
EXTERNAL GOODS IN ARISTOTLE: THE DILEMMA OF NIGERIAN POLITICS

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Introduction

In *Politics*, Aristotle embarks on the study of politics - human actions within the context of a political community. First, he needed to understand the reasons for such an experiment for community living, their actions, and the attendant consequences. Secondly, he employs his findings as a catalyst for achieving the *telos* of the political society (the good life), using the gifts of fortune – the external goods. However, Aristotle’s teaching on human conduct in *Politics* searches what such endeavor entails – the goal of life and its components.

The goal of life Aristotle teaches(is) attainable only within the context of a political community. This goal, identified in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as *eudaimonia*, translates as happiness but better expressed as flourishing or wellness. Hence, happiness is classified as living well and acting well.² It requires an active life of virtue as its primary component. With virtuous action serving as its primary component,³ happiness requires other factors for its realization. Therefore, this paper argues that external goods are not the primary components of happiness but may contribute to its attainment. It questions our apparent dilemma given the end of politics (common good), not minding the abundance of such gifts of fortune. The abuse of external goods by Nigerian politicians to the detriment of the people motivates this paper. It confirms the teaching of Aristotle that mere possession of external goods cannot translate into the common good if not anchored on values – virtuous character.

Aristotle, on external goods

In Book one (8) of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle delineates three classes of goods to strengthen his discourse in

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²Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a 18-19.

³Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 7-8.

chapter 1 on the object of life. They include the external goods, the goods of the body and those of the soul. Before this classification of goods, he discussed the object of life; through this, he arrived at the (good) of the soul - happiness (*eudaimonia*), defined as; "an activity of the soul by virtue."⁴ Hence, such good (of the soul) include the excellent states of the intellect or character (our positive feelings and affections). Aristotle argues for their supremacy over other goods; "of these, we say that the goods of the soul are [so] in the strictest and fullest sense, and we rank actions and activities of the soul as goods of the soul."⁵ As an activity, Aristotle, at the end of his function argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, (1, 7) agrees that the activities flowing from these virtues are the primary components of happiness. As such, virtuous acts are not all required for human flourishing; they serve as underlying elements, a pillar on which other factors must stand. Therefore, to exercise complete virtue, external goods are needed; that they may not be diminished or impaired while living out the science of politics whose end it serves. Consequently, Aristotle investigates the role of those other goods in the pursuit of happiness: "It seems clear that happiness needs the addition of external goods, for it is difficult if not impossible to do fine deeds without any resources."⁶

External goods for Aristotle are those things (regarded as good) but lie outside our mind, body, feelings, and character. They aid and sustain human flourishing within the political society. They include wealth, friends, political power, noble birth, honour and good children. Their acquisition Aristotle teaches is not overly dependent on human efforts. Hence, he regards them as gifts of fortune: "Now, that everyone strives for living well and for happiness is evident; it is open to some to achieve these things, but to others not, on account of some (sort of) fortune or nature."⁷ By this, Aristotle teaches that chance could impose control on the external factors required for happiness. One can freely choose his/her friends, but it is beyond his capacity to determine the friend's disposition regarding their

⁴Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a 17-18.

⁵Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098b 14-15.

⁶Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a 31-33.

⁷Aristotle, *Politics*, VII, 13. 1331b 40-41; The exhaustible nature of the external goods, and the fact that their availability, is not dependent on personal efforts as such corroborates Aristotle's qualification of them as gifts of fortune. Arthur Nwankwo corroborates Aristotle's stand in his description of the external goods as material fortunes. Cf. Arthur A. Nwankwo, *Nigeria. The Challenge of Biafra*, London, Rex Collings, 1972, 16.

friendship. We can also strive to stay healthy by taking precautions, but we cannot predict our health conditions, nor the occurrence of natural disasters and their impacts on us. Therefore, human nature has its limitations; certain factors and events are beyond our control. However, whether we become happy or not does not depend on chance. It is dependent on knowledge and choice.⁸ It (knowledge) enables us to perfect ourselves by virtuous acts, so strengthened further for better choices after due deliberations regarding community affairs – politics.

On goods of the body, Aristotle considers them as those desirable qualities that pertain to our physical condition. They include health, strength and appearance (good looks).⁹ On the impact of these qualities on us, Aristotle argues; “there are also certain advantages, such as good ancestry or good children or personal beauty, the lack of which mars our felicity; for a man is scarcely happy if he is very ugly to look at.”¹⁰ Lack of good looks classified in the *Rhetoric*¹¹ as a good of the body is alluded to here as one of those external goods that could diminish human happiness. Be that as it may, external goods Aristotle teaches cannot stand as primary factors for human happiness; virtue is needed to enhance the role of external goods for human flourishing. Therefore, we regard the external (goods) and those of the body as one, tracing their impact in present-day Nigerian politics.

External goods and Nigerian politics

Politics from its Greek origin concerns human affairs within the ambience of a political community. As a social being, Aristotle teaches that man naturally involves himself in the art of politics – decisions regarding his welfare in society. First, to realize the greatest of his human capacity (reason). He also needs to share in the administration of justice and the corresponding advantages to facilitate human flourishing.¹² In the context of Nigerian politics, Achebe corroborates such human interaction, contending that the discourse on getting things better is all about politics.¹³ However,

⁸Aristotle, *Politics*, VII, 13. 1332a 31-33.

⁹Cf. T. D. Roche, “Happiness and the external goods”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, ed., Ronald Polansky, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014, 36-37.

¹⁰Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099b1-4.

¹¹Aristotle, *Rhetoric* i 5.1360b22.

¹²Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 2. 1253a2-19.

¹³Chinua Achebe, *There was a country. A personal history of Biafra*, New York, Penguin Press, 2012, 58; In his own capacity as a political theorist, Straus argues

to make things better by realizing the end of political actions (the common good), proper use of the factors necessary for such achievement is required.

Aristotle considers external goods as those things regarded as beneficial but lies outside of our mind, body, feelings, and character. As indicated above, they include wealth, friends, political power, noble birth, honour and good children. In Nigeria, we can group such external goods under two headings: Natural resources and human resources. The natural resources include crude oil, coal, agricultural produce, good weather, etc., while the human resources include a sizable population, with individuals variedly talented. It is interesting to note, that post-independence Nigeria before the incursion of the military into politics could be referred to as the era of statesmen.¹⁴ Their commitment to the common good reflected in a competitive development across the nation using the external goods like mineral resources, agricultural produce etc.¹⁵ Today, our dilemma is not lack of these external goods, but the unwillingness to harness them properly. It is traced to our eroded value system, spurred by unhealthy competition/ethnic sentiments:

Public servants helped themselves freely to the nation's wealth. The social malaise in Nigerian society was political corruption. The structure [...] was such (that), there was an inbuilt power struggle among the ethnic groups, and of course, those [...] in power wanted to stay [forever]. The easiest, [and the] simplest way to retain it, even in a limited area, was to appeal to tribal sentiments.¹⁶

that political actions are aimed at either preservation or change. When we preserve, we discourage a change for the worse, and when desiring to change, we opt for something better. All political action he argues is guided by the thought for the good. Cf. Leo Strauss, *What is political philosophy? And other studies*, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1988, 10.

¹⁴In the *Statesman*, Plato describes the statesman as one who has the expert knowledge of how to rule justly and well to the best interest of the citizens. Cf. Plato, *Statesman*, in *Complete Works of Plato*, eds. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1997, 311 c.

¹⁵The effect of the statesmanship of our forebearers in the political arena were eloquent. In the east we had Premier breweries in Aba, cashew nuts industries at AkamaOghe, the Presidential hotel, the University of Nigeria Nsukka etc. In the north, the Bayero University stands as an evidence where as in the west, we had the first radio station and the liberty stadium in Ibadan.

¹⁶Chinua Achebe, *There was a country*, 51.

Tribal sentiments Achebe indicates have continued to undermine the connection amongst the peoples of Nigeria *viz a viz* external goods. It is of such intensity that mutual distrust affects control of our natural resources. And for the selfish interest of greedy politicians, such misconduct evolved a system of stagnation described by Critchley as the lowest common denominator politics.¹⁷ Politics in that form perfectly describes Nigerian politics today. It is utilitarian and serves only individual interests at the expense of the common good. It contradicts Aristotle and his teaching on external goods. The outcome is a nation with no identity, and by implication, no common aspiration: One that has degenerated, not only to the Hobbesian state of nature but to the apolitical community criticized by Aristotle for upholding the despotism of the body.¹⁸

At the heart of Aristotle's *Politics* is his teaching that despotism (of the body) should give way to reason and its attendant political rule.¹⁹ He endorses and defends political rule, that elected officers may bridge the gap between the people (and external goods) through the common good. However, the reverse is the case in Nigeria. Like the Legend of Midas, Nigerian politicians have turned our common patrimony into gold. Therein lies the dilemma as Aristotle questions: "How can that be [a]wealth of which a man may have great wealth and yet [his people] perish in hunger."²⁰ Nigerian politics today negates every bit of his (Aristotle) teaching on the connection between the people and external goods. Wanton accumulation of wealth through embezzlement of public funds is a way of life. Hence our public and educational sectors reflect the adverse effects of this misconduct: It points to the lack of virtues/values necessary according to Aristotle for translating the external goods for the common good of all. Such values traded at the altar of personal interests against the common good include social consciousness, discipline, respect for traditional values, justice, and worse still, loss of the sense of the sacredness of life.

¹⁷Cf. Peter Critchley, "Aristotle and the public good", in *Industry and Europe: Problems and Uncertainties in a Global Economic Environment: Vol I The Integration of the European Community* [e-book] Available through Academia website <<http://mmu.academia.edu/PeterCritchley/Books>>.

¹⁸Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 3. 1253b1-1254a1-15.

¹⁹ Political rule for Aristotle means ruling and being ruled in turn. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 12. 1260a7-9; IV, 6. 1292b26-31.

²⁰Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 9. 1257b14-15.

All these allude to the Aristotelian argument that values are necessary for the proper management of external goods.

Conclusion

This paper addressed the teaching of Aristotle on external goods, highlighting its impact on Nigerian politics. External goods are those natural endowments that are by their nature good but lie outside of our mind, body, feelings, and character. They include wealth, friends, political power, noble birth, honour and good children. As natural endowments, they aid the realization of the end of the political community – (*eudaimonia*), happiness or human flourishing. Not minding their role in human flourishing, Aristotle argues that they are secondary and not primary components of human happiness.

However, given the abundance of these external goods in Nigeria, one wonders why human flourishing seem unrealistic. Human flourishing expressed by *eudaimonia* is community oriented. Therefore, its progress is hindered by vice, evident in greed, personal desire over community interest and abuse of external goods. Expanding on the implications of the abuse of the common good, Critchley argues that flourishing represents a certain quality of life for a whole community and not individual choices.²¹ Such quality of life (flourishing) has eluded Nigerians because our politicians as public servants live as private persons insulated by embezzled public funds (external goods.) Such quality of life seems unrealistic because the private sector has joined the race in an unhealthy competition of hoarding the external goods at the expense of the community. The ugly trend seems unabated also because our people have lost a sense of community, that often-yielded projects that benefit the community at large. Religious groups and leaders are not left out. They can as well pull the bull by the horn by leading exemplary lives, instead of luxurious lives at the expense of the people.

Therefore, this paper subscribes to the opinion (of Aristotle) that proper use of external goods presupposes the possession of virtue by an agent. Interpreting Aristotle, Roche argues that “an external good can directly promote a person’s [or community] happiness only if that person is a virtuous person and therefore pursues and [excellently uses external goods].”²² To appropriate those

²¹Cf. Peter Critchley, “Aristotle and the public good”, 3.

²²Cf. T. D. Roche, “Happiness and the external goods”, 40.

endowments, for the full realization of the good life, and the common good, this paper, recommends character formation through culturally adapted civic education – the Greek *paideia*.²³ It would enable a reorientation of Nigerian citizens against the trending lowest common denominator politics. It would also produce a crop of politicians (from the citizens) with a different mindset – leaders with the political will to establish the connection between the people and the external goods through (common) good life – human flourishing.

²³Cf. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia. The ideals of Greek culture*, vol. 1, trns. Gilbert Highet, New York, Oxford University Press, 1945, xxiii.