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The philosophical roots of development ethics

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present the philosophical roots of development ethics as a field of study with its interdisciplinary character.

Design/methodology/approach – The conceptual and historical evolution of development ethics is unfolded through Aristotle's philosophy.

Findings – The authors argued that Aristotle's philosophy, incorporating the concepts of "a good life" and "a good society," defines ethical development and influences contemporary development ethics.

Originality/value – Development ethics is a relatively new field of study within social sciences and determines the ethical perspective of development in a holistic and normative manner. It is important to understand the antecedents, pioneers and contemporary practitioners of development ethics and how they are related. Based on the authors' knowledge, there has been limited research regarding the origins of the concept of a "good society" as a determinant factor of development. In this context, Aristotle's philosophy incorporating the concepts of a "good life" and a "good society" is the founding determinant in the study of ethical development.

Keywords Aristotle, Eudaimonia, Development ethics, Good life, Good society

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

When people think of development, they typically think of economic development, meaning economic growth (as measured by GDP). The economic growth model has not managed to create equal economic advantages for people, nor has it assured the overall well-being of individuals. In fact, the growth model mentality is largely responsible for considerable unfair and harmful outcomes toward humans, societies and nature. Development needs reconsideration. It must address the public's demand that society benefits all citizens and not at the expense of disadvantaged people, other societies or valuable natural resources. The ethical concepts of "a good life" and "a good society" are key ethical arguments in defining the meaning of development. Tackling the thorny relation between ethics and economics compels us to meet the objections of economists and political realists that ethics is arbitrary and subjective and contributes nothing to data-based policy. The questions are: first, How development should be viewed? Second, How such views are related to ethical and cultural values? Third, How do values affect and shape people's lives, opportunities and well-being? All these questions require rethinking development with regard to ethical issues.

In response, development ethics appeared due to the growing excessive levels of global poverty, famine, environmental destruction and human misery observable across the North-South division. Crocker (1991, p. 457) interprets development ethics as "the

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normative or ethical assessment of the ends and means of third World and global development.” Development ethics argues that “a good society” achieves three goals. First, it must satisfy people’s, material, cultural and spiritual needs. Second, it must provide efficient support to social justice and to individuals participation in decision making. Third, it must assure the global ecological balance through environmental sustainability (Astroulakis, 2011; Dower, 2005; Goulet, 1988, 1976). Nevertheless, “What is the subject matter of a good society?” According to development ethics, it is the attainment of “a good life” for each human being. French economist Louis-Joseph Lebrét states that the striking features of development ethics are the “development for all persons,” the “development of all the person” and placing the economy at the service of humankind (Bridge, 2009).

This state of “a good life” must be perceived as “being more” (successful, attractive and valuable) and not as “having more” (material goods, income and wealth), reflecting “human ascent” and not the hyper-consumption of material goods often observed in developed nations. Further, development ethics supports international justice and individual participation in social planning and in shaping social outcomes. Finally, ethical development is consistent with the sustainability of natural resources (Dower, 1998; Goulet, 1996, 1997). The rationale of development studies is to give credit to, and identify, the interconnections generated from social, political, economic and environmental change (Gasper, 2008, p. 458).

The paper’s purpose is to determine the conceptual and historical evolution of development ethics as a field of study, revealing and exploring its philosophical roots. The paper traces the development of, and reviews the main contributions to, this relatively new field of study. It is important to understand the antecedents, pioneers and contemporary practitioners of development ethics and how they are related. To our knowledge, there is limited research that investigates the origins of the concept of a “good society” as a determinant factor of development. In this context, Aristotle’s philosophy incorporating the concepts of a “good life” and a “good society” is the founding determinant in our study that explains the genesis and evolution of development ethics.

Students and researchers in the field of international development and political economy can benefit from this unique approach to development according to which economic development is enlarged with ethics, disclosing the perspective of an ethical developing world. Development ethics is an important area of study and one which deserves greater attention from economists and ethicists – particularly development economists and development studies scholars.

The paper is structured in the following manner: Section 2 explores the relationship between Aristotelian philosophy and development ethics. Section 3 identifies Aristotle’s notion of a good life and the concept of eudaimonia. Section 4 establishes the Aristotelian inspiration of development ethics. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Aristotelian philosophy and development ethics

Development ethics is a new area of study with few antecedents in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, its perspective on “a good life” and “a good society” can be traced back to Ancient Greek philosophy and, in particular, to Aristotle’s moral and political philosophy. It appears that development ethicists unconsciously draw on the ideas of Aristotle likely due to the widespread influence of Aristotle in modern thought. Although Aristotle’s contribution to the foundation of development ethics is mentioned in the writings of development ethicists, unfortunately, they are not able to formulate a clear association of Aristotle’s ethics and politics to development ethics. Outside the fields of classics and philosophy the ancient concepts of eudaimonia and human flourishing are forgotten or poorly understood. In fact, social scientists, in particular economists, give little (if any) attention to these concepts. Interestingly, positive psychologists are influenced by Aristotle; these social scientists often incorporate in their analyses Aristotelian principles (Al Taher, 2015). Furthermore, development economists, in contrast to development ethicists, are more practical and focused on the determinants of

economic growth, competition and trade avoiding the improvement or advancement of new approaches to development (Clark, 2002, p. 831). Consequently, a subtle account of the complicated relationship between Aristotle and development ethics is necessary. The Aristotelian ethico-political framework contains conceptual guidelines for improvement of development ethics. The discussion of the notion eudaimonia and the relation to ethico-politics demonstrates the relevance of Aristotle to development ethics.

Among the diversified origins of development ethics, we concentrate on the relationship of Aristotelian philosophy to development ethics. This choice is made in the line of argument that the Aristotelian vision of “a good society” inspires the contemporary development ethics perspective. More or less, every school of thought relating to development theories follows a theoretical pattern of defining that the end state of development is “a good society”; nevertheless, there has been limited research in development ethics regarding the philosophical origins of the concept of “a good society.” The ethical aspects of the Aristotelian analysis to the ethical notion of “a good society” are important. Aristotle investigates ethics mainly in his works *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics*, and *Great Ethics* – better known as *Magna Moralia* – and his engagement with ethical matters is also distinctive in his work *Politics*.

The key element of “a good society” is the ethical question of “what is a good life?” which traces back to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*[1] (Aristotle, 1959, 2000; Ross, 1995). Clark (2002, pp. 830-831) states that in ethical terms, “discussions of what makes a good life date back at least to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and the ancient Greek tradition.” Aristotle’s notion of politics encapsulates economic, social, cultural and ethical aspects are an inspiration to the views of development ethicists. It is also perceived as the means to achieve “a good society.” Amartya Sen (1987, p. 3) points out that “Aristotle relates the subject of economics to human ends, referring to its concern with wealth [...] economics relates ultimately to the study of ethics and that of politics, and this point of view is further developed in Aristotle’s *Politics*.” Due to space limitations, the analysis uses texts of Aristotle, Ross, Nussbaum and Sen.

3. Aristotle’s notion of a good life and the concept of Eudaimonia

Aristotle declared that the highest good of human life is “eudaimonia,” the word has been translated as “happiness” or “flourishing,” “good living” and “well-being”; it is a state where people are happy and have a good life that they desire to live in. An important issue in Aristotelian ethical thinking is that “a good life” is not only discussed in an idealistic mental context. In contrast to other ancient Greek philosophical schools of that era, for example, Epicureanism and Stoicism, and even in contradistinction to his teacher Plato, Aristotle inserts a notion of realism into his philosophical thought. Aristotle’s “eudaimonia” is “the state of having an objectively desirable human life” (Honderich, 1995, p. 252). This objectivity distinguishes “eudaimonia” from the ancient philosophies of the Epicureans and Stoics arguing that “good” is related to mental tranquility and from the contemporary utilitarian concept that believes in the achievement of a subjectively satisfactory life (Clark, 2002, p. 830).

Development ethicists implicitly accept the Aristotelian concept of “eudaimonia” and advance the concept to international development’s macro-perspective. The way to experience “eudaimonia” and “a good life” within an economic, social and ethical base, is via politics. Development ethics is consistent with the Aristotelian notion of politics as the means of accomplishing the goal of “a good society.” According to Aristotle’s ethical thought, the rules of human behavior within society are determined by ethics. Aristotle postulates his view of human ethical behavior as the stance of citizens to political affairs. Hence, Aristotle could be considered as one of the pioneers in elaborating the concept of a good life within the political and social context.

Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* discussed the question of people’s social activity: “every skill and every inquiry, and similarly every action and rational choice, is thought to aim at some good; and so, the good has been aptly described as that at which everything aims”

(Aristotle, 2000, p. 3). Human behavior consists of human actions based on the preferences of every individual and every human action has a goal. In this context, two types of goals can be distinguished: first, those that constitute ends to themselves; and, second, those that are means to achieving other goals. Usually, both types of goals occur simultaneously. For instance, exercising is an end in itself, as well as, the means for a healthy body. Thus, human actions can be perceived as an inextricable matrix with successive aims. According to Aristotle, there is a purpose in the entire course of actions and this is the “highest good” of “eudaimonia.” Eudaimonia is far more complicated than the simplistic translation of basic happiness as an end in itself. “[H]appiness [eudaimonia], then, is obviously something complete and self-sufficient, in that it is the end of what is done” (Aristotle, 2000, p. 11). “Eudaimonia” consists only in virtuous activity: “what really matters for happiness [eudaimonia] are activities in accordance with virtue, and to the contrary of happiness [eudaimonia] the contrary kind of activities” (Aristotle, 2000, p. 17).

Aristotle classifies goods into three categories: first, external goods; second, goods of the soul; and third, goods of the body. He argues that human action is motivated by the second category of goods (Aristotle, 2000, p. 16). External goods are necessary but not constitutive for a good and virtuous life. As Aristotle acknowledges that eudaimonia “[...] obviously needs the presence of external goods as well, since it is impossible, or at least no easy matter, to perform noble actions without resources” (Aristotle, 2000, p. 15).

Aristotle incorporates the notion of “a good life” both in his ethical work and in his “politics.” Politics is associated with the political but also to the social and ethical affairs of the state. The individual as a citizen is placed at the center of politics, and the state (“polis” in Greece) is placed at the center of ethics. In *Politics*, Aristotle describes the “good life” as the virtuous life of an individual who, at the same time, is a member of the narrow-confined polis (city-state). In Aristotelian ethics, the good of the polis (city-state) is perceived as superior to the aim of a good life of any one individual person. Therefore, Ross (1995, p. 120) accurately states that “Aristotle’s ethics, no doubt, are social, and his politics are ethical.” Aristotle’s “good society” poses rules and norms and refers to the concept of a “good life” in the micro-environment of the “polis.” For Aristotle, the polis could not stretch to hundreds of thousands of people, nor to a “state” of millions of people (e.g. Persia) since participation in politics was impossible and tyranny was almost inevitable. The extension of the ethical political community to a global community is something that Aristotle would have deemed impossible. Meanwhile, development ethicists advance the end state of human actions, “eudaimonia” in the international macro-environment, recognizing the difference between Aristotle’s perspective and the global perspective.

Aristotle (1959) argues that there are three reasons for the state’s existence: first, to fulfill a human natural instinct; second, to satisfy a “common interest” of its citizens; and third, to protect its members. Aristotle (1959) believes that people establish societies not only out of necessity for survival but also because of their political (social) nature; nevertheless, the fact that the state maximizes the mutual welfare of its members and is the means of achieving “a good life” must not be overlooked. The Aristotelian concept of “a good life” is two-dimensional referring to economics and morals in the sense that the road to “eudaimonia” and “a good society” requests both material prosperity and the virtuous life of the members of the state (Aristotle, 1959). Ethics appear to be strongly associated with institutions. Institutions, for example, that promote justice are required for a “good life,” due to the fact that the “common interest” can be satisfied only via a strong and stable social institutional framework (Marangos and Astroulakis, 2009). Therefore, the state and its institutional foundation serve the “common interest” and therefore the “good life” of its citizens. Interestingly, in *Politics*, Aristotle (1959) has a detailed and complex treatment of the common interest and welfare maximization depending greatly on the six broad types of regime – monarchy, aristocracy, polity, democracy, oligarchy and tyranny- and postulating how these regimes can be ranked and improved.

4. Aristotelian inspiration of development ethics

Development ethics as a branch of social sciences expands the scope of research to achieve the conditions of a “good life” and a “good society” on a global level. Development ethics is the ethical reflection of the ends and means for any purposeful social-economic activity toward development and the achievement of a “good society” on a local, national and global scale. Development ethicists determine the end state of development, based on the concept of a “good society” within three dimensions: first, what is the adequate limit to consumption that allows people to enjoy a “good life”; second, what are the foundations of justice in society; and third, how should people treat their natural environment. Thus, development ethics involve normative issues (Wilber and Dutt, 2010).

Development ethics can be considered in a social economy context, since development ethics acknowledges the Aristotelian concept of “politics” as the means of achieving the end state of development conceived of as “a good society.” By incorporating an Aristotelian vision of a good society into the development agenda, development ethicists do not define development according to the economic approach of growth (via GDP) and material consumption. Development ethicists look beyond economics toward the ethical, political, social, cultural and environmental dimensions of development. In addition, the approach of development ethics maintains that politics is the means to achieving “a good life” and “a good society.” Thus, for both Aristotle and development ethicists, politics is the means to “eudaimonia” and to “a good society.” Respectively, the field of development ethics determines the concept of “a good society” by examining the specific attributes of societies and individuals. This fact proves the impact of the Aristotelian perception of a good life to the development ethics school of thought.

Along with justice (in terms of equality for all people and nations), environmental conscience (in terms of individuals, nations and international organizations), the concept of “a good life” for all humans is a central point to the achievement of “a good society.” Development ethicists consistent with the Aristotelian objective and realistic definition of the term “a good life”, argue that since economic growth and material consumption determine the boundaries of “a good life,” “eudaimonia” requires material prosperity. Hence, the abundance of goods supports people’s efforts to live “a good life.”

The first edition of Goulet’s (1973), most influential work, *The Cruel Choice: A new Concept in the Theory of Development*, establishes the bedrock of development ethics. The ultimate goal of development is existence, i.e. offering the chance to all humans to live their lives in full, an ideal of comprehensive human development (Gasper, 2008, p. 454). The meaning of his work can be summarized as “debates over economic and social development into the arena of ethical values” (Goulet, 1973, p. vii). The central ethical question in relation to Aristotle is that Goulet’s development ethics examines “What are the requirements of ‘a good life’ and of ‘a good society’ in the modern world?” His answer is based on the ethical analysis setting of development on two basic concepts, that of “existence rationality” and that of “vulnerability.” These concepts can be perceived as a theoretical ethical umbrella that guides Goulet’s development ethics.

However, the hyper-consumption manner of life in developed nations has distorted the way “a good life” is perceived: “having more” (material goods and wealth) leads to the impression of “being more” (successful, attractive and valuable) (Fromm, 1947, 1978). Development ethicists do not support hyper-consumption of material goods and appear to be in the same line of thought as Aristotle in that “the amount of property which is needed for a good life is not unlimited” and that “a man [sic.] must have so much property as will enable him [sic.] to live not only temperately but liberally; if the two are parted, liberality will combine with luxury; temperance will be associated with toil,” concluding “it should not be thought that the man [sic.] who is to be happy will need many or great possessions, merely because it is not possible to be blessed without external goods” (Goulet, 2006, p. 191). Development ethicists

examine the abundance of material goods under a humanistic perspective, which attempts to specify how much is “enough” in order for people to have “a good life.” “[T]he notion of ‘having enough’ is not devoid of objective sense. To have enough means to have what one needs in order to be and to be well” (Goulet, 2006, p. 29). Even though, there is no definite answer to the question “what does one need in order to be and to be well?” it is widely acknowledged that underdevelopment (poverty, misery, diseases, famine, etc.) diminishes humanity. Thereby, “enough” should be, at minimum, all goods that lead to the satisfaction of biological needs, in addition to freeing part of human energy toward a wider range of living beyond satisfying first-order needs. In the same line of thought with Aristotle, development ethicists point out that material prosperity, in the form of the concept of “enough,” should work as a means to the end state of development: “eudaimonia.”

To underline the significance of the development ethics perspective to a more humanistic approach of a “good society” and the understanding of economic growth as a means to the direction of a “good life,” in line with Aristotle, the contribution of ethicist Denis Goulet should be mentioned. Well before Amartya Sen, Goulet (1971, p. 205) advocated that “authentic development aims toward the realization of human capabilities in all spheres” and that economic growth and technological modernity must be treated as, at best, potential means toward considered human values, not vice versa. Thus, it is evident that development ethics is consistent with the Aristotelian vision of “a good life,” in the sense that “eudaimonia” is beyond material consumption and pleasure. “Eudaimonia” is a true indicator of the qualitative enrichment of human beings in all relevant aspects of human life.

Particularly Sen, in his work Sen (1999), employed an original normative outlook for the theory and practice of international development (Crocker, 2008, p. 16). During the 1990s, he co-authors with Martha Craven Nussbaum, a distinguished scholar of ancient Greek philosophy and political philosopher. In 1993, they published a seminal anthology in development ethics, *The Quality of Life* (Crocker, 2008, p. 16). Intellectually, Sen and Nussbaum are complementary. Nussbaum’s neo-Aristotelian elaboration of a capabilities ethic presents “a full human life, and talks in terms of real people, real life, not thin abstractions” (Gasper, 1997, p. 299). Nussbaum goes beyond Sen’s approach by developing an objective list of ten central human capabilities, in the absence of even one will hinder the acquisition of a good human life. Therefore, she argues that in the words of Deneulin (2002, p. 504) “The aim of a public policy is to ensure that all the citizens live a good human life, to give them opportunities to function in some way, and to leave each person free to make use or not of those capabilities.” Nussbaum’s capability approach is considered on the one hand as perfectionist, since her list of capabilities is to be promoted independently of human desires. On the other hand, it is liberal, in the sense that public policy is not necessary promoting those “perfections” of human life and it is rather up to each individual to choose, if they will make use of those opportunities (Deneulin, 2002). In line with this thought, Manfred Max Neef, a Chilean economist of German descent and his colleagues Antonio Elizalde and Martin Hopenhayn, developed in early 1990s a matrix of human needs. The argument is that the satisfaction of needs occurs at different levels and with different tensions at the individual level and that of the social group or the environment. Accordingly, poverty derives from material needs that are not adequately satisfied (Alkire, 2002).

Development ethics stands in front of the historical and intellectual challenge to identify and support policies that will use the achievements of human action to improve living standards and will abolish inequalities between and within countries. Development ethicists must follow a more up-to-date approach addressing environmental protection and sustainable development. The impact of climate change, from an ethical perspective, is extremely dangerous, especially for vulnerable societies. A contemporary ethical analysis requires first to answer the question “When are those risks dangerous and for whom?,” then to frame the issues in reference to human beings and social systems.

Moreover to concentrate on social stratification from the perspective of the poor and marginalized and those that gain from the development models that produce environmental crises (St.Clair, 2014, p. 287). St.Clair (2014) in this context restates the critical role of development ethics toward sustainable development that address climate change and stresses the fact that development ethics can advocate to policy makers the importance of taking immediate action, moving to policies that will mitigate climate changes negative outcomes. Besides, unveiling the urgency to act, St.Clair calls for a redefinition of the components of well-being and the question of “what is a good life?” are worth strong consideration. Remembering that the Aristotelian concept of “a good life” is two-dimensional, referring to economics and morals requiring both material prosperity and the virtuous life. Humanity can no longer rely on an endless supply of natural resources or space for increasing waste. Thus, policies that address over-consumption and careless use of resources is necessary to benefit all living beings and future generations. This task is new and most theorists (e.g. Amartya Sen) have not included these aspects in their approach to development (St.Clair, 2014, p. 287).

5. Conclusion

There have been a number of contributions in the broad area of ethics and economics that explore why normative issues cannot be separated from the “positive” study of economics. The ideas of a good society and justice, and how ethical values and norms influence and are influenced by economic behavior and outcomes are important when trying to understand development. As well, development economists have given attention to the meaning of development that goes beyond the focus of economic growth and even material well-being. This paper explored how development ethics is related to Aristotle’s ideas and how development ethics contributes and draws from Aristotle’s ideas. The paper is primarily designed to explicate the genesis and evolution of development ethics.

The inspiration of Aristotle’s ideas on development ethics is valuable. The philosophical roots of development ethics can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy, particular to Aristotle’s moral and political philosophy that evaluates the ends and means of development and the notions of “a good life” and “a good society.” The ethical concepts of “a good life” and “a good society” are the cornerstones in the definition of development. Thus, the relation of Aristotelian philosophy to development ethics shows that the Aristotelian vision of “a good society” inspires the contemporary development ethics perspective. Aristotle’s answer to the question “What should be the aim of human actions?” is the concept of “eudaimonia.” Aristotelian “politics” are acknowledged in development ethics as the means to accomplish the state of “a good society.”

There is no question that Aristotelian ethics has been an important source of inspiration for moral philosophers and those studying development ethics. While Aristotle’s discussions of eudaimonia and human flourishing, the good society and intrinsic and instrumental goods are very influential for Goulet and for virtue ethics and the capabilities approach, there are many other roots. Aristotelian Eurocentric foundation is one of the multiple roots of development ethics, even for Goulet who valued indigenous cultures and different religious traditions. Nonetheless, throughout the paper, we recognize that development ethics has in some ways advanced beyond Aristotle; for example, the distinction between the “ultimate” needs and means, and the focus on “human” flourishing as opposed to a more holistic view of harmony among humans with nature and the importance of the environment in its own right.

The world today is not ideal, but we must hope that we can mould the future into something better for all people. Therefore, both global and development ethics guides us toward policies using the accomplishments human action to ensure a global state that promotes “a good life” and “a good society” and perhaps even “eudaimonia.”

Note

1. For Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, we used the version Aristotle (1959, 2000). For Aristotle's *Politics*, we used the version Aristotle (1959). They are cited as (Aristotle, 2000) and (Aristotle, 1959), respectively.

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