Facing post-truth from a neo-Aristotelian foundation of education

Afrontar la posverdad desde un fundamento neo-aristotélico de la educación

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Abstract

The current challenge of post-truth that threatens the functioning of democracy arises from the limits of our knowledge and the interference of emotions and values. Two common schools of thought, ethics of the discourse and agonistic politics, fall short in resolving this challenge. According to Aristotle's understanding of politics, both of these elements were already present. He presents politics as a field of knowledge determined not exclusively by knowledge itself, but also by the limits to that knowledge and by the emotional weight.

The aim of the present paper is to propose a contemporary conception of a *phronetic political discourse*, incorporating the key characteristics of an Aristotelian understanding of *phronesis*. The proposed hypothesis is that a contemporary *phronetic* political discourse cannot be founded on the good, since the plurality of conceptions of the good is what separates modern politics from Aristotelian times. Instead, and following the debates in neo-Aristotelian ethics, the foundation in development of the character of (future) participants in such discourse should be sought. Therefore, education is the key starting point to reinforce the capabilities and habits of discourse participants in order to manage, in the best way possible, the limitations of our knowledge and our personal commitment with the political realm.

Keywords

Post-truth, political discourse, Aristotle, *phronesis*, values, character.

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Resumen

El desafío actual de la posverdad que amenaza el funcionamiento de la democracia surge desde los límites de nuestro conocimiento y la interferencia de las emociones y los valores. Dos corrientes comunes, la ética del discurso, y la política agonista, son insuficientes para resolver este desafío. En la comprensión de la política de Aristóteles estos dos elementos ya estaban presentes. Él presenta a la política como un campo de saber determinado no exclusivamente por el saber, sino al mismo tiempo por los límites del saber y por el cargo emotivo.

El objetivo de este artículo es proponer una concepción contemporánea de un *discurso político phronético*, incorporando las características clave de una *phronesis* aristotélica. La hipótesis es que un discurso político *phronético* contemporáneo no se puede fundar en el bien, ya que la pluralidad de las concepciones del bien es lo que separa la política moderna de los tiempos aristotélicos. En su lugar, y siguiendo a los debates en la ética neo-aristotélica, se debería buscar el fundamento en el desarrollo del carácter de los (futuros) participantes en dicho discurso. Por consiguiente, la educación es el punto de partida esencial para reforzar las capacidades y los hábitos de los participantes del discurso a fin de mejor manejar, en la medida de lo posible, las limitaciones de nuestro conocimiento y nuestro compromiso personal con el campo político.

Palabras clave

Posverdad, discurso político, Aristóteles, *phronesis*, valores, carácter.

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Introduction

This paper addresses the post-truth issue from a practical approach in the political field. As an introduction, the post-truth issue is briefly presented as it has arisen in recent years in the political space. Then, the first argumentative step consists in contrasting two proposals for the organization of the political space: ethics of the discourse according to Habermas, and its agonistic counterpart according to Laclau and Mouffe, among others. Both proposals fail to recognize part of the root of the current post-truth issue.

Afterwards, the Aristotelic *phronesis* will be presented as a third alternative, which simultaneously recognizes the insufficiency of the exclusive reason in the political discourse, and the need for a community experience or an emotional commitment. From this proposal, a neo-Aristotelian conception will be developed from a political practice like *phronesis*, i.e., as a practical science as understood by Aristotle, but translated to the current context, determined specifically by the plurality of the conceptions of good.

With the aim of taking politics as *phronesis* to the present, the role of teleology in Aristotle's thinking will be explored, and its pertinency in the ambit of human activity. Although a characteristic of modernity is the fact that it ended the Aristotelian teleologic vision, it is still relevant to include a consideration of the purposes in the political realm. Never-

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theless, in relation to human activity and in the contemporary political realm, it will be demonstrated that this is an undetermined purpose.

Finally, the proposal of a contemporary *phronetic* political *praxis* can be articulated from previous analyses. After pointing out its most pertinent features, the paper ends with some suggestions to be considered for the education of the future agents of the *phronetic* politics.

Starting point: The post-truth issue

Post-truth is one of the most fundamental and complex problems in the current political field. The truth does not obey to an objective criterion anymore, but it has become a subjective adage subject to strategic uses. Politicians try to pass blatant lies as apparent certainties, insisting in their stance by adding a void "it is true". Meanwhile, listeners accept their word as absolute truth, as long as they are not convinced by any rebuttal which may seem obvious (Blackburn, 2018).

By the way, the use of falsehoods in politics is nothing new, and the roots of the post-truth issue extends beyond the present time. Its central role in the contemporary period has its origin especially in the shift made by Nietzsche (2006) of the truth as the basis of knowledge, and its strategic and useful understanding. His analysis of the usefulness of history "for life and action", among other writings and observations, marks the start of the end of the great self-evident narratives, and especially of the faith on the objectivity of sciences and of the existence of an objective truth. It demonstrates that what is called "truth" is rather the result of a conjunction of perspectives, choices and interpretations, all at the service of particular purposes (Heit, 2018).

The urgency of the problem resides in the fact that the strategic use of the truth in the political field leads to its undermining, which ultimately can contribute to the failure of contemporary democracy. This is due to the fact that democracy presupposes the capability of every voting citizen to give direction to political instances based on their own rationality and reasonableness. But when rationality is not the primary faculty in decision making nor in the management of political discourse, then the democratic process can lose its sense of being.

At least two phenomena that are too human can be identified that distract from the rationality of political discourse: emotions and ignorance. On one hand, political players may claim appeals to truth by the simple fact that their listeners cannot not know about everything, and

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not even them can know about everything. By definition, fact-checkers are behind the facts, when the argument has already been made and the political point has been already marked. In a society that is always more differentiated and specialized, and indeed always more complex, partial, or occasionally almost total, ignorance, is always greater and inevitable.

On the other hand, the political field is distinguished by the emotional commitment of the topics addressed. For a political player, it is more effective to debate about immigrants or crime, instead of talking about international agreements of economic cooperation or tributary systems. The reason is that the formers invoke the emotion of voters; they evoke rage, fear, outrage. Thus, in a democracy the political discourse naturally tends to move human beings 'of flesh and blood', before addressing rational beings (Escobar & Ramírez, 2020). The political participant experiences an emotional commitment with political discourses, and the handling of 'facts' and 'truths' finds its limits both in the political actors and in their listeners.

Finally, when ignorance and emotion take the place of rationality and reasonableness, one of the logical results is the growing populism of recent years, followed very closely by a general distrust in politics. Paradoxically, this distrust is accompanied by a blind obedience to the politicians followed by people, even when faced with the proven falsification of their postulates. In short, the post-truth leads to endorse political stances from an emotional identification and despite their proven falsehoods. Therefore, it is urgent to find an answer to the post-truth issue.

The phronesis as an alternative to the ethics of the discourse and the agonism

Some models have been presented to address the post-truth challenge. Indeed, a return and defense of the truth can be aspired. Meanwhile, there can even be a doubt about the existence of "The Truth", a "search for the lost truth" seems like a vain hope. The same complexity of contemporary society identified by Morin (2005), implies that there is not, and will not be, a single view of the entire world. It also implies that our position in the world is not a purely rational process, but always emotional as well (2004).

Then, two opposed alternatives to address the post-truth issue in political discourse can be distinguished. On one hand, there have been attempts to develop a formal framework where political agreements can be made, for example, based on certain participation rules. The ethics

of Habermas' speech (1985) is one of the most representatives of this option. His participative model requires and presupposes "only" to the formalist subscription of the rules to participate of the discourse. This solution requires the exclusion of the emotional basis, so corrosive in the contemporary political discourse. It is demanded that participants suspend their most fundamental personal values to assume "a controversy-free point of view", or which in terminology borrowed from psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, is called a post-conventional moral stance.

Without mentioning the innocence of which this proposal has been often accused, it is about an extension of the trust on human reason. By doing so, the emotional and evaluating commitment is ignored —an unremovable element, as it was demonstrated by the current post-truth crisis. The values to fight and make political decisions are not a discomfort, but they are the engine of politics. The unease that has chased democracies in recent years demonstrates that a technocracy leaves people impassive; a democracy (it is the condition for its existence) invokes people, involves them in decision making. As stated by Nussbaum (2001), the emotions experienced by people demonstrate what matters most. Happiness, rage, disappointment, even apathy, indicate the things we value deeply. And these values have cognitive content. Emotions are rational. Instead of excluding them from political discourse at all cost, it should be recognized that they constitute the starting point of such discourse. Instead of surrendering what is valued more, it can be included in the political discussion.

The political agonism described by Laclau and Mouffe (2015) is located at the other end of the same playing field. In this perspective, confrontation is not formalized, as in Habermas, but rather radicalized. While the ethics of the discourse excludes *pathos*, the agonism tends to reduce the political discourse to only the *pathos*. Agonism places in the middle the confrontation between conflicting perceptions and convictions, and considers that any previous discourse rule takes part of a hegemony, and hence reveals a destabilizing predisposition. Indeed, the objective is to repeatedly undermine the established discourse and centralize what was excluded before.

A risk that this path entails is made visible in the fragmentation of the left in many countries. For the purposes of this paper, an important problem is the insurmountable gap between, on one side, the so-called hegemonies (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015) and who they represent, and on the other side, the alterities and the excluded. The "left" and "right" cannot meet anymore, instead they keep themselves enclosed in their respective ideological walls,

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above which the "other" is projected as a mere caricature-like antagonist. Any shared community or playing field is rejected beforehand, considered either an impossibility a priori, or a hegemonic power strategy.

An alternative to both options is presented from a *phronetic* perspective of the political discussion, its concept of truth, and the participation in such discussion. It will be considered that the ethical discourse requires an adequate practical wisdom, that the involved concepts of truth and good are constituted in such discourse, and that, therefore, it is not such truth that establishes politics but the attitude of the participants. Indeed, the post-truth issue was already implicit in the conception of truth itself in the type of knowledge presented by politics, as well as the ethics. Then, from the conception of political discourse as field of *phronesis* and the place of truth in that discourse, some constitutive elements for the participation in such discourse can be indicated, and therefore in the contribution to a relationship adapted to the truth. And considering that the participants (and not the truth) constitute the fundamental element, education is crucial.

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The implicit assumptions in the politics as *phronesis*

The problematic status of truth in politics has its roots in Aristotle. He considers that politics is a practical science, or *phronesis*, and not a pure science. Certainly, the following characteristics of *phronesis* may be identified considering it, on one hand, as a practical science, and on the other hand, as a *dianoethics* virtue, as it was also presented in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1985)[1].

First of all, in *phronesis* an absolute truth does not exist. It distinguishes itself from scientific knowledge like mathematics, because "what is an object of science is necessary […] then it is eternal" (1139b20[2]). *Phronesis*, understood as practical knowledge, is not concerned with such eternal truths, but it is about the contingent (Aubenque, 1963). Its objective is not 'The Truth', if it is considered as eternal and absolute. Instead, it addresses local and particular knowledge. The count of participants in a protest can be a simple example. A common way to count the number of participants in a protest or political event is taking the average between the organizers of such protest, and their detractors. Since both numbers will be at a great distance, the 'truth' is surely somewhere in the middle. That is the reason why, when Kelly-Anne Conway defends the count of attendees to the inauguration of American president, she distinguishes

between a falsehood and 'alternative facts' (NBC News, January 22nd, 2017[3]), her proposal is not as strange as it may seem. In fact, 'political science' enables a plurality and indeterminacy of facts, a feature of *phronesis*. Indeed, a consequence is that political discourse is threatened by the *logos* itself (Aristotle 1990, 1356a1-4). Both the political reference to truth and its justification in facts, end up being problematic.

Secondly, as demonstrated by Aubenque (1963), Aristotle (1985) realizes that "political science", being a practical knowledge, contains truths that concern human beings. Its objective consists of "what is good and bad *for mankind*" (1140b2-5; the emphasis is ours). Thus, *phronesis* is not about any truth, but truths that affect and matter to mankind. Indeed, if emotions are understood as indicators of what matters to human beings, the fact that politics invokes our emotions becomes logical (*pathos*). Another example based on the same contemporary American political field is valid here. When the conservative politician Newt Gingrich was confronted about the official statistics demonstrating a decrease in crime and violence in most cities of the United States, he responded "being a politician, I prefer to trust in what people experience" (CNN Live, July 22nd, 2016[4]). In politics, not only *logos* or rationality are relativized, but also, since they concern to mankind, *pathos* and emotions are incorporated to touch mankind.

Nevertheless (and from the perspective of *phronesis* as more a virtue than a science), the matter does not stay in a purely subjective plane. Beforehand, Aristotle (1985) starts his analysis of practical wisdom with the verification that "regarding prudence, we can comprehend its nature, considering which men we call prudent" (1985, 1140a24-25). To know what is to be prudent, the prudent man (*phronimos*) must be investigated, and his example followed. The circularity is so obvious that takes part of the argument itself. To a general level, *phronesis* is fueled by the personal relationship with others, through common sense. So, their more general 'truth' is intersubjective.

Such intersubjectivity crosses the *Nichomachean Ethics* and *Politics* in general. To this, it is significant that Aristotle dedicates two of the ten chapters of his biggest ethic work to friendship (*philia*). The friend, i.e., the concrete other, works among others as an alter ego to measure and improve my own excellence. And it does not concern exclusively the friend as understood today: in general, *philia* is what also connects citizens with each other. Aristotle refers to the relationship between siblings as one between equals, based on love (*philia*) as a familiar parallel to the relationship between citizens. In other words, for Aristotle what connects

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citizens in a society is not only a self-interest or an earnings calculation; it is also an emotional bond.

In parallel, in *Politics*, Aristotle (1988) links the social nature of mankind with *logos*. His description of man as *zoon politikon* is well known (1253a2-14). This political sense of belonging is based on being conferred with reason, *logos*. This reference to *logos* can be taken literally, being the requisite of a common language. Only a being with language capabilities can express his/her needs and feelings. Only a being in possession of a shared reason is capable of talking about topics such as justice and injustice. The political community is based on the shared language of its members; literally a "common sense" is required. "This is unique to man among other animals: possessing, only him, the sense of right and wrong, of just and unjust, and other values, and the community participation in these things shapes the house and the city" (1253a18). In short, the intersubjectivity of *phronesis* is based on both the emotional part (the *philia*) and the rational part (*logos*) of human beings.

This final point is of central importance. *Logos*, along with *philia*, form the base of society. In fact, the members of a community can be called *philoi*. Aristotle recalls that any given community depends for its existence on a shared interest (1988, 1252a1-7). In a healthy community, each member has its role in the group, his/her contribution to the purpose of society.

Now, introducing the concept of purpose in the political debate, on one hand it is addressed to the point that more distinguishes the contemporary age from the antiquity, because the big shift in modernity has consisted in undoing the cosmovision from its teleological frameworks, changing them by a natural and determined world. Thinking about a "teleological" politics seems very problematic and even undesirable in a post-teleological framework. On the other hand, rethinking the purpose of political society from the angle of *phronesis* and *eudaimonia* will enable to formulate an alternative perspective on the end of society, based on constant discussion — in which the concept of good does not precede so much the discourse, but it takes part and object of the same discourse.

Teleology and *phronesis:* an undetermined purpose

So far, the non-absolute, committed and (inter)subjective character of phronesis has been highlighted. In other words, the concrete aspect of what Iris Murdoch calls "concrete universals" (Murdoch, 1970) is unders-

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tood. Now, such universality is under scrutiny. On one hand, *phronesis* reaches up to where its object allows, i.e., the concrete human behavior. However, the second foundation is that "prudence is a way of being rational, *true* and practical in regard to what is good and bad for man" (Aristotle, 1985, 1140b4-5; the emphasis is ours). In parallel with the subjective, intersubjective and contextualized tendency, for Aristotle *phronesis* also has an objective basis.

By linking the truth of *phronesis* with its object, human behavior, the bond is made for the same end, which is what is good and bad *for man.* With this, the *teleological* core of Aristotle's philosophy is reupdated, as a metaphysical framework, in its ethics and politics. At the same time, it is worth making a clear difference between the metaphysical and physical framework from that teleological foundation, applying the same in the field of practical knowledge. The teleological foundation has generally been abandoned entering modernity (for example, you may think about the devastating critique made by Thomas Hobbes at the Stagirite, in chapter 46 of his *Leviathan*, 1988). To adequately value teleology in the present context, Aristotle should be relocated in historical context.

With his teleological proposal, Aristotle (1994) opposes to two central and opposing tendencies at his time. On one hand, Plato (1992) assumed that the world of particular things is a mere particular representation of a separate transcendental world that he calls the World of Ideas. Trees, clouds, and men arise and perish, following the eternal models against which they always end up incomplete, imperfect. Mathematics is here the model science, from which philosophy takes its example. The 'what for' of particular things, their sense, is transcendental to these same entities, like mathematic laws are transcendental and external to triangles and particular sums.

On the other hand, there is the materialistic tradition, under which the world order principle can only exist in things that belong to the same world. The presocratic atomists have formulated a variety of ways to understand the complexity of the world and its phenomena, from a joint interaction of basic elements. Democritus, the last of the great *fysiologoi* and a contemporary of Plato, suggests that chance, or a kind of blind natural selection, is the principle that orders the world (Kirk & Raven, 1957). For Democritus, the 'what for' of things can only be explained from those same things, in combination with the chance that governs an exclusively material world.

Teleology is the Aristotelian answer to both extremes, idealism and materialism. Against Democritus' materialism, he proposes that the

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world order cannot be explained only by matter itself. From simple elements, chance is not a sufficient reason to explain the complexity of existing things. Simultaneously, he opposes Plato in considering that such complexity ordering principle cannot be transcendent to those same emerged entities. Elements do not obey, whether from the imposition of a demiurge or not, to transcendental ideas or exemplary essences. In other words, even if there is a principle ordering the world and the things, this principle is immanent to the world itself and its entities.

Now, in the framework of natural philosophy, such teleological framework has been abandoned a long time ago by a mechanist cosmovision. In such world (not so far from what Democritus foresaw), there is not a place for final causes. Rain does not exist to 'irrigate plantations", human noses are not what they are anymore 'to hold glasses'. But what does this overcoming of teleological thinking imply to our understanding of human behavior, and of course, of the practical wisdom of *phronesis*? The first phrase of *Nichomachean Ethics* states the teleological foundation of human activity: "Every art and every investigation and, equally, every action and free election seem to tend to some good" (1094a1-3). The 'what for' of human behavior is a profoundly teleological topic. And, while the physical world and nature have overcome the metaphysical framework, human behavior is still profoundly teleological, i.e., it is understood from the purposes is seeks to reach.

Thus, when wondering about the good at which human behavior is headed to, Aristotle presents a teleological question. In opposition to both Plato and Democritus, this good to which human behavior is headed, is not transcendent. There is not a transcendental Idea of Good, but it is something immanent to the human existence in particular. Good is immanent because it is about the "most complete fulfillment of our potency" (1045b33-36) that can be reached. Ethic excellence is being the best one can be —not in front of an ideal imposed from the outside, but from the own abilities and objectives of the human being. Nevertheless, in ethical and political areas, this fulfillment of human potency cannot be understood from a purely materialist way. Human good is not determined in a mechanist way; it is not in the hands of *fysis* or chance. Then, what is it?

To Aristotle, the question regarding the purpose or *telos* of human behavior coincides with good. The objective of human activity, the last point, is the good. As a result, and following the aforementioned, it is not about a transcendental Idea of the Good, but about the immanent fulfillment of the inherent potential of an entity. At the same time, this potential is not a mechanist effect of its causes, but it is about the personal

human potential. As such, the good of human behavior had not been determined prior to such behavior. The act ontologically precedes the potency. The indeterminacy inherent to human good resounds throughout *Nichomachean Ethics*. In the case of *phronesis* as a "practical science", the impossibility to formulate universal truths has repercussions on Aristotle's ethics, because there is a plurality of acts and intentions of interest. In the case of *phronesis* as a virtue, the circularity of defining it referring to the same prudent man has already been mentioned, to know what is to be prudent.

The *phronetic* political discourse

From the previous analysis, it is now possible to propose a tentative definition of the political discourse in its *phronetic* sense. A *phronetic political discourse* is a shared space based on the committed participation of the agents gathered by the plurality of perspectives in a discussion dedicated to topics about politics and values. Every element could be clarified briefly in the following manner:

- The starting point is the political discourse, considering the basis on the complexity that lies underneath the post-truth challenge, a contemporary and typically political issue. As such, it is about the space for ordering and handling the polis, i.e., of the society in which people live together.
- Politics is about a shared space; it is considered that human beings must live together. And living together entails at least a shared *logos*, a common sense.
- It is also considered that any participation is committed, i.e., that citizens care about both the process and its result, and not only for ourselves but for the society. Society, in the *phronetic* model, is based on a form of *philia*, an emotional bond between fellow citizens, a basis of shared values.
- Nevertheless, the values that are shared, and more precisely the desired conception of the final good, is fundamentally undetermined. Hence, what constitutes the basis or foundation of the *phronetic* political discourse is not the purpose as *eudaimonia*, but the participants themselves. It is about, in words of Michael Slote (2010), a view based on the agent.
- This foundation in the character links the cognitive and emotional, evaluating, aspects of the same agent

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- The final objective of the *phronetic* space is precisely the confrontation and the discussion of arguments and truths in favor of the different conceptions of good, as well as the conceptions themselves. In other words, the conception of good is a topic of the discourse itself (MacIntyre, 1984[5]).

The *phronetic* conception of political discourse refuses, on one side, to exclude the topic of the good of the discussion. The presence of post-truth seems an element already constituent of politics in an era of complexity. Assuming that the contemporary political crisis demonstrates the impossibility of removing the emotional from the political, it is rather sought to incorporate more fundamental values to the participants. The political debate does not let itself to be reduced to a simple calculation of interests, or to an administration of goods, as political philosophers along the entire ideological spectrum have dreamed of.

On the other hand, it is necessary to start from a common ground, from a common sense and from a community experience, to avoid falling into unsolvable oppositions. For the existence of political dialog, there should be some form of dialog in its etymological sense, *dia-logos*. It is inherent to the contemporary political community the need to live together with people that have beliefs, values, convictions, and desires that are different than ours. And yet, at the end of the day, any common good is not common anymore. Conversely, the indeterminacy of the *telos* of human activity has left in Aristotle room for a fragrant plurality. Thus, 'the good' cannot be anymore assumed beforehand, but it must be an object of the same political discourse.

After seeing that the background for political discourse is not in the same conception of good, and that plurality is what profoundly determines contemporary political discourse, the background must be searched for in another place. From the field of contemporary neo-Aristotelianism, the constitution of the participants of the discourse can be taken as a more appropriate background, i.e., the character of the agents in the *phronetic* political discourse, without referring to any previous conception of 'the good' or 'the right' (Van Zyl, 2019). Now, any exhaustive description of such character implies a contradiction in itself, and would be a setback in face of accepting the impossibility of formulating only one founding concept of the good in relation to *phronesis*. Similarly to Aristotle's ethics, ethical excellence can only be described through concrete examples and therefore an undefinable plurality, the character of the political maintains its undefinable plurality. Hence, instead of articulating such nature in full detail,

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the key elements to facilitate an adequate participation in the political discourse can be rather explored. Instead of looking at the requisite character, the foundational elements can be explored with better detail from their formation, to enable maintaining plurality of its constitutions.

Notes for the formation of the agent towards *phronesis*

In such *phronetic* formation, it is not possible to assume a specific conception of good. Since the agents must be prepared for a participation in a plural and complex field, it becomes impossible to simply assume a fixed identity, with a determined purpose. And, if it is decided to show any dominant identity, it must always be taken into consideration its contingent social-historic peculiarity and its relativity in front of a plural field. Regardless of this restriction, Aristotle himself gives us some guidelines to think of a more adequate education to prepare the agent for participating in a *phronetic* political discourse. He ends his *Nichomachean Ethics* with the call to pursue the greatest excellence than can be reached by means of nature, habits and education (1179b21-23)[6].

First, upon looking at nature, it is found at the same time the ancient heritage of Aristotelian teleology and the opening that it contains in the ancient thinker when addressing human activity. As it has been argued, the teleological heritage does not prevent, in the case of human behavior, an opening and the plurality of different coexistent purposes. In fact, Christine Swanton (2003) articulates a pluralist interpretation of the theory of virtues based on Aristotle. She understands virtues as "a good attribute of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or recognize, matters inside a field or fields in an excellent or sufficiently good way" (The translation is ours). So, for Swanton, plurality depends on the field in which one is acting.

Human nature consists in a conjunction of abilities that can be either developed or not, gathering both the rational and irrational parts of the human being. The emotional part, though is not rational in itself, depends on rationality (Aristotle, 1985, 1102a27-1103a11). Considering that it is proposed to start from the agent, and not from a fixed conception of good, the question is how it is sought to handle nature. Through the plurality of the fields in which we get involved, the agent is the starting point, not a reactive result. Nevertheless, the agent cannot be reconsidered to the measure of some fixed criterion that precedes the agent itself, whether in a transcendental or physiologic way. Even if the field in

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which the agent must act is distinguished by its irreducible plurality, the character of every agent must constitute a unity. It is proposed to think based on the character, assuming the field (or fields) of acting in a given manner. Of course, the unity of character does not imply its simplicity, nor its teleological goodness, but it refers more to its firmness. Aristotle considers that, in the end, the happy life does not depend on destiny, nor exclusively on our behavior at the moment, but on our attitude. A fulfilled life is measured according to the firmness of the character demonstrated (1103a6-11). Thus, referring to *phronesis*, the important thing is how much an individual maintains a certain firm attitude in front of his/her own limitations and impediments, especially rational and emotional, and under pressure depending by the demands of the field.

In second place, a central element in the education that prepares an agent for *phronetic* participation is the creation of habits (1103a24-26). For Aristotle, the virtues of character are shaped not only from nature or from the matter as a particular agent, but also through exercise and effort. Now, in the absence of a particular good, and with the impossibility of determining it in a political discourse, together with the inevitable presence of conceptions of good in such discourse, it is clear that this exercise cannot focus on the content nor on a result to be obtained. Thus, instead of focusing the exercise on a particular search for the good or its truth, it can focus on the search method.

Concretely, it goes back to exercise, not to the formulation nor the search of a particular good or a group of preestablished values; the exercise of constant evaluation and verification of proposals in the political discourse and its proponents. The capability of the (future) *phronetic* agent to recognize the validity of the proposed arguments could perhaps be prepared, as well as his/her ability to identify and understand the participants themselves who handle those arguments. Considering that it is impossible to remove the emotional dimension of political discourse, facing the absence of definitive truths, the best exercise consists in perhaps enabling to recognize the truthfulness of a discourse.

Obviously, it is an impossible effort and the objective is unreachable. However, an adequate education must incorporate this critical faculty of the character and of the motivations of the agents, and not only the arguments in question. It often involves an a posteriori work, as is the case of the virtues, where it is not always known where to direct the effort before being in a real situation. Thus, for example (and to use a typical Aristotle example), the warrior can only recognize his own strengths and weaknesses regarding his bravery after being in a real situation of lethal danger. From

there, it is possible to find the adequate exercise and correct each one in the optimal direction. From there, it is possible to search the adequate exercises and correct each one in the optimal direction. The fact that this optimal direction does not depend any longer of an established measure, but on a complex field of constant human behavior, it does not facilitate the work to be carried out, but it always makes it more important and more urgent.

In third place, regarding the education itself, it is demonstrated by excellence the aforementioned intersubjective treatment. An educator is, more concretely, the *other* that provides an example and a model for adequate and inadequate behavior, and that helps to reinforce both the construction of good habits as well as the articulation and refinement of the being itself. Hence, the responsibility for training the agents necessary to handle and form the *phronetic* political discourse lies on the education itself.

The educator is the example, not in his/her proposal of a truth or a particular good, but in his/her attitude and his/her *agent being*. From there, education must focus on the development of the two problematic elements pointed out at the beginning, rationality and reasonableness. Education must prepare agents capable of deciphering their own arguments, as well as their feelings, to subsequently be able to decipher the rational and emotional contributions contained in a political discourse. In education, the agent must develop the required firmness of character, not to search (or even worse, grab) a particular discourse or some idea of good, but develop his/her capability to prove any claim of truth, value, or truthfulness.

Of course, an education focused on a *phronetic* agency must combine both critical and self-critical faculties. This task does not exclude reinforcing its own conceptions of good. On the contrary, an agent in a *phronetic* discourse is capable of understanding, formulating, and transmitting his/her own values and convictions. And in education such capability can be reinforced —not from values, but from the agent itself. At the same time, the agent develops the ability to understand, analyze and criticize the proposals formulated in a political field. This capability is not exclusively rational, but also emotional and evaluative. In short, it is suggested that the best way to subvert the collapse of democracy is to appropriately prepare (future) citizens to handle the condition of complexity and live the reality of post-truth.

Conclusion

The final consequences of the complexity of contemporary society at a political level are both the inevitable ignorance and irreducible com-

mitment. The current post-truth issue demonstrates the attribute of complexity inherent to the contemporary political discourse. Politics, understood as a practical science, contains both the invocation to rationality and common sense (*logos*) and an undeniable emotional commitment. Certainly, a partial ignorance of citizens and political players cannot be avoided, nor their emotional commitment.

To counteract this political challenge, this paper suggests developing an involvement in political discourse, not from formal rules that exclude the most profound values and conceptions of good that every participant provides, nor from a model of fight that excludes beforehand the possibility of agreement between citizens in a common place and the possibility of a shared rationality, but from the model of (neo-)Aristotelian *phronesis*. This model assumes the non-universality of statements and the ethic commitment of the participants in the *phronetic* discourse. Then, an intersubjectivity is presumed, both from the constitutive rationality (*logos*) and commitment (*philia*) of the discourse itself.

For Aristotle, the teleological anchor of his philosophy is central. Translating the model of *phronesis* to the present this teleological framework is maintained, but not as a foundation of the discourse in a conception of a purpose or of a particular supreme good for mankind. It rather includes such purpose as a supreme value and source of the commitment of the agents that participate in the discourse. The conceptions of good maintained by citizens constitute the object of a discourse marked by its plurality. In short, it should be talked about what matters.

This plurality requires an education that prepares (future) agents for participation in the *phronetic* political discourse. Indeed, the focus of such education is not found in the search of a truth or of final purposes, but instead in the capability of investigating claims of truth, value, purpose, and truthfulness. Then, an adequate education does not seek to surpass the limits of knowledge, nor exclude ethic commitment. The objective is rather to explain and articulate such self-commitment, as well as to develop the faculty of recognizing and observing the different commitments of other agents, and recognizing and handling self-limitations and the limitations of others.

Finally, the goal of a preparatory education for *phronetic* praxis is the shaping and reinforcement of the character of the (future) agent. It is considered that the best remedy to the challenges of a complex society consists in solidifying ourselves to face its risks. The foundation of *phronetic* politics is not in a conception of good, nor in the exclusion of political values, but in the agent as a constitutive participant of a plural

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and complex space. Therefore, the education of the agent is the basis of a consolidation of the political field.

Notes

1   It is still an object of debate the place and the interpretation of the concept of *phronesis* in the work by Aristotle, especially its use closest to a virtue in the ethical writings, and its sense rather as a science in other texts such as *Metaphysics* (1994), For the purposes of the present research, it is closer to the reading of Aubenque (1963), without repeating the argumentative steps carried out in such debate.

2   For the references to the work by Aristotle, references have been included according to Bekker edition.

3   https://bit.ly/3m3G3sY

4   https://bit.ly/3E2gzlU, consulted on the 12-12-2019, the translation is ours.

5   MacIntyre defines a *practice* as follows: "any coherent and complex form of a socially established cooperative human activity, through which goods internal to this form or activity are carried out when trying to reach such excellence standards convenient to, and partially definite of, such form or activity, such that human capabilities are extended to achieve the excellence and human conceptions of the concerned purposes or goods" (p.187; the translation is ours).

6   Stanley Cavell (2004) incorporates Aristotle in his development of a moral perfectionism, a proposal and a terminology that this research work endorses completely.

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