

ÀRETÉ / A P E T H , A NUCLEUS-VALUE
OF THE CONTEMPORARY ETHICS

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Abstract. *Why 'àreté' / 'virtue'? We could as well as to ask: Why be moral?*

Actually, the main issue is one around the 'human'; and, finally, on debate is even the 'meaning of life' in a context when the valuable and standard reference points are shattering and overturning, when the danger of chaos menaces the whole existence itself, when the risk to lose the being's meaning is so obviously.

Thus, in the area of ethics, we find that the 'virtue' - called by the ancient Greeks: 'àreté' / 'α ρ ε τ η' - represents a real challenge for the human condition within the unity-of-everything-there-is-alive in the world of the third millenium's beginning. Our attempt is to sustain the concept of 'àreté' / 'virtue' as the key-concept for the present ethics. We submit an essay which could arouse in everyone the direction of a tentional conscience on the way of the option and free choice, also of the purposeful commitment toward the 'good life', toward the 'joy of being', through the 'àreté' concept.

The approach of an ethics centered on the α ρ ε τ η / àreté's value is claimed by a topical necessity of the re-exploration the moral space, emphasizing the significance of *human* in a world which is more and more under threat from confusion, anxiety, insecurity, chaos. We think that the revitalization of the spiritual enterprise - the moral one, especially - must be a priority among the exigencies of our time.

What means 'α ρ ε τ η ' / 'àreté', translated by Latinos in 'virtue'? Since Aristotle, until Stéphane Lupasco and André Comte-Sponville, this key moral category has been conceived as main medium of person's flourishing; also, of the community's progress. *Àreté / Virtue* has been defined as 'a mean between two extremes' / reconciliation of contradictory tensions. Respectively, "the midst way between excess and deficiency"ⁱ; "the equilibrium of potentialization and actualization energy in *T state*"ⁱⁱ; "the narrow climax between two opposite abysses"ⁱⁱⁱ.

Briefly, the *measure*, the *intermediary's excellence*, in the play of opposites, carrying on both that 'is ought' and 'is desirable' for life's progress. Setting between a 'too little' and a 'too much', as avoidance of extremes, mixing 'desire and need', 'delight and imperative', 'preferences and rejections', 'choices and refusals', as the midst state - that of the dynamic equilibrium of antagonisms -, *àreté* makes the nucleus of a holistically ethics, focusing on the 'human being-in-relation-with-everything-is-alive'; an ethics which also enfolds the Stoics precept: "κ α τ ' α ρ ε τ η ζ η ν ", *àreté* having to be found in 'man's power to achieve the very own function for that he is existing, and that is given to him by Nature'. In other words, an important problem brought up to date by the environmental ethics with its principle of the 'respect for the inherent value of Nature'; man having to understand that he is a part of and he must learn to live within the texture of Nature, into the universal unity of the Cosmos!

The authentic *creative destiny* of man leads him to the climax level of beingness: namely, that of the *human* - a

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synthetically concept for the moral fulfillment; respectively, embodiment of the *virtue* / *àreté*.

The *human* is the climax for $\eta \theta \omicron \varsigma$ / *èthos*, for the essential *character* of man, that intrinsic value of him; the real power, richness, and beauty of man; his nobleness which gives the joy, the satisfaction of the existence's improvement in the proximity of the happiness.

In such perspective, *àreté* represents that inculcate upon the beingness in the attributes which confer the value to the man's life: reason, measure, self-respect and respect and responsibility toward everything is alive, rectitude, peace, equilibrium, harmony. Through the *àreté's* concept, as *personal merit's* value and principle, we disclose the access into the enlightenment and understanding of the *man's excellence*, by setting within the spirit's topos and the revelation and enrichment of the *human essence's* endeavor.

Supreme value, the *human* supposes all that confers the *remarkable individuality* to man, that does ennoble him. It is the complex defining value of the merit to be aware and to live, effectively, at the spiritual potentiality implanted in him. Relating *human* with the old Greek $\alpha \rho \epsilon \tau \eta$ / *àreté* as the ability to fulfill the essential function for which man exists, we are opening into a major field of *values* and *rules* guiding to the meaning of '*human well being*' in the life-world, like: *wisdom* and *temperance*, *love* and *communion*, *sense of duty* and *justice*, *pleasure* and *happiness*, on one hand; the *simplicity and moderation's rule*, the *norm of the good reason*, the "*Golden Rule*", the "*Divine Commands*", the *principle of "life in harmony with nature"*, the "*Categorical Imperative*" as the '*respect for persons and for life, generally*', on the other hand.

All of these *values* and *principles* count, in the highest mode, for the overtaking of the importance of *àreté* in the ethics' territory into idea of the *man's authentic welfare*. And, the *human* - as plenary character at the most elevated level - includes a fundamental series of aretaic values, like: "order, tranquillity, wisdom, love, goodness, justice, fairness, discipline, spirit of cooperation and solidarity, trust in the man's strength to transform the existence into Good, into light, into creation, a continuous victory over the evil, over the brutality, over the pulverization or destruction's instincts"^{iv}.

In discussion there is the '*human way*', that engages the infinitely effort of man for regeneration through equilibrium, measure, decency, truth and simplicity, privilege of reason and moderation, authority for the general utility, thirst of knowledge, assessment of the culture, aspiration toward the existence's Beauty, a kind of inventive heroism, will to instill man's capacity of beingness in the world not only like any creature, but also like a little creator, a self-creator, after the supreme example of the Divine Creator. Here occurs the *virtue's* work, in its original meaning as the Ancients have acknowledged using the concept *àreté* / $\alpha \rho \epsilon \tau \eta$: the excellence of man, an intrinsic value, transfiguring after the transcendental pattern within the humanization work, the power to accomplish in the best way possibly the very own function for that man does exist^v. Therefore, 'the becoming into virtue' means 'the becoming into *human*', into that singular creative transfiguration in *freedom* and *dignity*, passing throughout the contradictory tensions into the most propitious *equilibrium* and *harmony* of life. Call to becoming on the

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upward axiologic-normative matrix, *àreté / virtue* discloses the 'royal path' that man *can* and he *has the duty and the honor* to inscribe in the world as subject of moral sovereignty and responsibility, of *human* creativity.

Far from the opinion that statue *virtue* like an old-fashioned issue, beside its superficial and reduced interpretations, we set off this term providing an in-depth examination of the moral referential, revealing it as the *nucleus-concept of ethics*.

Reconsidering its peculiar significance on the way rooted in the philosophy of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, in the Epicureans and Stoicism's writings or in the early Christian tradition, the *virtue / àreté* deserves an analysis that brings it into the heart of moral existence, in terms of an *aretology* as a *philosophy of a responsible participation towards the human's restoration* - that we've already tried to unfold in our "little treatise of ethics"^{vi}.

We place the term of *virtue / àreté* in a large context, and in the same time in a 'profoundness' one, aiming to transcend the often use of it in a vulgar sense, that makes thinkers to put it in a cone of shadow or even in a dark one, losing its essence, unfortunately. That's why we try to reconsider the *virtue*, to invite to decode the real significance of *àreté*, reminding the Greek vision about the person's moral excellency - so stringently necessary for our times marked by a great moral crisis.

Thus, in the area of an integrative ethics built around the term of *àreté*, the foundation in morality is the merit of the man, his character, the *human*. It could seem to

be another manner of explanation for the moral problem; actually, the interest is, naturally, centered on the *human project*; *àreté / virtue* revealing the onto-ethical beingness in the dynamism of an accomplished becoming, passing through the experience of the antagonistic equilibrium. According to the classic mode of understand this concept - as the quoted authors have made - challenges to a serious debate around the *àreté / virtue* which could open new horizons for the moral investigation and hermeneutic, as new opportunities for man to elaborate an organon for a good life, connecting the moral philosophy with the contemporary tech-science and with the arts, myths, religions too.

Discovering and developing the *aretaic dimension* of his existence, man finds the *synbolematic way of self-fulfillment*, using the moral conception into the entire practice as *aristos / αριστος* - a notion so much praised in the learning promoted by Socrates and Plato; actually, a 'learning' / 'μ α θ η μ α ' into 'order and harmony' / 'τ α ξ ι ζ κ α ι κ ο σ μ ο ζ ', into the 'Beauty and Good' / 'κ α λ λ ο κ α γ α θ ι α ' - a proportional joining of 'theory and action' / 'λ ο γ ο ζ κ α ι ε ρ γ ο ν '. This is the 'learning' of the "most precious thing": the *virtue / àreté / α ρ ε τ η*^{vii}. The culminating purpose, the 'telos' / 'τ ε λ ο ζ ' for man being to become 'aristerós' / 'α ρ ι σ τ ε ρ ο ζ ', 'noble and good', through the hypostasies of *àreté / α ρ ε τ η* .

Here is the main purpose of the ethical culture: to experience the tension between contraries and to overcome into the *equilibrium*, the *consonant unity*, *order* and *harmony*, getting the awareness of the human self-

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fulfillment. That supposes a kind of 'performance within the meditation sphere', by priority, able to guide the human conduct in the light of the moral ideal - like what is desired and commanded too, face with the given situation. Eventually, a kind of pragmatism is unveiled, centered on the concern for the *performance regarding the humanity from man* - so much necessary in a climate when the values are overturned, when the public and the private morality is pulverized.

Insertion in the *human's* field, an ethical learning around the *àreté* concept could be a viable response to the present and future's imperatives. Its pragmatic value is proved also by the fact that it doesn't avoid, it doesn't reject the things which seem to be priorities of the contemporary existence: the efficiency, the profit, the welfare, the comfort, the self-interest, the individual pleasure and happiness; on the contrary, by inoculating into the man's conscience a comprehensive and long conception of profoundness, it is grounding the importance to take in possession the 'midst way', the just measure, the temperance, the prudence, the responsibility and sense of duty, the freedom and 'rights', the well-understood-interest, the full love. Finally, helping to the *human health's* safeguard - a more and more frequent syntagma in the current idea debates.

'Variety in unity', *àreté* / α ρ ε τ η draws many categories of moral philosophy. We name, here, just a part of them, as cardinal forms of phenomenally for the 'intelligible One'. So, the 'theme' being *àreté* / α ρ ε τ η , its 'variations' can be identified through: *wisdom* - the

'practical' and the 'spiritual' wisdom (*phrónesis* / φ ρ ο ν η σ ι ζ , and *sophía* / σ ο φ ι α), *temperance* (*sophrosýne* / σ ω φ ρ ο σ υ ν η), *justice* (*dikaiosýne* / δ ι κ α ι ο σ υ ν η), *pleasure* (*hedoné* / η δ ο ν η), *happiness* (*eùdaimonía* / ε υ δ α ι μ ο ν ι α), *love* - on the levels: *ëros* / ε ρ ω ζ , *philia* / φι λ ι α , *àgápe* / α γ α π η .

All of these types of human features rest on some kind of consideration of *àreté* / α ρ ε τ η - the whole and deep intrinsically value, the most elevated expression of the moral being's progress into *Human*.

Rethinking the problems of ethics in the light of *àreté* / α ρ ε τ η 's significance, the entire moral philosophy could be assessed in its usefulness like a domain of help for an imperative *human*'s restoration. Actually, making us more sensible to our duty for a life lived into idea of equilibrium, harmony, order, peace, creation - first of all, self-creation -, into the highest communion 'human being-transcendental Being', in the horizon of the dialectical identity 'èthos-lógos-theós'.

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NOTES

ⁱ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a 5-7.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Stéphane Lupasco, *L'homme et ses trois éthiques*, Éditions du Rocher, Monaco, 1986.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. André Comte-Sponville, *Petit traité des grandes vertus*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1995.

^{iv} Carmen Cozma, *Studies of Philosophy Educating Humanity / Studii de filosofie a educatiei umanitatii*, Junimea Publishing House, Iasi, 1997, p.14.

^v Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Doctrines of Eminent Philosophers*.

^{vi} Carmen Cozma, *Introduction to Aretology / Introducere in aretologie*, "Al.I.Cuza" Publishing House, Iasi, 2001.

^{vii} Plato, *Crito*, 53c.