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“Who’s this?” Towards an Aristotelian Answer

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In the philosophy of Aristotle there seems to be no room for the discussion and the analysis of individuality. What is unique belongs to the realm of the accidental, which Aristotle excludes from the domain of science. Moreover, Aristotle does not seem to regard the fact that we cannot provide a *logos* of what is unique as a problem. If we read the *Metaphysics*, we get the impression that for him the only questions that matter are “what” questions. That is, questions that ask for a solution to the problem of what general kind of entity a certain substance is. All the attributes that are not essential play no or little role in the characterization of the nature of substances. Thus, for instance, the fact that Mozart is a composer, which is something that we tend to regard as constituting his very being, is considered by Aristotle a merely contingent feature of a member of the human species.

However, there are remarks in the *Metaphysics* which indicate that Aristotle does not simply disregard the problem of individuality. In particular, among the examples he offers to illustrate the nature of *per se* attributes, we find the following: “Callias is in virtue of itself Callias and the essence of Callias.”¹ *Per se* attributes, or attributes which a substance owns in virtue of itself, are those attributes which of

¹ *Met.* V, 18, 1022a 26-7.

necessity belong to a substance because they follow from its very nature or essence. The paradigmatic example of attributes of this kind is the property, common to all triangles, of “having the sum of its angles equal to two right angles”.² If something is a triangle, then necessarily the sum of its angles is equal to two right angles because this attribute belongs to the rectilinear figure which has three sides in virtue of its being this kind of figure.

Now, to say that a specific individual, Callias, is in virtue of himself not just his essence, but also himself – that is, this particular individual – means to suggest that all of the attributes which we can predicate of him flow from its nature *qua* particular individual. This means that Aristotle here would be suggesting that there is an individual essence of Callias in virtue of which all his properties belong necessarily to him.

This passage remains quite isolated in Aristotle’s writings, and it is almost impossible to find a coherent explanation for it. Indeed it contradicts almost everything else the philosopher says about essence on the one hand and attributes that qualify individuals as such on the other. The former is usually taken to be a universal essence, which is common to all the members of a given species. The latter are usually included in the class of accidental determinations of being. In this paper we will not try to solve this problem, but we would like to take Aristotle’s remark as a suggestion and raise a question about it. If there were individual essences, and thus if there was something which essentially distinguishes the nature of a human being from that of anybody else, how could we express such uniqueness? How would the definition of what is unique look like?

Aristotle tells us that this question rests on a misunderstanding because it is simply not possible to define individual substances. Here is the main reason he offers to support his claim: The formula must consist of words, and the man who is defining must not coin a word, because it would not be comprehensible. But the words that are in use are common to all the things which they denote; and so they must necessarily apply to something else as well. *E.g.*, if a man were to define you, he would say that you are an animal which is lean or white or has some other attribute, which will apply to something else as well.³

The problem is clear. If, in the attempt to preserve the uniqueness of the substance that we want to define, we coin an expression that applies only to it, we fail

² See *Posterior Analytics* I, 9, 90a 33.

³ *Met.* VII, 15, 1040a 9-14.

because the expression is unintelligible and thus the nature of our object remains completely obscure. In other words, we are back to the starting point. If, on the other hand, we use meaningful expressions, we fail because language and conceptual determinations are universal. In the attempt to express what is peculiar to the individual we universalize it and make it indistinguishable from any other individual to which the same properties apply. The individual escapes us and remains ineffable. Such a difficulty can be vividly expressed through the contrast between the “categories” of “who” and “what”. We look for an answer to the question of whom a person is, and as we begin to answer it, we find ourselves giving a description of a “what”, that is, of a certain *kind* of entity and of the general properties that belong to it. In the very attempt to articulate our intuition of the specificity of an individual our intended object undergoes a transformation in which it loses precisely those features which we are trying to express and takes on other attributes that we do not want to use to describe it because of their generality.

It might be argued that the generalizing nature of thought and language does not necessarily prevent us from grasping the specificity of an individual. Despite the fact that the attributes predicable of an individual are equally predicable of other individuals who own them, we might manage to grasp the unique *combination* of properties which apply to a specific individual, and thus “catch” its uniqueness after all. Aristotle anticipates the objection and points out that the suggested solution is only apparent.⁴ In book *Z* of the *Metaphysics*, he refers to an object which, like Callias, we know to be unique in its kind, the sun.⁵ If we formulate a definition of the sun consisting of the combination of its properties, we might believe that such a formula applies only to it. But this is due to the fact that we assume that the sun is unique. For, if another object with the same characteristics of the sun came into being, this very same definition would apply to this other object as well. In other words, there is nothing in the formula itself which makes it the definition of a unique individual. A combination of properties is still a combination of general predicates which, therefore, can apply to an indefinite number of things. The fact that we put together a rich combination of marks rather than a few essential attributes in a definition only makes it less likely that we will find another object to which the definition applies. But this has nothing to do with the nature of the definition, which remains universal. Because of the general nature of predicates, no combination of them singles out an individual. Rather, it always marks off a kind. To go back to the case of Callias, the implication of Aristotle’s reply to our objec-

⁴ See *Met.* VII. 15, 1040a 28- 1040b 3.

⁵ Ivi.

tion is that, even if we put together a definition of him which included his most idiosyncratic features, we would still fail to provide a *logos* capable of expressing his uniqueness.

Aristotle's thesis that the inquiries of science are of the form of "what is it?" then seems to be grounded in more than a lack of interest for what is accidental and unique. A reflection on the nature of thought, and the language which expresses it, seems to make his claim unavoidable. As soon as we try to make the nature of an object intelligible, the universalizing power of our dianoetic determinations transforms it into a universal.

Yet, does the acknowledgement of this problem exhaust the set of problems we raise by asking the question of the "who?" Aristotle seems to think so. He assimilates the question of the definability of individual human beings, such as Callias, to the general problem of the definability of any individual substance. In both cases, the only problem he identifies is the passage from individuality to universality which occurs when we try to provide the formula of a substance. A closer look at the process of definition, however, makes us aware that there is something more to the question of the "who".

When we try to define the sun, we transform a "*this*" into a "what". Whereas if we try to give a definition of Socrates we transform a "*who*" into a "what". Thus, although both definitions are wrong because they do not manage to grasp the specificity of the *definiendum*, we do not perceive the definition of the sun as being as inadequate as that of Socrates. The fact that in the case of the sun we end up with a "what" is not so problematic, given that the sun *is* a particular instance of a "what", namely, a "this". What is lost in the definition in this case is only the individuality of the object. By contrast, in the case of Socrates, we feel that the definition distorts his nature much more drastically because he does not lose only his uniqueness but also his distinctive character. In fact, he is assimilated to the general mode of being of a "this", and thus nothing is left of his character of "who". In other words, the definition of Socrates seems inadequate not only because it describes a type of entity rather than an individual but also because it describes it in such a way that its intelligible structure does not differ from the structure of all other kinds of entities.

A brief reflection on our interests enables us to make the same point in a simpler way. It is only in relation to persons that we want to know and that it makes sense to ask, "Who is it?" In reference to non-persons this question is absurd.⁶ As far as

⁶ The case of certain animals could constitute an intermediary case, which, however, we cannot discuss in this paper.

these latter are concerned we ask, “What is it?” However, in reply to both types of question, we obtain the same kind of answer, namely, the description of a “what” that exhibits the same ontological structure. This structure is, of course, what Aristotle claims to be the universal structure of what there is, which is articulated in substance and attributes.

That the problem we are addressing concerns the mode of being or the distinctive structure of “whos”, which seem to be lost in the schema of substance and attributes, becomes manifest if we consider that the quest for a *logos* of the who does not replace the “What is it?” question in relation to human beings. Rather, it presupposes it, and arises only after we have answered it. The fact that it is only of human beings that we want to know who they are, tells us that this question arises only when we already have recognized that the object of our interest is a substance of a determinate kind, that is, a human being or, to use Aristotle’s definition, a rational animal.

If the question of the nature of the “who” then calls for a characterization of being which does not fit the schema of substance and attributes, it comes as no surprise that Aristotle does not address it. Likewise, it is only to be expected that we find nothing of interest to our question in the context of the speculative science which studies the nature or essence of man, namely, the *De Anima*. For the goal of the speculative is precisely to understand what a certain substance is and what the attributes which belong to it in virtue of itself are.

What is surprising is instead that in another set of sciences, and in particular in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle, guided by the phenomena, does begin to characterize the nature of human beings in different terms, and in such a way, we believe, as to offer at least the beginning of an answer to the question of the who.

Only man, of all sensible substances, needs to be studied by the practical sciences in addition to the speculative ones, because only his nature is to a large extent plastic or contingent.⁷ In particular, it is only in the practical writings that we find a discussion of character. Of all the attributes which can be predicated of a human being, character is doubtless for Aristotle the one which can best qualify the “quality” of an individual. Character captures the fundamental and overall attitude that a person has towards life and other people. It informs the nature of all the actions which she performs – or, more precisely, of all the actions which can be the object of praise and blame – and it is inseparable from the kind of life which she chooses to live. With the words of the philosopher, “Character makes men of a certain qual-

⁷ The objects of the practical sciences are things whose principles admit of variation, and of which, for this reason, we cannot attain demonstrative or necessary knowledge (*episteme*).

ity”,⁸ that is, it differentiates different *kinds* of individuals in such a way that we call one virtuous and another morally weak.

Now, character is not something which is given to us simply in virtue of being substances of a certain kind, but rather something which we need to constitute. As Aristotle explains in the *Ethics*:

The virtues are engendered in us neither by nature nor against nature; nature gives us the capacity to receive them, and this capacity is brought to actualization by habit. ... Moreover, the powers given to us by nature are bestowed on us first in a potential form, and we exhibit their actual exercise afterward. ... The virtues on the other hand we acquire by first having actually practiced them, just as we do with the arts. ... We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. (*Nicomachean Ethics* II. 1, 1103a24-1103b2)

By nature we have the capacity or potentiality to become virtuous, but what that potentiality becomes depends on the way in which we habituate ourselves to feel and to act. That is to say, to a large extent, we need to *make* our nature or our being. The kind of human being I become depends on the actions I perform, which are in turn largely determined by the kind of education I receive and the models of good life which the political community to which I belong makes available to me.

The point worth noticing is that when we speak of character and thus of the nature of a certain kind of individual, action is prior to being, or which is the same, being appears as a function of *praxis*. Let me clarify the point. When we speak of substances, the first step we need to take in order to formulate any intelligible or meaningful *logos* about them is to identify what they are or their essential being. Only after we have thus identified their fundamental nature, can we proceed to further determine them, in terms of their essential or accidental attributes, or of the functions and activities they have the capacity to perform. For it is in virtue of being substances of a determinate kind that they are able to perform certain activities.⁹ On the other hand, when we speak of human beings in terms of their contingent nature, the relationship between being and acting is reversed. It is not possible to

⁸ *Poetics*, 6, 1450a 23.

⁹ The same is of course true of human beings to the extent that we address the question of their being in terms of substance. Thus, for instance, it is in virtue of the fact that we are rational animals that we are able to perform the very actions through which we form our character. The point I am suggesting, however, is that when we characterize human beings in terms of their character, this is no longer the case.

tell the nature of a certain human being unless we start from his or her actions, for the simple reason that, whereas we come into being as substances of a certain kind, it is only as a result of our activity that we become individuals of a certain nature. In other words, we need to do or act in order to be. Indeed, our being is determined so little by nature that our very humanity can come into being only as the result of the actions which we perform in the context of the *polis*. As Aristotle writes in the *Politics*: "A man that is by nature and not by chance without city is either a beast or a God."¹⁰ For it is only in the *polis* that we have the opportunity to perform those activities that enable us to develop that nature which comes into being only with the aid of art.¹¹

But there is another basic presupposition of Aristotle's ethics, besides the fact that the realm of *praxis* is the realm of the contingent, which makes the primacy of action even more significant for the discussion of character. Namely, the philosopher's tenet that there are no universal rules of action because the right action always is to be determined in relation to the specific circumstances in which it is performed. Because of this assumption, the *Nicomachean Ethics* has a very peculiar structure. So peculiar indeed that it seems to fail to meet the very requirements of scientific *logos*. All the definitions which Aristotle offers in this book (of the virtues, and thus of character which is the organic unity of the virtues/vices of a man, of the right action, and so on) are circular. Moreover, for them to be intelligible we *need* to refer to particular facts and actions. Let us take the general definition of virtue which Aristotle offers in Book II:

Virtue or excellence is a characteristic involving choice, and...it consists in observing the mean relative to us, a mean which is defined by practical reasoning, *such as the virtuous man would determine it*. (NE, II. 6, 1106b36-1107a1; emphasis added.)

What Aristotle can say of virtue in general terms is simply that it is a mean between two extremes, according to his famous doctrine which states, for instance,

¹⁰ *Politics* I. 1, 1253a 3-5.

¹¹ Of course, Aristotle holds that man is *by nature* (and not "by habit") a political animal. But our "political nature" only guarantees that we naturally organize ourselves in associations whose goal is not the preservation of life but the realization of the good life. The form which such communities take, however, and thus the way in which human beings develop their humanity, remains largely indeterminate. So much so that Aristotle claims that the nature of virtue, and thus of character, cannot be discussed in general terms, but requires a specific determination in relation to each of the constitutions which we consider, because different political communities educate their citizens to acquire different kinds of virtue (*Politics* I. 5. 1260b 9- 21).

that courage is the mean between cowardice and recklessness. What the mean is, however, cannot be formulated in general terms, because it can be determined only in relation to the specific circumstances in which a person finds herself to act. Likewise, if we describe someone’s character and say, for example, that he is a virtuous man, we are saying nothing more than in every circumstance he will consistently choose the mean between two extremes. *But because a man’s character reveals itself only in the actions he performs* – provided that we also know the intentions which motivate him – we do not know much about the nature of his character on the basis of this general characterization. In order to attain a more determinate knowledge of it we need to specify at least some of the actions which he actually performs. That is why Aristotle needs to refer to the virtuous man and the way in which he would act under given specific circumstances in the very definition of a virtuous character. What the philosopher is saying is actually: If you want to know the nature of a virtuous character, think of a particular virtuous man whom you know, or about whom you’ve heard or have read, and consider how he acts. It is only in this way that you can form a clear idea of the actions – and, through them, of characters which are virtuous because they “hit the mean”. If you do not happen to know, directly or indirectly, any man who can be called virtuous, you simply cannot know, except in quite empty terms, what being virtuous means.

It is for this reason that the *Ethics* is so rich in examples of men depicted performing particular actions, taken either from common experience or from mythology, literature, and history. They are a necessary complement to the teachings of the book couched in general terms. Without them, the *Nicomachean Ethics* would be unintelligible, or at the very least, unable to convey any determinate information about the nature of character and virtue. Likewise, in real life it is only through the knowledge of the way in which a person acts in the various circumstances in which she find herself that we can get an idea of her character, and finally, of who she is.¹²

The general point which we can make out of this brief analysis of the *Ethics*, then, is that it is not possible to know the character of a person through a list of qualities or attributes which can be predicated of her, such as temperate, brave, and

¹² It might be said that Aristotle is always fond of examples and uses them in every work. This is certainly true, but their function in different works is different. In the theoretical works they function as starting points and illustrations of general principles and definitions. Once we have moved from what is first for us to what is first in itself, however, such principles and definitions are intelligible in themselves and do not need to be supplemented by particular facts to convey a determined content. In the *Ethics*, on the other hand, they are a constitutive part of the very definition and general principles which they would remain quite empty without.

so on. Rather, we need descriptions – or first-hand experiences – of the ways in which she actually acts, or anecdotes about what she does, or, in short, *stories* about her.

In the *Ethics*, then, we begin to see a characterization of the nature of human beings which no longer depicts them as particular instances of a determinate substance. What is relevant is not so much that in this work we need to refer to particular circumstances to understand what we are talking about, given that when we act we always deal with ultimate particulars, whereas in the theoretical sciences we are required to use only universal determinations. The most important reason is rather that the representation of the nature of an individual, that is, of his character, requires a form of *logos* different from the one which is fit to grasp the nature of substances. The latter consists of the definition, that is, the articulation of the essence. The former, on the other hand, consists in the narration of a series of anecdotes or stories. And this is so because character itself is an object whose nature reveals itself only over time. To begin with, it constitutes itself over a certain period of time in which we acquire those habits which shape our nature. Second, once character is thus formed, its nature manifests itself only through the actions a person performs.

Character is thus something which, unlike a substance or an attribute, can never be given to us as a totality (or can never be completely given to us). Rather, we can catch glimpses of it only through the way in which it actualizes itself under particular circumstances. And if we want to have it in its entirety, we need to rely not just on a few anecdotes, but rather on the story of a person’s whole life.

To conclude, we would like to offer a hypothesis concerning the nature of the “who”, which is suggested by these observations and which is, of course, in need of elaboration. It seems that, unlike the what, the being of the “who” has a distinctively temporal structure. It can only reveal itself in the succession of the actions which a person performs, and thus can never be given to us as a totality. Its unity is therefore not the indivisible unity of the essence, but rather a unity provided by the connection of successive parts of elements. In sum, it is thus a kind of being which unfolds as a potential story. If this is the case, scientific discourse cannot be properly used to articulate the nature of the “who”. Rather, we need a *logos* which fits the structure of its object and which, therefore, should take the form of a *narration*. It takes a (whole) story to know who someone is.