

ONTOLOGY OF HUMAN ACTION

(*Aristotle's Eth. Nic. VI and Heidegger's commentaries*)

ἐφηῦρέ σ' ἄκονθ' ὁ πᾶνθ' ὄρων χρόνος
Sophocles, *Oedipus rex*, 1213

1.1. *The Topography of the Truth.*
How the Soul "Discloses the Truth"

Ontology understood as phenomenology starts with the idea that entity reveals itself, lets itself be encountered, goes out to meet us. In the midday epoch of philosophy the *place* of this meeting is designated by the two most important words with "concentrated" meaning: ἡ ψυχή and *das Bewußtsein*.

Ἀληθεύει ἡ ψυχή, "the soul achieves or discloses the truth," says Aristotle.¹ As an "area" where the truth is disclosed the soul has its own topography, described (or rather constructed) by Aristotle in book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle mentions here five ways in which the soul *discloses the truth* (ἀληθεύει) through affirmation or negation. These are: art or technical skill (τέχνη), science or scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), prudence (φρόνησις), wisdom (σοφία) and intelligence (νοῦς).²

In the winter semester of 1924–25 Heidegger delivered lectures on Plato's *The Sophist*;³ almost one third of this lecture course is devoted to interpretation, or rather variations on the theme, of Aristotle's reasoning in *Eth. Nic. VI*. Here Heidegger discusses the ontological foundation of the concept of *truth* and interprets the Greek ἀ-λήθεια (α *privativum*) so: *nicht mehr verborgen sein, aufgedeckt sein* ("to be no more concealed," "to be uncovered") (PS 16).

¹ *Eth. Nic. VI* 3, 1139b15.

² *Ibid.* 1139b15ff.

³ M. Heidegger, *Platon: Sophistes*, GA 19 (Frankfurt a. M.: V. Klostermann, 1992). Cited hereafter as PS.

Later on in Heidegger's language there will be a consistently used term to designate the Greek ἀλήθεια: *Unverborgenheit*, "unconcealment." Aristotle's phrase ἀληθεύει ἡ ψυχὴ is now rendered as "human *Dasein* remains in unhidness and unlocks the entity"; and ἀληθεύειν means "to be uncovered," "to free the world from closeness and concealment."⁴

Thus the truth is one of the characteristics of the entity itself insofar as it goes out to meet us, but in the proper sense of the word it is a determination of being of human *Dasein*. (PS 23)

I intend to show that Heidegger's search for *primordial* thinking about being, which underlies the project of "fundamental ontology," depends in many respects on Aristotle's "onto-psycho-logical" approach developed in the treatise *On the Soul* and, first of all, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (and which to a certain extent remains faithful to the "cartography" of the corresponding topics). The lengthy commentary by Heidegger creates a common textual space in which the discourses of both philosophers mix together, or rather in which Aristotle's discourse is strangely rendered in Heidegger's "German."

The most important result of the analysis of Aristotle's text is the discovery of different and equally primordial (having fundamental ontological significance) ways of arriving at the truth and abiding by the truth in its uncoveredness, i. e., of encountering entity in its being, of drawing entity in its being from hiddenness into unconcealment.

1.2. *Quarrel of Wisdom and Prudence*

The main collision depicted in book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a quarrel about primogeniture, about superiority between wisdom (σοφία) and prudence (φρόνησις).⁵ Yet as Heidegger has rightly remarked, behind the choice between *phronesis* and *sophia* there is hidden the fundamental ontological decision concerning the primordial, "first" meaning of being, along with another decision, not less fundamental, concerning the ultimate Good, at which all things aim (*Eth. Nic.* I, 1 1094a3). The latter is modelled in Aristotle's text after the divine *summum bonum* and is achieved when the human mind becomes in a certain way similar to the divine mind steadily contemplating the loftiest thing, i. e., itself (*Metaph.* XII 9). Thus along with the ontological and ethical (or "soteriological") decision we also encounter here the most important *theological* decision. These three firmly interrelated decisions have in many respects determined the whole of the European onto-theological tradition.

⁴ Heidegger refuses to translate in his commentary the verb ἀληθεύειν in order to avoid habitual connotations. He writes: "Wir wollen dies nicht übersetzen. ἀληθεύειν meint: aufgedecktsein, die Welt aus der Verschlossenheit und Verdecktheit herausnehmen. Und das ist eine Seinsweise des menschlichen Daseins" (PS 17).

⁵ *Prudentia* is the commonly accepted Latin translation of Aristotle's φρόνησις. I keep the term "prudence" as its English substitution. Ross renders φρόνησις as "practical wisdom" Rackham (*Loeb Classical Library*, vol. 73) prefers "prudence."

1.3. "Parts" of the Soul and Their Virtues

At first Aristotle defines two "parts" (μέρη)⁶ of the soul: the one "possessing the logos" (the *rational*, as the Latin speaking world used to designate it) and the one "lacking logos" (*irrational*). The first is in its turn divided into the "scientific" or "knowing-epistemic" (τὸ ἐπιστημονικὸν μέρος) and the "calculating," "projecting," "scheming" (τὸ λογιστικόν) parts. Wisdom (σοφία) and prudence (φρόνησις) are "virtues" (ἀρεταί) of these two "parts of the soul"; *sophia* belongs to the scientific, and phronesis to the calculative⁷ part. *Virtue* is maturity, completeness, fulfilment (τελείωσις) of a certain ability of the soul, "the best disposition of the soul" (*Eth. Nic.* 1139a16), which manifests itself in an action proper to it, i.e. in the way of arriving at the truth.

1.3.1. The Soul as the First *Entelecheia*

We must not forget that whatever Aristotle deals with, his reasoning always retains a connection with "first philosophy," its system of concepts and its rules of thinking. The metaphysical definition of the soul affirms that it is the form, or the first *entelecheia*, of the living body.⁸ Aristotle calls the first *entelecheia* a fully developed, mature ability (δύναμις) so far as it remains *ability*. In some particular cases the formula: "I can... I am able... I perfectly understand how to..., but I do not act at the moment," may serve as an illustration of the meaning of the term.

In *De anima* II, 5 Aristotle explains the difference between the first and the second *entelecheia* as follows: A newborn child is able, as a human being, to read and write, because he can be instructed in grammar. That is to say: he possesses the potency to know grammar = he knows grammar in potentiality = he is "a grammarian in potentiality." And when he actually has learned to read and write but is neither reading nor writing at the present moment but, say, is exercising in a gymnasium, he is also (at this moment) a grammarian in potentiality, though in a different sense: he knows grammar and can at any time, without learning any more, actually begin to read or write ("provided that external causes do not prevent him"). Mastery of grammar is the first *entelecheia* with regard to the capacity to learn which the child possesses. The reading and writing activity is the second *entelecheia* with respect to the "I can" of a person actually knowing grammar. Accordingly two meanings of

⁶ To be sure, in Aristotle's terminology "parts" (μέρη) rather signify "faculties." To the irrational part of the soul belong, for example, nutrition and growth, and because these functions are common to all living things they constitute the so called *vegetative soul*. The other division of the irrational part is the seat of appetites and of desire in general. In a sense, it is amenable and obedient to the rational principle (cf. *Eth. Nic.* I 13, *De anima* II 2).

⁷ We need to be cautious here, because the adjective "calculative" can provoke misleading associations. Aristotle explains that calculation is the same as *deliberation* (τὸ γὰρ βουλευέσθαι καὶ λογίζεσθαι ταὐτόν, *Eth. Nic.* 1139a12f.). I preserve in my translations the formal distinctions between λογίζεσθαι ("to calculate") and βουλευέσθαι ("to deliberate").

⁸ "So the soul must be οὐσία in the sense of being the form of a natural body, which potentially has life." (*De anima* II 1, 412a20f.) "The soul may therefore be defined as the first *entelecheia* of a natural body potentially possessing life." (27f.)

potentiality can be distinguished (termed *potentia prima* and *potentia secunda* by the Schoolmen). The ability to learn is the first potentiality; with respect to this potentiality the *knowledge* (though not actually exercised) of a person having learned to read and write is the first actuality (*entelecheia*). In its turn this knowledge (or skill) is the second potentiality (*potentia secunda*) as regards the activity of reading and writing. At a certain period of his or her life a person manifests different abilities; he or she manifests these abilities in activity, though even before, and irrespective of, any activity he or she already possesses them in the element of “I can.” The soul as the first *entelecheia* is, according to Aristotle, a coherent system of such interconnected abilities (capacities, faculties, functions), which can immediately manifest themselves in an appropriate action — *in* the body possessing organs (412b5f.), *by means of* it or *in relation to* it.

That is why we can dismiss as unnecessary the question whether the soul and the body are one; it is as though we were to ask whether the wax and its shape are one, or generally the matter of a thing and that of which it is the matter. (6 ff.)

1.3.2. Corporeality and Responsible Act

The care that Aristotle takes in making distinctions and providing definitions, in order to single out the actions (πράξεις) which can be submitted to moral judgment,⁹ merits our close attention. Moral actions are not and cannot be exceptions to the “rule of corporeality,” i. e., being manifestations of the soul’s dispositions — which means in the language of metaphysics, being definite aspects of form — they cannot be separated from matter, which “incarnates” form. For every *moral action* is an *action*, and from the formal ontological point of view belongs to the category of ποιεῖν. As such it is in one way or another connected with the possibility of manifesting human being *ad extra*, i. e., with his/her corporeality. For Aristotle *the ethics of incorporeal beings* is an impossibility. A moral *action* is a *responsible* action which can be an object of praise or blame. To be responsible, the action must be voluntary. An initial distinction pairing actions performed despite oneself or involuntary (ἄκων, ἄκούσιος) with those performed freely or voluntarily (ἐκων, ἐκούσιος) serves in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as the starting point for the subsequent investigation of moral action and virtue. Aristotle asks whether acts performed under the unbearable pressure of external circumstances are to be considered voluntary. His answer is *yes*, though with certain reservations. This is why in such a case “the origin of the movement of the parts of the body instrumental to the act lies in the agent (ἐν αὐτῷ); and when the moving principle is in oneself, it is in one’s own power, depends on oneself (ἐπ’ αὐτῷ), whether to act or not” (*Eth. Nic.* III 1, 1110a15–18). We see that the fact in itself that the source of the body’s movement lies in the human being (and not, say, in the wind which makes its body move along with the ship

⁹ In order to stress this peculiar character of human actions (to be subject to moral evaluation whenever it is a matter of submitting the action or the agent to the moral judgment), I call them sometimes in what follows “moral actions.” As just a specification of this kind of actions the adjective “moral” does not designate a “positive” quality of the action in contradistinction to the “immoral.”

to a certain place against the person's will) does not make the body's movement a moral *action*. The ἐν αὐτῷ is not so important as the ἐπ' αὐτῷ. The difference between the prepositions¹⁰ allows us to designate in a *preliminary* way the difference between a human action bearing an ethical determination, and a deliberate bodily movement, which cannot be an object of ethics. This difference becomes more precise in the subsequent development of the argument. And yet the context of the body, its instrumental parts and their movement determines the direction in which the search for a solution proceeds.

Going back to the discussion of the soul's topography we must remark that Aristotle, of course, cannot and does not mean, to use a Scholastic designation, the "real" parts of it, i. e., existing separately and independently. The soul is *the form* of the living body. The form is the principle of unity and the foundation of the entity's being [as such and such a *definite* thing].

"Unity" has many senses (as many as "is" has), but the proper one is that of *entelecheia*. (*De anima*, 412b9f.)

The soul as *entelecheia* or form is *simple*, and therefore does not have *real* parts. The "parts" Aristotle speaks of (in *the Nicomachean Ethics* too) are structural moments (faculties or functions), which cannot exist by themselves separated from the whole¹¹ just as a side of a triangle cannot exist as a side of a triangle separately from the triangle.

1.3.3. *Eternal and Temporal Truth* (αἰών and καιρός)

Yet since the abilities of the rational soul being discussed are connected with the *logos*, i. e., with understanding and calculating taken in the broadest sense, Aristotle distinguishes the "parts" (functions) of the soul according to the ontic character of the entity *manifested and brought to light* by their means, i. e., by means of the *energeiai* of manifestation (= perfect actions) inherent in them. "In a sense the soul is all beings," says Aristotle (*De anima* III 8, 431b21). "The soul is all beings" means that the forms of the things without matter are (potentially) located in the soul as in a "place of forms." The "parts" or faculties of the soul have a certain likeness or affinity to their "objects," "for it is in virtue of a certain likeness and kinship with their objects that they have the understanding (γνώσις) they have."¹² The parts of the soul correspond to the genera of the entities they are "receptive of" and, as a result, also to the ways of arriving at the truth. Now we could also say that they correspond to the ἐνέργειαι *of the truth*, i. e., to the actuality of the disclosed = the activity of disclosing = the specific character of disclosure.

¹⁰ Cf. the discussion of this passage in connection with the problem of the "ascription" of action to the agent in P. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 88–112.

¹¹ The only exception is perhaps the so-called νοῦς ποιητικός discussed in *De anima* III 5. However, the meaning of this exception requires thorough analysis and clarification.

¹² *Eth. Nic.* VI 1, 1139a10f. For the reasons, which will become clear later, I substitute "understanding" for "knowledge" in Ross' translation.

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