

**GYGES! TAKE OFF THAT RING IF YOU WANT TO BE A MAN.
REFLECTIONS ON THE SELF, FRIENDSHIP AND MORAL
MOTIVATION IN ARISTOTLE**

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***Abstract:** Why be moral? Since Glaucon challenges Socrates to solve the mental experiment of the myth of Gyges, the question about how it is possible to establish the need for moral action through an inherent principle to the action continues to be a tough hurdle for moral philosophy. As is well known, the answer Socrates made along *The Republic*, and finally offers in Book X, is to observe that the clandestine realization of evil undermines the very soul, damaging the inner harmony between its parts. Thus, Plato's Socrates inaugurates a mode of reasoning that connects the question "Why be moral?" with the development of subjectivity, or self –argumentative strategy, which can certainly be heard in the contemporary voices of Harry Frankfurt and Christine Korsgaard. However, on this matter, Aristotle develops a very different approach, while at the same time retaining many similarities, during his reflections on friendship –*φιλία*. In the well-known books VIII and IX of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, we can find the ideas of (1) *φιλία* is an inter-subjective time by which the virtues as a common good are realized, since (2) it allows human subjectivity to unify the parts of the soul according to the rational, that is, overcoming *akrasia* –*ἀκράσια*. While Aristotle seems to continue that platonic argument form that connects morality with the development of self, intersubjectivity of its approach transforms the Platonic reasoning in such a way that ends up completely rephrasing the question "Why be moral?". At this point, we could argue the thesis that Aristotle would not agree with the usual way of addressing the myth of Gyges' ring, noting that, in this case, the illegal practice of evil in itself does not harm the soul, but what actually damages the soul is trying to perform an action without being seen by others, that is, pretending to act the process of denying or forgetting intersubjective relations. The man who uses the ring of Gyges in order to hide from inter-relationships undermines the conditions that enable the realization of his soul, regardless of the type of actions performed, since from the perspective of Aristotle we can only realize ourselves as virtuous men among virtuous men, that is, as individuals who have developed their selves through an unavoidable connection with their "other selves" –*ἄλλους εαυτοῦς*. Thus, Aristotle could say that the attempt to escape intersubjectivity*

is itself something of an evil man, whose realization of soul has been frustrated. These notes about a possible Aristotelian approach to the myth of Gyges are fruitful to revisit the question of why moral being, under which could help us review the individualist and atomistic terms in which has usually been approached by tradition and present.

Keywords: Aristotle, Gyges ring, friendship, moral motivation.

1. Introduction

The question about why one should be moral continues to stimulate philosophical reflection. Contemporary discussions about the feasibility of the moral foundation renew and, sometimes, repeat the terms of the problem. Perhaps there is some kind of intrinsic moral motivation to action, or conversely always act morally with regard to external factors?

During the apparent collapse of the great stories, the question “why be moral?” was met with great skepticism, which at the same time inspired new basis of proposals, usually by constructivists, who together try to connect the moral motivation with development of subjectivity, agency or individual, as can be seen in the reflections of Frankfurt, Korsgaard and O’Neill. However, such reasoning kind is not entirely new. Socrates has already connected moral motivation with the realization of the soul, –or self, if I am permitted- to solve the ingenious mental experiment proposed by Glaucon in Book II of *The Republic*.

The myth of Gyges ring can be understood as the main responsible for philosophical reflection has been forced to question the existence of some kind of inherent normativity to the action itself. As it is well known, the myth of Gyges is evoked by Glaucon in order to argue and illustrate the thesis that men do good for the sole purpose of avoiding punishment, since in the absence of punishment men immediately embrace their deepest desires, thus abandoning all morality. So is that the question arises: what is that impels us to behave morally when there is no punishment on the horizon?

Faced with the skeptical and realistic strategy of Glaucon, Socrates is forced to develop an extensive argument throughout *The Republic*, which ends in the famous thesis that connects the realization of the soul, or subjectivity, with moral motivation. Paraphrasing his words, it would not be advisable to do evil, even and especially clandestinely, by virtue of the fact that parts of the soul would lose his noble harmony, becoming the frustration of the ontological and moral fulfillment of man (*R.*, 614b3- 621d3).

But it is not in *The Republic* where this reasoning mode appears for the first time given that before Socrates had already reasoned in a very

familiar way. When in the *Gorgias*, Socrates tries to convince Callicles that doing injustice is worse than suffering it, his main argument rests on the idea of the absence of contradiction with oneself: “I do believe that it would better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than my single self should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me” (*G.*, 482b-c). Thus, acting unjustly threatens to jeopardize the realization of human subjectivity itself by departing from its intrinsic rational nature, which requires ontological harmony, and therefore moral justice.

The interesting thing about this pose of the problem of moral motivation is that assumes un-problematically the construction of the mental experiment, that is, the “design” of the problem. For Socrates and Plato, the action must be moral even when the individual is hiding from the eyes of others; and in fact, they seem to think this mental experiment, which isolates the individual from others, brings to light the strength of their argument.

However, if we consider the problem of the myth of the ring of Gyges from the point of view of Aristotle, we can get a very different approach: what would have been the thoughts of Aristotle if Glaucon had proposed him think about the myth of the ring of Gyges? This is the counterfactual scenario that is the context of these reflections. While it is impossible to know what would have happened by the lofty mind of Aristotle in such a situation, we can develop an Aristotelian approach that not only analyse and answer the mental experiment of Glaucon, but can also say something about how to raise the issue of moral standards. Located in this counterfactual scenario, I will argue that Aristotle could not meet the challenge of Glaucon under that would not agree with how to address the problem. Aristotle could never consent that a human being could act virtuously behind or hidden from the eyes of others. Intersubjectivity of Aristotle's thought is so obvious that accuse insurance Glaucon be referring to a case divine and not human. To show this I will develop, first, strongly intersubjectivists features of friendship – *φιλία*-conceived by Aristotle, in addition to its two main features: on the one hand, facilitate the development of self through contact are the *ἄλλα μου*, while on the other, to help overcome the *akrasia* –*ἀκράσια*- by emulating straight and virtuous actions performed by upright and virtuous. From these notions sheltered in the concept of *φιλία*, I can sketch an Aristotelian approach to object also how to address the problem of normativity of Gyges, can shed some light on contemporary philosophical discussions about the same topic.

2. The importance of the *σιλία* for the development of subjectivity

To develop the view that Aristotle *might* have had about the problem of Gyges, it is extremely useful to recur to his reflections on friendship –*σιλία*–, where we can see, among other things, the following main ideas: (1) the *σιλία* is an intersubjective moment by which the virtues are made as a common good (*EN.*, 1169b35 / 1170a), since (2) allows human subjectivity to unify the parts of the soul according to the rational, this is overcome *akrasia* – *ἀκράσια* (*EN.*, 1155a12-17).

The first idea emphasizes, perhaps like no other time in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; since man is a social and arranged by nature to live with others (*EN.*, 1169b-15), is not tenable that man can be fulfilled by itself, since it can only do that between men. Naturally, a “man” who can fulfil himself in the absence of other men would not be properly a man but a God. Under its strongly intersubjectivist approach, Aristotle cannot accept that a virtuous man can fulfil himself autarkical, but only within a society in contact with other virtuous men (*EN.*, 1105b). Not enough with this anthropological stance, Aristotle also believes that intersubjectivity is necessary for the self-knowledge. This is clearly evidenced when he says that it is much easier to study our neighbours than ourselves and our needs (*EN.*, 1169b33-35; *MM.*, 1213a11-18.). Aristotle’s observations made about the difficulty of self-knowledge arise in the middle of his discussion on *σιλία* and the need to have good friends. These reflections are an attempt to emphasize that it is only possible to know ourselves through our friends, by virtue of the fact that through them we can look at ourselves. But at the same time, this contemplation of ourselves through our friends is only possible if our friends are like us, because otherwise, what we would contemplate in them could not express what is in ourselves. The only friends who can play this role will be those that are an “another I” –*ἄλλα μου*–, as a mirror of ourselves (*EN.*, 1166a31-32, 1170a1-4; *EE.*, 1245a29-30, 34- 35; *MM.*, 1213a11 23-24). Only a virtuous friend is a *ἄλλα μου*, reflection of oneself as only their friendship is based on the essential love of *σιλία*, unlike his other two modalities: “The other two kinds of friendship, those of pleasure and utility, are based on accidental qualities of the friend”.

In obvious connection with the first idea, the second shows the constitutive role of subjectivity that self-knowledge allows through friendship. The first evidence of the performative role of *σιλία* may be in the order of the Books. The books in which appear the reflections on the *σιλία* extend to Book VII, in which Aristotle stops in particular detail on the phenomenon of *ἀκράσια*. While it is true that “an internal textual evidence” suggests that *Nicomachean Ethics* may not be a systematic study of ethics but rather a compilation of

notes and readings not intended for publication (Ross 1959: 183-227; Hardie 1980: 1 -10), on several occasions Aristotle seems to have in mind the idea that *φιλία* is the best way to overcome *ἀκράσια*:

[Friendship] helps the young, too, to keep from error; it aids older people by ministering to their needs and supplementing the activities that are failing from weakness; those in the prime of life it stimulates to noble actions – ‘two living together’ [*Iliad* x, 224] – for with friends we are more able both to think and to act.

In another passage Aristotle says that good friends not only seek the good of others but also help their friend to avoid error, and therefore, the evil man cannot aspire to such *φιλία* because he “has no steadfastness (for they do not even like to remain themselves), but become friends for a short time because they delight in each other’s wickedness” (*EN.*, 1159a37-b10). This passage again suggests that the *φιλία* demands and favours the *realization* of the soul, forging harmony between its parts and resulting in the individual as an *individual*, as a self *in-divisible*, which presupposes overcoming *ἀκράσια*¹.

3. An Aristotelian approach to the myth of Gyges

These notes are enough to get back on the myth of Gyges’ ring and reconsider it from an Aristotelian perspective. First, from an Aristotelian approach, we must observe the absence of intersubjectivity that the Glaucon’s experiment involves. The act of hiding from the eyes of others presupposes the possibility of acting by circumventing human relations, which leads, in a way, to the possession of some divine capacity. However, for the sake of the mental experiment, we could accept that someone could actually act in a morally right or wrong way behind others without necessarily implying a divine capacity, for example political corruption. In this case, knowing that the virtuous man can only fulfil himself between virtuous men, Aristotle might object that although the problem of moral motivation is legitimate at all, the mental experiment, since it presupposes that a man could fulfil himself as a man behind others. From this point of view, the problem is not whether the individual could do evil clandestinely but if he could actually do good clandestinely. So, radically reformulating the experiment of Glaucon, we might ask whether it is possible to behave virtuously behind others.

¹ Interesting reconstructions on the two main ideas are taken here from the concept of Aristotle *φιλία* in Jaquette Dale (2001) and Robert Sokolowski (2001) and Peter Simpson (2001).

At this point it is where Aristotle could see that the mental experiment does not do justice to the problem of moral normativity, under which presupposes the possibility to act virtuously in the absence of intersubjectivity. When Aristotle says that “Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do (...) it is doing just acts that just man is produced” (*EN.*, 1105b) suggests that if not for the intersubjective emulation of virtuous actions would be impossible to become virtuous. The assumption that the actions are those that carry out subjectivity involves contact and learning with others, which is overshadowed by the mental experiment of Glaucon. Thus, in the event that someone could act behind the backs of others, Aristotle could doubt about whether such an individual can act otherwise than wrong, because by choosing to hide from prying eyes has chosen, at the same time, a way in which it is not possible to meet a *ἄλλα μου* that point their mistakes, avoiding intersubjectivity, and thus thwarting the realization of his self.

When Gyges chooses to use the ring to secretly do evil while reveals his *akratic* condition, and under it, choose a path that will make it impossible to overcome it by denying its intersubjectivity, particularly the possibility of drawing friendships. And under it, when friendship is not arising there is a *ἄλλα μου* not arising, without *ἄλλα μου* there is no *εγώ*. If there is no *εγώ* there is *ἀκράσια*, which ends up tearing the being of the soul into two irreconcilable parts (*EN*, 1166b-15).

4. Contemporary disease of the myth of Gyges and the possible Aristotelian cure

Why I speak here of a “contemporary disease” of the myth of Gyges? It may sound strange, but it does not seem at all whenever one serving some of the distinguished contemporary philosophers who have tried to solve the problem of normativity. Given the foregoing considerations, we conclude that the attempt to address the question “Why be moral?” from a perspective that shelve intersubjectivity is in danger of falling into empty formalisms that all permit. An illustrative case is that of Christine Korsgaard, who, generally speaking, has proposed to address the problem from an almost identical approach to the platonic, resulting in an unwanted one in which, in the absence of a metaphysical coat, any value or action to satisfy the lax approach of the absence of contradiction.

The constructivist Kantianism of Korsgaard argues that the sources of normativity lie in a practical identity that the individual develops during the deliberative processes of “reflexive structure of consciousness”. Whenever the individual reflects on what should deal with this or that situation, he

discovers that the commandments considered and developed through reflection represent manifestations and expressions of self, which gives rise to a “practical identity” that connects the ego of the individual with its elaborate commandments. The need to comply with the commandments one made, thus melt, in the need to be faithful or loyal to oneself as *I* that to constitute needs not contradict. Under which the fundamental rule that would guide our moral reflections would be the principle of non-contradiction (Korsgaard 1996: conference III)².

Thus described, the thought of Korsgaard seems to update that thesis of Socrates that connects the moral obligation to respect or loyalty to one’s self. And in this sense that I understand that the myth of the ring Gyges seems to be a disease that afflicts some of the contemporary philosophical discussions: discussions about why be moral still assume individualistic outlook, atomised, and egocentric, leaving out intersubjectivity that constitutes identity in almost all its aspects. It is not unreasonable to think that addressing these ways the moral topic, Aristotle could object to its individualistic assumptions in addition to their blindness toward interpersonal relationships. Usually, the Kantian moral agency approaches do not incorporate the other as an interlocutor both external and internal in moral deliberation, which could well leave out a key development factor of virtue, and constitution of the self.

Something similar happens with the well-known approach of Harry Frankfurt. In its various formulations, Frankfurt proposed to conceive the agency through a hierarchy of volitional economy that involves the assumption of moral superiority of some second-order desires over other of first order. The moral superiority of second-order desires was justified by its depth and closeness to the core of personal identity, which at the same time highlighted the *care* of the individual to a plan of good life (Frankfurt 2006: pp. 4 ff.). However, this approach also leaves out intersubjectivity.

Clearly, in Book III of *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle develops a theory of personal moral agency. But unlike Korsgaard and Frankfurt, Aristotle understood that the *ἄλλα μου* does not disappear during the practice of deliberation. The other, if it is not *in situ* interacting with the agent, would be internalized by the latter as an “internal dialogue”. This is the only way in which the agent can carry with himself the learning about himself and the virtuous developed during contact with the upright and virtuous men. And this is the reason that intersubjectivity that teaches what is good and how to

² For a detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of Korsgaard’s proposal see Fleitas (2015).

appear as a fundamental pillar of the thought of Aristotle, which not only enhances the other's position, but also puts into question all individualistic approaches to of the agency.

In this sense, the *proaíresis* properly emphasizes the idea of total vitality that all moral action includes Aristotle. *Proaíresis* has been translated by "intention", "decision", "election" or "preferential election", although none of these terms do its justice. As well noted by several specialists, the *proaíresis* emphasizes not so much the reference to achieve a particular purpose in connection with particular actions, but rather, the reference to those purposes of medium and long term delineating a certain total representation of the good life for rational agent of the case, which certainly involves a life plan as well as the relationship with others³.

On the other hand, the reservation that the thought of Aristotle might show against selfish moral approaches also leads us to wonder about how it was possible that the myth of Gyges has conditioned so much our approaches to the topic. By way of illustration, the famous objections of Hegel to Kant also give us evidence about how, almost imperceptibly, the myth of Gyges has tinged the way we address the problem of why moral being. In § 135 of his *Philosophie des Recht*, Hegel objected to Kant that his Categorical Imperative, insofar as it seeks to move away from the world of life inclinations sheltering substantivity of values, becomes a mere reified conceptual logicism. In this context, we could see that the Kantian attempt to address the topic of morality from an individualistic perspective has led him to repeat the problem of the myth of Gyges: why be moral if the punishment is not on the horizon? In fact, from the Aristotelian language we could interpret the objection of Hegel to Kant as a legitimate reserve against the possibility of solving the moral problem from the first person, so, how could we know the values that are at stake during a Kantian-moral reflection if not through other sources and substantive value? From an Aristotelian reading, Hegel seems to want to tell Kant and the followers of his distinction between inclination and rationality that an individual reaches his agency *if and only if* it is done through contact and learning that gets in its interaction with others, reaching knowledge of what is valuable, *conditio sine qua non* could then be interested in the realization of that moral test that Kant ingeniously formulated.

For reasons of space and thematic relevance it is impossible to reconstruct a history of ethics that exposes the influence it has had the myth

³ For the reconstruction of holistic ethical scope of Aristotelian *proaíresis*, see Anscombe (1965: 143-144) and Vigo (1996: 249-285).

of Gyges' ring in philosophical discussions. That is why I content myself here to point out that an Aristotelian approach about the ethical problem of Gyges forces us to incorporate human relations as a constitutive and indispensable element of the problem of why being moral, because to forget or deny it could condemn not have other alternative but to do evil clandestinely.

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