

That time I spoke with Aristotle about his virtue ethics and Sufism

SLAV 205

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I went to a pub that recently opened in our town. Beautiful wooden floors, old-style lanterns hanging on the walls, and a rich atmosphere with interesting folk. A nice table caught my eye and while sitting, I noticed a strange man across the room. He wasn't dancing or drinking, just sitting, as if he is very deep in his thoughts. Pondering about something. I wonder what. He looked familiar, I couldn't pinpoint his features, but I recognize this mysterious figure from what feels like a million prior encounters. No need to bother a lonely patron. I pulled my copy of *Ethics* that I've been meaning to read for one of my classes. My jaw immediately dropped. The man on my book's cover is the man that is there across the room. It must be him. That is Aristotle himself.

'Mr. Aristotle?', I said almost shaking. Imagine how embarrassing it would be to mistake a total stranger for a Greek philosopher that apparently lived on for 2400 years. [Düring, 1957]

Aristotle, who was deeper in his thoughts than I initially thought, quickly collected himself, looked at me with his piercing, yet kind eyes, and said, 'You caught me off guard, stranger! Greetings, how can I help you?'

'I have to say, sir, it is an absolute honor to meet you and the very thought of talking to you is something that I could only dream of. I have to say I'm a big fan of yours and your thoughts'

'Ah, I see! If I could oblige you, please take a seat, young man'

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‘Oh, thank you’

‘Well, I see you have a book of mine there. Personal interest or is someone making you read that?’

‘A little of both, I read your works out of my own interest in philosophy, and I also have this class, where I have to write a paper about Sufism and how it compares to your virtue ethics’

‘You do have a curious mind. Sufism, remind me, was it a branch of a first philosophy?’¹

‘It is more of a branch of an existing religion, of Islam’

‘Interesting, only around early 600s have I started seeing it in reports and in conversations’

‘That makes sense, it is the time of Prophet Muhammad, when he started receiving revelations from God through the archangel Gabriel’

‘Truly, if you would understand anything, observe its beginning and its development. Tell me more about Sufism, ... what was your name, son?’

‘Ah yes, of course, my name is Sandy’

‘Sandy, you remind me of *my* son, Nicomachus. Without digressing too much, tell me more about Sufism’

‘As I mentioned, Sufism is a branch of Islam, also called to be a mystical practice of Islam. It focuses more on knowing and getting closer to God through personal devotion. The main difference between Sufism and its uniqueness from traditional thought is love. Instead of fearing God and waiting for the divine punishment, as many classical religions do, Sufism decides to embrace it in a more positive direction, as being thankful to God for life and becoming one. The second part is largely my own interpretation of it’

‘So it is a branch that teaches on a union of a man and God, rather than strict adherence to ones rules. It is something deontologists and I would argue about all day. What actions lead a man to live a good life, Sandy?’

‘By your teachings, Mr. Aristotle...’

‘You can call me Aristotle’

‘Thank you, Aristotle. If we follow your teachings, we acquire virtue through practice. By practicing being Modest, Righteous, Patient, and Proper,

¹This is what A. calls a combination of theology and metaphysics

one can develop an honorable and moral character. This would help us to make the right choice when we are presented in a situation, which challenges our ethics', I said so fast, trying to sound good, but not too smart in front of the person, who wrote about it

'Good summary, yet you have much left to learn. We need not forget about the nature of our actions themselves. Our virtues are exercised in the same kinds of action as gave rise to them. Virtues are created as a result of an action and activities that flow from them will also consist in the same sort of actions.' [eth, 1955]

'So it's like training a physical body? With plenty of nourishment, the more I work out and undergo training, the stronger I will become, then the better I would be able to handle this programme?'

'Exactly! Same with virtues. It is by refraining from excessive Pleasure, do we become Temperate, and not Licentious. It is by refraining from excessive Anger, do we become Patient, and not Irascible. It is by refraining from excessive Indignation, do we stay away from Envy, becoming Righteous. It is by controlling the manner in which you speak, you become Truthful, without Boasting or Understating.'

'It is by following the doctrine of the Mean, virtues that are not essentially evil (Malice, Shamelessness, Envy, and Adultery), can we continuously divide and compare the portion to the remainder, deciding on its Goodness. The excess of Confidence is Rashness, the deficiency is Cowardice, yet only the Mean can be called Courage.'

'Pythagoras used to say that failure is possible in many ways, but success is only one. This is why the former is easy, yet the latter is difficult. Easy to miss, yet hard to hit right' [Burkert et al., 1972]

'And this is why excess and deficiency fall under evil, and the Mean is Good'

'Some students just learn so quickly! See Sandy, this is practice. The severe training, under which we shall lead a more life, a good life. What you told me about Sufism, do they try to act virtuously?'

'Sufism believes in experiential knowledge, the act of *unveiling*, such that one's union with God is not a single event of divine intervention like many orthodox religions operate, but a personal relationship that you develop through devotion, through love for God. In this sense, it is similar

to our virtue ethics, through a continuous string of events, challenges, and practices, can we reach the state of *becoming one*, of *annihilation of self*.' [Gülen and Gülen, 2004]

'What does *annihilation of self* here refer to?', Aristotle asked me with intrigue in his voice.

'They call it "Fanaa", it's a concept of breaking down your individual ego, a shield from God, thus recognizing your fundamental unity with God and all Creation. People who experience this talk about the intrinsic connection between Allah and all that exists, breaking down the barriers of an individual's mind.' [fan,]

'I wonder if it is recognized by orthodox Islam?'

'Totally not, it's heretical by their standards', I said in almost a joke-like manner.

We had a bit of shared silence, which is good for the soul and for the mind, to let it roam freer. Looking around, I noticed that the place was getting more crowded, as Aristotle and I were discussing Sufism and his virtue ethics. I guess I didn't notice all the clanking noises and chaos, simply by both of us being fully engulfed in our conversation.

'Can I bring anything to the two of you?', a pretty lady asked us as she was approaching our table.

'I will have Liatiko red sweet wine, my favorite from Crete and your favorite cheese plate', he said very enthusiastically. What can I say? A man has good taste.

'And I will have a glass of the same, please', I asked of the lady, without sounding as if I have never heard of such a wine.

After a quick sip of wine, I realized once more that my taste buds are nowhere near the refined level one would acquire, to truly enjoy the bouquet of grapes, love, and time that go into winemaking. Hopefully one day, I would be able to appreciate it as much as Aristotle is doing right now. Give me another couple of thousands of years to do so.

We talked a lot about what Sufism is, what Aristotle's virtue ethics philosophy encapsulates in itself. What really interests me now is how do they compare to one another? I feel they are so similar but still different. They are like brothers from different mothers, but the same father. After sipping a little bit more for courage (is it virtuous of me?), I started pondering out

loud.

‘Aristotle, think of it, I feel that in many ways, Sufist ethics are very similar to your own ethics. The perception about the right path, or the Good life if you will, is about patience and the constant strive of personal integrity and generosity of spirit. By your standards and by the standards of Sufists, we have to live by actions, by virtuous actions, which themselves later flow into their own virtuous activities.’ [Durkee, 1991]

‘I like you are going, continue!’, Aristotle exclaimed while having a taste of the tangy Swiss Gruyere, to truly open up all the flavors from combining red wine and cheese.

‘I never liked consequentialists or deontologists. It feels as their ethical guidance, which dictates all of their actions is extremely rigid. By deontological ethics, any action that is deemed to go against the rules is automatically bad and unethical, no matter the consequences. However, consequentialist ethics would tell you any action that resulted in a good outcome should be ethical. Looking at the former, we are bound by rules, which may not apply in extreme circumstances, and the latter is limited by our inability to know what consequences will lead after any action’

‘Go on...’, he started chewing the young cheddar now.

‘Virtue ethics is liberated from those constraints, as the way we view our actions, their virtue, and value can shape and grow with our experience, with the challenges we lived through. It gives us the freedom of living our own lives. Sufist ethics are the same. Orthodox Islam believes that it is impossible to be a Muslim without strict adherence to Islamic Sharia Law and Hadith. It is so deep within their consciousness, located at the root of Islamic identity politics that it has been the point of debates regarding the governance of democratically set-up nation-states. Muslims believe any legal system that is not Sharia must be anti-Islam’ [Stewart, 2013]

‘Is Sufism different?’, manchego.

‘Yes! Followers of Sufism truly believe that strictly following Sharia is not a guarantee to reaching unity with God. Intensive spiritual discipline with self-control and meditation would bring you closer to Allah. Therefore, I would dare to say, maybe the divine of this world is not somewhere out there in the wild that will punish you on Judgement Day, but something you have to attain and come to by yourself, within you. This is the virtue.

This is what it means to live your life virtuously. Your ethics and Sufism tell us that we should not wait for death, fearing for what comes after, if we don't follow scriptures or some rules. We should live in our lives, reach within ourselves, and embrace the divine closeness to God and all Creation in this life'

'Ethics is not theology, it doesn't talk about God as directly', no cheese?

'And that is the difference! You see, Aristotle, the similarities and dissimilarities are stemming from the same root - you. Me. That lady that brought us drinks. In the source of who is ultimately responsible for our lives and how we live them. Virtue ethics tell us how to live a good life with leading morals. Sufism pronounces the same enthusiasm about bettering yourself as a human, being virtuous, and developing from the inside. Raising your love, whether it is for God or yourself, but most importantly, living consciously. This is what they have in common. This is how they differ.', I proclaimed proudly.

'I see that my job here is done now', he said quietly with tones of what a proud father would say to his son.

'Is it time?', I understood everything.

'Yes, I will have to go now. My old man, Plato, and friends are having an anime night'

'Will I see you again, Big A?'

'Big A... That's funny. Maybe one day, Sandy. Until then, live consciously with virtue', he said as he left the pub.

I looked around. No one else is here. Am I all alone?

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