

A Critical Assessment Of A Moral Foundation Of Human Rights: An Aristotelian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyse Aristotle's ethical ideas from the perspectives of select thinkers to examine whether they accommodate a moral foundation of human rights. These thinkers broadly invoke Aristotle's ideas of happiness to justify their connections with the idea of human rights.

Keywords: Aristotle, Human Rights, Eudaimonia

Introduction

Human rights are considered as rights which are inherent to all human beings and it excludes race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights are regarded as universal and applicable to every person. It includes rights such as right to freedom, right to well-being and right to equality. The right to freedom is described as a fundamental human right which discusses about individual autonomy and liberty. The right to well-being discusses about the pursuit of a fulfilling and dignified life. The right to equality ensures that individuals must be treated with fairness and without discrimination.

We begin with analysing Aristotle's idea of human rights from different thinkers' perspectives and go on to elaborate overall advantage, mutual advantage and Aristotle's idea of happiness.

Perspectives of Select Thinkers on Inferring Aristotle's Idea of Human rights

We analyse some thinkers' perspectives on Aristotle's idea of human rights to assess whether Aristotle discusses human rights. According to Miller, does Aristotle discuss whether the citizens have any rights under the constitution, such as political rights, property rights, and the right to education? (Fred Miller, 2009, 550). We answer this question in two ways: overall advantage and mutual advantage. The overall advantage includes the state of the city, where most of the citizens are happy. The mutual advantage includes the state of the city in which each and every citizen is happy. According to Aristotle, a city is regarded not to be happy in regard to a portion of the citizens but in regard to all (Aristotle, 1916, 275). Both the two ways, that is to say, an overall advantage and mutual advantage, are not able to ensure how directly rights are formed and granted in connection with the state of happiness. What could be the moral foundation of these two ways in connection to the rights?

It has been said that in the overall advantage, the sacrifice of some individuals' basic interests in order to promote the advantage of others is taken into consideration. It is not considering all individuals. It is using individuals as a means to satisfy the ends of some individuals. Rights are to be given to all individuals because they are humans. This way of overall advantage is not deeply committed to individual rights, and it is not at all acceptable because when only some people have the advantage, only those particular people will also be granted rights.

In case of mutual advantage, political institutions consider and protect each participant's happiness. A city-state must look at the happiness of all of its citizens. The state is meant to consider the happiness of all of its citizens, but in practice, this is impossible. How can a state guarantee happiness of all citizens? How can a country's ideal constitution acknowledge individual rights if all of its citizens are unhappy? Whether Aristotle's ideal constitution is able to recognize individual rights? This question is dependent on the condition of whether

it promotes mutual advantage. Although Aristotle discusses the idea of well-being in terms of happiness, he does not refer to the right to well-being.

We may discuss Aristotle's idea of well-being as happiness to show its distinctive status. Aristotle states that the ultimate goal of human life is happiness. Aristotle focuses on the nature of the human good or happiness. The idea of happiness supports the idea of wellbeing. According to John and Nicholas, the idea of human flourishing is associated with Aristotle's idea of happiness (John and Nicholas, 2013, 540). Aristotle wants that flourishing in which humans might reasonably aspire for connection with their certain moral commitments. Both rights and happiness are important factors in the well-being of human beings, but Aristotle does not explain the idea of rights as such.

According to Gabriel, Aristotle thinks that we all can agree on the point that the highest human good can be called eudaimonia or happiness (Gabriel Lear, 2009, 391). Eudaimonia is regarded as the excellence of human functioning that organizes the principle of the happy life and good of an individual. Aristotle's practical philosophy is considered eudaimonistic because the highest human good is considered to be happiness, which leads to successful human living, and successful human living is regarded as practical life activity (Gavin Lawrence, 2009, 422). Human rights are a part of human living, but Aristotle does not explore them as he ignores the right to well-being and concentrates entirely on well-being.

Aristotle treats happiness as the inherent goal of an individual's nature. Happiness is required as an essential aspect of the idea of well-being. He defines happiness as exercising virtues that are actualized in actions and emotions. It includes character and intellect (Robert Heinaman, 2009, 483).

According to Aristotle, happiness is regarded as the ultimate goal of an individual's life. However, it is impossible to achieve happiness without obtaining other intrinsically valued things, such as love and freedom. The state of happiness alone as the ultimate end may not stand. Love and freedom are the key examples of intrinsically valuable goods that can provide an end in themselves apart from many instrumental goods. Instrumental goods depend upon the situation, but a state of happiness without love and freedom is impossible (Edward Ezedike, 2018, 61). Happiness is just one of many intrinsic values; we cannot treat it as the only ultimate end in life, and it will be unjust if we do this.

According to Loudén, Aristotle's virtue ethics provides no guidance on resolving ethical dilemmas (Louden, 1984, 315). Aristotle needed to fully explain the rules we must abide by while doing an action. Aristotle himself needs help to address the issue of determining the right virtues. How is happiness determined if the right virtues are not assessed? How is happiness assessed in the absence of the right virtues? When I talk about overall and mutual advantage, it is observed that happiness and rights are associated indirectly. If this is the case, why did Aristotle not address this issue?

From above, Miller clearly discusses the rights status from Aristotle's perspective.

Later, however, he makes an effort to address his own research. According to Miller, Aristotle discusses the issue of citizens' rights in the context of the best constitution. Citizens have rights in Aristotle's best constitution, but a female citizen has no political rights in Aristotle's ideal constitution (Fred Miller, 2009, 551).

2.0 Conclusion

Some thinkers accept that Aristotle talks about rights, and some thinkers deny that Aristotle talks about rights. It isn't easy to analyse the logical connection between Aristotle's theory of happiness and the theory of rights. These two theories do not make sense together. Many philosophers have attempted to analyse the idea of rights from the perspective of Aristotle, but they have been unable to support it theoretically. It seems it is impossible to read Aristotle as a defender of individual rights.

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