The Ethics of Virtues

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Abstract

Starting from Robert Solomon's interpretation of business ethics as an ethic of virtue, we analyze in the following paper the main Aristotelian moral virtues from the Nicomachean Ethics. *We start from the premises that the aspiration for happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the characteristic of humanity and that "virtue is a kind of midpoint" between two extremes that must be avoided. The most important Aristotelian moral virtues (also relevant to business ethics) are courage (*andreía*), generosity (*eleutheriotēs*), greatness of soul (*megalopsychía*), gentleness (*praótēs*), to which we can add compassion. Because "man is a social being", he also needs friends "to do them good"; these Aristotelian sentences are the key and purpose of the ethics of virtue.*

Keywords: *virtue ethics, eudaimonia, friendship, greatness of the soul, otherness.*

Introduction

In ancient Greek, the term ethics comes from ethos, which means character, way of being, set of habits. A virtue-based approach is a "social" perspective to understand how ethical values are produced (Jones, Parker & Bos, 2005, p. 56). According to Robert Solomon (1992, p. 325), corporations "are real communities, neither ideal nor idealizable," and they can be analyzed "to begin to understand the nature of the virtues." The American philosopher emphasizes corporate *reality* (or *realism*) and considers that the business environment is conducive to a "cold" analysis / interpretation of how to build virtue. He offers a true genealogy of virtues, starting with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 BC). Elsewhere, Solomon (1999, p. 37) argues in support of his perspective: "We could say that the bottom line of the approach to business virtues is that we need to go beyond the *bottom line thinking*, and to conceive business as an essential part of the society in which living well, concord with others and possessing a sense of self-respect are central, making a profit being only a means". Thus, we can conceive business ethics as the ethics of virtues, going beyond the command of profit, which seems to illustrate it essentially. The reason why we favor such a perspective is based on the membership of the business community in the *polis*.

Next, we will follow the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, focusing especially on the moral virtues. Aristotle distinguishes between intellectual and moral virtues. The intellectual ones are knowledge (*epistéme*), wisdom (*sophía*) and prudence or practical wisdom (*phrónesis*). The Greek philosopher shows that only the prudent person can possess all the moral virtues (see also Byars & Stanberry, 2018, p. 30).

The Purpose of Ethics

In *Book I* of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle bases the field of ethics at the junction of related disciplines such as political science, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. The starting point is the following common sense observation: "... good is what all aspire to" (1094a3). Thus, "... good is the object of science with the highest authority and the highest organization, and this is shown to be politics" (1094a27-28). We can only agree with the remark of Aristotle's editor, according to which the following reasoning becomes imperative: "thus commanding politics, ethics is, in a sense, superior politics" (Aristotle, 1988, 270 n.). Ethics understood as higher politics is a kind of idealization of politics, as a high point of view that coordinates, supervises and validates the activity of politics. "Good" ("good life", "right activity", "smooth running of things", "good order") is both the goal of politics and ethics (or the supra-political *telos* of ethics).

But what is the highest good from a general-human point of view? What do all our efforts converge on?

Given that any form of knowledge and any option tends towards a certain good, let us show which is the good that politics aims at and which is the highest good of all in the field of practical life. / On the name, of course, almost all agree, for the crowd and the elevated spirits, call it happiness, and I think that living well and enjoying success is the same as being happy. (1095a15-20)

The aspiration for happiness (*eudaimonia*) is this general-human constant. To rephrase, happiness is the good that politics and ethics aim at: moreover, it is the highest "good" from a practical point of view.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that even the most intelligent individuals, and the masses possess this common teleology; more roughly speaking, *we all want to be happy*, investing in this aspiration substantial efforts, orienting ourselves existentially according to this desire. Next, the philosopher operates with a distinction between a goal pursued for himself and one pursued for something else (an example of common sense for the latter would be money, which is never desired for himself, but as a means to achieve other benefits). The goal pursued for oneself is always perfect, par excellence desirable: "... absolutely perfect is the goal always pursued for oneself and never for anything else. Such a goal seems to

be happiness: we always want it for ourselves and never for anything else" (1097a33-1097b1). To recap briefly, the object of ethics is good, and the highest good from a practical point of view can only be happiness.

"Fair measure"

In Book II, Aristotle, in order to open the discussion on the virtues, operates with an important distinction between affects, faculties and habitual moods. Affects result in pleasure and pain: "I call affects desire, anger, fear, boldness, envy, joy, friendship, hatred, regret, emulation, mercy, and, in general, all that is followed by pleasure and pain." In the secondary stage, the faculties give us the possibility to (re)feel the affects: "They call faculties what gives us the possibility to feel all this, for example what makes us able to feel anger, or pain, or pity." And in the tertiary stage, the habitual moods determine our behavioral way, more precisely our way of reacting (*good* or *bad*) to the challenge of the affects: "Habitual moods name what determines us to behave good or bad regarding our affections; for example, in connection with anger, if we react violently or weakly, we do wrong, but if we keep up, we do well" (1105b20-28).

Such habitual moods (learned and repeated behaviors) are the virtues (1106a11-12). Here we find the definition of virtue as a means of gold (*aurea mediocritas*), as the just management and balancing of extremes: "Virtue is a kind of midpoint, its target being the right measure between two extremes" (1106b28). But we must be careful that this midpoint is not always arithmetic; we do not always proceed correctly if we avoid mathematically the extreme A or the extreme B, sometimes the Aristotelian midpoint is closer to one of the two extremes, to the excess or insufficiency of virtue. "Every expert avoids both excess and inadequacy, seeking and choosing the right measure, but the right measure not in relation to the work itself, but in relation to us" (1106b5-7). From a psychological point of view, we need to have a lot of common sense, a lot of insight and a lot of work with ourselves to appreciate and cultivate the "fair measure". Indeed, "ethical virtue represents a middle line, namely a middle line between two vices, one generated by excess, the other by insufficiency" (1109a20-21). But, "one of the extremes makes us mistake more, the other less" (1109a32-33).

But how do we cultivate virtue? How do we make as little mistakes as possible, given that there is an unstable balance between extreme A and extreme B? Anticipating contemporary psychoanalysis, the Greek philosopher believes that we must be guided by a (an) hedonic compass, some sort of moral compass in which pleasure and pain guide us and make us ethical subjects.

And it will be easier for us to know these inclinations based on the pleasure or pain we feel. And we must lead ourselves to what is contrary to our tendencies, because, moving as far away from error as possible, we reach the middle path, as do those who straighten crooked woods. (1109b3-6)

Aristotelian ethics presumes a harsh pedagogy, using the pain of learning as a process for correcting errors, for correction and moral improvement. It can be compared to the psychology of the twentieth-century hero of Joseph Campbell, who advocates for heroism understood as a discipline through suffering. Moreover, this theory is totally foreign to Epicureanism, despising – in a counterintuitive way – the subsequent hedonistic theories. "In everything we must guard ourselves most from pleasure and all that is pleasant, for in the appreciation of pleasure we are far from being incorruptible. In relation to the pleasure we must treat ourselves as the elders of the council treated Helen" (1109b8-11). In short, by distancing ourselves from pleasure (orientation after pleasure would be a kind of indulgence, a sybaritic self-satisfaction) and the use of the (an) hedonic compass we constitute, organize and chisel ourselves as ethical subjects. Aristotle seems to anticipate Plotinus, whose existential aphorism was: "Always sculpt your own statue!" The mentioned compass allows us to self-organize our own ethical discipline, as long as we say *no* to pleasure (and this contempt for drive and willpower seems to anticipate an ascetic ethic that has similarities with Christianity). Next we will deal with some of the Aristotelian moral virtues that are related to the contemporaneity of business ethics.

Courage

We start from the Aristotelian inducement (which combines philosophy with psychology), according to which "one must ... be born ... with a kind of spiritual eye, through which he will judge correctly and choose the good according to the truth" (114b7-8). That "spiritual eye" can guide us through the maze of business, in which immoral blindness often predominates (what we called earlier the command of profit). A discussion about courage (*andreía*) must start from the most common everyday point. Or, according to Heidegger's existential analysis, immersion in the impersonal "se" makes us sensitive to the experience of fear (*phóbos*) and anxiety. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself", one of Churchill's phrases, which is especially fit for the diagnosis of our actual moment, has its origin in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. "We are obviously afraid of what causes fear, and what causes it is, generally speaking, an evil; therefore, fear is defined as the expectation of evil" (1115a8-10).

Aristotle anticipates the Kierkegaardian theory of anxiety, according to which anxiety is an anticipatory affect, which is correlated with expectations about the future. Simply put, we cannot be anxious about the past (we can only regret it), fear (and by extension anxiety) is correlated with "expecting evil". Moreover, as Blaga and Cioran will argue in the twentieth century, the structure of anxiety includes the anticipation of finitude; simply put, any fear is correlated with the fear of death. "But the most frightening thing is death; it represents the extreme limit, beyond which there seems to be nothing left, neither good nor bad" (1115a26-27). But fear is a mechanism of evolutionary biology (those who are not afraid of anything have a high chance of being early eliminated from the genetic pool). Rephrasing, a dose of fear / anxiety is not futile: "Among those who exceed the measure, the one who does it through the total absence of fear does not have an appellation..., but someone must be crazy or insensitive to pain not to be afraid at all, neither of earthquakes, nor of the waves of the sea, as they say about the Celts."

Excess of courage is not, however, a good thing, as it can be assimilated with narcissistic-histrionic behavior in contemporary psychology. The daredevil plays a role, exaggerating his own importance, "affecting" courage. In the face of real dangers, he loses. "As for the one who boldly exaggerates in the face of dangers, he is called reckless. But it seems that the daredevil is also boastful and that it only affects courage; because, while the brave man really shows courage in danger, the daring one, pretending to look the same, imitates him as many times as he can, Therefore, most of the daredevils are in fact cowards who do the brave; for, though they boast that they have courage, they are not able to withstand the dangers" (1115b24-33). In order to react bravely to dangerous circumstances, a "science", an "art" of dosing courage is needed: a kind of selection of appropriate battles and appropriate behavior. The daredevil is vain, being a coward disguised as a brave man, unable to assume and manage this proportional art of courage. The daredevil is also out of sync; he does not choose the right moment for attack or defense. "... the daredevils are impetuous and determined before dangers, but, in their midst, they back out; but brave men are prompt in action, after they have previously shown composure". (1116a7-8). If the excess of the "brave" is constituted by the "daring", its insufficiency is given by the "coward". "He who fears excessively is cowardly, because he fears both why he should not, and in an inappropriate way, and all sorts of such traits characterize him. He also lacks confidence, but because in fear he commits excess, here his nature is revealed more. So, the coward is a man who is easily discouraged, because he is afraid of everything. While the brave man is his opposite, trust characterizing those who hope" (1115b33-1116a4). From

a psychological point of view, the "coward" is probably over-traumatized, if he lacks judgment (that spiritual eye) and "is afraid of what he should not be". The Greek mentality, sensitive to *hybris* (overcoming the measure), penalizes the coward more drastically than the reckless and thus we can appreciate that the moderation of courage is closer to "reckless" than "coward". Moreover, the coward is, according to Aristotle, the one who commits the "sin" of fearing excessively.

Courage is "a middle line between trust and fear" (1116a 10-11). Moreover, let us not believe that the brave do not feel fear at all; they are able, however, to manage it. Overcome it and take on the art of the right battles. Cognitive psychology considers that resilience (recovery from trauma, acceptance and management of anxious situations and their repeated overcoming to self-efficacy) is the only "cure for fear" (anxiety). So, the cowardice-courage dynamic is less schematic than in *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, the Greek philosopher has interesting intuitions, for example the association between courage and anger (we also take into account the fact that in anxiety management it is recommended to move the subject on the fear-anger axis). "And anger can be taken as courage, for brave seem those who, being its impulse, seem brave like beasts that throw themselves onto those who have hurt them. In fact, brave people are also irascible; for anger is the most vivid impulse in the face of dangers, whence Homer's words: "by anger he breathed vigor," or "aroused his ardor and anger," or "his nostrils trembled with fierce anger," or "his blood boiled." "All this seems... to signify the stimulation and awakening of anger. / Courageous people act, of course, for the sake of good morals, and anger only comes to their aid" (1116b24-32). Aristotle observes that anger gives tone (while fear and anxiety paralyze, block, "freeze") and "comes to the rescue" of courage. We also find in the text new clues of that an(hedonic) compass, recalling the ethics of the hero or of the ascetic: "courage is associated with pain and rightly receives praise; for it is more difficult to bear something painful than to abstain from something pleasant" (1117a33-35).

According to Robert Solomon (1999, pp. 82-3), the context of courage in business ethics refers to situations of tension and danger (threat of dismissal or non-promotion) and the real test of courage is, for example, a situation in which the boss is unwavering, however, he is not right at all. No one dares to say anything, but the results of the boss's decision would be disastrous. Starting with Aristotle, Solomon speaks of moral courage: "the courage to make the difficult decision to do the right thing even in the context of serious threats or dangers." Even if there are no more vital threats (as in the military), the threat to financial security or one's own career is extremely annoying (in fact, Adorno considered

existentialist anxiety to be the "fear of unemployment"). Without moral courage, "many of the other virtues are only good intentions."

Generosity

A second important virtue is generosity (*eleutheriotēs*). "It is, of course, easier to receive than to give." Generous "are called the men who offer..." (1120a17-19). Pedagogical psychoanalysis teaches us that the everyday situation, the starting point in the matter of generosity, is the boundless egocentrism of the subject (just as the field of cultivating courage was that of anxiety), egocentrism whose corollary is pettiness and greed. In other words, in our primary situation we are inclined to receive, to "collect". But, in order to advance towards otherness and a kind of intersubjective responsibility (towards ethics, if we want), we must give without counting how much (or how little) we receive. According to the Dune philosophy, "*the gift is the blessing of the giver*". The extremes of the medium term which is generosity are *waste and greed*: "waste is an excess in giving and not receiving, ... greed is an insufficiency in giving and an excess in receiving..." (1121a13-15).

The avaricious suffer from a spiritual disease, which affects their ability to give. From an evolutionary point of view, this is a mistake, because generosity is really a blessing with a societal impact: self-help can save lives, including one's own.

> *Those designated by their names as cheese-scratches, pinchpenny, stingy, all are too unwilling to give, but do not covet the goods of others, and do not want to take from them... among them is the griper and all like him, they are so named because they go so far as to exaggerate that they give nothing to anyone...* (1121b22-28).

It is noteworthy that stinginess (with its extreme form of *niggardliness*) is quite widespread in the corporate environment, where it is disguised as *efficiency*. I am referring to those companies with huge turnovers and profits, which are not able to invest small sums in improving the working conditions of employees. There is also this Protestant mentality, which favors stinginess, according to which "*a buck saved is a buck earned*". This *myth of the stingy* is legitimate for saving resources, but it is easier for us to believe that great fortunes were built by bold and original ideas, by courageous *coups*, not by perpetuating this philosophy of "giving nothing" to anyone in no circumstance. Rather, the epigraph and anxiety of those "mingy" seems to be: "ask and it will be taken from you."

Returning to the problem of the median, "righteously avarice is considered the opposite of generosity; it is a greater evil than waste, and people often make mistakes out of greed than out of waste..." (1122a13-16). However, the

coordinates of generosity are closer to waste than to avarice; the insufficiency to give is more annoying (more immoral) than the excess of giving. From the point of view of business ethics (Solomon, 1999, 87-8), the context of generosity is simple: you have, others do not. Generosity is a useful virtue for the self in that it gives a sense of positive impact on others and useful for others because it meets their needs, exceeding their expectations. The absolute test of generosity would be: "are you willing to give your valuable time, not only money, to those who really need it?" According to Robert Solomon, generosity is all the more authentic as it is more spontaneous, more "unintentional."

Grandeur of the Soul

The greatness of the soul (*megalopsychía*) is related to what Emerson called *over-soul* or Nietzsche *Übermenschlichkeit,* thus being a virtue that helps us to overcome the ordinary limits of the human. "The greatness of the soul... Is connected with high things" (1123a34-35). The extremes of the median which is the grandeur of the soul will be vanity and humility: "He who considers himself worthy of great things without being so, is conceited ... He who considers himself worthy of things inferior to those he is capable of betrays a humble soul ..." (1123b8-11). To show *megalopsychia* you must not only consider yourself worthy of greater things (then you are only conceited), but to be truly worthy of them (the grandeur of the soul is not only imaginary, but ontic, existential): "It seems that the man of soul grandeur is the one who, considering himself worthy of great things, is truly worthy of them. Whoever considers himself so without actually being shows a limitation." (1123b1-3)

Like magnanimity (*megaloprépeia*), which is a bridge between humanity and divinity - hence the reference to Übermenschlichkeit, to what goes beyond the narrow anthropic sphere – "the generous man spends not for himself but for the community, and his gifts have something similar with offerings to the gods ..." (1123a5-7) – , *megalopsychía* can be understood as a kind of aspiration of the human to the divine (a kind of immanent divinity): "if the man of soul grandeur considers himself worthy of great things being truly worthy of them, and especially of the greatest, then he shows himself to be so especially in connection with a certain thing. Value is seen as relating to external goods. *But the highest of these goods is the one we grant to the divinity* (s.n.), to which the notable people aspire and which constitute the reward for the most beautiful deeds. Such a thing is the honor ..." (1123b16-21). But these honors must really correspond to the value, otherwise we have only a Caragialian masquerade: "If the man with soul grandeur

is worthy of the greatest honors, then he must also be the most valuable man; for the more valuable someone is, the more worthy of honors...” (1123b27-28).

For Aristotle, *megalopsychia* is the crowning of virtues, the key virtue to which all others tend: “the grandeur of the soul seems a kind of adornment of the other virtues, which it elevates and outside which it could not exist. Therefore, it is difficult for someone to truly show grandeur of soul, such a thing not being possible without having reached perfection” (1124a1-4). Extreme A is *humility*, which we could associate today with a kind of depressive mentality of one who considers himself unworthy of great things, being above the existential-human capacity: “The man with a humble soul although he is worthy of some goods, deprives himself of them; thus, his defect seems to lie in the fact that, not knowing himself, he considers himself superior to the goods he is worthy of” (1125a20-23).

Extreme B is the *vanity* of the one who amazes, who wants to impress without any foundation. Viewed from the point of view of greatness, vanity is pure stupidity (*stultitia* in Erasmus’s terms):

> As for the vain, they are foolish and do not know themselves, and this visibly (they perform things with glorious perspectives as if they were worthy of them, and then only their inability emerges). And they flaunt their clothes and their appearance... they like to display their well-being... (1125a27-32).

However, the median of greatness is closer to the needle of vanity than to the depressive *no man’s land* of humility: “But to the grandeur of the soul opposes more the humble spirit than vanity; for the humble spirit appears more frequently and is more annoying ...” (1125a33-34).

From the perspective of business ethics, grandeur is difficult to manage, because, according to Jungian psychology, great personalities also have shadows of proportional densities. Moreover, at the psychic-ontological limit, *megalopsychía* borders on the complex of God (omnipotence, aseity, exceptionalism). The “great ones” might think that they are playing by their own rules, that human regulations do not apply to them. And if they are dishonest, they could apply a double measure, annoying, even “vicious” for their teammates and inferiors. From the point of view of existential philosophy, however, grandeur can be linked to the Nietzschean concept of *Selbstüberwindung* (self-transcendence): it is desirable to aspire to transcend one's own limits; at the same time, we must not forget that when we rise, we must have a strong foundation. Also, from a Jungian point of view, assuming one's own inferiority (for example, the courage to acknowledge your cowardice) can sometimes be more fertile than grandeur.

Gentleness

Gentleness (*praótēs*) is the last important moral virtue analyzed by Aristotle.

Gentleness is the middle line when it comes to outbreaks of anger. But as this middle line does not have a proper name, nor do the extremes, we will use for it the term gentleness, which leans more towards the absence of anger, which in turn lacks a specific appellation. As for excess, we might call it irascibility. (1125b26-31)

Gentleness is the middle ground between irascibility and the unnamed absence of anger. According to Aristotle, anger is not necessarily a vice. As we have seen, it invigorates and comes to the aid of courage. Moreover, there is a justification for anger, a just *anger*. And the one who is not angry about what is right (in situations when anger is justified) has a slave mentality.

"He who is justifiably angry and against whom he must, in the circumstances and for the proper length of time, deserves to be praised...

Those who are not angry for what they should look like fools... endure to be insulted without your reaction and overlook the insults brought to those close to you denote a servile nature" (1125b32-1126a8).

Also interesting is the portrait of the *man of resentment* that Aristotle makes, which anticipates both the Nietzschean genealogy and the phenomenology of Max Scheler's affects. From the perspective of corporate ethics, rancor (pure venom) can affect working relationships. The only remedy may be proper communication, as well as the honest assumption of errors and defects (errors and defects behind which rancor presupposes paranoid intentions): the rancorous are difficult to accommodate and keep anger for a long time, not finding peace until they take revenge. Only revenge puts an end to their resentment, replacing anger with joy; but until then, they keep to themselves the pressure of this state of mind. And this is because, without externalizing themselves, no one can persuade them to give in, *so that anger boils in them for a long time* (s.n.). Such people are, both for themselves and for their best friends, very hard to bear" (1126a20-27).

Along with gentleness, I would place compassion in the context of business ethics. Etymologically, *com-passio (Mit-Leid)* implies "suffering-with". The context of compassion is the suffering of others, and its primary intention is to alleviate this suffering. The Chinese philosopher Mencius considered that "no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others... He who is devoid of the heart of compassion is not human" (Solomon, 1999, p. 79). According to Schopenhauer, the essence of compassion is recognition in the suffering of the other. And according to Rousseau, if there was no compassion, we would probably be extinct as a species. Of course, compassion "can be expensive. Granting leave,

paying medical or psychological counseling, taking time off from work to express our concerns..." But compassion, like care, is essential "if we are to conceive of the existence of the corporation as a human community." (Solomon, 1999, p. 79)

Conclusion. Friendship

According to Robert Solomon, the modern commentator of Aristotle, the ethics of virtue can be the model of business ethics. And the corporate environment (which is part of the *polis*, is a microcosm of the *polis*), if it is to be thought of as virtuous, it must include friendship in its internal structure: "... the same people who are capable of virtue are also those capable of friendship..." (1155a31-32); "...nothing characterizes friendship more than life together..." (1157b19-20). It is very interesting that authentic friendship is a real Buberian I - You relationship, in which otherness has even preeminence over ipseity: "The friendly feelings we have towards our fellow men, and which serve to define friendship, seem to derive from those on which we feel towards ourselves" (1166a1-3); "...the highest level of friendship resembles how we feel about ourselves..." (1166b1-2).

We could say not only that the friend becomes a true alter ego, but that the Buberian ego becomes an internal You (an inner otherness) that allows the dialogue with the authentic otherness. The human being needs inter- and trans-subjectivity, which is the same as recognizing that there are fundamental needs that can only be met by recourse to the other: "man is a social being, destined by nature to live conjointly" (1169b17); "The virtuous man will need friends to do good to" (1169b13). And if the usual dispositions must always be practiced and assumed, "permanent contact with virtuous people means a kind of training of virtue" (1170a12-13).

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