

## Arstippus and Ethical Relevance of Megarian Thought

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### Abstract

This essay by Göbel on the ethical relevance of Megarian thought is one more return to the ancient Greek Philosophers in search of contemporary relevance for a pragmatic and wholesome approach to life with its perennial and cross cultural attraction by bringing back to focus the philosophy of Aristippus of Cyrene a Post Socratic Megarian.

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### Introduction

There is – even in Western Academic Philosophy – little attention for the old Greek school of Megara<sup>1</sup> – except, maybe, for a certain interest in its logic and linguistics by some historiographers of analytic philosophy. Since Lukasiewicz, one has seen the origins of modern predicate logic in Stoic and, before that, in Megarian philosophy<sup>2</sup>. But apart from that, even the most important part of Megarian philosophy, which it was famous for in Antiquity, had been totally forgotten for centuries: its doctrine of modalities, or more precisely, its concept of possibility. Only in recent years, some specialized and predominantly historically oriented research has been done into this<sup>3</sup>. But what we have to ask is: Can't we understand Megarian thought primarily as a "way of life" as well, looking for practical wisdom beyond all abstract metaphysical or logical speculation? This is what all Greek philosophical schools after Socrates were concerned with. They were communities, almost 'religious', of individuals who dedicated their lives to meditation, wisdom, truth, education, seeking a meaningful existence; ancient philosophy was not only speculation but primarily a holistic way of life and of dealing with existential questions long before existentialism became a fashion in 20th century philosophy and culture. My suggestion is to reread Megarian philosophy from such a perspective of practical philosophy which is, above all, *ars vitae* (Cicero), an art of living. The following reflections intend to be a little contribution to a reinterpretation of the Megarian concept of possibility from this leitmotiv and, at the same time, to give an introduction into the often neglected Megarian thought. They will look into the possibilities and relevance of the Megarian doctrine of modalities.

1 Texts and testimonies in K. Döring, *Die Megariker, Kommentierte Sammlung der Testimonien*, Amsterdam 1972, G. Giannantoni, *Socraticorum Reliquiae*, Neapel 1983-1985, L. Montoneri, *I megarici*, Catania, 1984.

2 Cf. J. Lukasiewicz, *Zur Geschichte der Aussagenlogik*, in *Erkenntnis* 5 (1935), pp.111-131.

3 Mostly focusing on the so-called "master argument" (see below, ch. 1, text 3).

This can, e.g., have an eminent relevance for philosophical theology; here, however, I will have to concentrate on an even more important aspect: the *ethical meaning* of Megarian thought, which is still relevant and inspirational for our way of living, in the 21st century, almost 2500 yrs after the Megarian school was founded in ancient Greece. At the same time, it is my goal to present an example of the fundamental unity between the two major philosophical disciplines of Metaphysics and Ethics.

In showing the above-mentioned relevance, it doesn't matter that the Megarians themselves are not known as 'ethicists'; for what I am going to do is not give simply a historical-contextual reconstruction (some kind of 'archeology of spirit') but suggest a wider understanding of Megarian thought, beyond the narrow boundaries of the historical school of Megara, proposing it as a philosophical attitude which can also be found in other thinkers, in Greek philosophers as well as in contemporary thought.

Offering historic examples of that attitude, I am going to present another ancient Greek philosopher as a 'Megarian' thinker: Aristippus of Cyrene. His philosophy has elements that, I think, can be called "Megarian". At the same time, presenting him as a Megarian thinker will cast a new light on this – often misinterpreted – figure in Greek philosophy. So, in a first part I will give a short presentation of the Megarian school, then (in the 2nd part) suggest a re-interpretation of Aristippus as a 'Megarian' thinker, thus illustrating further the relevance of what I call "Megarian thought". It is my hope that those familiar with the ancient Indian wisdom tradition can easily identify many convergences with the 'sapiential' dimension of ancient Greek thought.

## I

### The School of Megara

At least four Megarian thinkers should be mentioned here:

- Eucleides of Megara (ca. 450-380 BC), a disciple of Socrates and founder of the Megarian School, who was probably the first one to combine the Socratic "Good" with the Eleatic "One" (Being) and thus offered an early theo-logical concept<sup>4</sup> ;
- Eubulides, whose trick questions are still a favorite logical pastime (e.g. the Cretan or liar's paradox: "'all Cretans lie', says a Cretan": so what is the objective truth value of this?: this inspired contemporary analytic philosophy to distinguish between the language of 1st and 2nd order or between object- and meta-language, e.g. in B. Russell);
- Stilpo, who is an important historical point of reference for the contemporary revival of predicate logic and who was also a convinced follower of the Socratic ideal of autarky.

4 Diogenes Laertius (=DL) II p. 106.

- The best-known Megarian thinker, however, is Diodor(us) who died in 307 BC. Even in his thought, sometimes a playful presentation of logical absurdity (eristic thought) dominates over philosophical seriousness. In Diodorus, the influence of the static ontology of the Eleatic school is most obvious, e.g. in his paradoxical thesis that there can't be any movement in which he followed Zeno, the disciple of Parmenides. That's why he was nicknamed *kronos* which means "old fool" and even *onos* which means "silly ass" and was derived from *kronos* (so that, today, he is actually known under the name "Diodorus Cronus")<sup>5</sup>.

But in Diodorus' philosophy, we also find important linguistic reflections, and, above all, he was the one who first introduced the Megarian idea of modalities. This is expressed in the following quotations, from some early 'historiographers of philosophy': Aristotle, who gave an account of Diodorus' doctrine intending to criticize it, Epictetus, and Cicero (in my translation):

(1) A thing only has potency when it functions; when it is not functioning it has no potency: a man, for instance, who is not building something cannot build; only the man who is building can build, and only at the moment when he is building. The same is valid for all other cases.

(2) Possible is only [it can only happen] what is either real or will be real.

(3) [The so-called "master argument" or *kyrieuon logos*, which is sometimes referred in a confusing way but quite clear in Epictetus' summary]: [1] Every past thing must necessarily be real. [2] Nothing impossible can follow from the possible. [3] 'Possible' is what is neither real nor will be real. [4] Consequently, it is impossible that something happens which is neither real nor will be real.<sup>6</sup>

All of these passages express the idea that nothing that never really happens (at some time) is possible, which means: possible is only the real, and all that is possible is real. This thesis was widely discussed in Antiquity<sup>7</sup>. Vehemently attacked by Aristotle, the Megarian concept of possibility vanished and was completely forgotten for centuries;

5 DL II 112. For his 'negation' of movement cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* X pp. 85 and 347.

6 The texts are taken from: (1) Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IX 3, 1046b; (2) Cicero, *De fato* 17; (3) Epictetus, *Dissertationes* II 19, 1. - Aristotle (text 1) is not referring explicitly to Diodorus but to the Megarians in general. However, the obvious similarity between his account of the doctrine and Diodorus has always been noted, cf. S. Berbzien, "Chrysippus' modal logic and its relation to Philo and Diodorus", in: K. Döring; Th. Ebert (edd.), *Dialektiker und Stoiker. Zur Logik der Stoa und ihrer Vorläufer*. Stuttgart 1993, pp. 63-84, here 70. - A word on text 3: These are four different statements, not in logical order of argument, but the first three are statements that contradict each other (or 1 + 2 contradict 3); then, Epictetus says: "Diodorus used the plausibility of the first two statements in order to show that (4) nothing is possible that neither is nor will be true". (4) is only a conclusion from 1+2, contradicting 3. - For more details regarding the historical background and meaning of the "master argument" cf. C. Göbel, *Antike und Gegenwart. Griechische Anmerkungen zu ethischen Fragen unserer Tage*, Hildesheim/New York/ Zürich, 2007, 383-494 and *Philosophiegeschichte und logische Analyse* 2 (1999) (the entire issue is dedicated to it); a comprehensive bibliography can be found in K. Döring, "Eukleides aus Megara und die Megariker" in: H. Flashar (ed.), *Sophistik, Sokrates, Sokratik, Mathematik, Medizin*, Basel, 1998, pp. 348-352.

7 Apart from Aristotle, some other eminent thinkers wrote critical commentaries, e.g. Panthoides, Chrysippus, Cleanthes, Antipater, cf. Cicero, *De fato* VI, 12ff. and Epictetus, *Dissertationes* II 19, 1ss.

only at the beginning of the 20th century, N. Hartmann, a German metaphysician and great rival of M. Heidegger, tried to revive this thesis in his 'Neomegarian' doctrine of modalities and his concept of 'real or total possibility'<sup>8</sup>, meaning that something is only possible once the totality of its conditions is given; but then, it is also already real; so again, the possible and the real and even the necessary are identified: possibility and necessity coincide in reality, for what is real is, in so far as it is, necessary; it is – at least as long as it is – necessarily existent. (This is, of course, only a 'weak necessity' that even Aristotle acknowledges but distinguishes from the necessity of the unmoved mover, who has necessary being. It is merely the necessity of a thing that is what it is and cannot be what it is not<sup>9</sup>).

After Hartmann, in the course of the general decline of metaphysics in contemporary thought, the Megarian doctrine of modalities was forgotten again (with the exception of some specialized circles of mostly classical philologists).

Essential in Megarian thought is the rejection of the Aristotelian side- or extra world of the possible, the rejection (as something real) of what is 'merely possible' and of what 'seems to be possible'; possibility is almost abolished as a modality on its own. Possibility is only a modal moment within the real<sup>10</sup>.

Now, we can of course, quite easily, question the relevance of this concept and its value in view of our ordinary use of language, in daily life<sup>11</sup>. We have to distinguish between: 1) an (Aristotelian) substantial possibility or potency or meaning of "can", which refers to *the* condition for the realization of a particular event, which is defined as a disposition by this event (relationship between *dynamis* and *ousia*) and 2) a (Megarian) possibility 'here-and-now', which requires the fulfillment of *all conditions*, i.e. the reality of what is possible (or of what I "can" do). In our daily use of language, however, this scarcely plays an important part; here, possible states refer to those states or events that (can) occur sometimes<sup>12</sup>, as opposed to events that are on principle excluded from reality (i.e. impossible).

Consider, for instance, the question if it is possible to catch the 10 o'clock train: If, at 9.30, I ask a local for the way to the railway station and ask him "Can I still catch

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8 N. Hartmann, *Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit*, Meisenheim/Glan 1949, esp. pp. 12-14 and 181-188, Id., *Der Megarische und der Aristotelische Möglichkeitsbegriff*, in *Kleinere Schriften*, Vol. II, Berlin, 1957, pp. 85-99.

9 Cf. W.D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Vol. 2, Oxford repr, 1981, p. 244. Cf. e.g. Aristotle, *De interpretatione* IX, 19a.

10 This doesn't affect negative necessity or impossibility which is also implied in the traditional idea of possibility, as the exclusion of those possibilities (*non-a*) that have not been realized once *a* is realized. In a Megarian perspective, however, only *a*, which has become real, can be determined (afterwards) as possible = real (see, however, Hartmann 1949, p. 13 on the apparent identity of possibility and reality). Here, the *posse-est* Nicolaus of Cusa uses as a theo-logical affirmation becomes a condition of any form of modal speech. Still, even in a traditional understanding of modalities, reality can at least be seen as a proof of possibility.

11 Cf. R. Spaemann, R. Löw, *Die Frage Wozu?* München, 1991, 55ss.

12 Cf. I. Kant's definition of possibility in *KrV B* p. 184.

the 10 o'clock train?", I don't want to hear a 'Megarian' answer: "You can only get it, if you get it", but I expect a reasonable assessment of the length of my way to the station and the time needed to get there, and – hopefully – directions for the fastest way to the station. Another example: If I introduce you to my friend and say "Marion can play the piano", this is not a false proposition just because there is no piano in the room right now and she is not actually playing the piano right now. Here, we could distinguish between possibility and potency or capacity ("can" = skill). Otherwise, propositions about capacities could only have the Megarian form: "a person p can (is able to) do x only if she, actually, does x at the same time (actualizes it)". It is certainly true, as the Megarians say, that a thing is what it is and cannot be what it is not, but "can", in our daily language (and in Aristotle), means that some conditions of an event are now present, and if certain others are added, the event will take place<sup>13</sup>.

However, we have to ask if such considerations (which have been used, for example, to criticize Hartmann's Neomegarian ontology) do not reduce, in an inappropriate way, Megarian thought to a mere linguistic and logical subtlety and sophism, to some kind of "splitting hairs", thus not doing justice to the true, proper and authentic intention and to the positive possibilities of it. In answering this question I don't want to discuss details of modal theory but I will limit myself to some characteristic and fundamental features of 'Megarian thought' which I understand in a wider sense: not only as those theorems traditionally ascribed to the Megarian school, but as a general philosophical stance and way of thinking *in which possibility is primarily seen as a modal moment within the real*. At the same time, taking it in this wider sense, also offers a better opportunity to show the practical relevance of such a philosophy. Again, my intention is not so much to present historic Megarian thought, but to demonstrate – of course, with historic examples – its importance for people of today who seek a philosophical form of life.

Decisive in the Megarian way of thinking the modalities is, obviously, the concentration on a facticist stance of observation of the factual, the present, and the after (i.e. interpreting the present as something that has proved its possibility by becoming real, as something that *has become real or has been realized*). The Megarians emphasize the way of attaining knowledge about possibility, its 'determination'; they offer epistemological rather than ontological reflections.

And how else could we judge possibility? This element maintains its validity even in Aristotle's attempt at solving the problem by introducing *his idea* of "real potency", "realization", "generic possibility" or "developing possibility", e.g. in *Physics* III 2 where he defines movement or *kinesis* as "the reality of the possible as the possible". Here, too, reality precedes (the determination of) possibility – actually, Aristotle himself argues for the precedence and priority of reality (act) over possibility (potency) in *Metaphysics* IX 8. This is also obvious, for instance, in the application – by some

<sup>13</sup> Ross, p. 244.

contemporary scientists – of Aristotelian terms in *biology*<sup>14</sup>, which is conceived as an illustration of his idea of real potency or generic possibility: the bud of a plant, with its intrinsic possibilities (or “potency”), is seen as a symbol of real potency. But: even in this case, we maybe do not need to see a particular realization, but at least once we have to have observed a bud b1 in its development toward the plant B1 in order to be able to say that other buds b2-n will also become specimens of the plant B. So, here, as well, (real) possibility cannot be determined completely *a priori* but only within a horizon of experience of reality, in some kind of ‘retrospect’ – and this, of course, is how the *sciences* work; natural science is an investigation into or re-reflection upon facts and phenomena which are already there, a given (‘natural’) reality; science discovers something; for Plato, in his small dialogue *Minos* 315a, (the formulating of) a law – and we may add: a law of nature – is a “discovery of something that is”.

## II

### Aristippus as a ‘Megarian thinker’

There are ways of showing e.g. the ontological and theological relevance, possibilities and challenges of Megarian thought, e.g. by presenting the Presocratic philosopher Parmenides of Elea as a Megarian thinker (actually, Eleatic thought deeply influenced the Megarian school)<sup>15</sup>. More interesting in our context, however, is the ethical relevance of the Megarian concept of modalities. It is a perfect example, apt to illustrate the intrinsic relationship between the philosophical disciplines of metaphysics/ontology and ethics.

We said that Megarian thought is, essentially and primarily, characterized by its way of defining the possible as a mere modal moment within the real and is therewith first of all an attitude of observing the factual. Such a way of thinking has a double ethical meaning, corresponding to the double concept of ethics in Antiquity whose guiding question “How should I live?” – or the Socratic question of the “good” – can be answered in two ways: 1.) with regard to the self; here, ethics deals with self-knowledge and self-cure, i.e. with the human soul and peace of soul (‘psychology’ in the ancient sense or ‘individual ethics’); and 2.) with regard to the common life: “How shall I live in community with other human beings?” (‘social ethics’).

With regard to the ‘psychological’ aspect, the Megarian retro-spective (as we may call it) and concentration on the here-and-now obviously corresponds to the ancient way of focusing on the moment, the present instant, most popular in Horace’s formula “*carpe diem*”<sup>16</sup>. The content, placid and happy tranquility that the Hellenistic schools

14 Cf. e.g. C. Kummer, *Philosophie der organischen Entwicklung*, Stuttgart, 1996. Kummer aims at showing that the self-organisation of living beings cannot be completely described from a mechanistic perspective alone; instead, he applies the Aristotelian philosophy of becoming to the findings of modern cell biology. Here as well, “the totality of the organism, as a possibility, is already present in the form-reality of the bud”.

15 Cf. Göbel 2007, 62-65.

16 Cf. Seneca, *On the brevity of life*. On the meaning of the present instant and on the existential and practical

seek to communicate to their disciples is particularly based upon an emphasis on the singularity and uniqueness of the present, warning against a de-authentication of the present moment in anxious and fear- or worryful anticipation of a future which is, ultimately, *uncertain* – or in looking back on a long gone past, uselessly mourning its passed possibilities which are nothing but pure speculation or wishful thinking. Regretful as well as wishful thinking are hindrances to the capacity of enjoying *and addressing* the present. The Megarian concentration on the real, the here-and-now, corresponds to this. The advice of ancient school wisdom is equal in its intention to the Megarian rejection of the burden of the possible, the rejection of *potential* mood and especially of *irrealis* mood which is often put into doubtful questions like: “What would be/have been, if...?”. Megarian thought can be understood as a warning of such a loss of the present. Examples of such a way of thinking can be found in texts from all ancient schools. I will only instance and quote from one thinker in whose philosophy a ‘Megarian’ attitude is particularly obvious: Aristippus of Cyrene (435-355 BC). For, he is the only one who applies the Megarian perspective not only ‘psychologically’, but also in a context of alien or social ethics; and he was one of the *first* thinkers to propose that philosophical attitude of focusing on the present moment<sup>17</sup>.

Aristippus is frequently underestimated as nothing but an ‘immoral’ hedonist (or, at best, a less important precursor of Epicurus). People overlook that his thinking is also centered on the Delphic and Socratic quest for self-knowledge (*gnothi seauton*), which is the central motif of Greek philosophy. Aristippus’ appreciation of *hedone* as the guiding principle of leading one’s life can be explained in this context. *Hedone* should rather be translated with “happiness” or “joy” than “pleasure”, “fun” or even “lust”, to avoid common misunderstandings. I will leave it untranslated in the following. In *hedone*, a concept is made the basis of philosophical self-knowledge which is truly individualistic because of its intuitive principle. The axiom of Aristippus’ philosophy is a pluralistic (plural) width, which can be seen in many of the testimonies about his life and philosophy – if they are read without any prejudice. True humanity towards fellow humans determines his thought and deeds; the Greek word for humanity or being humane, *anthropismos/anthropinos*, is actually first used in a description of Aristippus, not, as is often thought, in Stoic philosophy, and he is said to have said: “it is better to be a beggar than an ignorant [un- or mis-educated] person; for a beggar only lacks money, but an ignorant person lacks humanity” (DL II 70). This humanity is manifest e.g. in his humane relations with people from all social classes, even with slaves or prostitutes<sup>18</sup>. Even his adversaries are full of praise for him calling him the one

dimension of Greek philosophy in general cf. P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. Paris, 1987.

17 Fragments and testimonies in E. Mannebach, *Aristippi et Cyrenaicorum Fragmenta*. Leiden 1961; G. Giannantoni, *I Cirenaici, raccolta delle fonti antiche, traduzione e studio introduttivo*, Roma 1958. Some recent studies on Aristippus include W. R. Mann, *The Life of Aristippus*, in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 78 (1996), pp. 97-119, V. Tsouna, *The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School*, Cambridge, 1998, K. Döring, *Aristipp aus Kyrene und die Kyrenaiker*, in Flashar, 1998, pp. 247-266. My detailed reconstruction of the philosophy of Aristippus can be found in C. Göbel, *Griechische Selbsterkenntnis, Platon, Parmenides, Stoa und Aristipp*, Stuttgart, 2002, pp. 238-298.

18 Cf. e.g. DL II pp. 77 and 67, King Dionysius once forced him “to select which he pleased of three beautiful

“who begins friendship” (DL II 83). Aristippus *does* know for himself how to live well in most different circumstances: “he always made the best of existing circumstances”; this is also symbolized in what Plato says to him: “You are the only man to whom it is given to wear both a whole cloak and rags” (DL II 67); but, on the other hand, he even resists the king in order to preserve his philosophical freedom: “Dionysius once mocked him saying: ‘He who does frequent a tyrant’s court, becomes his slave, though free when first he came’; Aristippus took him up, and replied: ‘That man is but a slave who comes as free’”<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, Aristippus also considers different forms of life as equally valid; even if living an ‘unconventional’ life himself, he also accepts those who aspire to a political career<sup>20</sup>.

Aristippus’ philosophy is more clearly expressed in the numerous anecdotes about his life than in the incomplete, insecure and biased accounts of his doctrine, for in his life he proves, applies, explains and lives his philosophy, and here, long before all modern individualism, the individual self is the ultimate standard and measure of its doing, without prescribing which form of life should be adequate (or ‘authentic’) for it (as it was common practice in most Greek and Roman philosophical schools<sup>21</sup>). For this, the individual is referred to itself alone; the single person has, responsible for herself, the chance (potential) to examine her life in self-knowledge. Here, again, the Socratic character of Aristippus’ philosophy is obvious: an examined life is a good life<sup>22</sup>. According to DL II 78, Aristippus “found fault with men, because when they are at sales, they examine the articles offered very carefully, but yet they approve of their lives without any examination”. The standards of this self-examination, according to Aristippus, cannot be a general reflection or doctrine, but only a subjective, immediate and – therefore – sensual ‘sensation’ (for only the senses provide immediate, individual knowledge; reason is the capacity of universal thought). And this is the sensation of *hedone*. *Hedone*, in Aristippus, is a concept of something that signals correspondence with oneself, inner harmony, a successful and content life<sup>23</sup>. It is contentment with one’s life. It is the word that Aristippus uses for that state of mind which comes with successful self-knowledge. His doctrine of *hedone* (or ‘hedonism’), based upon

courtesans”; and he managed to shuffle out of the situation in a more than clever way, to his advantage and to the advantage of the courtesans: Diogenes Laertius reports that he “carried off all three, saying that even Paris did not get any good by preferring one beauty to the rest. However, when he had carried them as far as the vestibule, he dismissed them”.

19 DL II 82. Aristippus’ appreciation of philosophical freedom is e.g. confirmed in Stobaeus pp. 49, 3 and DL II 68.

20 Cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* II p. 1, 8ss.

21 It seems, however, that even in the Cyrenaic school, Aristippus’ lifestyle, inclined to luxury, became more influential than his tolerance; cf. DL II pp. 65-104. Still, even here, it is clear enough that Aristippus himself always knew to keep a philosophical distance – even though he *allowed* himself the luxury of enjoying worldly things instead of simply denying them to himself as the Cynics (and later the Stoics) did.

22 Cf. Plato, *Laches* pp. 187e-188a.

23 This peace of mind, signalled by *hedone*, which, as such, is conceived as a *corporeal* sensation, can be attained through either corporeal or spiritual activities. Even self-restraint and servitude don’t exclude the sensation of *hedone*; not only carnal but also spiritual pleasures, reflection and meditation, can lead to *hedone* according to Aristippus (DL II pp. 72, 89, 94).



a sensualistic doctrine of knowledge (which is rather perception than cognition)<sup>24</sup>, is insofar a confirmation or realization of the individualistic principle of Aristippus as it gives a universal concept or term (*hedone*), which, however, can only be filled with concrete content *subjectively*, by each individual. It is an 'integrative' idea.

What it is, that makes someone feel *hedone*, cannot be judged or prescribed from the outside, by someone else (not even by a philosophical master). It is also clear that not *hedone* or lust is the highest end of being, but the *human being*, the individual *person*. For, *hedone* does not exist in itself but only as a personal fulfillment of the individual. This is obvious from the concept of *hedone*; moreover, Aristippus says explicitly: "I possess *hedone* and yet I am not possessed by it, since the best thing is to possess pleasures without being their slave, not to be devoid of pleasures" (DL II 75). *Hedone* is neither an intrinsic nor an abstract value but only a value because a human being feels or *senses* it, each one in their way; it is an expression of the fact that the individual person has come to 1.) knowing her Self and has 2.) realized this self in her life. For this, Aristippus considers *hedone* to be the right and only possible, because subjective-intuitive, measure or standard.

Still, he hopes that the individual, when exploring his self and searching an adequate way of life takes himself seriously, as a rational or mind being (cf. DL II 78<sup>25</sup>); as a philosopher, he is concerned with reason and self-responsibility, with reasonable choices, his ideal also being a reasonable and, thus, responsible existence. Ultimately, however, he refrains from judging others, convinced that he cannot, from the outside, say if the other has come to know himself or not. Aristippus doesn't even explicitly exhort to self-knowledge, for in an ultimate equality of forms of life – Aristippus' ethical principle – even someone who has seemingly lost himself in the view of others can still have found his self in precisely the form of life he leads, for "he has lived"<sup>26</sup>. Rejecting all external judgments about others, for Aristippus, in observing the other, there is no distinction between authenticity or unauthenticity; the other is always and on principle accepted and respected as authentic. This is the foundation of the tolerance of Aristippus. Nothing is more certain for him than the fact that "everybody is what they can be, and on all the conditions on which they are, they couldn't have been different"<sup>27</sup>.

Now, this is exactly an ethical form of a 'Megarian way' of seeing reality, in which the possible is only a modal moment within the real, meaning that nobody can be

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24 On Aristippus' epistemology cf., in particular, Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* VII 192f, and K. Döring, *Der Sokratesschüler Aristipp und die Kyrenaiker*, Stuttgart 1988, pp. 8-32 and Tsouna, 1998.

25 Göbel 2002, p. 285.

26 The idea of the equal value of human lives is rooted in Aristippus' metaphysical and existential reflections on death and immortality; cf. my commentary on Stobaeus p. 40, 8 in "Ancient Philosophy as a Model for Inter-Cultural 'Ecumenism' – I. The Origins of Ecumenical Thought in Greek Philosophy".

27 O. Engel, C.M. Wieland: *Aristipp und einige seiner Zeitgenossen*, in W. Jens (ed.), *Kindlers Neues Literaturlexikon*, Vol. 17, München, 1992, p. 638. Wieland, himself not only a poet but also a classicist, offered, even though in the form of a novel, one of the most insightful and authentic accounts of the life and thought of Aristippus.

judged according to someone else's standards, confronted with possibilities from the outside, which, moreover, are nothing but hypothetical; according to this mode of thinking, people shouldn't be assessed according to what could have been or could be (the case) but according to what is (the case), or better: they should only assess themselves according to this standard.

In Aristippus himself, this ethical principle is primarily applied in his behavior towards others; it is particularly evident (and proven) in his abovementioned relationships with people from most disparate social classes. This stance – transferred to the social, political and global encounter of peoples, cultures, civilizations, and religions – could also be exemplary in today's attempts at finding and founding a common ground of dialogue, respect, tolerance, peace, and unity among diverse cultures and traditions, a truly *universal ethos*, because Aristippus simply accepts others in their very being, 'letting them be' (who they are), convinced of a fundamental equality of all and promoting a philosophy that is rooted in true humanity, which all humankind deserves insofar as human. He takes a philosophical stance of unconditional openness towards the other (be it another individual or another culture). Thus, he can see equality and (in) diversity. He is an example of the *ecumenical mind* that would be needed for an 'ecumenical philosophy' which is one of the most important tasks today – being confronted with what has been called the "clash of civilizations" (S.P. Huntington).

But the Megarian principle of his philosophy is also realized in the more psychological aspect of self-cure, in which Aristippus is an example of the ancient esteem for the single greatness of the present moment. His perspective does, of course, not exclude that the other (the self) can have completely changed his life in the next moment; however, the motive and reason for this, according to Aristippus, cannot be someone else's judgment, but only the self's own discontent – which it senses intuitively – and which comes from a missed self-knowledge so far.

Here, however, it is important to see that Aristippus explicitly warns against depreciating and damning one's passed life from such moments of insight and 'conversion'. After he has, in his doctrine of *hedone*, assigned and entrusted the task of self-knowledge to the individual, he further explicates this doctrine e.g. in the advice to concentrate one's attention fully on each single moment:

You shall not lament over passed things nor shall you be concerned with future things: that is a sign of tranquility or peace of the soul and a proof of a calm and composed mind. Turn your attention to what each day brings, and on each day, turn it to the moment in which you do or consider something. For, the present time alone is ours; neither the past nor the future: the first has gone, the latter is dark – if it comes at all.<sup>28</sup>

28 Claudius Aelianus, *Varia historia* XIV 6, cf. DL II p. 90.

It would be the biggest mistake, a complete missing of the proper nature of *hedone*, to question the authenticity of passed (or present) moments of life because of a *possible* change of the external conditions of one's self-assessment, and thus put life under the constant fear of maybe losing oneself or having missed one's self and having to change oneself. The concept of *hedone* is also apt to explain this attitude, for *hedone* always has a topical, instantaneous and momentarily or 'presentist' character<sup>29</sup>.

### III

#### Conclusion

Trying to show the fundamental principles and possible relevance of what I call 'Megarian thought' in a larger sense – which could be defined as an emphasis on the possible as a mere modal moment within the real and as a philosophical stance of observing the factual, a philosophical 'facticism' – we had to extend this kind of thinking beyond the historical limitation to the school of Megara. Thus, Aristippus could be presented as a 'Megarian thinker'. In his philosophy and form of life, we can see the ethical relevance of 'Megarian thought'. The Megarian concept of possibility, which determines the possible only 'in retrospect', looking back from the present, on possibilities from their realizations, can be practically applied wherever it comes to ethical judgments: either in the preservation of the singularity and authenticity of each moment, from the perspective of the present instant and not of a maybe-later; also, however, in relativizing passed moments of life and their *Auf-Hebung* in the present – this probably goes beyond the historical Megarians, for they proposed a static ontology under Eleatic influence; the idea of dissolution and elevation, of one moment leading to and disappearing in the other, of progress and existential development implies a dynamic ontology; that is one of the paradoxes of Megarian thought, that their *dynamis* (possibility) is 'static' or, at least, only determined once it has come to be a 'static' reality. Anyway, such an attitude towards life – which is transferable from personal life to our relationship with history as such – judges passed moments from and by the present (the 'now'), and not the present by what, maybe, could be in the future, and is not sorry about what might have been possible.

Most of all, however, this philosophical attitude is to be extended and applied to the unconditional acceptance of (or acknowledgement and respect for) the other in each moment. In this context, Aristippus' basic principles appeared as an ethical correspondence to or application of the Megarian understanding of modalities – or the latter as an ontological foundation of such ethics<sup>30</sup>.

29 Cf. DL II p. 90.

30 NB: this possibility of a relationship between such ethics and ontology/modal theory is only a logical (and maybe exemplary) relationship, not a historical one; the existing testimonies don't tell us anything about the (social) ethics of the Megarians or a corresponding personal way of life (Stilpo is at least presented as an autarkic philosopher in a Socratic sense; cf. DL II pp. 113-120); neither do we know about explicit reflections of Aristippus on questions of ontology and modal theory.

To resume, we can say that such a 'system' of ethics limits itself to facticist and descriptive "is-" instead of "shall-" propositions on three levels:

1. It determines what the human being or being human is not following a Platonic or Stoic or a similarly elitist and ideal modal-anthropology but by observing the single person, the individual human being – and it "lets him be", lets him find his being and live his life (this is the pluralistic-individualistic character of such ethics);

2. It refrains from determining the proper being or authenticity of the individual human being – i.e.: in how far the person x succeeds in being 'authentically' x and in living adequately, in accordance with her (presumed) 'self' –, for it denies itself any judgment of other persons. This is something like an ethical *epoché* (if we can apply the Sceptics' idea to ethics) or reservation of judgment. It hopes, however, for reasonable and responsible self-judgment; and for that, the Cyrenaic school trained its disciples, just as other philosophical schools did.

3. Finally, however, even self-assessment is limited in the sense that the individual is advised not to put his life under the burden of passed or coming possibilities, of *irrealis* and *potential mood*, but to live the moment, looking back on events that have happened, on moments that we have lived, only with content, confident that there is a meaning in the way they happened and didn't happen differently (this is the 'presentist' character of such ethics).

It is true, however, that some problems remain as yet unsolved, which concern the practical realization of such ethics:

1. With regard to the individual: Megarian thought is not fatalistic but facticist, but this acceptance of what has happened and is, therefore, unchangeable, is only an attitude of observation or of coping with done deeds, occurred events; it is not a theory of acting which would help the individual in a concrete, single act of choice and decision. Still, it can be seen as a foundation of the ancient school-wisdom that gains confidence and tranquility from the faith in a right course of things<sup>31</sup>.

2. With regard to social ethics: the individualism of Aristippus which is inspired from the Megarian 'retro-spection' and which "lets be" instead of judging others is, in the rejection of any foreign assessment, a warning that can be addressed to the

31 At the same time, such a form of facticism is the only coherent form of *fatalism* which, in itself, has little relevance (or, at best, "fate" is a wide idea, void in itself and to be filled only by the individual, an 'integrative' concept similar to Aristippus' idea of *hedone*): people might say they believe in fate but they never know what their fate is, now and here; a fatalist interprets given facts as fate and doesn't change them (or acts according to *his interpretation* of them, e.g. Zeno, founder of the Stoic school, who saw an accident as a call of fate and committed suicide; cf. DL VII p. 28f.). But that is not a necessary conclusion. Given facts don't need to be seen as one's fate, but it can also be one's fate to *change them*. (The Stoics became pessimistic and politically defended the status quo: even though they started, for instance, to doubt the rightness of slavery they didn't do anything to change society but accepted a system of social classes and the *imperium romanum* as the best possible form of the Stoic utopia of a *cosmopolis* whose ideal was projected into a better world to come, the post-*palingenesia* return of the "golden age").

pluralistic claim of post-modernity, in so far as it is the only truly consistent pluralistic-individualistic way of thought, as against many modern attempts in which the slogan of liberation of the individual meant nothing else but *new* ways of prescribing *how* this individual really had to be. Still, here too, the problem remains that this stance is essentially not a theory of acting but absolute tolerance only as a neutral form of merely looking at others without interfering.

If we are looking for universally valid moral foundations which are necessary to guarantee the freedom of the individual in a society, this approach needs some additions. The philosopher Aristippus himself didn't need to be concerned with this, for he could be sure that his actions would remain ethical even without laws: "If all the laws should be abrogated, we [philosophers] should still live in the same manner as we do now" (DL II 68). A society, however, does need such rules, norms, and regulations, for it can never exist on the basis of pure tolerance alone. The idea of "pure tolerance" has long become "a speculation and ideology [...] in practice it proves to be blind to the conditions on which human beings [live,] work and act in society"<sup>32</sup>.

Nevertheless, the reflection upon the ancient wisdom of the Megarian idea of possibility shows that this can be a foundation of a 'Megarian way of thought' that is still worth to be considered today; it can become the condition and source of an exemplary pluralistic-individualistic and presentist way of life and of ethics, even in an inter-cultural context, for it is, on principle, inclined to grant authenticity to everybody and to every form of life and of culture – while, at the same time, it doesn't lack a norm of self-assessment and self-cure either: that is reason, which is so essentially human that it can be found in all men and cultures, and, is, ultimately, the common ground that unites us all, a ground which philosophy has made its foundation, principle, object of study and of teaching and education, a ground, which ultimately and through philosophical education of the future generations, can, hopefully, even help to establish a global ethos and worldwide peace, once all opposition and conflict, which frequently originate in the 'passionate' part of the human soul, are brought under the dominion of reason and self- and social responsibility.

32 H. Marcuse, *Kritik der reinen Toleranz*, Frankfurt, 1968, 91 (transl. C.G.). But Aristippus himself is well aware of this problem as well. Therefore, he exhorts his disciples to respect the law (DL II p. 93); and later Cyrenaics even discuss details of the juridical system (cf. DL II p. 90). – Other questions could arise, e.g. regarding a more optimistic and 'holistic' model of time, existence and personality, a dynamic ontology, the objectivity of values/natural law, etc.; most of these, however, are not excluded by Aristippus' integrative philosophy and don't diminish the inspirational character of his thought; for a more detailed discussion cf. Göbel 2002, pp. 272-280 and Göbel 2007, pp. 464-495.