

THE CREATOR IN ARISTOTLE'S *METAPHYSICS*

Other things [are called 'before' and 'after'] . . . with respect to nature and substance, that is, when these things can be without those, but not those without these, a distinction which Plato used.⁵⁰

So when Aristotle calls God "the first of beings" the most natural reading is this: God is the being which can be without any others, but they cannot be without him. This is at least compatible with saying that God causes all other beings by his choice. And he says explicitly about the order of the universe that God does not depend upon the order, but the order depends on him.⁵¹

Coming back to *arché*, there is another sense of that word which Aristotle distinguishes in *Metaphysics* 5.1 that he might wish to bring to mind when he calls God the *arché* of beings. He says:

that at whose will mobile things are moved and changeable things are changed, such as the political authorities and oligarchies and monarchies and tyrannies, are called *archai*, and also the arts, and especially the architectonic ones.

Both arts and rulers are called *archai*. But Aristotle has called God the ruler of the universe,⁵² and so when he calls him the "*arché* of beings" he gives us to understand that God is the "prince of beings" or the "king of beings," at whose mere will things are and come to be. And Aristotle has also called God an art, that is, a knowledge which aims to communicate its form to other things, like the art of medicine. In calling God the "*arché* of beings," he therefore gives us to understand that God is the "architect" of the universe. On both understandings, God is a voluntary agent with knowledge of things other than himself.

⁵⁰ *Metaphysics* 5.11 1019a1-5.

⁵¹ *Metaphysics* 12.10 1075a15.

⁵² *Metaphysics* 12.10 1075a15, 1076a5.

ARISTOTLE'S GOD AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Joan Kingsland

When people hear the name Regensburg I would guess that a good number of them might recall the lecture of the Holy Father of September 12, 2006 and the ensuing violent reaction in the Muslim world. It was not surprising to learn that the leaders had not themselves read Pope Benedict's address; but were relying on the media to form their opinion. A fair reading of this text shows that he was not so much trying to address the Muslim world as he was the Western world. The line he emphasized was: "not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature." The Holy Father repeated various times in his lecture that God is *logos* and therefore acts with *logos*. He claims in that address: "The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance." He speaks of a "synthesis between the Greek spirit and the Christian spirit."

My talk goes right along with the spirit of Pope Benedict's address, in which he emphasized the importance of this synthesis between the Greek spirit and the Christian spirit. In

Joan Kingsland has been a consecrated member of the Regnum Christi Movement since 1993. She earned licentiate and doctoral degrees in moral theology at the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and the Family in Rome, as well as a Bachelor of Arts degree from Thomas Aquinas College, and a Master of Arts degree from the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, University of Toronto. She currently teaches theology at Mater Ecclesiae College in Rhode Island. Her first novel, *Ask Me No Questions*, will be published in April of 2011.

particular, I will address how Aristotle's notion of God and ethics laid down solid foundations for Christian ethics. I wish to show how, from the point of view of ethics, Aristotle's notion of God and the good life left room, or even paved the way for the Christian God and Christian ethics.

I'll proceed by way of comparison between the basic elements of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Christian Ethics. I'll cover these points: happiness, the importance of virtue, wisdom and friendship.

But first I would like to begin by considering the Dominican priest Servais Pinckaers' definition of Christian Ethics and seeing how it connects to Aristotle's notion of ethics:

Christian ethics is the branch of theology that studies human acts so as to direct them to a loving vision of God seen as our true, complete happiness and our final end. This vision is attained by means of grace, the virtues, and the gifts, in the light of revelation and reason.¹

By extracting the elements that contain something connected to revelation and grace, we come up with a coherent definition that would have been recognized by Aristotle.

"Ethics studies human acts so as to direct them to our true, complete happiness. This is attained by means of the virtues, in the light of reason."

I do this exercise in order to show how his system far from negating the Christian vision of ethics is rather an integral part of Christian ethics. Similarly, it seems that his notion of God, though incomplete, remains open to the notion of the Christian God. We will address this point as we compare the two systems of ethics.

First of all, there is the question of happiness. Aristotle directly addresses the question of happiness, which is central

¹ Pinckaers, S. *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 1995), p. 8.

for him, in his first and last books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Human action ought to be ordered towards achieving true and lasting happiness. He means something stable, not easily taken away, and internal, that has to do with the perfection of man's faculties. He does, however, recognize that external elements can affect a person's happiness. So it would be good if a person could remain free of misfortune. Nevertheless, even a lot of bad luck and unfortunate circumstances cannot make a person miserable, because that depends upon a person's actions (though neither would a person like Priam be called blessed).

His concept of happiness has to do with fulfillment in this life alone. This can be seen by what he calls perfection in man. We'll develop this point more when we turn to virtue. There is one more thing to point out about how Aristotle is considering happiness in regards to this life. In Book I, chapter 10 (line 1100a13-14) he says "is it also the case that a man is happy when he is dead? Or is not this quite absurd, especially for us who say that happiness is an activity?" Given that the human person needs the body for human activity, including the brain for thinking, it seems Aristotle did not conceive of how we could be capable of activity after death. A little further on, he says: "even if anything whether good or evil penetrates to them, it must be something weak and negligible, either in itself or for them, or if not, at least it must be such in degree and kind as not to make happy those who are not happy nor to take away their blessedness from those who are." (Ch. 11, 1101b1-3) Is he following this line of thought merely for the sake of the argument, or is he open to the possibility of happiness and unhappiness after this life? It would seem that he does not see how it is possible.

Turning to Christian ethics, we know that it does not deny the kind of happiness in this life, spoken of by Aristotle. St. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between imperfect happiness, which can be found in this life, and perfect happiness,

consisting in the loving vision of God. For him, the first leads to the second. Aristotle's vision of happiness, then, is open to the truth that will be given through revelation.

Secondly comes the key role of virtue in both systems of ethics. Aristotle makes the case early on that "human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there is more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete." (Bk. I, ch. 7, 1098a17-18). Later on he'll say "happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue" (Bk. I, ch. 12, 1102a5). He expands on this idea by first presenting the moral virtues and then contemplation. As to the moral virtues, Aristotle devotes books II-V to defining them, in general and individually. Here we encounter not only the cardinal virtues of fortitude, temperance, justice, but additionally, an array of other virtues, including, truthfulness, friendliness, good temper. . . .

For Aristotle, a person experiences happiness in acting virtuously because that person is subjecting his passions to his reason, what is lower to what is higher by nature. When we act in accordance to reason, we're acting according to what is highest within us. This is fulfilling in and of itself. Happiness is then something interior, not coming from something external. That's why a person cannot be made wretched by exterior circumstances: he still governs his own actions and can choose to act honorably.

Aristotle goes one step further in speaking about the highest activity in man: wisdom. The speculative act of reasoning goes even above the practical reason, which is involved in virtuous acts. "life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the happiest." (Bk. X, ch. 7, 1178a6-9) Virtuous action is not entirely excluded by the philosopher-type who contemplates the highest things; however his superior act is that of contemplation.

Having made this argument, Aristotle seeks to come to

the same conclusion by bringing in God. "The activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness" (1178b22-24). Here, Aristotle is saying that whatever activity of man is most akin to that of God will be the source of greatest happiness.

Further down he once more refers to the gods in regards to human contemplation to argue that the gods will reward this type of activity the most:

Now he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods. For if the gods have any care for human affairs, as they are thought to have, it would be reasonable both that they should delight in that which was best and most akin to them (i.e. reason) and that they should reward those who love and honor this most, as caring for the things that are dear to them and acting both rightly and nobly. And that all these attributes belong most of all to the philosopher is manifest. He, therefore, is the dearest to the gods. And he who is that will presumably be also the happiest; so that in this way too the philosopher will more than any other be happy. (1179a22)

It might be worth noting that in the first citation "god" is in the singular, while in the second Aristotle refers to the "gods" in plural. Does he really consider that the human person will be pleasing to the gods and rewarded by them for philosophizing? The first citation of the singular "god" seems more in keeping with God as he is presented in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The second citation seems more of an argument aimed at convincing people to seek to occupy themselves with contemplation, motivated by the desire for reward from gods they believed in. Or is perhaps Aristotle's belief in God superior to what he can ascertain about him by unaided reason?

If we compare Aristotle's highest activities of virtuous

action and contemplation to that of Christian ethics, we find that St. Thomas too puts a strong emphasis on the virtues, adding into his own presentation the theological virtues. There was a trend in moral theology up until Vatican II that even continues, to relegate the study of virtues to the realm of spirituality. This trend is towards a legalistic, minimalistic attitude that does not aim at the perfection of the human person. The question of happiness does not fit into the picture here. However, there are also those who follow the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas more closely, such as Servais Pinckaers, whose definition of Christian ethics I quoted at the beginning of my talk. He would say, in line with St. Thomas' teaching, that human virtues are part of Christian ethics, but so are grace and the place of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In Christian ethics, God accompanies and assists the human person in his quest for spiritual growth and eternal happiness.

As far as contemplation goes, it's interesting to point out that Pinckaers' definition includes "the loving vision of God". In this life it turns out we're aiming at an eternal contemplation of the highest good. If Aristotle had known that this kind of contemplation were possible, he would have agreed that it would be the highest activity, and therefore the source of greatest fulfillment and happiness. In a sense, he was very right, but just did not know that such great happiness was possible. In fact, without God's help the loving vision of God is impossible.

Perhaps it would be good to touch upon the theme of concupiscence here. Aristotle does recognize that only the virtuous person and the philosopher obtains man's natural end. And this is odd, since all other natural beings tend towards their natural end. He does not have an explanation for why the human person is "capable" of going wrong and not reaching his natural end. There seems to be a mess up, something unnatural to man. Aristotle does not provide any answers, but at least he does not negate man's weakness in this regard. On

the other hand, Christian ethics' treatment of grace and explanation of the Fall of man helps us to understand our weakness and how it can be overcome with God's help thanks to Christ's Incarnation, Passion, Death and Resurrection and the grace coming to us as a result.

Lastly is the question of friendship. Aristotle says in regards to friendship that it "is most necessary with a view to living. For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods" (Bk. VIII, ch. 1, 1155a1-6). Later on he says:

Surely it is strange, too, to make the supremely happy man a solitary; for no one would choose that whole world on condition of being alone, since man is a political creature and one whose nature is to live with others. Therefore even the happy man lives with others; for he has the things that are by nature good. And plainly it is better to spend his days with friends and good men than with strangers or any chance persons. Therefore the happy man needs friends. (Bk. IX, ch. 9, 1169b18-22)

For Aristotle the human person is a social being and needs to be with others, with friends. We find support and delight in each other, or in real friends who are kindred souls.

What of Christian ethics? We can say that Jesus Christ acts as the greatest of friends in laying down his life for each one of us that we might live. His loving act of self-immolation makes it possible for our friendship with God to be restored, through faith and baptism. Grace which is given to us so that we can act rightly and thus be rewarded with the joys of eternal life, is not imposed on us in an exterior, violent way; but is infused within us, permitting the cooperation of our freedom.

Aristotle could not have conceived of God being Incarnate, of lowering himself in such a way. Perhaps this is because he roots the greatness of the spirit in reason and not in the act of loving. Once more, however, while his concept of God is

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surpassed by Christian revelation, what he did come to by his reason is not negated. The two aspects of the human person, his sociability and his reasoning are both fulfilled in his loving union with God in the Beatific vision.

Aristotle's ethics are an important foundation for the later synthesis of a Christian ethics. And his image of God and human happiness are fulfilled in the Christian teaching of Christ's saving act, his grace and our eternal reward. Aristotle's ethics could almost be considered more Christian than current ethical trends called Christian; but which are deprived of the natural foundations upon which a true Christian ethics must be built. This can be seen from Pope John Paul II's introduction to his 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, in which he says "It is no longer a matter of limited dissent, but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine, on the basis of certain anthropological and ethical presuppositions" (VS §4). A thorough renewal of Christian ethics today will include a recognition of the core teachings of Aristotle.