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Is a Contemporary Conservative Political Philosophy Based on the Aristotelian Concept of *Phronesis* Possible?

ABSTRACT: *This essay – although aware of the contradiction in terms of the concept of conservative theory – tries to pick out some key notions within the conservative political mindset, and offers an analysis of them by relating them to one another. Beside Aristotelian phronesis or practical wisdom, it focuses on kairos, or the right moment for action. It points out that due to the time constraint inherent in the realm of political action, agents need to acquire a kind of tacit, practical knowledge of how to deal with pressing issues, and phronesis is a term which covers this sort of practical ability. The paper then tries to show that individual action is closely connected to communal interests, differentiates between formal and informal forms of communal knowledge and ends up by referring to Oakshott's, MacIntyre's and Tocqueville's ideas of communal wisdom and practice.*

KEY WORDS: *phronesis, kairos, virtue, moeurs, practice, institutions, Aristotle, Oakshott, MacIntyre and Tocqueville*

1. PROLOGUE: *PHRONESIS* AS THE THEORY OF NON-THEORY

Politicians with a conservative inclination are well known for their non-theoretical stance: that is, they dislike political ideologies or theories in general. Perhaps the best example of this kind is Winston Churchill who did not mind leaving the conservative party when other considerations made that decision reasonable – theoretical considerations could not restrain him from this move. Even if self-contradictory, this anti-theoretical attitude is regarded as a first preliminary consideration and, as such, plays a permanent part in conservative theory as well. Aristotle famously claimed in his *Ethics* that political expertise is “concerned with action and deliberation,” and therefore it “is not systematic knowledge, since it has for its object what comes last in the process of deliberation” (NE 1141b28, 1142a24). Edmund Burke, too, points out in his *Reflections* that one of the key problems of the French revolutionaries was that they were men of theory and not of experience:

After I had read over the list of the persons and descriptions elected into the Tiers Etat, nothing which they afterwards did could appear astonishing. Among them, indeed, I saw some of known rank, some of shining talents; but of any practical experience in the state, not one man was to be found. The best were only men of theory.¹

And speaking about “old establishments,” for Burke again, it is just their independence from theory that makes them the more reliable: “they are the results of various necessities and expedencies. They are not often constructed after any theory; theories are rather drawn from them.” For indeed experience supersedes theory in politics: „The means taught by experience may be better suited to political ends than those contrived in the original project.”²

If nothing else, these facts about conservative practice and theory should make the present author cautious in trying to “reconstruct” conservative political philosophy along a theoretical proposition, namely, that the concept of *phronesis* should be regarded as central to it. However, this is a tricky problem, logically. For, indeed, here the theoretical concept is exactly to support an anti-theoretical stance. On the other hand, its use would still be theoretical – after all, conservative politicians are not ready to consider theoretical constructs, like the concept of *phronesis*, at all. Therefore I have to admit that to think over the possibilities of a conservative political philosophy with *phronesis* in its centre is still a contradiction in terms. But perhaps if I fail, the very fact of the theoretical failure would save my project in the end. At least this is the hope which I cherish. If the argument of the present paper can bring home my message, i.e., if it works theoretically, then I did my job as a philosopher. If it does not, then it can serve as one more example that theory really cannot help conservative politics. But one can express this logical connection a bit more pessimistically as well: if I succeed to convince the audience that this is a viable theory of conservatism, then it certainly will not be a conservative theory, after all, that is a contradiction in terms. And if I do not succeed, I prove to be a loser, anyway. Not too promising prospects.

2. THE TEMPORAL DIMENSION OF CONSERVATISM

Let me have this starting point: as we saw, both Aristotle and Burke had a basic distrust in the reasonability of organising human and, more particularly, political affairs on theoretical principles. Both held this view with good reason, presumably having drawn the conclusions from first hand experience of the political

¹ I use the following internet link: http://www.constitution.org/cb/rev_fran.htm

² From the same internet source.

matters of their political community. Therefore their mistrust of (political) theory was not a simple theoretical construct, but was the summary of experiences collected in their own life as well as by other authors whom they might have consulted. They were experienced men, with the necessary amount of scepticism about political construction.

If we want to characterise the position of authors like Aristotle and Burke, the concept of *phronesis* seems to be useful as a point of departure. We can rely on it to be particularly suitable when dealing with political matters. *Phronesis*, or practical wisdom is opposed to other manifestations of rationality in Aristotle. It is to be distinguished from the primary vehicle of thinking about politics in the modern Western philosophical tradition: instrumental, or even moral reason. Perhaps the main target of Aristotle's criticism is Platonic political constructionism, while for Burke indirectly the Kantian tradition. In 20th century terms, Conservatism is opposed to the form of neo-Kantianism as it was reinvigorated by John Rawls in his *Theory of Justice*. Kant tried to reinforce the efficacy of reason in practical matters, reacting to Hume's devastating criticism of rationality claiming that it is, and ought only to be "the slave of the passions" (Hume 1992. 415). However, in his effort to prove its capacity to directly influence human action, and for that special purpose contrasting it with pure Reason, Kant exaggerates his case, and this way – so the conservatives can argue – distorts human nature as it appears in the context of political action. On the other hand, while his enthusiasm for the self-capacitating intellectual powers of the individual is overstated in the neo-Kantian tradition, there can be no doubt that the philosopher from Königsberg was a firm believer in public reason, i.e., in the human ability to discuss (and solve) political matters in a free and open way as part of a deliberative process. Rawls – and Habermas, for that matter – takes over this firm belief in the effectiveness of public debate leading to a more democratic political culture than it would be possible without this sort of open-ended, and theoretically informed cooperation between the citizens.

Conservatism in the Aristotelian tradition is not much less intellectual than the Kantian tradition, even if it is much more sceptical about the potential of human reason in solving human problems on a grand scale. Although the scale of reasonable scepticism in political affairs is debated within the conservative tradition itself, Aristotelian political thought never denied the intellectual capacities of humans, even in their every day affairs. *Phronesis* is both an intellectual and a practical virtue.

But then in what sense is it less optimistic intellectually? It seems to me that in this respect Aristotle is a critic of his master, Plato who was a keen constructor of political ideology in his *Republic*. Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* is there to show that politics should not be taken as a playground for the philosopher king: human affairs do not allow so much licence for rational deliberation as is ordinarily accepted in the empire of thought. The main reason for this is not simply the

nature of political authority, i.e., not the fact that free thought can be politically risky for those in power. Neither is it simply the political responsibility of the political agent that should hinder him from the exercise of free enquiry. It has more to do with another trait of politics: that power has to be operated under very severe time constraint.

Time is necessarily a scarcity in the human realm, not only in politics and not only because of the shortness of human lifespan. It has to do with the dynamism of human affairs: there is a constant flow of ever newly born and reborn situations, and a never relaxing pressure on agents to decide and act. The life story of a human being or community is so much in a constant and dynamic flux that one can only afterwards, looking back on the whole story from some distance, cut it up into distinct entities which could be regarded as episodes or political situations. When experiencing one's life, moments are not really separated from one another but grow organically into one another, making it almost indiscernible when one moment closes and another one opens up. Therefore we carry along huge baskets of unresolved conflicts, tensions, dilemmas, and each and every decision or non-decision of ours will have a direct or indirect, foreseeable or unforeseeable effect or counter-effect on this package.

But there are special moments when decisions have to be made, here and now. These moments of crisis call for immediate judgement. These moments have their own Greek god after whom they are named: they are regarded as being under the rule of *Kairos*. *Kairos* is a rhetorical term, meaning that the moment calls for the decision of the actor, it is the connection between the moment and the agent who is confronting it. Each right action has its naturally assigned time of execution, the actor needs to make good use of those moments in order to be able to act properly.

If we want to make sense of Aristotle's views on *phronesis* for our present concern, what we need to understand is the way *kairos* objectifies time in this ancient concept. Let me refer to Aristotle's earlier idea in moral philosophy, to the golden mean, so as to shed light on the meaning of this concept of *kairos*. The golden mean is a teaching about how we should not miss the target in moral decisions: either by over- or undercharging the case, by excess or deficiency in our chosen type of behaviour. Aristotle's point is that the moral target cannot be hit by simply complying with the rules – what is needed is a kind of sense which helps you to find the right proportions, balance, and scaling, in other words to find what is “intermediate” between excess and deficiency (NE 1104a26). But this is not an objective category because it is relative to the particular object and to us as subjects confronting the object. What needs to be found is therefore “the intermediate, that is, not in the object, but relative to us” (NE 1106b5).

Kairos calls our attention to the fact that a right decision is always to be realised in time by a particular agent. It is neither to be done by him too quickly nor too slowly. The first would amount to hasty-mindedness while deliberation

should be done slowly, the second might miss the target by arriving at the spot too late. Think about Aristotle's reference to the archer as a metaphor for the agent who deliberates in urgent situations. This time the task of the archer is the more difficult as the target is moving, and as there is a very short time span when he can actually act. *Kairos* is the temporal intermediate found. For deliberation might last too long, or can be finished too quickly, but "deliberative excellence is correctness as to what one should achieve, and the way in which, and when [...]." (NE 1142b29). It is achieved not by trying to force the stream of time to stop but rather by tuning oneself to the right rhythm of the flow. This is the more important because the target is on the move – it can only be hit if subject and object are moving in the same rhythm in this dynamic.

Finally, there is yet another dimension to the importance of the temporal element in human decision-making to be taken into account. It is not simply the objective flow of time that invites subjective response in particular cases or emergency situations. Individuals also need a sense of timing in another way: to accumulate enough experience for a good improvisation by the time the decision is required. This temporal condition of the right amount of accumulated experience lets Aristotle say that "sense and comprehension and intelligence [...] depend on age", adding that "experienced and older people, or wise ones [...] have an eye, formed from experience, they see correctly" (NE 1143b8, 1143b13–14).

Now my claim is that these two axes of what counts as ideal timing in Aristotle, i.e., to find the intermediate between the too early and the too late, and be fortunate and careful enough to accumulate experience in life, will be central to our understanding of the conservative agenda. For it shows that liberals and conservatives definitely have a different perspective on the relevance of time for human decision-making. That conservatism is not simply a superficial admiration of the past in direct contrast to the future-oriented positivism of the leftist ideologies is already made obvious by Titian's famous painting of Prudence which presents the face of a young, of a middle-aged, and of an old man, representing the past, the present, and the future. These faces show the different attitudes of the different generations, one caring about the past, the other facing the present, and the third one trying to make sense of the future. None of them is neglected by the artist, none of them is controlling the others. The three of them together build up prudence, a virtue playing a pivotal role in conservative political theory as it is related to right timing, *kairos*.

In what follows we would first concentrate on Aristotle's idea that, in order to achieve maximum safety in the temporal dimension, we have to obtain the virtue(s) which will help us to save energy and time in daily life. Then we point out that the individual agent's virtues themselves are insufficient to lead us with some guarantees in the labyrinth of political life. That is why we need to consider the importance of communal practices for the conservative agenda. The

role played by virtue(s) in our individual lives is complemented by the communal practices of our political communities. Finally, we shall have a look at how communal practices are divided then into informal techniques of harmonising individual behaviour (*moeurs*) and formalised techniques of encouraging social cooperation on societal level (institutions).

3. VIRTUE AS THE ACCUMULATED PRACTICAL DELIBERATIONS STORED IN THE INDIVIDUAL'S ATTITUDES

Virtue, or *aretê* plays a key role in Aristotle's moral theory. It is usually translated into English as excellence, and Aristotelian virtues – which were largely based on Plato's example and Socrates's views on it – are identified in the literature as “complex rational, emotional and social skills” (Kraut 2012). However, even if they are social skills, they belong to the individual's personal sphere: virtues (or the lack of them) build up – in the ancients most of the time – his moral behaviour. This is not the place to give a full account of Aristotle's concept of virtue – the division of contemporary moral theory called virtue ethics has already done a lot to update our knowledge of it in accordance with recent philosophical developments. It is more interesting to ask if it can have any relevance in political theory – and especially in a conservative moral theory – today. To answer this question we are in need of a working definition of virtue in the Aristotelian sense in order to be able to show how it can turn out to be useful in a conservative theory.

Now for Aristotle virtues are dispositions (*hexis*). And more exactly: “the excellence of a human being too will be the disposition whereby he becomes a good human being and from which he will perform his own function well” (NE 1106a24). And in a statement which refers back to our earlier discussion he adds:

Excellence has to do with affections and actions, things in which excess, and deficiency, go astray, while what is intermediate is praised and gets it right [...] Excellence, then, is a kind of intermediacy, in so far as it is effective at hitting upon what is intermediate. (NE 1106b27–8)

In other words, virtue is a complex human skill that leads one to the right sort of action. And even among the virtues *phronesis* becomes a very special one: it is regarded by Aristotle as both an intellectual and a practical-moral excellence, and, as such, the virtue of virtues, a kind of meta-virtue. In other words, what Aristotle suggests is that practical wisdom will help us in risky situations to find the right decision in time. It can help us to do this because virtues are dispositions, or even more radically translated, habits, which means that they do not need the

sort of rational deliberation each and every time an action has to be performed. Aristotle's account of virtue in general, and *phronesis* in particular, does not aim at providing a description of the whole decision making procedure. This is because he does not believe that such a procedure can possibly be imparted. And yet he insists on the rationality of our moral choices. His point is that by conditioning ourselves to patterns of behaviour, or acquiring socially acceptable dispositions called virtues, we can ensure that in an unknown situation we shall be able to mobilise these rational potentials without losing time which is the most precious valuable in those very moments. Also, *phronesis* is so handy for him because it can stock all the knowledge one can acquire in one's life in a condensed but easily unwrapped form and activate it in unfamiliar situations at the right time, too. The mechanism of how *phronesis* leads to action is not clearly described by Aristotle but that it is not a simple syllogism or mechanical rule-following is clear from his account, and nothing else is really relevant in this respect.

But what is the real political advantage in all these points? Well, it is, I hope, obvious by now. Aristotle's concept of moral virtue in general, and of *phronesis* in particular can be used to override the sceptical premise of the political epistemology of Conservatism. After all, what Aristotle argues for is a kind of rational knowledge in the political sphere which, however, has nothing of the a priori in its nature. In this respect Gadamer's account of the Aristotelian analysis of *phronesis* sounds quite convincing for he succeeds to show that although this form of knowledge has no universal validity, it does not sink into mere subjectivism or emotivism, either. On the contrary. It helps the political agent to behave in a rational way in politics without disregarding the requirements of this particular form of craft. It presents the activity of the statesman as based on principles, without becoming clumsy or inadequate. The prudent politician handles each case by mobilising the means of the adequate solution to it from the situation itself and from his own conditioned reservoir of earlier experiences.

4. THE COMMUNAL DIMENSION OF VIRTUE POLITICS: PRACTICES

The Aristotelian doctrine of virtues enables the individual to mobilise his accumulated experience in an emergency situation. It can also be read, however, as a summary of social norms: a manual of what is required from the agent by the Athenian political community. But it can only make sense if we suppose the existence of particular forms of social coordination mechanisms called practices. This concept has been worked out in 20th century philosophy – among others – by Michael Oakshott and Alasdair MacIntyre.

Practice, or activity, for Oakshott is a kind of social game played by a limited number of people to achieve certain ends. He takes, for example, the activities of the historian, the cook, the scientist, or the politician (Oakshott 1962/1991).

117). All of them, he claims, are engaged in a certain way of behaviour defined by the particular questions this activity tries to answer. Those people belong to a given group – who think they know where and how to look for the answer to these particular questions. However, Oakeshott also keeps emphasising that their knowledge is not given “to be such in advance of the activity of trying to answer them.” His knowledge is about the practice of that activity in general but the activity itself generates particular questions as well as the modes how they can be answered, and none of them can be foreseen before they are actually born. But the activity itself already exists before any one practitioner of it will actually take part in it, just as language exists before any individual speaker starts to use it. It is in this sense that political action is not individual: it always happens in the context of what we could call political practice. There are other participants, other questions, other efforts to try to answer those questions. And each and every activity needs to have an idiom (as opposed to well-defined rules): a certain “knowledge of how to behave appropriately in the circumstances” (Oakeshott 1962/1991. 121). This knowledge cannot be abstracted from the very practice itself: “it is only in the practice of an activity that we can acquire the knowledge of how to practise it”. It is in the very activity where the knowledge is stocked: “principles, rules and purposes are mere abridgments of the coherence of the activity” (Oakeshott 1962/1991. 122). But there are certain “elements” which can be identified “with a relatively firm outline” within the pattern inherent in a certain activity: “we call these elements, customs, traditions, institutions, laws, etc.” Oakeshott identifies these relatively firm and solid parts of a given pattern of activity as “the substance of our knowledge of how to behave” within that particular form of activity. The pronoun ‘our’ shows that this is not the knowledge of a single person but shared by all those who participate in the activity in an adequate way. We shall turn towards these crystallised forms of social knowledge in the last part of our paper very soon. Before that, however, let us look at an alternative description of practice – this time by Professor MacIntyre.

MacIntyre calls practice in his book *After virtue*

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions to the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre 1985. 187)

He calls leisure activities, and sports like football and chess, useful arts like architecture, and fine arts like painting, farming as well as the work of the historian, and music, too, practice. And he also regards politics as practice in the Aristotelian sense.

What is the novelty of this understanding of the activity of politics? One of the important points of this analysis is to show that the fruits of a practice are not only to be looked for outside of the very practice but also inside. Certain patterned activities are good in themselves – because they help us to fulfil the potentials inherent in human nature. In this sense the activity of doing politics is not simply useful if it leads to political success – as a certain form of activity it might be valuable in itself, independently of the external consequences resulting from it. But what does the internal value of politics consist in? The activity of politics gives us occasion to relate ourselves to our fellows in the *polis* in a way that is characteristic of the potential of being human: by it we can prove that we are just, courageous and temperate. It is a way to become better as human individuals by becoming better participants of the given practice. In this sense the *polis* educates its members in a way that the modern state can hardly do by now.

Yet what is specifically conservative in these two descriptions of political practice? There is no doubt that both Oakeshott and MacIntyre relied on Aristotle heavily. But the question still remains whether this analysis belongs to what is legitimately called conservatism today, or not. I would like to argue that the answer to this question is yes. These descriptions of practice are to be seen as answers to the specific problem of the time constraint which we characterised as the sceptical starting point of conservative politics. According to this insight, a primary problem for a political agent is the lack of adequate time span to process rational deliberation to choose the right type of action in a tight political situation. I showed how virtue, or conditioned *hexis* is an answer to this sort of time constraint: a virtuous agent does not need to think each time before he would choose the right action in a given situation because his disposition contains all the knowledge, in condensed form, he might need even in a brand new situation. If we accept the conclusion that the concept of virtue is a conservative answer to the characteristic preliminary conservative problem of time constraint, we only need to see that the analysis of practice is also directly linked to this set of problems. I propose to understand the concept of practice as the communal side of individual virtue. Virtue as the habituated knowledge of the individual of how to behave in situations for which there are no exact rules of behaviour only makes sense if we realise that individual action in politics is governed by a socially constituted framework called practice which orders the relationships of individual behaviours in a given situation. If virtue is an accumulated and condensed form of that knowledge which the individual requires to be able to make the right decision in a given situation, practice is the reservoir of communal knowledge responsible for the right coordination of individual actions in possible situations. Practice is also a form of *phronetic* knowledge in the sense that it is not a set of abstract norms, rules, or etiquettes, but a practical way to handle complex social relationships in a way that fits the situation, and the participants who take part in them at the same time.

5. FORMALISED AND INFORMAL PRACTICES: INSTITUTIONS, *MOEURS*, POLITICAL CULTURE

As we have seen, one can separate certain items within the general phenomenon of what is called practice, in our case within political practice. A conventional way to distinguish between different types of this crystallisations is to identify formal and informal ones among them. Formalised solid structures within a given activity are called institutions, while the not less important informal ones, which are, however, much more difficult to explain, are labelled as *moeurs* or conventions. Formal institutions and informal *moeurs* build up what we call political culture.

In his detailed and sensitive description of the unprecedented workings of American democracy, Tocqueville focused on institutions and *moeurs* as part of his effort to describe the characteristics of the political culture of the New World. In this effort of his, he could rely on forerunners like Montesquieu or Rousseau who tried to define the *differentia specifica* of modern republics before him. Certainly the identification of the different forms of government went back even in the 19th century to ancient sources, among whom Aristotle played a pivotal role. But the novelty of Tocqueville's effort was that he was not satisfied with simply identifying the form of rule, or political regime. Rather, he tried to show that democracy is more than a power structure, it is better to be regarded as a certain form of life. He succeeded to show that it was due to certain historical peculiarities of the birth of the United States that some unintended consequences engendered a certain way of practicing politics. And this held true not only of the governing elite, but in an undifferentiated way of all those partaking in political life – and certainly one of the key points was that a lot more people engaged in politics on a regular, but most of the time non-professional basis.

Institutions are legally confirmed forms of social cooperation, fixed practices that help to make the flow of political life smoother. They guarantee procedures, intersubjective relationships, and room for manoeuvring for individual or group participants taking part in it. Institutionalisation is a formalisation of human cooperation that is highly recommended by conservatives because institutions serve to make manifest and available the experience of earlier generations for any member of the present generation of the political community. This way it makes political life less rough and more foreseeable.

But institutions are highly recommended by other ideologies of Western democratic politics as well, even if they do not rely on it, most of the time, as a solution to the problem of time constraint. Therefore, the informal constructs of political activity, the soft forms of social expectations encoded under the name *moeurs* are perhaps more characteristically conservative means of providing social peace. Here there are no formal agreements, contracts, legal sanctions or any form of government pressure behind the self-controlling mechanisms of society. Rather, requirements are “expressed” in the forms of habits or customs, i.e., in

patterns of behaviour that are repeated in wide enough circles within a certain community to be regarded as social expectations. It is based on the Aristotelian insight that the human learning process is based on imitation, and on the mass psychological observation that individuals are keen to adapt the norms of a given society in order to get in on it.

Comparative studies of political culture reveal the fact that the frequency and the elaborateness of the network of institutions and informal behavioural patterns can indicate the level of development of the political culture of a given political community. According to the conservative agenda, these crystallised parts of political activities should be encouraged because they can safeguard public peace and prosperity by transferring the experience of earlier generations to the next one. They all contribute to handle the temporal deficit of political agents in actual political situations – this way they answer the first problem of the conservative politician and the conservative thinker.

6. SUMMARY: *PHRONESIS*, *KAIROS*, VIRTUE, INFORMAL AND FORMAL PRACTICE

In this paper I tried to show that if one wants to understand the perspective of conservatism on time, it should not be interpreted as a simple nostalgia for the past. On the contrary, conservatives care about the present moment: they call attention to the fact that political agents can rarely have enough time to process a whole programme of rational deliberation before they decide in a tight situation. It is in order to handle this time constraint that they rely on the Aristotelian notion of practical wisdom, or *phronesis*: this is a kind of meta-virtue, intellectual and moral excellence at the same time which enables the agent to make the right decision and act on it without the sort of rational enquiry into the nature of the cause that would be required in a theoretically defensible process like in a scientific investigation. *Phronesis* is a kind of conditioned, habituated form of technical knowledge which, however, does not allow any subjective preference to take the lead as a motivational force in one's decision making. *Phronesis* in the Aristotelian discourse is closely connected with the concept of *kairos* which denotes the ideal moment for an action to be executed. Practical wisdom leads us to find the kairotic moment which is neither too fast nor too slow, and which ensures that the agent be tuned to the rhythm of the dynamic of the object he targets.

Finally, I tried to show that while *phronesis* is an individual virtue, it has a communal counterpart, called practice by Oakeshott and MacIntyre. Practice expresses the accumulated practical wisdom of the community by channelling individual behaviour in a given community's political life, relying on the experience of earlier generations, expressing it in practical knowledge instead of fixed

rules. There are two types of practice: while institutions are pretty stable forms of social cooperation, based on formalised human activity, *moeurs* are habits, customs and conventions, unwritten rules, that govern members of a group without reflecting on the very rules individuals are following.

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