

The Philosophical concept of Freedom and Human Nature: Aristotle's Perspective

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Abstract

Aristotle considers freedom as a situation in which people perform their activities for the benefit of themselves rather than of someone else. A free-born person is one who exists for himself without being confronted to the oppression by others. The conception of freedom occupies a prominent place in the history of philosophical discussions. The concept has been dealt in by different thinkers in different ways at different times. A correct apprehension of the concept of freedom is highly on demand because of the role it has played in the construction of various socio-political patterns and also in the formation of major philosophical theories itself. However, freedom cannot be adequately studied without addressing the philosophical notion of human nature. The philosophical and socio-political theories of human freedom imply the idea of human nature either directly or indirectly. In this paper, I aim to discuss Aristotle's idea of human freedom and nature. I shall also try to find out the interconnection between these two concepts and how the Aristotelian views can enrich our general understanding of human nature and freedom.

Keywords: Freedom, Human Nature, Aristotle, Philosophical, Interconnection

Introduction:

Debates on freedom have been a part of our everyday life in the socio-political scenario where we exist and interact and these debates have occupied a prominent room in the history of

philosophical literature starting from the early Greek period to till date. From the early period, philosophers have tried to conceptualize freedom in many different ways. The development of a proper understanding of the notion of freedom is among the central issues in the Western philosophical tradition.

The long-established understanding is that freedom is a situation of being free from the domineering decree of another. The state of freedom is contrasted with slavery, as a slave is constantly subjected to the dictatorship of another. A free man can make free choices in his life without hindrances and can live in whichever way he likes to, so long as he does not stand in the way of freedom of others and does not shatter the law. So conventionally freedom is conceived in two general senses: (a) freedom as being independent of the barriers which stand in the way of achievement of our desired ends or goals; and (b) freedom as self-direction and self-regulation. It is on the basis of this idea that the famous contemporary thinker Isaiah Berlin has made a distinction between the concepts of positive and negative freedom in his work *Two Concepts of Liberty*.¹

Now the concept of freedom cannot be adequately studied without addressing the philosophical notion of human nature. The philosophical and socio-political theories of human freedom imply the idea of human nature either directly or indirectly. But here the relevant question is: what role does the concept of human nature play in understanding freedom. In this paper, I shall try to discuss the concepts of human freedom and nature from Aristotelian perspective and will try to find out how this can enrich our general understanding of the interconnection of the two philosophical concepts of human nature and freedom.

Aristotle's notion of Human Nature:

Starting from the early Greek period to the modern days, the concept of the nature of man has been interpreted in several ways. Aristotle while insisting on the biological aspect of human nature claims that man is an aggregate of material elements and is strictly determined by his physical appearance. But he strictly believes that man is more than a biological creature. Aristotle was among the first thinkers who claim that human beings are rational animals. Human nature is essentially composed of two elements: *animality* and *rationality*. This rational faculty is what makes us different from animals. The rational soul prevents us from leading a life controlled by mere instinct, rather necessitates us to lead a conscious and purposeful life in a considerate manner.

Humans are above all an ethical being who have the reason and freedom to choose between what is right and what is wrong. Aristotle's theory of ethics is mainly teleological in nature. For him, the purpose of the study of the ethical dimension of human nature is to find out what is good for man. The *telos* of ethical study of human nature is the realization of a good life which, Aristotle would say, is synonymous with the attainment of *eudaimonia* which has been often translated in modern periods as happiness, flourishing, well-being and so on. "The end or *telos* of humans as ethical beings is happiness."² While making a consideration about human nature, Aristotle felt the necessity of connecting it with the idea of a good life. He thinks that human nature is an aggregate of innate capabilities and possibilities. The realization of a good life is possible only when these inner capacities can be actualized in true terms. Aristotle never saw economic or material welfare as the sole determinant of a good life. Wealth is one of the various means to attain *eudaimonia*. Instead, he thinks, virtuous life of the people of a state or society is more valuable than mere material prosperity while determining the quality of life. In modern times, the advocates of development ethics like Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have adopted this Aristotelian concepts of 'good life'

and *eudaimonia* while developing their discourse of capability approach which holds that development means qualitative enrichment of all the aspects of human life.

Another important quality of human being as a rational animal is that they are political in nature. As they yearn for a good life, they take part in state affairs. Aristotle is one among the pioneers who initiated the thought tradition that man is a social being who gets completion only through interaction with other fellow human beings. As 'good life' is the chief aim of human society, he thinks, it is desirable not only for individual interest but for the whole community. Aristotle has always given priority to community good than that of the individual. The human tendency to participate in state affairs and work for the wellness for the state community allows them to seek virtue of a greater level, as the state aims at the happiness or good of the whole community. Aristotle has distinguished the community into three different types: the household or family, the village and the state or polis. The simplest kind is that of the family which purposefully unites into villages. These villages are again organized to sculpt the state which is the highest form of the community according to Aristotle. Of these, Aristotle refers to the household as a biological unit whose main function is to preserve the biological being and lifestyle of its members. The management of household is always regulated by economic activities which are, for Aristotle, necessarily biological in nature.³ On the other hand, the state is the ultimate aim of people's social life. Here the interactions among people are always rational.

The concept of free choice occupies an important place in Aristotle's theory of human nature. We are the part of a social settlement where we have the freedom to choose and form the type of society we want to engage in. Aristotle thinks that unlike slaves and animals, human can participate in state affairs because they are endowed with the faculty of free choice, which

again is the result of reasoned action. The result of this action by free choice is a virtuous and happy life. As Aristotle writes: “A state exists for the sake of a good life, and not for the sake of life only: if life only were the object, slaves and brute animals might form a state, but they cannot, for they have no share in happiness or in a life of free choice.”⁴

Here, it can be pointed out that, in Aristotelian view of political life, women and slaves have no role to play. It is very unfortunate to say that Aristotle was in favor of male supremacy. He thinks that slaves and women have very less rational power. As in the workings of state, only reasoned action is allowed, so Aristotle legitimized that the participation of women must be excluded from the political domain. But such kind of argument is highly controversial and cannot be accepted at least in present days.

Now apart from this gender-related issue, Aristotle genuinely thought that equality is an element which is extremely required for the proper functioning of politics. There must be equal participation of each individual in the regulation of the state. There must be freedom of expression in the state where anyone can express their thought without any interference. The social life can work properly only in an environment where the actual discussion takes place, where the comment of every individual person is counted without favoritism. In a well-do society, the equality of speech must exist.

Aristotle’s Idea of freedom:

In his philosophical framework, Aristotle develops a notion of freedom as similar to that of modern thinkers. When we go through most of the writings of Aristotle we find that while dealing with the concept of freedom Aristotle was more interested in considering the concept from moral and political sense. The metaphysical exposition of freedom is very minimal in

Aristotelian Philosophy. One fact of this consideration is that Aristotle most of the time contrasts freedom with either slavery or tyranny other than the metaphysical concept of determinism.

At first, Aristotle describes freedom as a state which is contrasted to slavery. Freedom is considered to be a state where a person acts or performs his activities to serve the interest of himself rather than of someone else. A free person is one who leads a life of his own without being oppressed by others; a person who exists for himself alone. A free man has the capability to “foresee with the mind”⁵ the means which will lead to a certain end. On the other hand, a slave is one who lacks this deliberative capacity. The slaves lack the faculty of reasoning but can only perceive it. This means that a slave can recognize a rational act but cannot produce one. Slaves depend upon their masters while making decisions. But a free person is a master of his own. He can reason the ends which ought to be pursued and the means which is the most suitable for achieving it. While referring to Aristotle’s idea, Moria M Walsh writes, “the naturally free man is the one who’s capable of self-direction, and who is perhaps also capable of directing others.”⁶ Moreover, a free person acts for his own well-being as he exists for his own sake rather than anyone else. As Richard Mulgan puts, Aristotle himself “regards the essence of freedom as being one’s own person and as having independent value rather than being, like the slave, merely an instrument for the purpose of others.”⁷

Aristotle recognizes freedom as a condition of human life which leads to the claims of justice. Though Aristotle never explicitly defined freedom in his books like *Nichomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, we can have a glance of his idea on freedom when he has discussed about the democratic form of government in *Politics*. In Book VI of politics, he has considered freedom or liberty as a fundamental ground of democratic society. While discussing the forms of the constitution, the citizens of the democratic constitution are labeled as freeborn persons and in

contrast to this, the citizens of tyranny are called slaves by him. As Daniel H Frank has pointed out, Aristotle's "discussion of freedom in the context of democracy is inextricably bound up with his appraisal of the specific type of individual who constitutes a democracy, viz. the democratic man."⁸

Aristotle's theory of democracy is incomplete without the concept of freedom. Democracy can never be possible without acknowledging people's freedom of choice. Freedom defines democracy. A democratic state is one where each citizen can lead a life of his own choice. A person is free as long as he can perform his activities according to his will without being interfered by others. But a person's freedom is associated with an awareness of responsibility towards other fellow citizens. Every citizen is equally free in the eye of the constitution. In the words of Aristotle:

"The basis of a democratic state is liberty; which, according to the common opinion of man, can only be enjoyed in such a state; this they affirm to be the great end of every democracy. One principle of liberty is for all to rule and be ruled in turn, and indeed democratic justice is the application of numerical not proportionate equality; whence it follows that the majority must be supreme, and that whatever the majority approve must be the end and the just. Every citizen, it is said, must have equality, and therefore in a democracy the poor have more power than the rich, because there are more of them, and the will of the majority is supreme. This, then, is one note of liberty which all democrats affirm to be the principle of their state. Another is that a man should live as he likes. This, they say, is the privilege of a freeman, since, on the other hand, not to live as a man likes is the mark of a slave. This is the second characteristic of democracy, whence has arisen the claim of men to be ruled by none, if possible, or, if it is impossible, to rule and be ruled in turns; and so it contributes to the freedom based upon equality."⁹

As mentioned earlier, a free person is one who lives as he likes and a slave is one who is being ruled by another. Daniel H Frank observes that Aristotle, while discussing the equality-based

freedom, has recognized two kinds of rules: first, the kind of rule the master has over his slave and the second one is called the political rule which is the rule over a free person.¹⁰ A free man, unlike slave, has the power of rationality. According to Aristotle, the political rule is the rule over a free man who can reason and learn from the subjection and can at present and later participate in the political life. A free man is one “who knows how to obey and how to rule.”¹¹ Generally, people are of the opinion that being subservient to any constitution is inconsistent with freedom. But Aristotle is of the opinion that, as Roderic Long puts, “it is perfectly compatible, so long as subjection is voluntary.”¹²

But in spite of the above, Aristotle sees both the merits and the weaknesses of the democratic freedom. He is also critical of the unmitigated democracy and the kind of freedom that it espouses. It has to be mentioned here that “living as one likes” is not Aristotle’s own definition of freedom. According to him the extreme form of democracy promotes false ideas of freedom and is inconsistent with the interest of the ideal state. Aristotle says:

“For two principles are characteristics of democracy, the government of the majority and freedom. Men think that what is just is equal; and that equality is the supremacy of the popular will; and that freedom means the doing what a man likes. In such democracies, everyone lives as he pleases, or in the word of Euripides, ‘according to his fancy’. But this is all wrong; men should not think it slavery to live according to the rule of the constitution; for it is their salvation.”¹³

What Aristotle wants to say here is that freedom does not necessarily mean acting and living in whichever way one likes and approaching towards each and every object that one thirsts for. According to Aristotle, this is not the correct way to define freedom. He says that acting according to one’s fancy cannot be regarded as freedom, it is rather a form of slavery, being

subservient to his own irrational desires. By a particular interpretation freedom means doing as one desires, but such a desire cannot be a blind and imperceptive one. In a stricter sense, freedom can be associated with desire only when it is truly guided by one's rational disposition.

In *Politics* Aristotle has given a detailed analysis of democracy and oligarchy, as these two were the most common types of constitution prevailed in his times. He indicated these two as a pair of contrasting opposites. According to him, "oligarchy is when men of property have the government in their hands; democracy, the opposite, when the indigent, and not the men of property, are the rulers."¹⁴ He criticizes both forms of constitution by claiming that each works for the self-interest of the rulers- oligarchy for the achievement of the wealth and, democracy in the interests of the poor.¹⁵ The motives of both oligarchy and democracy are similar. Both oligarchs and democrats aim for material economic advantages, and they do so in order to gratify their desires, in case of oligarchs living a life of luxury and license, in case of democrats "living as they like".¹⁶

Conclusion:

Aristotle notions of human freedom and nature are interconnected. The conceptualization of freedom is grounded upon the correct apprehension of human nature which will help us to fix the minimum circumference to regulate the interactions among people in society. In fact, all the discourses of human behavior are interconnected owing to the fact that every human activity is grounded on human nature and cannot be studied without recognizing it. Moreover, the complete knowledge in any field of study is possible only when the constituent elements of that area are interrelated.

According to Aristotelian tradition, a person's freedom can be best realized if it leads to a state of flourishing or well-being accompanied by a good life. His concept of *eudaimonia* is grounded on his philosophical realism. This means that the concept of the good life has an objective standard. Freedom must be equally accessible to everyone owing to the common human attributes of rational faculty and free will. But even though some human tendencies are common to all of them, we should also consider the distinctive propensities which belong to the individual beings. As Younkins says, "the good is objective, but it is not wholly the same, for all individuals."¹⁷

I agree with Aristotle that the element of rationality present in humans is what differentiates them from other living beings. Making conscious choices being guided by reasoning power is man's distinctive way of tackling with world affairs. As marked earlier, Aristotle was against providing a status of absolute freedom to man as he thinks that man has the capacity to confine his own actions. Man can utilize his freedom to the extent that he does not interfere with the freedom of others and harm them. "Human beings are a distinct species in a natural world whose lives are governed by means of each person's free will and individual conceptual consciousness."¹⁸ It means that humans belong to a unique species which is configured in a unique manner, as each one of its members possesses individuating characteristics. We need to recognize the fact of human diversity while considering human nature and its relation to the natural world. Distinctiveness is indispensable to human nature. And each man is accountable for the kind of life he owns.

Notes and References:

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²Brian R. Nelson, *Western Political Thought* (Second edition), New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2009, p. 54.

³ Aristotle treats economic and biological aspects as two sides of the same coin.

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⁶ Ibid, 499.

⁷ Richard Mulgan, “Aristotle's Analysis of Oligarchy and Democracy,” in *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics*, David Keyt and Fred D. Miller Jr.(eds.), Oxford: Blackwell, 307–22, 1991, p. 319.

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¹⁸ Ibid, 258.