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Aristotle and Gilbert Keith Chesterton on 'Dogmatic Thinking'

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Düsseldorf

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In view of the diagnosis of massively increasing and globally perceptible social polarisation, in my paper I will look at two perspectives on polarisation phenomena, their causes and ways out. Following a brief look at the basic understanding of polarisation, I will examine two possibly surprisingly related perspectives on the causes of polarisation: Firstly, I will focus on the reflections of the British writer, journalist, and cultural critic Gilbert Keith Chesterton on 'dogmatic thinking'. In the second step, I present the Aristotelian version of 'dogmatic thinking' based on his theory of action and tragedy. Finally, and as a conclusion, I discuss the consequences of both thinkers' considerations on how not to get lost in polarisation.

I. What Polarisation means - a short reminder

Over the past two decades, the increase of polarisation in political, ideological, public, and private discourse has been identified as a factor that threatens democracy globally[1]. While 'a healthy degree of ideological polarisation'[2] is considered fundamental for deliberative democracy, i.e. for fact-based and constructive debates about the common good, and must, therefore, be accepted, the disputes subsumed under the label of polarisation have reached a new quality: widespread phenomena such as hate speech, cancel culture and even physical assaults reveal topic-, group- and person-related mechanisms of a deliberate termination of the culture of debate. Social psychologists, sociologists and political scientists have shown that and how polarisation results from certain biases, i.e. cognitive fixations. Whether it is the 'cognitive bias'[3], the 'confirmation bias'[4] or a 'motivated reasoning'[5], to name but a few, in any case, it is a psychologically explainable 'less explicit, less consciously one-sided case-building process' which 'usually refers to unwitting selectivity in the acquisition and use of evidence'[6]. Behind this selectivity, in turn, are judgement criteria or prejudice structures that can be attributed to fears, ignorance, carelessly generalised negative experiences, adverse life circumstances, personal failures and many other factors[7]. This form of explainable but one-sided judgement of opinions, positions, political decisions and measures that differ from one's own point of view is accompanied by a strong emotional component, such as anger, fear, hate which in turn is based on a moral dimension.

Social developments that are perceived as existentially threatening, such as migration or climate change and their consequences[8], are particularly tempting to make one's own convictions about the importance of the topic and one's own attitudes, which are recognised as correct, absolute. Such a 'belief persistence'[9] is based on the supposed factual superiority or truth of one's own position and can not only lead to a selective perception of the available facts, but also cause the resulting disdain

[1] See, for instance, Carothers and O'Donohue, 2019
[2] Hecht, 2023.
[3] Tversky & Kahnemann, 1982.
[4] Nickerson, 1998.
[5] Haidt, 2012.
[6] Nickerson, 1998, 175.
[7] Fukuyama, 2022, 104, points to Jonathan Haidt (2012) and other social psychologists who suggest that "many people follow a very different cognitive model. They do not begin with any kind of neutral observation."
[8] Herold, Joachim, Otteni, and Vorländer (2023), 9ff.
[9] Nickerson 1998, 187.

and rejection of dissenting opinions. The judgements on the assumed lack of alternatives and unambiguousness in one's own assessment of a situation, such as dealing with climate change or migration, lead to dissenting viewpoints no longer being seen as a constructive stimulus in the sense of John Stuart Mill's famous thoughts on the 'silencing of the expression of an opinion'[10] which to preclude he emphasises as an indispensable element of free societies. It now becomes a personal and inappropriate affront which is categorically excluding the other's opinion or approach as completely missing the truth[11]. This apparently growing discrediting of dissenting opinions, which are no longer regarded as factually beneficial, but, in a reciprocal attribution, only as unreflective, prejudice-based and ultimately dangerous, is based on an obviously growing hypermoralisation [12]: through an inappropriate reduction of complexity and the moral charging of the facts ('immoral' and 'inhumane', instead of factually 'appropriate'/'inappropriate'), some engage in a 'self-righteous stylisation of their own position in order to belittle another moral position'[13]. This mutual exclusion, which jeopardises discourse, is further encouraged by the growing possibilities of fragmented or alternative public spheres on the Internet[14]. In the web-based search for like-minded people, i.e. for support in selective perception and positioning, as well as in soldiering against dissenters, the omnipresent algorithms help to find echo chambers, i.e. separate sub-publics. These echo chambers, in turn, massively drive polarisation and exacerbate divisive tendencies because the opinion is homogeneous and 'spared' from divergent factual arguments - through a one-sided perception of reality and the mutual confirmation of the shared (partial) truth. Polarisation is shown here as a morally highly charged self-immunisation of a group or an individual against other groups, perspectives, opinions, and complementary facts, forcing the willingness to denounce, demonize or even physically fight positions and opinions which are deviating from one's own perspectives.

As a look at the climate protection movement in recent years in particular exemplifies, polarisation can also drive a morally based duty to support an undoubtedly existentially important cause to take on quasi-religious, sectarian traits, as evidenced not only by the general rhetoric, but especially by the dogmatic rejection of dissenting views and quasi-heresy and recourse to apocalyptic scenarios[15]. To put it bluntly, it looks like the clash of secular or atheistic creeds, whose claim to exclusivity can lead to new religious wars. It is a certain irony of history that these secular conflicts, with their fervour, stigmatisation, and aggression, resemble a distorted image of the religious conflicts and religious wars of past centuries.

II. *What's Wrong with the World* – G.K. Chesterton's view on dogmatic thinking

Of course, this combination of cognitive one-sidedness, a sense of moral superiority and affective impetus is not an entirely new phenomenon. In one of his articles from 1919, the renowned British novelist, journalist and cultural and social critic Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) provides a

[10] Mill, 2010, 27: 'But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; (…) those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it.'
[11] Merkel, 2021,9ff
[12] Grau, 2018, 41ff.
[13] Merkel, 2021,9; translated into English by JSA.
[14] Carothers and O'Donohue, 2019a.
[15] Kohl, 2020, proves that climate protection activists, with their ideological dualism of good and evil and the imminent apocalypse, are following the line of Gnosticism, a radical religious movement of the 2nd/3rd century AD.

commentary on the causes of societal conflicts in England in the early 20th century, combining an individual psychological diagnosis and basic hermeneutical thoughts that can also capture the current polarisation and its causes:

> The special mark of the modern world is not that it is skeptical, but that it is dogmatic without knowing it. It says, in mockery of old devotees, that they believed without knowing *why* they believed. But the moderns believe without knowing *what* they believe – and without even knowing that they do believe it. Their freedom consists in first freely assuming a creed, and then freely forgetting that they are assuming it. In short, they always have an unconscious dogma; and an unconscious dogma is the definition of a prejudice. (…) A man who is awake should know what he is saying, and why he is saying it – that is, he should have a fixed creed and relate it to a first principle. This is what most moderns will never consent to do. Their thoughts will work out to most interesting conclusions; but they can never tell you anything about their beginnings. They have always taken away the number they first thought of. They have always forgotten the very fact or fancy on which their whole theory depends.[16]

Chesterton's concise and sharp-tongued analysis of contemporary discourse behaviour regarding religious, social, and societal issues focuses on the lack of substance and groundlessness of the positions (dogmas) taken in the debates: he diagnoses most participants in the discourse with a comprehensive ignorance of the premises of their thinking. For Chesterton, knowing one's own position ('what') and its foundation ('why') obviously is an indispensable prerequisite for thinking and arguing. Elsewhere, he is truly clear about the consequences: 'The man who begins to think without the proper first principles goes mad; he begins to think at the wrong end.'[17]

The above opening quotation from a newspaper article on the debate surrounding spiritualism as one of the contemporary countercurrents to Christianity thus not only illustrates the thrust of the discourse critique. It is also a proof of the intended ambiguity in vocabulary, such as 'creed' on the one hand, which denotes both the Apostles' Creed and the quasi-religious firm convictions of secular contemporaries, and 'dogma', which in Chesterton's case means, depending on the context, the intellectual position on an issue or a fixed doctrine of the Catholic Church. He repeats the play with the ambiguity of the concept of dogma in a frequently quoted sentence from another newspaper article from 1929, entitled *On Europe and Asia*: 'There are two kinds of people in the world: the conscious dogmatists and the unconscious dogmatists. I have always found myself that the unconscious dogmatists were by far the most dogmatic.'[18] The nuance of meaning of this term that is also relevant in the context of polarisation - the unwavering or narrow-minded adherence to one's own opinion or idea - is also unmistakably underlined here in an ironic way.

The criticism of the intellectual weakness of many of his contemporaries and debate opponents, outlined here in all brevity and clarity, preoccupied him particularly in some of his key texts, such as the so-called apologetic books *Heretics* (1905) and *Orthodoxy* (1908)[19], and in the socio-politically programmatic booklet *What's Wrong with the World* (1910)[20]. The first two are not only focused on

[16] Chesterton, 1989, 441.
[17] Chesterton, 2023, 210.
[18] Chesterton, 1929, 29.
[19] See both in Chesterton, 2023.
[20] Chesterton, 2021.

the defence of the Catholic faith and its fundamental role in understanding the world, but also and especially a plea for the necessary return to the fundamental prerequisites for understanding and judgement.[21]

In the very first chapter of his book *Heretics*, Chesterton explains how absurd he considers the discourses of the present day, which focus exclusively on practical details and phenomena, to be. Trivialities and specialised knowledge are considered important, but the whole is lost sight of: 'Everything matters – except everything'[22]. An eye for the foundations and prerequisites of details and individual things or topics is no longer present or in demand, '..in our time, philosophy and religion, our theory, that is, about ultimate things, has been driven out …'.[23] Theology and philosophy are therefore needed in the sense of a safeguarding of knowledge based on ultimate principles in order to escape an intellectual narrowing or vagueness, which Chesterton elsewhere identifies as sources of a new fanaticism: 'The one argument that used to be urged for our creedless vagueness was that at least it saved us from fanaticism. But it does not even do that. On the contrary, it creates and renews fanaticism with a force quite peculiar to itself.'[24] The less well-founded an opinion is, the more bigotry flourishes, as a precursor to fanaticism, so to speak, i.e. an attitude that 'may be roughly defined as the anger of men who have no opinions', as Chesterton emphasises.[25] Vagueness, clinging to prejudice, bigotry, fanaticism - Chesterton ultimately sees this as the end of any debate, as a step towards polarisation:

> For the sincere controversialist is above all things a good listener. The really burning enthusiast never interrupts; he listens to the enemy's arguments as eagerly as a spy would listen to the enemy's arrangements. But if you attempt an actual argument with a modern paper of opposite politics, you will find that no medium is admitted between violence and evasion.[26]

This description of the plight implicitly contains the beginnings of the solution that Chesterton has in mind. Openness, curiosity, respect for other opinions and their representatives are the 'norm' for him, which his contemporaries are apparently unable or unwilling to fulfil. Chesterton's answer to the logical question of what leads out of this individual and social misery of lack of knowledge and refusal of discourse is for him the revival of basic hermeneutic and epistemological principles:

> The best reason for a revival of philosophy is that unless a man has a philosophy horrible things will happen to him (…) But man has no alternative, except between being influenced by thought that has been thought out and being influenced by thought that has not been thought out. The latter is what we commonly call culture and enlightenment today.[27]

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[21] Oddie, 2008, 296, shows for *Heretics* that '... the primary objective … is not directly to put the argument for Christianity in any of its objects, but to achieve, rather, a preliminary objective: the re-establishment of an understanding that any particular world view has a theoretical basis which needs imperatively to be understood …'

[22] Chesterton, 2023, 4.

[23] Chesterton, 2023, 6.

[24] Chesterton, 2021, 12.

[25] Chesterton, 2023, 178.

[26] Chesterton, 2021, 13.

[27] Chesterton in an article under the heading of 'The Revival of Philosophy – why?', in *The Common Man* (1950); citing from Haldane, 1990, 69. who gives a concise and very instructive analysis and explanation of Chesterton's philosophical fundament, i.e. the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition he stands in.

In addition to his sarcastic reckoning with his contemporaries and their supposed enlightenment, Chesterton once again alludes to the need for a valid philosophical foundation to guide knowledge. The foundation he has in mind is already shown by isolated references in the books *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy*, before he becomes explicit in his biography of St Thomas Aquinas in 1933. As Chesterton summarises in *Heretics*, the 'mental growth'[28] as the goal of the individual, which is important for a culture of reason and reasonableness in everyday life, first requires an understanding of reason which he outlines as follows: 'The human brain is a mechanism for coming to conclusions.'[29] As if to concretise this, he wrote a few years later in *Orthodoxy*: 'Thinking means connecting things, and stops if they cannot be connected.'[30] And on the basis of this ability to reason as a capacity for discernment and combination and its practical realisation, man becomes man, as Chesterton formulates it in a quasi-anthropological foundation that reveals its Aristotelian-Thomist character: 'Man can be defined as an animal that makes dogmas. As he piles doctrine on doctrine and conclusion on conclusion in the formation of some tremendous scheme of philosophy and religion, he is, in the only legitimate sense of which the expression is capable, becoming more and more human.'[31] These two sentences may well be understood as a 'translation' of the Aristotelian understanding of nature and the *télos* of man as an '*animal rationale*'[32].

That and to what extent Chesterton owes this understanding of rationality to the Aristotelian tradition in its Christian manifestation in Thomas Aquinas becomes very clear in his biography of St Thomas Aquinas.[33] In Chapter VI, entitled 'The Approach to Thomism', Chesterton not only traces the metaphysical foundation of Thomistic epistemology, but also demonstrates with impressive clarity that human rationality proceeds deductively in the process of cognition, i.e. syllogistically in the manner already alluded to above:

> I have never understood why there is supposed to be something crabbed or antique about a syllogism; still less can I understand what anybody means by talking as if induction had somehow taken the place of deduction. The whole point of deduction is that true premises produce a true conclusion. (…) And Aristotle or Aquinas, or anybody in his five wits, would of course agree that the conclusion could only be true if the premises were true; and that the more true premises there were the better. It was the misfortune of medieval culture that there were not enough true premises, owing to the rather ruder conditions of travel or experiment ….[34]

To summarise Chesterton's positions presented above and their classification in an interim conclusion: Chesterton observes a prevailing tendency in his time to constrict and refuse to engage in discourse on socially, politically, and religiously controversial issues. He identifies a seemingly unteachable fixation on one's own point of view as well as an inability and unwillingness to

[28] Chesterton 2023, 172.
[29] Chesterton 2023, 172.
[30] Chesterton 2023, 219.
[31] Chesterton 2023, 172.
[32] Aristotle's definition of the *zóon lógon échon* in his Politics, I,3 (1253a7ff).
[33] Haldane, 1990, 67-72, gives a concise and very instructive analysis and explanation of Chesterton's 'philosophical mind' and fundament, particularly pointing to his criticism of contemporary philosophical theories, as Irrationalism and certain forms of Rationalism from a Thomist perspective.

[34] Chesterton 1986, 520.

intellectually reflect on one's own thinking prerequisites as the cause of this attitude of refusal. Reflecting on these prerequisites of thought, i.e. openly considering one's own criteria of judgement as well as those of one's interlocutors in the opinion-forming process and listening to each other, describes the educational path that Chesterton considers best for overcoming polarising attitudes.

III. Cognitive Fixation and human failure – Aristotle on the causes of polarized thinking

If we look with Gilbert Keith Chesterton to the actual source of his philosophical thinking, namely Aristotle, the question of the causes and consequences of polarised thinking is immediately linked to his understanding of the tragic, as he presents it in his *Poetics*.

Cognitive polarisation and failure: Aristotle's theory of 'hámartia'

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle explains that the tragic, i.e. the failure of the 'tragic hero', is essentially caused by an attributable and avoidable wrong action or tragic flaw (*hamartía*) of the protagonist.[35] This mistaken action of the main character, who in epic and tragedy is characterized neither by outstanding prudence nor by wickedness, results from a momentary weakness of cognition, which leads via a realization and a hasty conclusion into a corresponding fixation, the consequences of which prove to be devastating and at the same time avoidable. Thus, Achilles of the Homeric *Iliad* rightly recognizes Agamemnon's behaviour towards him as an unseemly disrespect and gets into an understandable and, according to the matter, appropriate anger. At the same time, however, he fails to meet the criteria of degree and duration that are important for appropriate anger and that Aristotle describes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.[36] Fixated on grievance and reparation, he causes the death of many Greeks, and especially that of his friend Patroclus, by deliberately staying away from the battle.

The most illustrative and famous example of tragic failure Aristotle is referring to is *Antigone*, one of the few surviving tragedies the ancient Greek poet Sophocles composed. The basic constellation of the tragedy is based on the confrontation between the title character Antigone and her uncle Creon. The bitter dispute centres on what is considered the appropriate course of action after Polynices, one of Antigone's brothers and Creon's nephew, falls in a duel with his brother Eteocles over the rule of Thebes. Their uncle Creon, who then takes over the rule of Thebes, refuses to bury the traitor Polynices, his nephew, for political and religious reasons, while Antigone accepts the burial of her brother as her familial and religious duty. The emotional conflict between the two finally comes to such a head that Antigone hangs herself and her fiancé Haimon, Creon's son, then takes his own life. The tragic in Aristotle's sense thus unfolds in an exemplary polarisation situation: Antigone, out of love and the feeling of familial obligation, increases her unconditional will to bury the body of her dead brother Polynices lying in front of Thebes - although relevant and known religious and legal obligations forbid it at the same time, which she can no longer 'see' in her one-sided focus. Her uncle Creon is in no way inferior to her in the emotionally conditioned fixation: He insists on the observance of the law and the compliance with his orders without any consideration for Antigone's

[35] On the crucial role of *hamartía* for the Geek tragedy and for its specific emotions of compassion and fear (*éleos* and *phóbos*) see Aristotle, Ars Poetica, ch. 13, 1452b28-53a23.
[36] Aristotle, Ethica Nicomachea, book IV, ch. 11, 1125b26ff

claims and motivation. The misguided actions resulting from the mutual misconduct ultimately cause the failure of both.

As a closer analysis of Sophocles' plot structure shows[37], the two antagonists Antigone and Creon, in their respective fixation on the course of action perceived as the only appropriate one, prove to be morally entitled to fight through this respective option regardless of possible and possibly valid counter-arguments - although their characterisation by Sophocles shows them to be capable of insight. The polarisation that leads to the extreme ultimately lies in a misperception and action, the *hamartía*, which - and this is decisive for Aristotelian tragedy theory - could have been avoided, given the character disposition of both protagonists as good, but fallible persons, and can thus put the audience in a state of fear and pity.

The logical question is why and how the cognitive fixation, a cognitive bias, leads to a wrong action with terrible consequences although the knowledge and mental breadth are actually available. In other words: how does Aristotle understand action and thus also wrong action? And is a wrong action actually avoidable? How?

Aristotle's theory of action I: The 'Practical Syllogism'

The obvious elementary connection between a cognition and a resulting specific striving for an action points to parallels with and possible clarifications by Aristotle's theory of action. The so-called 'practical syllogism', which is described in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, provides further information. In Book VII, Aristotle examines the causes of unrestraint and passionate action, which runs counter to existing 'right opinions' (*dóxai*) the unrestrained person or character has acquired. In this context, he returns to the distinction between the particular and the general as objects of knowledge, which is fundamental to his philosophy[38]. In the core passage on the 'practical syllogism'[39] he states that the human soul faculty of opinion (*dóxa*) plays an essential role in the formation of action: One opinion of the agent, according to Aristotle, refers to something general, the other to the individual. His example is the combination of the acquired 'general' opinion that one must taste everything sweet with the concrete opinion, directed to an 'individual' case, that one has just something sweet before oneself. If now both opinions - connected with the idea of enjoyment connected with pleasure - are combined, the acting person, if he is able and unhindered, will also act, i.e., taste the sweetness attainable in front of him. This subsumption of an individual knowledge under a general premise or attitude (*héxis*), which is formed by learning and experience, Aristotle sees as a quasi-syllogism[40].

Elsewhere, in his writing *De Motu Animalium* (On the Motion of Animals), Aristotle is even clearer on this point.[41] To the self-posed question, why one acts once when one recognizes something, but does not act another time, he explicitly equates the mental process behind it with the system of the mathematical-logical syllogism: two premises, put in relation to each other, lead, says Aristotle, in the conclusion to an action. On the basis of several examples, he shows that the connection of a general cognition, so to speak a general premise, with a concrete perception to be grasped under it,

[37] See Schmitt, 1988, who convincingly analyses the *Antigone* according to the Aristotelian theory and, simultaneously, refutes interpretations based on Friedrich Schiller's or Hegel's concepts of tragedy.
[38] See Schmitt, 2012, 395ff.
[39] Aristotle, Ethica Nicomachea, book VII, ch. 3, 1147a24-b5
[40] See, e.g., Cessi, 1987, and Kenny, 1979; Kristjánsson, 2021, speaks of mechanisms that are infused with reason and experience.
[41] Aristotle, De Motu Animalium, ch. 7, 701a7ff

leads directly to an action, which he explicitly calls an immediately and directly drawn conclusion (*sympérasma*).[42] The prerequisites are the availability of general knowledge and the perception of an individual case falling under this general knowledge, which is at the same time recognized as good and achievable.[43] This, however, does not mean that such a chain of cognition and action takes place in the same way in the same person in every case and at every time.

Obviously, Aristotle understands the emergence of action as a highly rational act, in the formation of which a number of mental performances, even of soul faculties are involved, as he shows in his writing *De Anima* (On the Soul): Perception (*aísthesis*), imagination (*phantasía*), the connection of memories (*mnémai*) of experiences made with the cognition of the just given possibility of a renewed realization (*dóxa*) - these soul faculties each perform specific distinctions and connections, because they all have a corresponding share in rationality in their respective specific activities.[44] Thinking, says Aristotle in the tradition of Plato, is, just like perceiving, always a distinguishing process (*krínein*),[45] i.e. a rational act, which the acting person carries out through the soul faculties inherent to him as a human being - unconsciously, but, in the line of Aristotle's claims to appropriate acting and feeling as described above, controllable, or better: in a way to be learnt and thus also cultivable. So, Aristotle sees the specific of thinking in the appropriate application of criteria of distinction, which is the responsibility of the acting person.

Aristotle's theory of action II: Causes of Failure

Aristotle is obviously interested in understanding and explaining how and for what reasons someone who, despite having formed his character and having already proven his practical wisdom (*phrónesis*) in certain situations, is obviously not able to bring the actually available correct premises and the current individual case into congruence and to feel and act appropriately in relation to the situation.

One can ask oneself, Aristotle formulates in book VII of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, how one who knows the right thing is nevertheless unrestrained. Some say, he continues, that this is simply not possible for a knower; for it would be disastrous, as Socrates also thinks (according to Aristotle), that despite the existence of an available knowledge of the right something else dominates, overpowers the knowledge and 'drags it around like a slave'.[46] On the basis of the already mentioned example of the prospect of tasting something sweet for an action that is ultimately carried out against better knowledge (sweets harm health) Aristotle explains that at the moment of perception and the associated imagination of something known to the agent as good and pleasurable (the sweet in the example), the subsumption under an opinion (*dóxa*) is inevitably required. This faculty of the soul does not only put the mere imagination under general knowledge, which the agent has, but at the same time also provides the insight into the realistic prospect of the attainability of what is recognized as pleasurable: So, while the imagination is the mere mental realization of something, which is also still without reference to the real presence, feelings are always connected with an

[42] Aristotle, De Motu Animalium, ch. 7, 701a22.
[43] Aristotle, De Motu Animalium, ch. 7, 701a23.
[44] Aristotle, De Motu Animalium, ch. 6, 700b17-21. See also Schmitt, 2012
[45] Aristotle, De Anima, book III, ch. 2, 426b8-16; book III, ch. 3, 427a17ff.
[46] Aristotle, Ethica Nicomachea, book VII, ch. 2, 1145b21-24. For a detailed exploration of Aristotle's concept of incontinence (*akrasía*) see Cessi (1987), 210-24, particularly 222ff.

opinion[47] because with it the actual presence of the good and pleasurable is recognized - or better: can be recognized, provided that one has the knowledge which is contributed by this soul faculty and is able to activate it in a given moment.

This ability to connect and activate the right premises according to the situation is essential, especially at the level of human interaction and its success, as the fierce argument between Antigone and Creon exemplifies. Depending on the character's capacity for a 'practical syllogism', the perceptions of the actions of another person are connected with more or less complex conclusions, which are more or less appropriate to what is observed, as well as, at the same time and always, with the evaluations of what is pleasant or unpleasant for oneself. In such an 'emotional syllogism', the unrestrained person, for example, tends in the anger-triggering perception of an inappropriate disregard of oneself in a concrete case to a frequently hasty and only one-sided conclusion, which can cause a correspondingly excessive or simply misguided anger.

This concept of a morally charged emotional fixation, the avoidability of which Aristotle emphasises in an overly optimistic, even philanthropic way, provides a remarkable individual psychological and pedagogical approach to dealing with polarisation tendencies: knowing what is right and good is not enough, he emphasizes. Rather, one must make the right attitudes and their situational actualization one's own also through practical exercise and learning from others' experiences. In doing so, it is indispensable to learn to distinguish, i.e. to taste the truly good and the pleasure associated with it[48].

IV. Conclusions

Gilbert Keith Chesterton's and Aristotle's observations on the causes and consequences of cognitive fixation and intellectual bigotry as triggers of polarisation at the individual and societal level allow two conclusions to be drawn on how polarisation can be softened and contained in its extreme forms of expression, such as hate speech or cancel culture:

- ➔ **'Relearning how to think'**: According to the above considerations, Chesterton and his 'indirect' teacher Aristotle obviously agree that thinking can be understood as a process of discernment and combination in the manner of a syllogism. Every conclusion is only as good as its premises, and every premise is only as good as the cognitive criteria on which it is based. Both, it can be concluded, are thus in favour of a pedagogical focus on the mediation or rediscovery of the prerequisites of thinking. In terms of life and school practice, this is to be understood as a call to permanently train judgement in the face of increasing complexity and a flood of information available via multimedia, and to critically examine one's own prerequisites for judgement repeatedly.[49] The balanced combination of the predisposition of character, the habituation in practice and the most varied and comprehensive guidance or instruction possible is decisive for the education to virtuous behaviour as well as to overcome polarizing fixations.
- ➔ **'Strengthen intellectual humility and curiosity'**: Aristotle sees the specific achievement of tragedy, understood as the literary treatment of a sequence of human actions and the resulting avoidable failure of the characters, in the arousal of the emotions of pity and fear

[47] See Schmitt, 2012, 277-287
[48] Aristotle, Ethica Nicomachea, book II, ch. 2, 1104b8-13.
[49] Aristotle, Ethica Nicomachea, book II, ch. 2, 1104b8-13.

(*éleos* and *phóbos*) in the audience, as a warning against the dangers of mental fixation. However, this pedagogical endeavour is only successful if the author succeeds in making the viewer identify with the protagonists and if the viewer is open to the obvious danger of cognitive narrowing and its negative effects, which are also realistic for him. Regarding the dramatic level of debates and differences of opinion, Chesterton summarises the same insight in the idealistic sentence already quoted above, '... the sincere controversialist is above all things a good listener. The really burning enthusiast never interrupts; he listens to the enemy's arguments as eagerly as a spy would listen to the enemy's arrangements.'[50] In the end, both thinkers are therefore in favour of always examining one's own thought patterns first in the spirit of intellectual humility and meeting those who think differently and their positions with curiosity, openness and respect.

In conclusion, both argue in favour of starting at the individual level by placing the cognitive causes of the polarising fixation and hardening of thinking at the centre of educational efforts and the lifelong learning process. By explicitly advocating the strengthening of intellectual and moral virtues in particular, they once again explicitly as well as implicitly confirm the value and necessity of a virtue-based character education.

[50] Chesterton, 2021, 13.

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