The influence of Herodotus on the practical philosophy of Aristotle

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Key words: justice and the species of the just; anthropology; ethics; political theorizing; the six types of political structuring; the liberty of the citizens, the equity on the agora and the supremacy of law;

Abstract: There are hundreds of interpretations of the Aristotelian political, ethical and anthropological ideas. The approach of this paper is a retrospective one (and is a part of a much larger text). It is an attempt to see how many important ideas of the great thinkers before Aristotle have influenced his practical philosophy. Ideas, exposed for the first time by Herodotus and Thucydides, have been inherited by Aristotle. The paper focuses on several topics from the History of Herodotus, which have resounding echo in the Nicomachean ethics and in the Politics of Aristotle. The main ones in respect of the ethical theory are: the different forms of justice and the just (the superhuman justice; the just in the family relations; the judicial just and the just in the polis or the larger human community). Book Epsilon of the Nicomachean Ethics is indebted to Herodotus in several points. In respect of the political theory the most interesting in the History of Herodotus is: firstly, the conversation of the three noble Persians, who discuss the six basic types of political order and organization of power-and-submission in a state or city-state (in book III, 80-82), which becomes a paradigm for the next typologies of Plato (in the Republic and the Statesman) and Aristotle (in the Politics); secondly, the importance of the personal freedom, the equity of the speaking men on the agora and the supremacy of law for the well-being of any human community and
its peaceful future. The legacy of Herodotus is seen in many anthropological and ethical concepts of Aristotle, especially in his most read and quoted ethical writing and in the *Politics*.

**Contextual introduction**

The *History* of Herodotus (484-425 BC) is an encyclopedic source for the later anthropology and the practical philosophy of Aristotle. Needless to say, its value is immeasurable and of utmost importance as a source for the Greek-Persian conflict in the 5th century BC and for its pre-history. However, the text is much more than the alpha of historiography. The immediate narrative of the warfare begins just in the last quarter of the work and in the other three preceding quarters Herodotus narrates about many different persons, families, dynasties and events. In great detail and very attentively he describes all possible aspects of the way of life of tens of human communities. Some of them are Hellenic (Athenians, Euboeians, Spartans, Corinthians), others are not (Lydians, Medians, Persians, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Massagetae, Pelasgians, Scythians, Thracians). He describes without any cultural predilections and prejudices their dietary habits and/or the men’s hairdresser-fashion and the clothes they wear. Even more precious than these life-style descriptions are his accounts of the customs and the habits, the mythological believes and the images of the gods they worship. In short, he provides a voluminous material for all major peculiarities in the worldviews and the everyday practices of tens of communities in the decades, contemporary with the rise and decline of the Persian empire.

Another remark is to be added. The father of the idea of history has to be respected as the founder of other scholarly and scientific disciplines, as well. The nine books of his writing, called by him with the names of the nine Muses, and labeled *History* much later, are an extraordinary database for the origin of the Greek knowledge of geography, zoology and of everything related to Egypt.

Last, but not least, the method of the historiographer is the weaving of the ‘great’ political history with the hundreds of smaller personal, family and/or dynasty stories – countless narratives mainly not of full biographies, but of telling episodes of fatal
importance for the destinies of the humans, engendering the fabric of the ‘great’ history. That’s why the writing acquires depth and value not only as anthropological and historical chef-d’oeuvre but also as a sketch of the ancient philosophy of life and philosophy of history.¹

Why it is worth looking back to Herodotus as an ancestor of some ethical ideas in Plato and Aristotle?

The influence of Herodotus on Plato and on the practical philosophy of Aristotle, conceived as inseparable unity of political, ethical and anthropological thinking is obvious, although in different facets. The traces of it are more visible and explicit in Aristotle, and somewhat hidden in the delicate texture of the Platonic dialogues. Why is it worth looking back at Herodotus? In contrast to the De anima, in which book Alpha abolishes with devastating criticism absolutely everything, proposed by the previous thinkers on the soul-body problems, the practical philosophy of Aristotle is indebted to many of his predecessors, mainly to Herodotus, Thucydides, Sophocles and Plato. Maybe the most impressive concept in the heritage, left from Herodotus for both Plato and Aristotle is the differentiation between ἡ δηθαηοζύλε and τὸ δίκαιον – the individual autonomous self-sufficient virtue and the relational ethical, juridical and political result of interpersonal interaction between at least two agents².


Two great ideas from the thesaurus of Herodotus are cherished only by Plato and neglected by Aristotle: the first one is the causal theonomy in the course of the historical events and the second is the relativity in the human narration of the past. The latter is easier to explain, because it is stated clearly in the very first pages of the History: the Hellenes, the Persians and the Phoenicians have three completely different versions for the causes, the origin, the happening and the development of the same events. Herodotus stays at a distance from the epic and mythology. For him the real events and the real persons are unmasked in their deeds and the “human well-being is never stable” (I, 5).

The causal theonomy mentioned above is striking in the instructive stories of the rise and fall of the greatest Lydian and Persian kings: Croesus the Lydian, Cyrus the Great, his son and successor Cambyses; Darius and Xerxes. Herodotus summarizes the moral of them in the sentence: “ὡς τῶν μεγάλων ἀδικημάτων μεγάλαι εἰσί καὶ αἱ τιμωρίαι παρὰ τῶν θεῶν. The gods punish the greatest unjust deeds with greatest revenge”. (II, 120, 10). It is not difficult to see how these stories of the fall of rulers, who are punished for their cruel atrocities, and even for the deeds of their far remote predecessors, are echoed in the final myths of the Republic (614b-621d) and the Gorgias(522e-527a). Indeed, Plato mirrors the moral of the Herodotus’ stories of the severely punished rulers with a greater emphasize on the deserved retribution, provoked by their own wickedness, than on the family guiltiness.

As a distinguished mark of this causal theonomy-framework of the stories – especially of the rulers - in the History, the reader of the masterpiece encounters several astonishing examples for the power of the providence and its prophecy in dreams, oracles and signs. The credo of Herodotus is expressed in the famous: “ἐν τῇ γὰρ ἀνθρωπηγῇ φύσι οὐκ ἐνὴν ἄρα τὸ μέλλον γίγνεσθαι ἀποτρέπειν (III, 65, 10-11). It is not within the human nature to reject what will happen in the future”. Some examples are to be mentioned: 1. The death of the son of Croesus (I, 34-45); 2. The failed attempted of Astyages to change his destiny (after a dream of a sexual intercourse with his daughter; that was a prophecy that his grandson will run over Asia, but will deprive him of the power as well. (I, 107, 108). 3. Cambyses, frightened by a dream, also tried to escape from the predicted future. 4. Also, the unveiling of the
future through the bird-prophecy for the new-coming dynasty: the seven pairs of falcons tearing the three pairs of vultures (III, 76).

This part of the paper should be finished, however, by pointing out that Plato and Aristotle remained indifferent to some admirable sparks of humanism, expressed by the sophists and Herodotus, who was a close friend at least with one of them, Protagoras. These ideas, unfortunately neglected by Plato and Aristotle, are Herodotus’ convictions and statements that there is one and universal human nature, an universal human nature, which is inherent in all human beings, irrespectively of their origin and tongue. The readers find the relevant passages on the human nature in a plenty of stories: a) to begin with, in the conversation between Solon and Croesus (I, 29-33); b) in the conversations and the letters, exchanged between the tyrant Periandros and his son Lycophron, and between Lycophron and his anonymous sister (III, 52): the passionate appeal of the anonymous sister is: the fatal feuds in a family must be ended, because we are all just mortal humans; c) in the conversations between Xerxes and his uncle Artabanos (VII, 45) and between Xerxes and Demaratus (VII, 101-104); d) in the unbelievable windings in the life of the Egyptian Amasis and his golden sink (II, 172); and e) the letter of the same Amasis to the tyrant Policrates (III, 40). Although his personal story is one of the very few examples in the History for the generosity of the benevolent fate, the happy vicissitudes have not deprived him from the sober wisdom: not only concerning the uncertainty of power, but also the fragility of the human beings in every aspect of their existence. πᾶν ἔστι ἄνθρωπος σύμφορη (I, 32)

Fundamentals of the thinking of ἡ δικαιοσύνη and τὸ δίκαιον in the History

For the sake of conciseness in this paper several fundamental ideas of Herodotus, inherited later by Aristotle, will be briefly sketched as follows:

1. Let’s begin with the unjust as casus belli gerendi, with which the chain of the great conflict is conceived: one unjust deed was followed by another, by a third

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3 Compare with Pindar, VIIIth Pythian Ode.
and then by one more unjust deed (І, 2, 1-3). Herodotus is definite: the sequence of unjust events and the sequel of reciprocal revenges do not lead to just solution and do not resolve any conflict righteously. See (in І, 2) the report of the successive kidnap of Io and Europe; of Medea and Helen. This message sounds already as conviction in the second book, where Herodotus proposes an alternative to the epic of Homer with his version of the real and true history of the beautiful Helen⁴. It is worth comparing Herodotus apology of Helen in this alternative story with the Enkomion for Helen by Gorgias⁵. (II, 113-115).

The just as a result of subjective human judgment

There are at least three examples, which might be read in the History as the foundation of the Greek juridical and philosophical thinking of the subjective role of the person who judges properly (or not) for the attainment (or the failure) of a justified decision: a) The verdict of the judge Proteus in Egypt in the true history of Helen and Menelaus, who issued what is to be done after the awful crime, committed by Alexander in Egypt; b) the story for the gradual rise of Deioces from a humble judge to the power of authoritarian ruler (І, 100); c) the depiction of the merciful Egyptian ruler Mycerinos, son of Heops (II, 129).

If we detach all the details from these stories, we will see that beneath them lies an important idea, lately developed by Aristotle in book Epsilon of the Nicomachean Ethics as one of the forms of the just. The just in the decision of any judge is a possibility, which might be actualized, but also might be not.(II, 31) NE, E: ὁ γὰρ δικαστής βουλεῖται εἶναι οἶδαν δίκαιον ἐμψυχον (1132a21-22). The judge is a kind of ensouled just, sums up Aristotle. The readers familiar with Herodotus are reminded at this point of the prototypes or the impressive personifications of the embodiment of the just, portrayed by Herodotus.

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⁴ Н. Гочев. Χεροδότ και χαρακτήρες του παγκόσμιου. Τόμος ΙΙ. ΑΙγύπτιος: Orientalia, 2005/2. σ. 62-72.

There are also shocking pages in the *History* for quite the opposite. Let’s recall the horrifying episode: Cambyses cruelly punishes the corrupt judge Sisamnes, but puts on his place his son Otanes (V, 25): *Therefore Cambyses slew and flayed Sisamnes, and cutting his skin into strips, stretched them across the seat of the throne whereon he had been wont to sit when he heard causes. Having so done Cambyses appointed the son of Sisamnes to be judge in his father's room, and bade him never forget in what way his seat was cushioned*.

Another similar, but not analogical example is the punishment, imposed by Darius, who ordered the crucifixion of Sandokes, but later interrupted the torture (VII, 194) because the punishment must be commensurable with the crime. The commensurability of the crime (or in milder cases of the unjust deed) with the punishment becomes one of the milestones in the NE, book Epsilon. The just solution of any case is in the middle between the wrong doing (or the unjust deed) and becoming a victim of wrong or unjust judgment.

The just in the family

Earlier in this text, in the mapping of the relevant passages with regards to the idea of the (universal) human nature in the *History*, the correspondence between Lycophron, the son of Periandres, and his anonymous sister was mentioned. A passage from her appeal is worth quoting: παῦσαι σεωτόν ζημιῶν. φιλοτιμίη κτήμα σκαίων. μὴ τῆς κακῆς το κακὸν ἵδ. πολλοὶ τῶν δικαίων τὰ ἐπιεικέστερα προτιθεῖσι. πολλοὶ δὲ ἡ δικαιοπραγία μέσον ἐστὶ τοῦ ἀδικεῖν καὶ ἀδικεῖσθαι (1133b29-30), where this comes as the conclusion of an argument from the previous chapter.

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7 ἡ δικαιοπραγία μέσον ἐστὶ τοῦ ἀδικεῖν καὶ ἀδικεῖσθαι (1133b29-30), where this comes as the conclusion of an argument from the previous chapter.
The letter of the compassionate sister has twofold impact on ideas, later enriched by Aristotle. The one of them is the appraisal of the indulgence as the supreme form of the just in the NE...

Another tricky question in the thematic circle of the just in the family, which will be only mentioned here, is the one concerning the heir of the throne: when a ruler has a polygamy family and many wives, who from the many sons of his, born by different mothers has the right to inherit the father? The just solution of this question has triggered many feuds and bloodsheds in plenty of dynasties throughout the millennia. In the History Herodotus reports reservedly without any partial comments that the decision was solved with the following definition: it is the son, who was born first after his father had become the actual ruler, who should be the heir of the empire, not the sons, born before him by the other spouses, because at their birth the father still has not run the state (VII, 2-4) (VII, 4-1).

The just in the human community

The real foundation of the political thinking on the different types of the self-organization of a community of people is exposed on three significant pages of the

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8 τὰ ἑπεικέστερα is reflected in the NE, E, ch. 10 or ch. 14 in some editions of the text: the supreme form of the just is the indulgence, which is not the proper and the commmeasurable judgment, but the merciful and milder one (1137a30-1138a2).
History (III, 80-82) in the famous trialogue, in which collocutors are Otanes, Megabyzus and Darius.

The first one to speak was Otanes, the unhappy child, who has witnessed the terrible death of his corrupt father: it is no wonder that after such a shocking experience in his childhood the first speaker glorifies τὸ πληθος opposed to μουναρχίη. After him Megabyzus praises the rule of ἀριστων ὁ ἄνδρων, opposed to ὀλιγαρχίη. Darius (who on the day after will become the new monarch with a treachery and falsification) is the champion in this conversation of the rule of one opposed to the power of the people/demos(III, 85). The conversation of the three Persians is reflected with some variations and new arrangement by Plato in the Republic (in the VIIIth book, with the addition of timocracy to the forms of the political orders) and in the Statesman (291d-292e). Precisely these six forms, sketched by Herodotus in the trialogue, are laying down the foundation of the meticulous analysis of Aristotle, developed at length in the Politics from the middle of the third book up to the end of the sixth.

The just in the rule of majority

The great advantages of democracy, the rule of the many, called politeia in Aristotle’s typology in the Politics, is greatly influenced by Herodotus:

1. In the view of Otanes the inherent feature of the rule of majority is stated to be ἰσοπομίη – the germinal idea of the rule of law; the equity of all in front of the requirements of the laws. 2. What a monarch does, never occurs under the rule of the many. The bitter experience of Otanes and his childhood trauma obviously influenced him to insist on this, but in tens of other stories in the History Herodotus narrates the instructive stories: there are perilous consequences of the unlimited power of a person on the first instance on himself. The boundless power of a ruler leads him to madness and catastrophe. 3. Another valuable characteristic in the rule of many according to Otanes is the distribution of many public duties, positions and responsibilities by the
lot - πάλω μὲν γὰρ ἄρχῃσ ἄρχει. 4. Even more important is the responsibility for these responsibilities, or translated into our modern slang, the accountability of the persons, who have been in charge: ὑπευθύνον δὲ ἄρχην ἔχει – the power is held into account, it is responsible. 5. Last in the speech of Otanes is the mode of the decision taking: all the problems are discussed and resolved in common βουλεύματα δὲ πάντα ἐς κοινὸν ἀναφέρει. This might be read as the first advocacy of the deliberative democracy.

Later on in the fifth book of the History two other important factors for the democratic developments in Athens and its subsequent leadership among the city-states are mentioned: ἡ ἰσηγορίη ὡς ἐστὶ χρήμα σπουδαῖον... ἀπαλλαχθέντες δὲ τυράννων μακρὸ πρῶτοι ἐγένοντο (V, 78)9. Firstly, the equity-and-equality of the citizens on the agora, the participation of the citizens in the arguing and the decision making of the public matters; and, secondly, the abolishment of the tyrants’ regime, the hostility and the resistance to many despotic authoritarian practices - these are the healthy strengths of the Athenians, which lead their city-state not only to the economic prosperity, but also to the military and the political supremacy among the Greek communities. All of them are marked as the inner engines of the glory and the positive changes in the polis10 by Aristotle as well in The politeia of the Athenians. Once more we see how brilliant examples of stories, used as instruments by the narrative method in the History of Herodotus, become implicit concepts in an Aristotelian text. In the institutional history and the constitutional stages of Athens the warfare is just uttered: the Greek-Persian wars and the Peloponnesian war are just mentioned, because The politeia of the Athenians was meant to be a sketch of the successive forms of the


institutional self-governance of the city-state and not a political history. In this brief survey of the constitutional progressive development of Athens many of the explanations provided for the political evolution of the city-state are in harmony with the ones, proclaimed as the most influential ones by Herodotus.

Conclusion

Herodotus is a true anthropologist, political and ethical thinker, and moreover philosopher of history. He is not just modest historiographer of chronicles, because in all the stories he looks for the real grasping of man and the causes of the events. His main concern always is the answer to the question “why it happened”, and not just “what and how it happened”. He is confident in the responds for the causes of the victory (VII 138-139): the Athenians saved the whole Hellas, because they have been free. Earlier in the same book (VII 102) he writes that in contrast to the enormous wealth and territory of the empire of the invaders, the poverty has always been a neighbor to Hellas, but nevertheless the virtue of the Greeks is firm and invincible. However, the liberty of the majority of the Greek city-states, the resistance to the despotic and authoritarian rules in the bigger part of them is never a source of anarchy, because the master to which all of them obey unconditionally is the law (104). The divided and competing city-states have reached some form of unity not only because they were threatened by the mighty enemy, but also because of the underlying bonds between them. For the shaping out of the united Hellas VII (136) the engendering prerequisite was: everywhere in these formerly conflicting city-states live

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11 The number of the invaders is exactly 5 283 220 (VII, 186)

12 “the most unjust and bloody rule in the world is the tyrant’s one” (V, 92). There are ‘small’ exemplary stories (of some deeds) of more than 50 tyrants in more than 50 Greek polices in the History.
people, who have the same blood, the same tongue, the same sanctuaries and temples, devoted to the same gods; the same habits, rituals and traditions (VIII, 144).  

However his most fatal warning was: “But if there are internal wars, Hellas will perish” (VIII, 3)\textsuperscript{14}.

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\textsuperscript{14} See also Christopher Pelling on Le Miroir d’Hérodote, 1980; The Mirror of Herodotus, 1988): *East Is East And West Is West - Or Are They? National Stereotypes In Herodotus.*


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