

ARISTOTLE AND RACISM

A Paper

Presented to

John B. Howell

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for CNETH 4313

by

Billy Marsh

March 7, 2007

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The essence of ethics is the outworking of practical reasoning. This concept may involve various characteristics such as duty, good, right, virtue, freedom, and etc.¹ Ethics in its very nature is an activity. Therefore, the end of ethical systems is proper application of its values. Thus, developed reasoning executes its practical implications on areas of sociological and political problems.² Men such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and John Mill have been major philosophical contributors to the realm of ethics. In particular, Aristotle's views concerning virtue have been greatly popularized. One of the foundational works concerning moral ethical systems is the Aristotelian virtue theory presented in Aristotle's book entitled *The Nicomachean Ethics*. In this work, Aristotle exposed his idealistic teachings for interpreting the meaning of life and the end of man. However, in light of the previous understanding of the function of ethics, Aristotle's arguments do not rest in peace aloft somewhere in the academic mind. His reasoning is meant to be applied inside the culture as well as in life in general.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Aristotle's virtue theory in order to evaluate whether or not his ethical system is a proper component for the process of racial reconciliation. This paper will accomplish this task in three main ways. First, the issue of

¹Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 126.

²Ibid.

racism will be introduced within a particular context. Second, using Aristotle's virtue theory, the problem of racism will be assessed in terms of understanding the manner in which he would have responded. And third, Aristotle's moral ethics will be evaluated in light of his perceived response as to be a viable theory for racial reconciliation.

Essentially, racism is how people view a certain class or race of people. Racial prejudice illuminates the attitude towards those people highlighted; and racial discrimination is the ability to enforce and enact the ideals expressed under the influence of a particular prejudice.³

Racial prejudice and discrimination extends far beyond the typical Americanized perception of an ongoing battle between white and black people. For example, Nazi Germany shared a nationalistic approach to racism. Their ideals concerning the Jews led to its inevitable outcome, namely genocide. In a similar respect, the establishment of the United States resulted in a tumultuous upheaval and overturning of the Native American Indians.⁴ However, for the purpose of this paper, the topic of racism will be focused exclusively upon the American trial of white and black racial relations. This limited viewpoint will allow for constructing a narrower context in order to view racism in a stable and precise manner for further evaluation in light of the Aristotelian virtue theory.

Due in large part to the role of slavery in American history, racism is predominantly understood as the oppression of black people at the hands of white people.

³David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw, eds., *Issues and Applications*, vol. 2, *Readings in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 262-3.

⁴*Ibid.*, 261-2

This disjuncture in the society's core has allowed for various sorts of injustices to be put upon the black Americans.⁵ For instance, black men are seven times more likely to be murdered than white men. A black man has a better chance of being sentenced to death than a white man convicted of the same murder charge. In addition, due to the deprivation of various privileges, black women typically live five years less than white women, and black men die seven years earlier than white men.⁶

In addition, economic factors continue to tell the same story. In 1998, the average income for a black household was \$25,351 while the average income of a white household rested at \$40,912. As an attempt to level out the economic status of non-white male Americans, the government instituted Affirmative action in the late 1960's. This movement was an intentional stratagem for creating opportunities in colleges, universities, and businesses towards the disadvantaged groups in American culture.⁷ However, in this effort to create fairness in the economic and political system, a "reverse discrimination" occurred within the public mindset.⁸ Throughout this system whites were disadvantaged due in part to its deliberate inclusiveness while blacks felt degraded.⁹

Other demonstrations of the results of racism in America appear in informal ways. Housing segregation occurs through social exclusion and ostracism. Meanwhile, churches and other organizations such as country clubs and voluntary associations

⁵Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 391.

⁶Ibid., 391-3.

⁷Ibid., 393-4.

⁸Clark and Rakestraw, *Readings in Christian Ethics*, 266.

⁹Ibid .

practice informal exclusion towards non-whites.¹⁰ Despite the apparent one-sidedness on display, racism is never attached solely to one particular group as the victim and another as the one at fault. In a broader view, instances of racism issue forth from the black community towards the white population in various forms as well. However, this study is intended to set up a scenario based upon American heritage in order to provide a working-base for Aristotle's virtue theory to be applied.

The Aristotelian ethic revolves around a specific ideal. Opposed to later developments in ethics which based themselves primarily off of the actions of man, Aristotle's system places the emphasis upon the one performing the actions. In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle posits that every action performed aims at some good.¹¹ According to this view, every activity such as sports, the arts, politics, leisure, and ambition has in mind the good as its end. Aristotle further defines the "good" as happiness. Within this concept of virtue, Aristotle conveys the need for establishing that man has an overall purpose or function. He develops a teleological basis for understanding the meaning of life. Every part of creation has a function or *telos*.¹² Therefore, since happiness serves as the ultimate end of every action performed by man, then the supreme end of man is happiness.¹³

Immediately, at the outset of Aristotle's ethic one may account for his virtue theory discrediting racism and vowing for racial reconciliation. All races and classes are

¹⁰Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 397-8.

¹¹Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 3.

¹²The Greek word *telos* means "end or "purpose".

¹³Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 6-13.

included in the assertion that the primary purpose of mankind is happiness. According to Aristotle, humans are separated from the rest of creation due to their ability to reason. Therefore, whether a person is in a minority or of a different color, each one is equally set apart from the rest of creation based upon his or her capacity for reason. Hence, the ability to reason requires the necessity for a person to fulfill his or her main goal of existence, namely the pursuit and reception of happiness in virtuous activity. This fact entails that discrimination towards different peoples is unwarranted due to the truth that equality amongst others exists in the universality of mankind's chief end. Furthermore, all humans have the right to be happy as well as to freely pursue this supreme satisfaction of the soul.

In the pursuit of happiness, a person acts out in various virtues as a result of reason. These virtuous acts advance the attainment of happiness. Thus, the acts themselves are never the end. However, happiness is not to be attained for the sake of one's self-satisfaction alone. The universality of mankind's purpose entails that happiness is most perfectly experienced in a corporate setting. Aristotle supported this point by establishing that happiness is self-sufficient. The essence of happiness implies that it is the most desirable aspect of life. Therefore, all reasonable humans capable of actions ought to pursue the joint happiness of mankind. Aristotle says, "By self-sufficient we mean not what is sufficient for oneself alone living in solitary life, but something that includes parents, wife and children, friends and *fellow-citizens* in general; for man is by nature a *social being*."¹⁴ This theory does not allow the direct prejudice or discrimination of differing groups of humanity for the sole happiness of those in superior rank. This type

¹⁴Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 14. Emphasis added.

of ethic is flawed in light of Aristotle's teaching because of the selfishness and maliciousness inherent in its own unsociable end. For Aristotle, happiness is a common goal best attained through the performance of virtuous activity. Furthermore, racial reconciliation in America is the best solution under the umbrella of Aristotelian ethics on account of its virtuous effort to seek the equality and happiness of all its citizens.

The Aristotelian virtue theory indicates that in order for a person to achieve happiness one must develop the habit of virtuous activity. According to Aristotle, developing the characteristics indicative of a virtuous person is dependent upon carefully choosing virtuous activities in which to participate. Because the moral virtues, unlike the intellectual virtues, must be formed through repetition and habit, one must be allowed the right to freely perform virtuous deeds in a good disposition through the observation of others' virtuous activity.

Racism hinders this crucial step of achieving happiness in life. Constant degradation permitted in society reduces those suspected as inferior to a state less than human. This attitude discourages the habit of good character and virtuous activity because of the temptation to react in spite and retaliation towards a person's oppressors. Once again, Aristotle posits that social virtue is a prerequisite for happiness because of how it affects the honing of our habitual deeds. With this idea in mind Aristotle states, "Now this holds good also of the virtues. It is the way that we behave in our dealings with other people that makes us just or unjust . . ." ¹⁵ Moreover, Aristotle affirms that the way in which people interact with others determines what kind of virtuous person he or she will be. The disposition of the particular habit dictates whether or not the deed or the

¹⁵Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 31-2.

person is virtuous. Obviously, racism in its very core is an unjust model for how to socialize within the culture; therefore, inside of the Aristotelian virtue theory racial discrimination seems to be out of place in the pursuit of happiness whether for the part or the whole.

One final point in disapproval of racism present in Aristotle's ethical system is his model of determining means. All virtues are means. A mean is the midpoint of a particular virtue which has the possibility of slipping into excess or deficiency. This aspect of Aristotle's virtue theory is relevant because of how he views excess and deficiency otherwise known as vice. For Aristotle, vices reside in the category of evil. Only the mean of a particular virtue is in a state of good.¹⁶ Therefore, habitual practice of virtuous deeds with respect to virtuous dispositions helps discover the mean resulting in the good. This process enables a person to become virtuous and further his or her pursuit of happiness.

However, in light of the fact that racism is a product of excess and deficiency, this truth declares that its nature is evil and therefore unethical. Racism entails deeds and dispositions that are not products of means. For example, temperance is an important virtue for Aristotle. The excess of temperance is insensibility and the deficiency is licentiousness.¹⁷ Without upholding temperance in a state of mean, insensibility as well as licentiousness permits a person to develop a prejudice and to discriminate towards others. Licentiousness allows a person to act out of character in an evil way for selfish pleasures. Also, insensibility supports the hardness of heart towards the feelings and

¹⁶Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 41.

¹⁷Ibid., 285.

states of others in society. Thus, a racist has the freedom to participate in an attitude of prejudice manifesting itself in discriminating actions towards whomever he or she chooses. Without temperance, a person is not regulated in the effects of his or her relationships. Furthermore, virtue as a mean is necessary for developing the right actions and feelings which ought to lead to the extinction of racism that is typical of American culture, namely the white and black social problem.¹⁸

In conclusion, the Aristotelian virtue theory unites all people under a common purpose which may only be achieved by a joint effort. Aristotle's model does not allow for racism to exist without conviction. Although his ethical system appears to be somewhat heavily ideological, this concept supports America's quest for racial reconciliation. White and black people alike need to readdress the universality of their humanity and the implications thereof. A better understanding of equality in light of a universal end such as Aristotle's "happiness" would entail encouragement and ambition for all citizens to cooperate with each other for a universal good.

The biblical perspective is in agreement with the result of Aristotle's evaluation of racism. For example, Jesus ministering to the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-43 depicts the reconciliation of a Jew and a Samaritan. Likewise, other examples are prevalent in the New Testament such as the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19, Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10, and the theological statements concerning racial and ethnic equality of the apostle Paul such as Colossians 3:11. Therefore, racial reconciliation must be sought not only for the sake of fulfilling humanity's creative role, but also fulfilling its redemptive role as well.

¹⁸Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 42.

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