

Book Review

Olav Eikeland (2008): The Ways of Aristotle. Aristotelian phrónêsis, Aristotelian Philosophy of Dialogue, and Action Research

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The Rediscovering of Protreptic Method in the Social Sciences

Philosophers writing on Plato's work during Hellenism and later on in Antiquity would often be inclined to view his basic project as a protreptic one, even if Plato did not write a separate protreptic manual. However his pupil, Aristotle did write such an "eincheiridion", a handbook for using dialogue to help another person to be master of his own life. The "Protreptikos", the text of which was reconstructed recently, was famous among the so called "exoteric" works of Aristotle, and in line with Epicurus' famous "Letter to Menoikeus", Cicero's "Hortensius", Epictetus' "Encheiridion", and "Seneca's "De clementia", to mention just a few.

In short protreptic is the art of turning, "trépo", another person to the essence of his life, and strengthening his awareness of the good. The dialogical capacities of the protreptic speaker spur the listener to reform his life, but not, like the Christian tradition through a revealed and all-excluding "kerygma", but through a non-dogmatic philosophical discourse using the person's own desire to transform himself – St. Augustine was spurred by Cicero's protreptic treatise, "Hortensius" to convert, "conversion" being the Latin translation of the Greek word "epistrephein", a word with the same root as "protreptic". However, protreptic, eagerly pursued by great rhetoricians like Isokrates, has no trace of persuasiveness in it, it works at the level of conviction. The

person who convinces himself about the importance of taking his own life seriously is reflective, “phrónimos”. He develops strategies of listening to himself and to others, practicing the two Stoic virtues, “akoúein”, to listen properly to oneself and to others, and “proséchein”, to pay attention to. Such a permanent awareness is often called “phrónesis”, a concept translated imprecisely by Cicero into either “prudentia” and “sapientia”, and later on, during the Enlightenment even more imprecisely into the concept of “practical wisdom”, a translation dominating today, if it is not through inspiration from Postmodern writers’ fascination with Immanuel Kant’s “Kritik der Urteilskraft”, identified with the sense of judgment. Protreptic is the essence of a philosophical rhetoric.

Thus, protreptic contains a normative theory of dialogue, acquiring enormous importance in the political history of Western culture, up to the era of democracy as the strategy of “softening the tyrant” or functioning as the “mirror of the king”, or the “via regia”, the road of the prince. Philosophers like Erasmus and Leibniz wrote protreptics, and even Frederic the Great of Prussia wrote an anti-Machiavellian one together with Voltaire. This “road” of the prince is the “hodós” of the classical Greek thinkers, the quality and intensity of the practice of self reflection, and it had a life parallel with the Christian “hodós” reinforced by the Stoic renaissance during the Baroque as a new project of combining Christian thinking with a humanist philosophy of life – prototyped in Justus Lipsius’ bestseller “De Constantia” from 1584.

Protreptic exists in two basic versions: As an exhorting text or as a practice of the counsellor of princes. Its essence is dialogue, even when it is written, because it is conceived of as a mirror. Its other central perspective is that the inquirer can, and ought to, learn from the dialogue which he is leading. Here protreptic becomes crucial today both for a re-understanding of dialogical functions in management, consulting, and leadership based coaching, as well as in research.

Now, in managerial and organizational practice, in politics, as well as in social research, the dialogue has become more and more important since world war two. The most influential book on dialogue written in this era is beyond doubt Jürgen Habermas’ formal pragmatic manifesto “Theorie des

kommunikativen Handelns". However this book does not at any level match four much elder books on communication written by a certain Aristotle, his "Analytica posteriora", his "Topica", his "Sophistici elenchi", and his "Art of Rhetoric". What Habermas' book lacks in the investigation of the content and "situatedness" of dialogue, due to its dependence on the English speech act theory, is richly presented in Aristotle.

The book by Olav Eikeland is almost revolutionary from this point of view, because it presents an extremely erudite and systematic investigation on how Aristotle creates the foundation for a critical and normative dialogue, incorporating logic and dialectics, and reducing the "performative", persuasive and manipulative strategies which are obvious as direct or indirect agendas in management and social research. Through this it contributes with an analytical apparatus which, in my opinion, is able far beyond modern theories of communication in casting light on the complexity and problems of this crucial phenomenon. No, doubt, behind Eikeland's discourse burns the tacit ideal of a totally open awareness of the other person in the dialogue, as developed by Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, and Emmanuel Lévinas, but also the legacy of the great socialist tradition of human interrelation in the work place liberated from strategies of power.

The core problem is how one leads a dialogue that is not manipulative, not using power, not relying on expert knowledge, and which is not prone to the traps of the "micro fascism", which Gilles Deleuze talked about.

It must be mentioned that the hermeneutic analysis of this book is refined and complex, and that it is impossible to pay a full honour to it in a short review. Also the implications for the reception of the Aristotelian work cannot be dealt with here. When this is said, the following can be stated: The idea of the book is that *phrónesis*, in the capacity of the core attitude to one's own reflective abilities, and in the end to one's own life, cannot stand alone, but need knowledge of the dialectical method. It has to be combined with the whole other dimension of Plato's system, so meticulously developed by Aristotle, and by Diogenes Laertius summed up as functions of the "*zetésis*", the capacity to search for: The "agonistic" aspect of speech on the one hand, containing the "endeictic", criticizing, and the "anatreptic", rebutting; and the "maieutic", identifying-liberating, and the "peirastic", (self)-criticizing, on the

other. Only when dialectic joins forces with philosophy's search for truth in forming the dialogical capacity, the central enemy, the strategic rhetoric, can be conquered. This is the classical Greek sense of the philosophical dialogue:

“Dialogue does not differ from philosophy by being a different ability or power, however. According to the *Rhetoric* (1355a17-21), it belongs to the same capacity (**dunamis**) to see, aim for and it is *both* truth *and* the **endoxa** that dialogue starts out from. Dialogue differs from philosophy in a more restricted sense by remaining mostly tentative and testing (**peiras-tiké**) in its approach, while proper philosophy is bent on engendering knowledge (gnôristikê) (cf. Ph 194b4). But their way of working is actually the same.” (p. 227).

What actually is able to transform philosophy into a dialogue directed towards the knowledge of truth is phronesis, but without phronesis and its inherent intuitive capacity, “nous”, (a concept close to “the sense of judgment” in Kant), the conversation, be its dialectical sublimity ever so high, can never be transformed into a dialogue.

“Critical dialogical thinking (**nóêsis**) is still the way to sort out definitions, basic principles, and elements in every discipline ...” (p. 235).

Every conversation oscillates between the “doxa” and the “endoxa”, between common sense and the knowledge of the more reflective, or even wise, and every conversation is able to liberate the phronesis of one's talking. But what exactly is phronesis?

Phronesis has a complicated position in the works of Aristotle, especially in his “Nicomachean Ethics”. It is a moral or ethical virtue, an intellectual virtue, and the dynamo of the important “etho-poietical” perspective of forming oneself in the image of the good through the helix of the “hexis”. “Hexis” (its positive, creative sense being almost blurred by Cicero's translation into “habitus”) means actualising the good through the practice of it, in such a way that one comes to know more about it. This might look like a *circulus vitiosus*, but it is not, since it is not an *aporia* that doing the good presupposes knowledge of the good, and that knowing the good presupposes the capacity to live it in any different situation. It is precisely the concept of phronesis which explains why this is not an *aporia*, because it is the capacity

of the actor to learn the meaning of what he himself is doing from doing it. This process is only possible because phronesis presupposes the “*nous*”, the intuitive knowledge of norms and the modes of practice. Thus phronesis has two sides, so to speak. An axiological level consisting in the learned principles of the moral virtues, and an intellectual, but intuitive, capacity to develop this knowledge fully, the “*nous*”, because principles or maxims in themselves can be transferred as a rich and ripe knowledge of the good through experience (p. 212-215). This is also why phronesis is so closely connected to dialogue, because this effort of knowing the moral or ethical significance of one’s own actions cannot be undertaken alone.

To the Greeks, phronesis was so crucial, because the end of life was seen as ultimate happiness, most often described by Aristotle with the concept “*eudaimonia*” (the synthesis of mental and physical bliss) which is the result of the phronetic opening of the road to “*theoria*” to contemplation, a road which must be travelled, however, through the practical, moral actions. There is not a trace of the later so influential opposition between practical and theoretical knowledge in Aristotle. The “*episteme*”, the “*sophia*”, or the “*gnosis*”, the three central concepts of theoretical and contemplative knowledge from the “*Nicomachean Ethics*”, are simply the resultants of the *vita activa*, of the life of the “*hó phrónimos*”, of the individual who sought to live by the virtues, and in agreement with the “*paideia*”, the canonical, taught set of cultural values – Cicero succeeds in translating, when he chooses “*humanitas*” for it. Here, in the socio-economic relative content of the “*paidea*”, we also find the limits of Aristotle which answer to the limitation of the polis and its “*oikos*” and its “*scholé*”. The *oikos* is the primary unit of Homeric culture, the highest order of political, economic and social organization, it is the noble household with the omnipotent pater familiaris at the top. The primary loyalty was to the *oikos*, which included relatives, servants, and retainers, but also companions, and even the *xenios*, the “*guest friend*”. This concept is closely related to the original, Homeric sense of *ethos* meaning “*habitat*”, “*dwelling*” – a concept of immense importance to the whole work of Martin Heidegger and perhaps the secret of why he avoided a classical posing of the ethical problem, even if he might have conceived “*Sein und Zeit*” as a “*new*” “*Nicomachean Ethics*”. The early Greek gods, Hestia and Hermes, are the epichthonian gods, the gods of the dwelled soil. The character of a person is formed by

the virtues (the “agathos”) of the *ethos* as an *oikos*. Hence family relations, and tribes, were always the core of Athenian democracy competing with the sense of a broader community. Aristotle still thinks through the image of an inherent connection between character and ethical-political capacity on the one side and the *oikos* on the other, presupposing without any critical sense the “agathos” of the aristocrats, and hence, taking the leisure time, the *scholé*, grasped by the powerful, as a natural state of things. So, when Plato and Aristotle introduce the modern concept of ethics, it must both be seen as a deliberate break with the former thinking where freedom, *eleutheria*, was bound to specific idiomatic relations of the blood, and an unyielding vindication of a class society – the important difference posited by Plato in this eulogy of “Res publica” of (aristocratic) philosophers as the ruling class. However, the line of thinking resulting from the Athenian concept of *paideia* never developed a firm concept of the *plesion*, the “neighbour” as everyman as it was later presented by St. Paul. There were still slaves, women children and barbarians, i.e. the democracy of Athens rested on an extremely exclusive society – as Eikeland notices. Not until the Stoics transformed the concept of *oikos* into the concept of *oikeiosis* during Hellenism could any trace of a general concept of the human being be found. *Oikeiosis* means that every man is a natural part of the world, that everybody is dependent on each other, and that it is possible to realize this through reason and shape one’s life in ethical accordance with it. The *oikos* becomes the world. It was the great accomplishment of Roman Imperialism and early Christianity to establish and really realize this.

From this perspective the work of Eikeland inscribes itself in a social-critical, existentialist tradition, repeating and transgressing the effort of the Heidegger of “Sein und Zeit” to extract an ethic from a phenomenology more inspired by Aristotle than by Husserl. However there is another, just as important perspective in Eikeland’s book: the intention to transform the concept of social research.

Eikeland is a social critic, standing on the platform of “die kritische Theorie” of the Frankfurter School, and, from his own work as a social researcher, very well equipped to handle the problems of the theory of science related to developing a new concept of action research.

It is an irony of fate that Eikeland could already present his ideas on the importance of the classical concept of dialogue for a reconstruction of social research in 1990, and that this brilliant text was rather unnoticed outside Norway. Now, however, time is ripe for Eikeland's ideas.

The "hodós" marked by phronesis implies a "meta-hodós", a method for social research. This method is the essence of protreptic:

"If action research is going to be more than just "applied research", or complementary "research/er assistance" to practical development processes, leaving basic research uncritically to other approaches, it has to concern itself with and transform the formative learning processes and the research work *directed* towards basic principles, ends, and definitions, too." (p. 460)

Action research must learn from Aristotle:

"Aristotle's epistemic model works *upwards dialogically*, based on, and focused on analyzing the acquired practical experience and *habitus* of the researchers-learners themselves, cast and inscribed in social, economic, and other institutionalized historical arrangements" (ibid.).

As Eikeland said about the transformation of conversation to dialogue:

"Any particular conversation, any discourse, or any process of thinking can change character from one moment to the other by turning the attention towards itself and talking *about* it rather than just *within* it, suspending it" (p. 235).

In other words, research must become a protreptic project, it must seek to liberate the inherent knowledge of the participants, in order to assist them in posing the problem about the essential, and virtual or utopian, relation between work and life.

In a time which could be judged as a liberalist version of the middle age, creating a scholastic of natural science, new feudal elites, and new groups of serfs worldwide, a new enlightenment must be the dream. The enlightenment found its basis in the Greek tradition, but after the wars of Napoleon it had already become ideology. Since American business economics and social science discovered the continental philosophical traditions with their close connection to the Greek legacy some twenty years ago – even Foucault ended up by "going Greek" – concepts like phronesis have become parts of the

ideology pursuing a pseudo-humanist version of liberalist power, and so has the concept of dialogue. The number of volumes with titles like “Leading by Wisdom” is growing day by day, and managerial intuitionism is vindicated by referring to tacit knowledge contained in “phronetic experience”, i.e. levels of acquiring knowledge not open to discursive reflection. The smuggling of such a trivial concept of “phrónesis” into the overall economic paradigm of information retrieval and handling as the core of market and management behaviour destroys its root in the logos, but also the possibility of understanding the proper relations between action and consciousness, and the possible content of the concept of tacit knowledge as well. Eikeland’s work must be greeted as a sovereign attempt to reestablish the critical and liberating content of the extremely forceful Greek, conceptual framework underlying all thinking not exclusively devoted to an idiosyncratic “scientific” research. Thus, after all, even a neo-epistemic project must connect to the meaning of philosophy once stated by Epicurus: “Any philosophy which cannot remove suffering is false.”

Reference

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