



# Top models: Aristotle, Maslow and Rogers on the Perfect Human Being

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## Top models: Aristotle, Maslow and Rogers on the Perfect Human Being

This paper aims at presenting some relevant correlations between Aristotle on one side, and Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow on the other. The so-called Humanistic Psychologists propose a number of general traits of the healthy or perfect human being that are in accordance with important notions of the Aristotelian approach.

The core of this brief study will focus on the parallels of a recurrent idea in the ethical writings of Aristotle regarding the morally well-formed human being that can be summarized in a few words: the person whose character is well-formed is he who acts well, but it is also he who feels the right way, at the right moment, consistent with stimuli. This “person of value” acts well precisely because he has first felt that which one must feel (pleasure, fear, anger, etc.) and because he is capable of responding actively and in the correct proportion to the demands of the moment.

### 1. Aristotle and the virtuous model

There are a number of texts in which Aristotle describes the virtuous person and the close correlation between his actions and his character. One of the main factors of this relationship is the role of pleasant situations for this kind of man:

“And as in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for it is some of these that are victorious), so those who *act rightly* win the noble and good things in life.

“Their life is also in itself pleasant. For pleasure is a state of soul, and *to each man that which he is said to be a lover of is pleasant*; [...] just acts are pleasant to the lover of justice and in general excellent acts to the lover of excellence. Now *for most men their pleasures are in conflict with one another because these are not by nature pleasant*; and *excellent actions are such, so that these are pleasant for such men as well as in their own nature*. Their life, therefore, has no further need of pleasure as a sort of adventitious charm, but has its pleasure in itself. For, besides what we have said, the man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not even good.”<sup>1</sup>

This attunement between actions and feelings is one of the positive internal outcomes of virtue because moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pain, and it is on account of pleasure that we perform bad actions, and on account of pain that we abstain from noble ones. And Aristotle continues with a quote from Plato: “we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth [...] so as both *to delight in and in and to be pained by the things that we ought*; for this is the right education.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *NE*. 1098b30-1099a24. [Barnes, v. 2, 1736-7]. Emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1104b9-24 [Barnes 1744-5]. Emphasis added.

This general remark is confirmed through a quite demanding discipline of our feelings:

“For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but *to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of excellence.*”<sup>3</sup>

One of the most difficult arguments for any proposal in ethics is that which regards the relativity of the good for the human person. For Aristotle, on the one hand, there are absolute goods and good actions but, on the other, there are many situations in which goodness depends on the permanent or transitory conditions of the subject. Sometimes the conditions refer to accidental aspects of actions, i.e. the amount of food required by a sportsman or by an “average” person presupposes that eating is good in general, so it is necessary to include these elements in order to evaluate what is better in different situations for different subjects. That is why excellence (virtue) is a permanent disposition “lying in a mean relative to us,” but “determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.”<sup>4</sup>

Later, Aristotle discusses the relationship between good and truth, linking the choices of the wise person to nature through a comparison with the capacities of the healthy body. Then he proposes an argument to overcome the problem of subjectivism regarding the good:

“Are we to say that absolutely and in truth the good is the object of wish, but for each person the apparent good; that that which is in truth an object of wish is an object of wish to the good man, while any chance thing may be so to the bad man, as in the case of bodies also the things that are in truth wholesome are wholesome for bodies which are in good condition, while for those that are diseased other things are wholesome—or bitter or sweet or hot or heavy, and so on; since the good man judges each class of things rightly, and in each the truth appears to him? For each state of character has its own ideas of the noble and the pleasant, and perhaps the *good man differs from others most by seeing the truth in each class of things, being as it were the norm and measure of them.* In most things the error seems to be due to pleasure; for it appears a good when it is not. We therefore choose the pleasant as a good, and avoid pain as an evil.”<sup>5</sup>

So, the accordance of personal behaviour with the good of the person requires right reason, that is to say, a reason able to discover what is good *per se* and in a good relationship with the lower tendencies that makes the person capable of pursuing the good and feeling good while acting well.

## **2. Internal strengths rather than external goods: a common trait of the three models**

Platonic and Aristotelian discussions about the relationship between external goods and happiness are based on the importance of developing one’s own capacities, especially cognitive ones. It is a recurring statement within the Aristotelian *corpus* that the possession of external goods is useful only if man knows how to make use of them by ordering them to the good life: it is of no use to have the tools to work with wood if one does not know their *use*; it is not sufficient to have food and other goods if one does not how to *take advantage* of them. Knowing is the only absolute

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1106b15-1107a1 [Barnes 1747-8]. Emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1107a1 [Barnes 1748].

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1113a23 -1113b1 [Barnes 1757-8]. Emphasis added.

and stable good and upon this depends the *use* that is made of external goods<sup>6</sup>. In using those goods, however, other capacities are developed in a parallel way<sup>7</sup>.

Everything, then, is ordered to happiness. It seems that “it is necessary that the one who is to be happy must not only get possession of such good things, but also must *use* them, or else there is no benefit from *having* them”<sup>8</sup>. He concludes further on that “not only good fortune but good *doing*, as it seems, is provided by *knowledge* for mankind in every *getting* and *doing*. Thus, he goes back to the affirmation that “when wisdom is present, whoever *has* it needs no more good fortune than that”<sup>9</sup>.

Maslow follows a different path in order to arrive at very similar conclusions regarding the priority of internal dispositions with respect to goods or external conditions. His proposal relies on a profound idea of autonomy that will not be explained in detail in this paper<sup>10</sup> and that, at first glance, might give the impression of being antisocial:

“One of the characteristics of self-actualizing people, [...] is their relative independence of the physical and social environment. Since they are propelled by growth motivation rather than by deficiency motivation, *self-actualizing people are not dependent for their main satisfactions on the real world, or other people or culture or means to ends or, in general, on extrinsic satisfactions. Rather they are dependent for their own development and continued growth on their own potentialities and latent resources.*”<sup>11</sup>

And he recalls in the following lines that the normal premise for building this stability of character, i.e. a relative independence from love, safety, respect, etc., is to have given plenty of this very same needs in the past.

Carl Rogers emphasizes the dynamism of happiness as personal growth, as if the person could become his or her own activity. A prerogative that Aristotle acknowledges only in God:

“The adjectives which seem more generally fitting [for the good life] are adjectives such as enriching, exciting, rewarding, challenging, meaningful. This process of the good life is not, I am convinced, a life for the faint-hearted. *It involves the stretching and growing of becoming more and more of one’s potentialities.* It involves the courage to be. It means launching oneself fully into the stream of life. Yet the deeply exciting thing about human beings is that when the individual is inwardly free, he chooses as the good life this process of becoming.”<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Three models as a standard for anthropology

From a dynamic point of view, Maslow summarizes the behaviour of the self-actualizing individuals in a very daring way:

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<sup>6</sup> *Euthyd.* 280b-d.

<sup>7</sup> *Theaetetus.*

<sup>8</sup> *Euthyd.* 280d. transl. by W.H.D. ROUSE in E. HAMILTON and H. CAIRNS (eds.), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton 1989, p. 394. Italics added. Cf. the commentary of W.K.C. GUTHRIE, *A History*, v. 4, cit., p. 60 on the importance of the relationship between education and personal goodness.

<sup>9</sup> *Euthyd.* 280b, p. 394. Italics added.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to observe the similarities to the Aristotelian *autarcheia* of the virtuous person.

<sup>11</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality.*, 162. Emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> Rogers, *On Becoming a Person.*, 195-6. Emphasis added.

“The motivational life of self-actualizing people is not only quantitatively different but also qualitatively different from that of ordinary people. [...] Perhaps it will be useful to make a distinction between living and preparing to live. Perhaps the ordinary concept of motivation should apply only to non self-actualizers. Our subjects no longer strive in the ordinary sense, but rather develop. They attempt to grow to perfection and to develop more and more fully in their own style. [...] They work, they try, and they are ambitious, even though in an unusual sense. For them motivation is just character growth, character expression, maturation, and development; in a word self-actualization.”<sup>13</sup>

One may say that the aristocratic view of the virtuous character present in Aristotle is revitalized by Maslow. But not only that: this sort of superiority of self-actualizers is in line with another classic principle, that is, that living beings, especially human beings, naturally tend not only to survive, but to improve their lives.<sup>14</sup>

“Not only is it good to survive, but it is also good (preferred, chosen, good-for-the-organism) for the person to grow toward full humanness, toward actualization of his potentialities, toward greater happiness, serenity, peak experiences, toward transcendence, toward richer and more accurate cognition of reality, etc.”<sup>15</sup>

Carl Rogers used to explain the perfection of human activity as that of the “fully functioning person”. Needless to say, one must take for granted that by “fully functioning” Rogers means a positive general way of behaving.

Thorne summarizes several qualities of this kind of person in a way that easily connects with the ideas of Maslow stated above:

“Such people demonstrate, as Rogers saw it, what it means to exhibit mature behaviour, a concept he defined in 1959 as the capacity to perceive realistically, to accept responsibility for one’s own behaviour, to evaluate experience in terms of the evidence coming from one’s own senses, to change the evaluation of experience only on the basis of new evidence, to accept others as unique individuals different from oneself, to prize oneself and to prize others (Rogers, 1959: 207)”<sup>16</sup>

For Rogers, this effortless respectful attitude towards reality is tightly interwoven with personal responsibility. If compared to the cited texts from Maslow, this is the only novelty one can find so far. Rogers linked the role of reason to a comprehensive interpretation of human nature, referring directly to his concurrences with Maslow’s ideas:

“One of the most revolutionary concepts to grow out of our clinical experience is the growing recognition that the innermost core of man’s nature, the deepest layers of his personality, the base of his ‘animal nature,’ is positive in nature – is basically socialized, forward-moving, rational and realistic.”<sup>17</sup>

Rogers explains his model through three main concepts, i.e. *openness to experience* (contrary to defensiveness), *adaptability* to a changing reality, and *trust* in our own organism. He presents those qualities as the basis of mature behavior in search of happiness and that is why his argument focuses on functionality and activity:

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<sup>13</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality.*, 159.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *NE.*, 1098b18-22.

<sup>15</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality.*, 104.

<sup>16</sup> Thorne, *Carl Rogers.*, 33.

<sup>17</sup> Rogers, *On Becoming a Person.*, 90-1. Cf. 67.

“The good life, from the point of view of my experience, is the process of movement in a direction which the human organism selects when it is inwardly free to move in any direction, and the general qualities of this selected direction appear to have a certain universality.”<sup>18</sup>

The three concepts quoted above are the pillars of this development and will be explained later in this paper.

But there are more concrete and significant concurrences between Maslow’s description of the self-actualizing individual and Aristotle’s “excellent man”.

From the methodological point of view, it is easy to connect the Aristotelian study of the *spoudaios* with the assertion of Maslow that “the study of self actualizing people must be the basis for a more universal science of psychology”.<sup>19</sup> Carl Rogers’ claims in this sense are quite similar to those of Maslow. The two humanistic psychologists were looking for a complex model to be studied and promoted.<sup>20</sup>

Their models are the point of reference (standard, canon) for evaluating human action. Maslow used to say that his focus on the study of such personalities started with the admiration he felt for concrete persons he came across in his professional activities and some historical figures, and he wanted to connect this natural admiration to the psychological research. Needless to say, Maslow and Rogers were very much criticized by numerous colleagues for what they consider a corruption of experimental science, which must keep a descriptive profile and avoid proselytizing particular anthropological theses.

## **4. Concrete elements of the psychological models**

### **4.1. A better comprehension of reality implies a harmonious relationship with one’s feelings**

The first characteristic that Maslow assigns to the self-actualizers is “a more efficient perception of reality and more comfortable relations with it”.<sup>21</sup> With this title Maslow summarizes the harmonious relationship between reason and emotions in healthy people. The character traits derived from this relationship were already included in the book he wrote with Bela Mittelmann as a textbook for the course on abnormal psychology they had been holding for several years.<sup>22</sup>

Generally speaking, the self-realizing individuals are more accurate in judging persons and behaviours, especially in identifying the insincere and dishonest in personality.<sup>23</sup> Even if Maslow considered that the results of the experiments upon which he relied needed further development, he connected those preliminary conclusions to the remarks of another psychologist (Money-Kyrle) who claimed that the root of the problem with neurotics is not emotional, but cognitive: neurotics do not perceive the real world as accurately as the healthy person. Maslow remarks that intellectual capacity (high IQ) and some professions (intellectuals) seem to be a requisite for this mindset, but

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>19</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality.*, 180.

<sup>20</sup> Rogers, *On Becoming a Person.*, 187.

<sup>21</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality.*, 153-155, in chapter 11. In this chapter, Maslow describes the 15 characteristics of this kind of person.

<sup>22</sup> Maslow and Mittelmann, *Abnormal Psychology.*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality.*, 153.

he also stresses that intellectual capacity is not enough, and that even intelligent scientists lack this harmonious contact with reality.<sup>24</sup>

The presupposition of a link between mental sanity and objectivity implies that there is also a correlation between judgments of matters of fact and of values, that is to say, a better evaluation both of external reality and one's personal situation and stable attitudes.<sup>25</sup>

As explained in detail in chapter 13 of *Motivation and Personality*, these persons are far more apt to pay attention to "what is there" rather than to their own wishes, hopes, fears and personal or cultural prejudices.<sup>26</sup>

The conclusion and summary of this general attitude is that "the self-actualized person sees reality more clearly: our subjects see human nature as it is and not as they would prefer it to be. Their eyes see what is before them without being strained through spectacles of various sorts to distort or shape or color the reality".<sup>27</sup>

Rogers developed some ideas about openness to experience as opposed to defensiveness that present clear analogies with Maslow's proposal.

In one of his autobiographical papers, Rogers explains "some significant learnings" that had been maturing during his work as a psychotherapist<sup>28</sup>. Even if the formulation of those principles is very personal, we will find some of them in the requirements of the fully functioning person. Several of these maxims regard the effectiveness of the acceptance of reality:

- Experience is the highest authority in the search for truth, in opposition to another person's ideas.<sup>29</sup>

- Facts are always friendly because every bit of evidence leads one closer to what is true.<sup>30</sup>

- It is enjoyable to discover order in experience because it fulfills the natural tendency to seek the meaning of facts and to formulate articulate explanations of them<sup>31</sup>.

These are some premises to the proposal he formulates in an explanation of the "good life" to which I referred in the previous paragraph, and I chose to use them as a guide in the forthcoming explanation.

Rogers explains openness to experience as the capacity to face reality as it is. As in the case of Maslow, Rogers simultaneously considers the "evaluation" of the internal conditions of the agent and of external factors. Thanks to that openness, the individual becomes

"more able to listen to himself, to experience what is going on within himself. He is more open to his feelings of fear and discouragement and pain. He is also more open to his feelings of courage, and

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 153-4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., cf. 154. On pg. 158 he asserts that "their ease of penetration to reality, their closer approach to an animal-like or childlike acceptance and spontaneity imply a superior awareness of their own impulses, desires, opinions, and subjective reactions in general".

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>28</sup> Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, 15-27; Rogers, *The Carl Rogers Reader.*, 17-29.

<sup>29</sup> Rogers, *On Becoming a Person.*, 23-24.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 24.

tenderness, and awe. He is free to live his feelings subjectively, as they exist in him, and also free to be aware of these feelings. He is more able fully to live the experiences of his organism rather than shutting them out of awareness.”<sup>32</sup>

In the process of maturation, the person is more able to live fully in and with each and every one of his feelings and reactions; to experience all of his feelings, and be less afraid of any of his feelings. He makes increasing use of all his organic equipment to sense, as accurately as possible, the existential situation within and without; makes use of all of the information the nervous system can thus supply, using it in awareness, but recognizing that his total organism may be, and often is, wiser than his awareness. The person becomes a balanced sifter of evidence.<sup>33</sup>

As a consequence of this improvement in dealing with reality there is an intensification of feelings and a different evaluation of them. A more sensitive living implies a greater range and richness of experiences. Subjects can live

“more intimately with their feelings of pain, but also more vividly with their feelings of ecstasy; [...] anger is more clearly felt, but so also is love; that fear is an experience they know more deeply, but so is courage. And the reason they can thus live fully in a wider range is that they have this underlying confidence in themselves as trustworthy instruments for encountering life.”<sup>34</sup>

Maslow translates the Augustinian statement “love God and do as you will” as “be healthy and you may trust your impulses”, as a position to overcome traditional dichotomies and oppositions. Some of the classic conflicts, i.e. selfishness-unselfishness, duty-pleasure, and especially heart-head are, for Maslow, a problem only in less-healthy individuals. In self-actualizers, desires are in excellent accord with reason. That is why the direction of their desires has a constructive role in those persons, and it also partly explains their enjoyment in doing good, normal things. Their appetites are attuned to judgments, so the relationship among them is synergic rather than antagonistic.<sup>35</sup> It is easy to discover the concurrence with Aristotle’s “right feeling” before and during virtuous actions.

#### **4.2. Flexibility according to circumstances**

Maslow asserts, in association with a good relationship with reality, that the self-actualizers

“can be, when the total objective situation calls for it, comfortably disorderly, sloppy, anarchic, chaotic, vague, doubtful, uncertain, indefinite, approximate, inexact, or inaccurate”, so their reactions are in accordance to the matter and the situation, and the need to react in situations of uncertainty are often for them stimulating instead of straining.<sup>36</sup>

This flexibility is in accordance with an acceptance of themselves, others and nature, without caring much about social or cultural trends regarding status or shortcomings. The peaceful assumption of personal reality regards all the spheres of personality, including the biological level and the emotional and social reactions, for example, to the peculiarities of masculinity or femininity: they are more prone to be reserved than shy, and their negative feelings are about discrepancies between what is and what might very well be or ought to be.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 191-2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>35</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*., 202.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 157.



Their behavior is marked by simplicity and naturalness, and by a lack of artificiality or straining for effect. This does not necessarily mean unconventional behavior, even if sometimes their behavior could be unconventional or seem unethical to the external observer.

“They can break down not only conventions but laws when the situation seems to demand it. But the very opposite is the case. They are the most ethical of people even though their ethics are not necessarily the same as those of the people around them.”<sup>38</sup>

This might be a very controversial remark that should be presented at length within Maslow’s ideas. I just wish to stress the similarity to the Aristotelian notion of equity (*epikeia*), a kind of autonomy of judgment that allows the prudent person to go beyond the text of the law in order to do good.<sup>39</sup>

Carl Rogers expresses himself in broader terms, referring this capacity to a more existential living and greater adaptability. It involves an increasing tendency to live fully in each moment. Rogers describes it as the capacity to live in the present, and explains it in close relationship to an openness to experience and a realistic approach to the present situation.<sup>40</sup>

It develops into an almost spontaneous response to reality because it means “to open one’s spirit to what is going on *now*, because the complex configuration of inner and outer stimuli which exists in this moment has never existed before in just this fashion, and to discover in that present process whatever structure it appears to have.”<sup>41</sup>

Rogers claims that we usually react in a defensive way and “bring a preformed structure and evaluation to our experience” and blend it to fit our preconceptions, annoyed at the fluctuating qualities “which make it so unruly in fitting our carefully constructed pigeonholes.”<sup>42</sup>

**This attentiveness to the present implies “an absence of rigidity, of tight organization, of the imposition of structure on experience. It means instead a maximum of adaptability, a discovery of structure *in* experience, a flowing, changing organization of self and personality.”<sup>43</sup>**

**This fundamental attitude is important because life is “a flowing, changing process in which nothing is fixed”, as he expresses as one of the significant learnings quoted above.<sup>44</sup>**

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, Book 5; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae.*, 2.2.120.

<sup>40</sup> Rogers, *On Becoming a Person.*, 188-9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 27.

### 4.3. Maslow: “problem-centeredness” out of a wider and deeper view of situations

Maslow explains the capacity to focus on problems outside the person as an evident consequence of this healthy relationship with reality. This lack of self-centeredness implies that they are not “a problem” for themselves, in contrast to the introspection frequently found in insecure people.<sup>45</sup>

This general attitude is displayed both in personal and in social affairs, linked to the sense of responsibility. Maslow exalts this characteristic and comments on this trait in terms quite daring for a psychologist:

“With a few exceptions we can say that our objects are ordinarily concerned with basic issues and eternal questions of the type that we have learned to call philosophical or ethical. Such people live customarily in the widest possible frame of reference. They seem never get so close to the trees that they fail to see the forest. They work within a framework of values that are broad and not petty, universal and not local, and in terms of a century rather than the moment. In a word, these people are all in one sense or another philosophers, however homely.”<sup>46</sup>

Maslow underscores the positive impact of this capacity in their personal relations: through it they diffuse a certain serenity over immediate concerns that make life easier not only for themselves but for all who are associated with them.<sup>47</sup>

### 4.4. Rogers: efficacy out of an increasing trust in one’s organism

Rogers understands the trust in one’s feelings as related to the capacity to behave in the best way in each existential state of affairs<sup>48</sup>.

As in the capacity to cope with reality as it is, Rogers explains the most frequent –and non-desirable situation:

“In choosing what course of action to take in any situation, many people rely upon guiding principles, upon a code of action laid down by some group or institution, upon the judgment of others [...] or upon the way they have behaved in some similar past situation.”<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, better functioning individuals are able to trust their total organismic reaction to a new situation “because they discover to an ever-increasing degree that if they are open to their experience, doing what ‘feels right’ proves to be a competent and trustworthy guide to behavior which is truly satisfying.”<sup>50</sup>

This reliability of the right feeling—shared by the Aristotle’s *spoudaios*—goes hand in hand with some qualities of the classic notion of wisdom or prudence that can be defined as the capacity to soundly select and evaluate the information available for every single situation:

“The person who is fully open to his experience would have access to all of the available data in the situation, on which to base his behavior; the social demands, his own complex and possibly conflicting needs, his memories of similar situations, his perception of the uniqueness of this situation, etc., etc. The data would be very complex indeed. But he could permit his total organism, his consciousness participating, to consider each stimulus, need, and demand, its relative intensity and importance, and out

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<sup>45</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality.*, 159.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>48</sup> Rogers, *On Becoming a Person.*, 189.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

of this complex weighing and balancing, discover that course of action which would come closest to satisfying all his needs in the situation. [...] This is the behavior of our hypothetical person.”<sup>51</sup>

This “hypothetical person” avoids the twofold defect of including information which does not belong to the present situation or excluding information which does. This person profits from positive or negative memories and learnings to cope with present challenges without distractions from which erroneous behavioral responses arise. He or she checks the feelings that can influence the decision-making or evaluative process in a distorted form, allowing all of the available data to be considered in an accurate way.<sup>52</sup>

This careful and almost intuitive choice of the relevant inputs of the situation assist those persons in trusting their reactions, and “if they ‘feel like’ expressing anger they do so and find that this comes out satisfactorily, because they are equally alive to all of their other desires for affection, affiliation, and relationship. They are surprised at their own intuitive skill in finding behavioral solutions to complex and troubling human relationships”.<sup>53</sup>

#### **4.5. Serenity and detachment**

For Maslow, the capacity to focus on real problems also implies the ability to remain undisturbed by that which causes turmoil in others. Self-actualizing individuals assimilate misfortunes and frustrations with serenity. They “can maintain a relative serenity in the midst of circumstances that would drive other people to suicide”<sup>54</sup>. It seems that their internal evaluation of different situations makes them less dependent on external pressure, as Rogers stresses in a very similar way. For Maslow, a number of signs are connected to this objectivity at evaluating situations and their own position within them, i.e. a particular ability to concentrate to a degree not usual for ordinary people, and consequently to present “such phenomena as absent-mindedness, the ability to forget and to be oblivious of outer surroundings [...] the ability to sleep soundly, to have undisturbed appetite, to be able to smile and laugh through a period of problems, worry, and responsibility.”<sup>55</sup>

These individuals also *like* solitude and privacy to a greater degree than the average person, and this might be interpreted as coldness, snobbishness, lack of affection, unfriendliness, or even hostility. But the reality is that an ordinary friendship becomes more clinging, more demanding, more desirous of reassurance, compliment, support, warmth, and exclusiveness.<sup>56</sup>

As they make up their own minds and come to their own decisions, they display an active, disciplined, responsible self-government, rather than being conditioned by others.<sup>57</sup> This conclusion is quite similar to those of Rogers referred to in the previous paragraph, but Rogers does not associate them explicitly with collectedness or serenity.

#### **4.6. Continued freshness of appreciation and the perception of beauty**

Maslow stresses the childlike approach to reality of self-actualizing individuals. Apart from the lack of prejudice and shyness that they display in their activities, they keep a sense of curiosity and wonder regarding the normal things of life. They rediscover the beauty of their partners after years

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 190; Cf. Aristotle, *NE* Book 6.

<sup>52</sup> Rogers, *On Becoming a Person.*, 190.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>54</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality.*, 162.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 160-1.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 161.

of familial life or ecstatic sensations facing a sunset or feel thrilled by the normal day-to-day business of living.<sup>58</sup>

On this point, the connection with the Aristotelian thought is not so immediate. Aristotle underscores the role of curiosity as a normal but sophisticated tendency of human beings and considers admiration a prerequisite for philosophical life.<sup>59</sup> This pleasurable contemplation of nature that fuels intellectual reflection does not have the strength of Maslowian wonderment or sense of awe and its ecstatic connotations. Kristján Kristjánsson underlines this difference between Aristotle and contemporary psychology, especially some trends within the positive psychology movement.<sup>60</sup>

Carl Rogers does not establish any particular connection between the better knowledge of the fully functioning person with such a capacity to enjoy and rediscover beauty in everyday life.

An important contribution of the way Maslow deals with this evidence is the correlation established between this permanent and subtle appreciation with the capacity to keep in mind the blessings we receive: when we take for granted the role of very normal things, situations and persons we lose an important source of deep joy:

“Wives, husbands, children, friends are unfortunately more apt to be loved and appreciated after they have died than while they are still available. Something similar is true for physical health, for political freedoms, for economic well-being; we learn their true value after we have lost them”.<sup>61</sup>

#### **4.7. Sense of fellowship and constructive relations**

The last chapters of Book 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* deal with questions regarding individuality and social life, as a conclusive discussion about friendship and the need for good friends.

The first question is about the tension between the autonomy of the mature human being and the need for friends:

“If we can contemplate our neighbours better than ourselves and their actions better than our own, and if the actions of virtuous men who are their friends are pleasant to good men (since these have both the attributes that are naturally pleasant)—if this be so, the blessed man will need for friends of this sort, since he chooses to contemplate worthy actions and actions that are his own, and the actions of a good man who is his friend have both these qualities”.<sup>62</sup>

Maslow condenses the argument using the German term *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*. It was coined by Adler to describe the sense of belonging and solidarity. According to this “feeling”, the best individuals have for human beings in general a deep sense of identification, sympathy and affection. They have a genuine desire to help the human race, as if they were part of a single family. Nevertheless, they feel a sense of frustration when they face situations of the misuse or waste of personal and natural resources. However far apart he is from them at times, he nevertheless feels a basic underlying kinship with these creatures whom he must regard, if not condescension.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>59</sup> Aristotle, *Met.* Book 1.

<sup>60</sup> Kristjánsson, *Virtues and Vices in Positive Psychology.*, Ch. 8.

<sup>61</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality.*, 164. Maslow quotes several studies in which the positive impact of this permanent attention to the good things we receive is becoming more and more evident.

<sup>62</sup> Aristotle, *NE.* 1169b33-1170a4.

<sup>63</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality.*, 165-6.

Self-actualizers have deeper and more profound interpersonal relations, and are capable of more fusion and greater love. There is a significant correspondence of mental health on the two sides of this relationship, that is to say, that there is a high selectiveness in the process of loving and caring for others in a stable way. The ones that they love profoundly are few in number, and it depends also on time because “devotion is not a matter of a moment”.<sup>64</sup>

Important texts from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are very close to this position:

“Those who have many friends and mix intimately with them all are thought to be no one’s friend, except in the way proper to fellow-citizens, and such people are also called obsequious [...] one cannot have with many people the friendship based on excellence and on the character of our friends themselves, and we must be content if we find even a few such”.<sup>65</sup>

And the coincidences extend also to the idea that the exclusiveness of devotion can and does exist side by side with a widespread *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, benevolence, affection, and friendliness.<sup>66</sup>

For Maslow, the fact that self-actualizers tend to be nice or at least patient to almost everyone is not an obstacle for expressing their judgments realistically and harshly if the situation demands it.<sup>67</sup> They possess a strong sense of right and wrong. “They are more likely rather than less likely to counterattack against evil men and evil behavior. They are far less ambivalent, confused or weak-willed about their own anger than average men are”.<sup>68</sup>

As a summary of those apparently paradoxical characteristics, Maslow states that:

“They are more completely individual than any group that has ever been described, and yet are also more completely socialized, more identified with humanity than any other group yet described. They are closer to *both* their specieshood and to their unique individuality.”<sup>69</sup>

And this fits quite well with the Aristotelian tension between autonomy (*autarcheia*) and the need for friends:

“Surely it is strange, too, to make the blessed man solitary; for no one would choose to possess all good things on condition of being alone, since man is a political creature and one whose nature is to live with others. Therefore even the happy man lives with others; for he has the things that are by nature good”.<sup>70</sup>

Rogers does not face the tension between individuality and friendship as Maslow and Aristotle do, but some of his ideas can be used as a background to somehow fill this gap. One can underscore that he clearly explains the positive social outcomes derived from openness, adaptability and trust in one’s organism: when the person is open “to the wide range of his own needs, as well as the wide

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>65</sup> Aristotle, *NE.*, 1171a16-20.

<sup>66</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 166; cf. Aristotle, *NE.*, 1166a1-1167b15.

<sup>67</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality.*, 167.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 178; "self-actualizing people, our best experiencers, are also our most compassionate, our great improvers and reformers of society, our most effective fighters against injustice, inequality, slavery, cruelty, exploitation (and also our best fighters for excellence, effectiveness, competence). And it also becomes clearer and clearer that the best 'helpers' are the most fully human persons" Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature.*, 334.

<sup>70</sup> Aristotle, *NE.*, 1169b17-21.

range of environmental and social demands, his reactions may be trusted to be positive, forward-moving, constructive.”

## **In this process, he or she will become more realistically socialized, and it is not necessary**

“to ask who will control his aggressive impulses; for as he becomes more open to all of his impulses, his need to be liked by others and his tendency to give affection will be as strong as his impulses to strike out or to seize for himself. He will be aggressive in situations in which aggression is realistically appropriate, but there will be no runaway need for aggression. His total behavior, in these and other areas, as he moves toward being open to all his experience, will be more balanced and realistic, behavior which is appropriate to the survival and enhancement of a highly social animal.”<sup>71</sup>

### **4.8. From distinguishing good and evil to identifying means and ends**

A distinctive observation in Maslow’s discourse is the explicit reference to this point, i.e. the capacity of the best-behaving human beings to distinguish between means and ends, and to link this to ethical conduct.

Maslow judged, as has been mentioned, that self-actualizers are deeply ethical human beings, and have clear and demanding moral standards, even though often times their notions of right and wrong are not in accordance with the social mainstream.<sup>72</sup>

Through their decisions and general behaviour they show a tendency to focus on ends rather than on means, and means are obviously subordinated to ends. But this mental attitude concurs with a capacity to enjoy transitory situations as if they were ends in themselves; they

“are somewhat more likely to appreciate for its own sake, and in an absolute way, the doing itself; they can often enjoy for its own sake the getting to some place as well as the arriving. It is occasionally possible for them to make out of the most trivial and routine activity an intrinsically enjoyable game or dance or play.”<sup>73</sup>

Again, their childlike mindset—as stressed by Wertheimer about this particular attitude— blends with the capacity to discover newness and amusement in ordinary life.<sup>74</sup>

### **4.9. Creativity as an element of the good life**

I avoided a direct confrontation between Aristotle and Maslow on creativity because the approach of the psychologist is in this case far from the classic, i.e. the modern treatment is very much associated with novelty and invention. On the contrary, Rogers connects it to the idea of the good life and the socially constructive role of the sound handling of emotions and situations. And he explains this inventiveness in continuity and close connection with the three characteristics of the fully functioning person:

“With his sensitive openness to his world, his trust of his own ability to form new relationships with his environment, he would be the type of person from whom creative products and creative living emerge. He would not necessarily be “adjusted” to his culture, and he would almost certainly not be a conformist. But at any time and in any culture he would live constructively, in as much harmony with

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<sup>71</sup> Rogers, *On Becoming a Person.*, 194.

<sup>72</sup> Maslow, *Motivation and Personality.*, 158.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

his culture as a balanced satisfaction of needs demanded. In some cultural situations he might in some ways be very unhappy, but he would continue to move toward becoming himself, and to behave in such a way as to provide the maximum satisfaction of his deepest needs.<sup>75</sup>

## Concluding remarks

As the main purpose of this work is to underline the concurrences between the three proposals, the core of the work can be summarized by the titles within paragraph 4.

A finer comparison between the origins and direction of the ethical approach of Aristotle and contemporary psychological trends remains a future task, but some hints can be gleaned as conclusive comments.

It seems that Aristotle states in a direct way the necessity of recognizing and following the good, and then incorporates it into the characteristics of the virtuous person, while contemporary psychologists discover this capacity of recognizing the good after an effort at interpreting the data has emerged through regulated experience. Empirical data is refined using common sense ideas regarding health, gratification, collaboration, and social impact. A discussion on the origin of Aristotle's thesis from vast sources of evidence and profound scientific criteria would take us too far from the core of our debate. What I consider more relevant for the present study is that the Aristotelian work on purifying common sense-oriented ideas be displayed all throughout his ethical works. Apart from life and health, every other single item is carefully chosen and evaluated.

In the proposals of Maslow and Rogers one finds an explanation in which the external activity and the internal faculties of the individual are harmonized in a coherent image. Coherence or consistency is based on a mutual correspondence of some characteristics, i.e. what we consider as a constructive attitude refers to a harmonious interconnection of knowledge and desire. This connection depends on an efficient contact with reality, not far from the classic *recta ratio*. Feedback on the whole system is evaluated positively, because feeling good is a consequence of acting good. In these terms, the psychological explanation is longer than the philosophical one, but almost fully compatible with it.

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<sup>75</sup> Rogers, *On Becoming a Person.*, 193-4.

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