauruṣeya* logos inherent in the raga, lies, I would like to suggest, in two distinct but related grounds or principles: the first could be termed the principle of improvisation, and the second . . . - the motive or the principle of pleasure: ordinary *human* pleasure, and not that of a *sthita-prajña* sage" (Lath, 1988).

Here Lath is telling us about the foundational principles of raga music (consider as ethics), which has two main principles: improvisation (consider as *phronesis*) and seeking human pleasure (consider as the happiness of Aristotle). Now, before presenting nuances of this argument, it should be noted that these equations are not so flat in reality; these are just for the sake of understanding. The principle of desire is nothing but for which people come to listen to a musician, i.e., *rasa*. Now we should notice that like the fragile happiness of life; the *rasa* is not so easily available on the surface. Both listeners and musicians have to have done the necessary training. In other words, the *rasa* only comes when a musician would have cultivated the ability to 'improvise' (this word is not exactly reflecting the real meaning) or she must have cultivated *manodharma* (Carnatic name for the same concept). But why is this *manodharma* so significant? Generally, these musicians sing the same composition that their teacher and the previous generation of their teachers would have sung. So, there does not seem any point in listening to the same thing again and again in concerts. But, actually it is not the same thing that people get to listen in their concerts. Here musicians are trained on a 'given' foundation to cultivate their own *manodharma* or their ability to improvise and make the 'ever-new' music happen on the fixed frame of melody (*rāga*) and beats (*tāla*).

Highlighting this imaginative creativity, Carnatic musician T M Krishna observes that, it is not about just singing a composition well. If it is this only then, it is a waste of student's and teacher's time. It is about something else that happened between the composition, which we need not notice, but we feel it. That is the feeling for which whole structure of music is created (First Edition Arts Channel, 2019).

It should be very clear that whatever happens as 'ever-new' music is nothing but the result of the imaginative creativeness of the artist, losing which a musician, qua a musician, has no existence. And he develops this 'musical wisdom' through a rigorous process of training under a prolific teacher who teaches them to be free and exercise the freedom to be a musician; without this "musical wisdom," they do not have existence.

Now, recall our idea of *hexis* where Aristotle asks us to practice it in order to cultivate excellences. We can understand an artist's musical wisdom with respect to practical wisdom because both have to freely choose for the good. However, there might be some difference in the objectives of both but not much. Because as Lath says, a musician too is searching for ordinary human pleasure. Therefore, we can understand politics as – that prolific *hexis* cultivating ground, like the music teacher. In other words, they do not attain musical wisdom from scratch, or it is not 'given' naturally. They have to develop it on a "given pattern." The music teacher provides the students patterns of some melodic possibilities, which then need to be grasped by student to produce more such possibilities. This is perfectly identical to the human condition in terms of practical wisdom. Aristotle says that "neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do excellences arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them and are made perfect by habit [*hexis*]" (NE, 1103a20-25). This is the reason why Gadamer aptly said that *phronesis* is difficult to conceptualize. Because it is not a moral dilemma solution providing a computer. Not that it cannot give any solution but this test of asking an artificial solution without cultivating it seems unreasonable. So, it is clear that the moral agent will have complete freedom and no conflict with the socio-customary morality of the ground of politics, only if both perform

their functions well and the politics does not cease to be prolific. Otherwise, we also have examples of such music teachers who ate up the career of their students; therefore, still maintaining politics is really a challenge for us.

4 Conclusion

On the whole, we saw that Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* offers much space to interpret it the way it reflects our problems as we are living now. Though there might be some objections regarding this approach, we do not find anything closer to what Aristotle speaks about. Because in this fragile fact of life, we are always in a process to maintain order in life. Though we do not know the good, we are not accepting the fact and still dialoguing for centuries just in order to cultivate the 'ever-new' practical wisdom. And still, because *phronesis* is not independently existing out there, it too needs the support of external sources; we are always in a way to assure that. We are always self-interpreting life and exercising our freedom which can only firmly stand on the ground *hexis* (ethos or character). These words of Gadamer, encapsulates the 'self-interpretive' base of Aristotelian ethics:

It seems to me undeniable that ethics, even as a metaphysics of morals, cannot seek its grounding anywhere else than in the self-interpretation of the life through which we all live. The doctrine of *phronēsis* stands in ethics, and ethics is the doctrine of *ethos* ['character']. *Ethos* itself is a *hexis*, and *hexis* is a comportment, which withstands *pathē* ['passions,' 'sufferings']. This is the anthropological basis of Aristotelian ethics. ... *ethos* is the basis from which alone we can develop the sense for rationality in our human existence. Even the life dedicated to the theory and its highest actualization, *sophia* ['wisdom'], depends upon it (Gadamer, 1988).

One might find our illustration of 'art' to understand '*phronesis*' as standing in contrast to Aristotle's distinction of *techne* and *phronesis*. However, my primary concern was to show the 'complex' nature of Aristotelian ethics, which Gadamer sees as grounded in the self-interpretation of life. Like musicians, we are in a perpetual process of cultivating un-given moral sensibility from the given state of life in our social context. Aristotle's many examples of health, eating, and archer seem to assert that it is not easy to explain *phronesis* in its own term. Therefore, artistic ability (not the product) is unproblematic for illustration. It shows that *phronesis* is not a mere mechanical algorithm or syllogism to give a factual conclusion for moral problems.

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