

## ARISTOTLE'S ETHICAL THEORY & MODERN HEALTH CARE

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### ABSTRACT

The Greek physician of antiquity - Hippocrates (460 - 356 B.C.) is called the Father of Modern Medicine and the Hippocratic Oath to which doctors of modern medicine traditionally and formally express their allegiance, forms the basic foundation of medical ethics. The tradition of Western ethical philosophy began with the ancient Greeks. From Socrates (469-399 B.C.) and his immediate successors, Plato (427-347 B.C.) and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), there is a clear line of continuity, through Hellenistic period (from the death of Alexander the Great (323 B.C.) to the end of Ptolemaic dynasty (30 B.C.) and the Roman annexation of Egypt - broadly post-Aristotelian) and medieval thought to the present day. But the society has qualitatively and quantitatively changed since the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Society, today, is just a collection of discrete individuals, each with his or her own purposes and interests. Hence it has become almost imperative to apply the principle of autonomy to issues in the ethics of health care. The aim of this short essay is, therefore, an attempt to explore the relevance, if any, of Aristotelian ethical theory to the modern health care.

Aristotle's ethical theory, in the main, represents the prevailing opinions of educated and experienced men of his day in Athens and other city-states of Greece. Ethics is derived from the Greek word "Ethos" meaning custom and, in antiquity, it was a systematic account of the principles by which decent, well-behaved citizens would regulate their conduct. Even in those days, society was not homogeneous. In the city-state of democratic Athens, the citizens with voting rights numbered about 50,000 and the slaves have been calculated at about 100,000 (Tofallis

1978). This socio-political scenario in Greece of the day reflects the limitations of Aristotle's ethics and its relevance to the modern society of today.

Aristotle's concept of justice in his most famous ethical treatise "NICOMACHEAN ETHICS" is still widely prevalent (Russell, 1946). He thought that each thing or person had its or his proper sphere, to overstep which is unjust. Some men, in virtue of their character and aptitudes, have a wider sphere than others, and there is no injustice if they enjoy a greater share of happiness (eudaimonia). This view is taken for granted in Aristotle.

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In a society, as it is today in most parts of the world, particularly in this country, this concept of justice has definite relevance to the distribution or 'availability of resources in the health market. Ability to pay is the determining factor, discrete individualism rules over everything else in modern health care.

Autonomy and the principle of respect for autonomy is important in contemporary medical ethics. Autonomy (meaning "self rule") is the capacity to think (autonomy of thought), decide (autonomy of will) and act (autonomy of action) on the basis of such thought and decision, freely and independently and without any hindrance. Autonomy is, therefore, a subclass of freedom or liberty, but not all freedom or liberty is autonomy. According to Aristotle, the concept of autonomy may be termed as man's specific rationality. Thus, the role of doctors is to provide good expert advice concerning various available options and then to support the patient's or his/ her legal guardian's (when the patient is incapable of exercising his or her autonomy). Coercion or malicious way of influencing in such matters by doctors is not acceptable. This is the usual norm in current medical practice in this country.

Aristotle's "teleology" (Greek-telos, 'end', 'purpose') flavours all his work, including his ethical theory. The "end" of man is to live "well" or "happily" (Eudaimonia); the state arises naturally as assisting and working towards that end; and the various institutions of the state should be judged by the standard of how far they assist the

state to achieve its purpose. Aristotle's celebrated description of man - a "politikon zoon" - an animal that naturally lives in a state - "Polis". Medical or health care system as one of the essential institutions of the state should also assist that state to achieve its purpose, in this case, the "happiness" or eudaimonia for the individual citizen. "Eudaimonia" or "happiness" is "a virtuous activity of the soul".

On "Virtue"(arete), Aristotle classified human character into five types, ranging from the great souled man to the moral monster. Medicine has a moral tradition dating back to Hippocrates and Galen (131-200 A.D.). Good health of the society depends on the good health of the individual member of the society. Aristotle's concept on virtues could be the guiding philosophy of modern health care management.

Modern health care systems are different in different countries. In most countries, health care is a purchasable, private commodity, depending on the individual's ability to pay. Private medicine, as in the U.S.A. is the classic example of this laissez faire medicine. In Great Britain, the National Health Service (N.H.S.) established in 1948 is undergoing tremendous changes and is slowly and steadily proceeding towards privatisation. When Britain is departing from the socialist health system, the U.S.A. is rushing fast today to some sort of socialist health system. The Marxist doctrine - "from each according to his ability to each according to his needs" is still lurking in the psyche of those

who formulate health care systems in different countries. This is what is likely to happen in the U.S.A. in the near future under the proposed health care system.

In Great Britain, market economy is guiding every system - health, medical, education, etc. Patients, rather clients (from the Greek word "Klin" meaning 'bed') are consumers in the health market. Trust hospitals are providers. Ability to pay for the care is the criteria. Individual choice in the selection of doctor or health care or hospital gets priority. The care needs to be cost-effective. The carers - hospital managers, fund-holding general practitioners (G.P.'s) are shopping around in the market place - the corridors of private and Trust hospitals. It is just? Just or unjust, market forces will regulate accessibility to hightech modern medicine on the basis of people's ability to pay. All these fit well into Aristotle's concept of distributive justice.

Aristotle's concept of doctors is as follows (Temkin, 1953) and is still prevalent in the world of health and medical care in many parts of the world:

1. Ordinary Practitioners (Demiourgos)
2. Master of the Craft (Architektonikos)
3. Man who studied medicine as part of general education.

The third category of doctors fits into the making process of modern doctors. Others are self-styled or self-trained or quack doctors/village healers, still prevalent in many parts of the developing world. Doctors of today, in private practice, may select their patients or clients according

to their financial ability to pay, but not according to social status. It is money and money alone which holds the key in selection. It fits well into libertarian and utilitarian theories of justice so long as it is approved by the individual's purse.

Justice is one of the central concerns of philosophers and Aristotle's formal principle of justice is still widely accepted. The formal principle of justice or equality attributed to Aristotle is that equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally in proportion to the relevant inequalities (Aristotle, Politics, Book3, Chapter 9, P.193, Penguin Books, London, 1988). But this Aristotelian principle of justice with demands for equal consideration, fairness and impartiality is interpreted by different authorities in different ways to justify their own thinking on the matter.

With enormous scientific advancement in the 20th century, medical treatment has become expensive. Costs prohibit the supply of hightech medicine universally. Resources are scarce. There is disparity between supply and demand. Morality dominates the allocation of rare resources, Inequality in health care is the result in the end. Private medicine flourishes for the rich few and shies away from the maximum number of people and thus unequals are treated unequally. On top of everything else, market economy or forces rule the world of modern health care. In this respect, privatisation of health services seems to be consistent with Aristotle's ethical theory on distributive justice. But it is in conflict with the prevalent situation

in modern health care in Britain and also in some West European countries where the cradle-to-grave welfare state is considered as a mark of a civilized society. Recession and again population threaten to make it all unaffordable. It is a moral dilemma for the society and the state. In this sphere, 'Aristotle's concept of distributive justice is under considerable strain.

Aristotle's concept of good health is quite clear. When health is destroyed by diseases, the body needs purification through medicines, just as sick souls need purification through music - Aristotle saw health as harmony - proper attunement of the body. To him, health was "Summum bonum" ("Eudaimonia", "happiness") - it was identical with happiness, the aim towards which all human endeavour should be directed. This is the essence of all health care systems globally even today. Aristotle's ethics also dealt with practical issues in day-to-day medical care, which doctors frequently face, even today.

Suicide, according to Aristotle, is a cowardly act because it gives in to bodily pain. Aristotelian school condemned suicide. The modern stand on suicide remains the same and is expressed as accidental mis-adventure. Aristotle advocates that abortion should be performed before the foetus attained animal life; after that, he no longer considers abortion compatible with holiness (Aristotle, Politics, Book VII, 1335b/19). Abortion is still a contro-

versial issue.

In modern times, the physician has become the confidant of the healthy and the sick, the expert of social agencies, the counsellor of the judge, the authority to whom even the planners of foreign and domestic policies look up. To the Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, the Physician was no advisor on morals, justice or politics. To them, medicine was not another form of education or philosophy. However, it needs to be mentioned that in modern health care, which is more complicated and sophisticated than was prevalent in antiquity, the physician's advisory role over many of the above-mentioned matters is not only acceptable, but essential. Escaping capital punishment for murder on grounds of diminished responsibility due to mental insanity diagnosed by relevant medical experts is a good example which is at variance with the physicians role in Greek antiquity.

In Greek antiquity, medicine was not an educational force, nor doctor an educator, though he might have identified with the ideal of health. According to Aristotle, the physician can tell men how to be healthy; the decision is in their own hands (Aristotle, Topica, II, 2,110a 19). It is a clear expression of respect for autonomy of the patient. This is a very important aspect of modern health care.

The principle of medical confidentiality - that doctors must keep their patient's

secrets - is one of the most venerable moral obligations of medical ethics. The Hippocratic Oath enjoins:

"Whatever, in connection with my professional practice, or not in connection with it, I see or hear, in the life of men, which ought not to be spoken of abroad, I will not divulge, as reckoning that all such should be kept secret".

Indeed, according to World Medical Association (W.M.A.) International Code of Medical Ethics, it is an absolute requirement, even after the patient's death (B.M.A. 1984). In France, the obligation of medical confidentiality is enshrined in law as

an absolute medical privilege which no-one, including the patient, is allowed to override, even when to do so would be in the patient's interest (Havard, 1985).

In a conflict between confidentiality and telling the truth, according to Aristotle "the decision rests with the perception" of the doctor (quoted by Ross, 1930). That means that the final decision in such a controversy rests with the doctor to make on the basis of the doctor's understanding of "the greatest balance of right over wrong". This interpretation is broadly consistent with both French and W.M.A.'s position and also with the basic tenets of Aristotelian ethics.

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सारांश

## अरिस्टोटल के नीतिपरक सिद्धान्त तथा आधुनिक स्वास्थ्य संरक्षण

— सीसिर के मजुम्दार

प्रचीन कालीन यूनानी चिकित्सक हिप्पोक्रेट्स को आधुनिक चिकित्सा शास्त्र का पिता कहा जाता है । हिप्पोक्रेटीय शपथ, जिसके प्रति आधुनिक चिकित्सा विज्ञान के चिकित्सक परम्परागत एवं औपचारिक रूप से अपनी निष्ठा व्यक्त करते हैं, आधुनिक चिकित्सात्मक नीतियों को मूल आधार प्रदान करती है । 18 वीं शती के अन्त में आयी औद्योगिक क्रांति के पश्चात समाज गुणात्मक तथा परिमाणात्मक रूप से बदल गया है । आज का समाज ऐसे पृथक पृथक व्यक्तियों का केवल एक समूह है जिनके अपने अपने उद्देश्य एवं स्वार्थ हैं । अतः लगभग यह अत्यावश्यक हो गया है कि स्वायत्तता के सिद्धान्तों को स्वास्थ्य रक्षापरक नीतियों के विषयों पर लागू करना चाहिये ।