INDIVIDUAL/SOCIAL, OR OF THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF NOT FALLING INTO ESSENTIALISM

An attempted comparison between Aristotelian and modern humanitarian thinking

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Of the background and the approach of this text. The *single individual / human collectivity* relationship is one of the major issues of present-day social sciences. Highly dependent on everyday speech, they suffer the difficulty of the transition from the idea of the static opposition between individual and social towards the dynamic transformation which these two forms of human presence in the world undergo in real situations of one or other type. The problem is already there, as far as both the external and internal situations the individual falls in are formed as oppositions between 'me' and 'us' moments, but also as the overcoming of these oppositions in view of the acquiring of an indispensable identity.

The major difficulty in analyzing human situations lies in the fact that they are permeated with speech acts. A speech act is something very different from the situation itself, but also overlaps with it, as far as, besides all its other functions, it is expressed in a kind of doing something. This doing, which is also understanding, includes certain 'individual' and 'social' connotations. It is rather comfortable that human situations and the related speech acts are also manifested in more easily observable oral or written texts, which, just like the situations and speech acts that had produced them, are processes for transforming references and the related individual and group specificities in view of producing an indispensable identity. The transformation might take place in the propositional content of the text, but might also be only external, pertaining to the act of its understanding.

It is the situation of understanding that is the agent of the *sociality* or *communitarity*, which is active in the meaningful background of every speech and in which I am particularly interested. Imposed by the external act of understanding, which is always understanding on the part of someone similar for others of the same understanding, communitarity is revealed in some way in the text produced by the speech act. The text is a procedure of relying on things already understood in order to understand new ones. The signification of the new suggests the existence of referential support from objects, whose existence is beyond doubt, but also suggests communitarian support and acceptance of the givenness of these objects on the part of extant real or virtual communities. The new situation, affirmed in the text, requires referential and, correspondingly, communitarian transformations, and connotes a new communitarity and a new identity for the subjects of understanding.

The relationship between the reference of speech to certain existing, having existed and possible to exist things, and communities and individuals transformable via their textual signification, can easily be mystified when the semiotic manifestation of this relationship in various speech proceedings is not being observed. This happens in several famous books by Karl Popper, in which he presents the general thesis of his so-called *methodological nominalism.* His nominalist ideal of science, dealing not with definitions of notions but with the way things and phenomena act, has lead him to the abstract statement that the external factor of the closed society and its way of

thinking are responsible for the line of the so-called *methodological essentialism* in European philosophy.

Here I propose another interpretation of the urges behind the reasoning of Aristotle, the patriarch of essentialism and subject of Popper's criticism, and also of the grounds of essentialism that still dominates present-day social science.

Criticism of Popper's criticism of Aristotelian essentialism. Karl Popper presents his critical arguments against Aristotle's philosophy and method in the opening pages of Volume II of his famous book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. The open society, that is, the ideology of modern Western democracies, is a positive ideal to him, while the closed one, manifested in the ideology of the so-called *tribalism*, symbolizing the past and its residue in modern times, is a negative thing to be fought against. Popper places in the account of the closed society methodological essentialism, historicism and totalitarianism. According to the author of *The Open Society*, these are being professed by certain philosophical texts belonging to the Western tradition like, for example, the works of Plato and Marx. Adding to the critique of these major culprits of tribalist thinking, in Volume II of his book he offers a more extensive analysis of Hegel's doctrine, and a shorter one of Aristotle's philosophy. Interestingly, despite his prejudice toward the ideology of the closed society, Popper still admires Plato, while in the few pages on Aristotle, he presents him as a mediocre philosophizer of the ideas belonging to the author of *The Republic*.

Here are Popper's arguments, in brief. Aristotle is blamable for the methodological essentialism proliferating within the European philosophical tradition. By developing logically Plato's essentialist postulates, the Stagirite lays the foundations of historicism, elaborated further by Hegel. There are two initial assumptions in Aristotelian philosophy: the principle of hierarchic differences (between the slave and the free man, the woman and the man, the Greek and the barbarian) given by nature, and the related doctrine of the naturally given essence, defined as a kind of intuitive premise. Popper insists that essences cannot be revealed via definitions; this type of philosophizing results in scholastics and breeds fatalism, which, among other things, is the clearest mark of the closed society ideology. To this, the author of *The Open Society* opposes his methodological nominalism, according to which definitnions are only the stenographic symbols of doing something. Not the essence of things but the way they act should be studied. Scientific theories, Popper says, do not reveal truths, as is believed in the perspective of philosophizing whose model is Aristotle. These are nothing but hypotheses tested by one type of consequences or other.

The great problem with the approach of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* is the radical character of the employed paradigm - the fact that Popper makes no difference between the closed and the open societies as types of social organization, thinking and paradigms which represent these. Implying that the closed and the open societies are easily distinguishable social states of mental kind, Popper does not suggest that social order and mentality are inconsistent or provoke each other. He denies causality relationships imposed within huge historicist schemes, developed in European science after Hegel, but at the same time discusses the bad perspective in world thinking, starting with Plato and Aristotle, and the good one, starting with Democritus.

In either case, the closed/open society paradigm is just a scheme. From a present-day point of view, both the huge contexts of entire cultures we build in order to access the regime of a possible understanding, and the real philosophical texts are

violations of the schemes we use to represent them. Such violations are not only specific texts by Plato and Aristotle, but also their entire philosophical work. At first glance, this view reproduces Plato's essentialist thesis that real things are diversions from the paragon of primary ideas. The perspective, however, is nominalist. My claim is that the schemes and paradigms we employ are only means for constructing a more relevant model of things. Achievable only through the violation of the schemes and paradigms used, it is, so to say, temporarily true in view of the work needed to be done.

Relying on this working principle, we notice that Plato's and Aristotle's texts are inconsistent. With his teaching about ideas/essences, existing apart from undone real things, Plato has created the so-called *theological or transcendental essentialism* in European philosophy. This, of course, does not prevent him from developing the method for synonymous/antonymous understanding in his dialogue *Sophist*. Discussing the compromises to which spoken word is exposed, the philosopher claims that since it is manifested in connection and separation, it collapses if the speaker falls into separation of everything from everything. Here Plato deals with reality, of which it is possible to speak, and, respectively, of the reality of spoken word, and not of the actual reality, which only certain symbols and myths are empowered to represent.

The same holds true for Aristotle, who, on the one hand, believes that every thing 'contains' its form/essence and there might be a truthful statement about it. On the other hand however, he makes a step towards methodological nominalism by formulating the idea of primal substance, of the existence of single things only. Hence, the difference between statements about single things and statements about essences pertaining to a whole class of things. Lead by the ambition to present Aristotle in a certain kind of light, Popper pays no attention to the philosopher's sense of the natural diversity of things.

Popper's radical position concerning the mental manifestation of the closed society, and his belief that this is surmountable, prevent him from noticing the fundamental reason for the indispensable amount of methodological essentialism in every type of human response. It is needed due to the alternating closed and open visions in every human act, due to the demand, every time when something is being discussed, to outline a sphere of 'nature', which is beyond question. This outlining is a working one. Of course, neither the mode of thinking of the humanities, nor everyday practice, negotiate its temporariness. On the contrary: it is usually implied that this nature is real.

Not only Aristotle's texts, however, abound with hypertrophic claims of this kind. Almost every second scholar in the field of social sciences acts the same way as Aristotle. This is what Popper himself does, too. His radical nominalism would not operate without background assertions about nature. Among them is also the one saying that only single individuals exist, and that human thinking should be freed from the accompanying communitarian ideology. Hence the need to refute the main cognitive carrier of communitarity: the idea that words and definitions signify things and essences.

No doubt, ways should be sought to limit the extremities of methodological essentialism. Which does not mean believing that it can be generally avoided. For, as a framework agreement on certain axiomatic provisions, which are beyond discussion, every speech is also an act which supports conventions. Hence, it is manifested also as a kind of indirect preservation of communities. Indeed, as Popper thinks, essentialism means thinking of naturally given referents and naturally given collectivities, closed on the working level, while the act of uttering and understanding proceeds. But these

naturally given referents and understanding groups do not result from a fundamental removable tribalism. As a permanent tool for human understanding of the world, they are only the framework withholding the dangerous nominalistic discussion of new things. In order to operate in a nominalistic mode in discussing new situations, that is, in a instrumentally groupwise and individual way, before these situations become habitual and covered by convention, every speech needs essentialist support, especially when it comes to that which is not being directly discussed. In man's understanding, the world cannot be entirely new and projective, which means having an instrumental individual or communitarian connotation totally dissonant with the accepted as naturally given for a specific environment individuality and communitarity.

And since the major impetus in Popper's thinking is his concern about the independence of the individual human being, we cannot go without a formula on this issue. *The individual human being is neither so individual, nor so much connected, as is presented by the two opposing radical ideologies, which hypertrophy either the one, or the other aspect of human fulfillment in the world*. As far as he is connected and socially raised to power, the individual has no way of avoiding essentialism, just like, in his turn, he is unable to avoid disconnecting himself from his bindings, questioning the natures he comes across, and acting nominalistically, that is, individualistically and instrumentally groupwise, as well.

Essentialism and communitarianism in Aristotelian thinking and in modern humanitarian reflection. In juxtaposing the negative and positive aspects of nominalism, and placing Aristotelian thought in the land of essentialism, Popper presents only partially the dispositions of Aristotelian thinking. The essentialism of the author of *Metaphysics* is intrinsically complex. Following Plato's transcendental essentialism, he questions it. Aristotle's reply is the compromising *immanentist essentialism*, which recognizes the existence of things here, in this world. On the other hand, in his reflections on practical issues, the philosopher reacts as a nominalist - mainly by distinguishing between theoretical and practical modes of speaking. The theoretical mode deals with the absolute values of essences and things, and hence, with the implication of naturally given communitarities. The practical mode of speaking discusses the change of things. Theoretically, every thing is defined by the potency of its essence, given to it through its species, while in practice its essence resulting from its species enters complicated relationships with other essences. Aristotle's theoretical and practical modes of speaking are inconsistent.

Hence the consequence that in reflecting on social phenomena, the philosopher acts nominalistically. A polis community has an essence, which refers to all polis communities, but this essence is a thing sophisticated and complex. A polis is civil community, population and territory, whose dynamic interactions cannot be represented theoretically. To Aristotle, the polis is only a potency for the improvement of the individual citizen. It is he who is the real thing with a subject, and not the community. Hence the consequence that the individual and the collective are not of the same standing and cannot be discussed in opposition. Of course, Aristotle in fact makes statements on the way the polis community acts, describing it with analogies and metaphors. Somewhere in *Politics* he says that the multitude of the polis is like a person with many arms and many heads, but he never considers a specific polis multitude with a real subject and an essence of its own. In Aristotle's practical philosophy no traces are found of the *essentialism of the single* developed in the European humanities after the 18th century. By making group and individual

subjects equal, modern humanitarian thinking merges real group situations with virtual and desired ones, speaking of all these as objectively existing things with their own essence as species, but also as defined by original essences, specific for them.

In this way, among the challenges which present-day humanitarian thinking faces, the first might be represented by Aristotle's differentiation between the existence of the individual and the existence of various classes of the human, and the resulting understanding that individual and social do not belong to the same category and, therefore, cannot be opposed. But modern humanitarian thinking faces yet another major distinction. What I mean is human social groupedness as a multiplicity, different from the multiplicities of this or that class of individuals. For there are differences between communities like family, kin, ethnic group and nation, and between communities of men, women, medical doctors, athletes, Europeans and all the people. The science of the social should effectively distinguish between externally existing, and hence, considered to be *actually given human groups* and virtual ones, fixed only in speech. The communitarian, which develops hierarchies and power structure, giving reason to present-day social sciences to speak of it as subject, should be differentiated from the really or virtually communitarian, of communal nature, maintaining the equality among all participants, but without developing actual high subjects. It is not only a matter of taxonomy, but also of the instrumental use of community types in the analysis of specific situations.

The individual/social correlation in human groups acting in reality. This is the point of the uncommented by Aristotle, and generally unconsidered by modern thinking, aspect related to human groups acting in reality. Their fundamental peculiarity has in a certain way been discussed by 20th century anthropology, especially in cases of acknowledging the similarities in the organization of animal and human groups. Because the multitudes of ants and bees are also made coherent by developing hierarchy, outlining casts and singling out leader individuals. An animal herd does the same which a human group does: it merges into an entity set within an additionally constructed environment. To one or other degree this social entity tends to become too closed, severely subjecting the individuals to the whole of the social group.

On the one hand, Aristotle is right: the existence of the individual is more real than the existence of the human multitude, as far as the latter is only a class of similar individuals. At the same time, he is not right, as far as both the animal herd and the human multitude single out individuals who are actually or symbolically able to represent them. Agents of collective identity, their appearance and qualities, indicate the more powerful entity, towards which groupedness is directed, and through which individual subjects are reinforced.

This static aspect of every community situation is dynamically expressed as an alternation between moments of relatedness to real and to virtual communitarities, in view of a permanent external and internal disposition to some kind of optimum state. This alternation is observable from the outside, but is also given in man's internal world, in the alternation of his emotional and mental responses, expressed in speech and the resulting texts. Just like the constantly alternating moments of reference to singularity and communitarity in real human situations, the individual, too, is a series of various combinations between individual and communitarian, an on-going effort to build the identity needed in any specific case, taking into account the internal environment of the body and the array of real and ideal external environments, in which he fits or from which he separates himself. In this, the individual ceaselessly

affirms, rearranges and destroys the signs of certain extant communitarities and individualities. Of course, certain individuals create new signs as well - not only for themselves, but also ones that become conventional in a broader or narrower social circle.

Thus, the hermeneutic interrogation of Aristotelian and modern thinking establishes a point of similarity between these, which consists in their failure to represent the specific correlation between individual and social, and their inability to distinguish the subject of the single individual form the subject of the real human community. Strangely, despite his theoretical understanding that the realities of the individual and of the human multitude are non-identical, Aristotle still claims practically, many times, that the ways the individual and the human communities act are identical. The problem is that even after modern, more dialectic theses on this subject have been offered by psychoanalysis, hermeneutics and American pragmatic philosophy, European humanities not only follow this leveling, but also bring it to an extreme by relating it to the essentialism of the single and the individual/community dichotomy, both of which are not present in Aristotle.

The major tool for the discursive understanding of the individual/community relationship is the notion of subject. It is no accident, then, that together with the great designs on the issue of man's social world, this notion is so actively discussed after Descartes. Aristotle was the first philosopher to deal theoretically with it. To the Stagirite, the subject is a logical category - a thing, of which something is predicated. Creating a theory for understanding 'is'-conditions, related to the participation of individual things into classes of similar things, the philosopher argues that theory can exist only for this static aspect of being. This does not prevent him from stating the ideas of praxis and poiesis, pertaining to human activity. Of these, however, he speaks only in practical terms. Aristotle never developed a theory of the subject of doing and making, especially of the making/doing, in which the essence of the species is transgressed.

Following this logic, Aristotle never worked out a theory of the subject of social acting and never arrived at ideas of the correlation between the subject of the individual and the higher social subjects that represent human communities. He did not imagine that the king or the short-lived leaders in a state of democracy were expressions of human groupness, tending to form a subject. And this is strange, given his brilliant analysis, in *Poetics*, in which, revealing his insights into so many other problems, he never notices that in the Attic tragedy there is a play of representability between a high hero and a human group related to him. Hence the question why both Aristotle and present-day humanitarian reflection do not develop a concept and, correspondingly, instrumental ideas about the actual subjectness of groups, communities and complex collective entities.

This is probably because these are difficult to observe in static, being a thing in happening and always unready. Apparently, Aristotle is motivated by the ideological concern, distinguishing himself from Plato's transcendental essentialism, to provide with notions the being of singularities that exist in reality. His reluctance to speak about the truth of the happening and always not-having-happened thing of the poorly objectified community subjects perhaps derives from his ambition to emphasize the static logic of the individual thing he had developed. We, however, fail to understand why the modern studies of society, too, fall short of presenting this result of the actual correlation between individual and group, once they have been dealing both theoretically and specifically with the dynamic of such happenings.

Thus, my conclusion is a performative one. I think that present-day social studies need to comprehend the dynamic relationship between essentialism and nominalism, which organizes every kind of scholarly speech, and seek, on the basis of this, instrumental means for more effective presentation of the individual/community dynamic within the complex of real human situations.