



Review

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BOOK REVIEWS

Political Theory

Action and Contemplation: Studies in the Moral and Political Thought of Aristotle. Edited by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999. 333p. \$24.95 paper.

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Inspired by the recent resurgence of interest in Aristotle among moral and political philosophers, this collection claims to address “the possibility of grounding moral and political action in some version of Aristotelian rationalism” (p. xi). The majority of authors “are united by their conviction that Aristotle, and hence reason, deserves a second hearing” (p. xiii). There are fourteen contributions, six of which were published in the 1980s and 1990s. They fall into two parts. In the first, five well-established, generally continental, scholars address the relevance of Aristotle; the second part is primarily exegetical, comprised of interpretations of aspects of Aristotle’s moral and political thought.

The first set provides an overview of Aristotle’s renewed relevance. Franco Volpi surveys Aristotle’s influence, discussing an entire list of scholars, for the most part German. These range from Hans-Georg Gadamer, and his interest in practical reason, to Konrad Lorenz, who is interested in the biological basis of moral conduct. Volpi ultimately questions whether Aristotelian practical wisdom, removed from its metaphysical backdrop, can properly guide moral action. Hans Brunkhorst examines Hannah Arendt’s claims concerning the relevance of classical republican models, criticizing her for insufficient attention to the West’s Judeo-Christian heritage. In “Do We Need a Philosophical Ethics?” Ronald Beiner argues for the continuing relevance of Aristotelian contextual, practical reason, as articulated by Gadamer, against Jurgen Habermas’s attempt to establish moral judgments on firm philosophical foundations. According to Beiner, the debate between these two thinkers “ultimately comes down to a question of the relative priority of theory and prudence” (p. 47). In his own brief contribution, Gadamer compares Aristotle’s view on the logic of moral imperatives with the more transcendental views of Kant and Plato.

In the most ambitious contribution in this part, Richard Bodeus attempts to work out Aristotle’s account of natural law as it relates to the positive law of existing regimes. Although well-known discussions of something resembling natural law are presented in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Rhetoric*, Bodeus argues for a view that dissociates Aristotle’s “natural law” and nature. For Aristotle, he claims, nature does not provide a norm of right; rather, overriding positive law are provisions “which precisely assure the common interest in a correct regime” (p. 81).

Although of high quality, the contributions in Part 1 are far from establishing the applicability of either Aristotle or “reason” to contemporary issues. They present nothing approaching Alasdair MacIntyre’s attempt to work out a defensible account of virtue, based on Aristotle’s views, or Arendt’s distinctive reformulation of the nature of political action. Although these authors recount attempts to work from Aristotelian perspectives, on the whole they commemorate the significance of this approach rather than demonstrate it.

In addition to contributions from the editors, the essays in

Part 2 are by David O’Connor, David Bolotin, Lorraine Pangle, Aristide Tessitore, Judith Swanson, Wayne Ambler, and Bernard Yack. These make for a mixed set. Some are highly interesting. For instance, Yack presents a stimulating account of the importance of conflict for Aristotle’s understanding of political community. Scholars who approach Aristotle from a liberal perspective generally focus on Book I of *Politics*, looking for “a counterimage to liberalism’s image of political society” (p. 289). Yack claims that the image in Book I should be interpreted in the light of the conflict-ridden accounts of political life in books III–VI. Doing so gives the lie, for example, to Arendt’s celebration of the unique qualities of the Greek *polis*. (Yack’s view is elaborated in *The Problems of a Political Animal*, 1992.) O’Connor explores Aristotle’s rhetorical strategy in *Politics*. Against Aristotle’s remark in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that an audience receptive to instruction in moral philosophy must be well brought up and so imbued with good habits, O’Connor marshals impressive evidence for a “morally minimalist” account of the audience, claiming that Aristotle actually addresses ambitious Athenian youth bent on political careers. Wayne Ambler pursues the unpromising task of comparing views of Thrasymachus and Aristotle on the role and responsibilities of political leaders, but he emerges with an interesting account of what Aristotle means by the “common advantage,” which distinguishes good and corrupt political regimes.

Several authors try too hard to overturn established interpretations, often combing texts for hidden meanings. For instance, Aristide Tessitore presents a revisionist account of Aristotle’s portrayal of Socrates. Although Aristotle dismisses the views of Socrates on *akrasia* (moral weakness) outright in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and is similarly critical in other contexts, Tessitore holds that Aristotle is more sympathetic than is generally recognized, as a part of the latter’s “larger effort to secure at least partial acceptance for the place and importance of philosophy in the city” (p. 220). There is much to criticize here, including Tessitore’s focus on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, which ignores important evidence in the *Eudemian Ethics* and (possibly pseudo-Aristotelian) *Magna Moralia*, and no attempt to construct the overall intellectualist moral view that Aristotle ascribes to Socrates and of which he is highly critical. In her contribution, Judith Swanson thoughtfully examines the evidence concerning Aristotle’s view of women in biological as well as political works, but then she unaccountably downplays the clear view of women’s intellectual inferiority put forth in *Politics*: Aristotle’s “dogmatism means to conceal an elusive teaching about the changeability of nature from those in his audience whose political ambitions might lead them to misconstrue and abuse that teaching” (p. 242).

Despite the editors’ claims, little in the volume directly addresses “the possibility of grounding moral and political action in some version of Aristotelian rationalism” (to quote the cover copy). Throughout, there is little attempt to apply Aristotle’s thought to contemporary problems. Although the contributions are uneven, considered as a whole, the volume has a definite significance. Traditional scholars will doubtless argue against many particular claims, but they will benefit substantially from doing so. Against the weight of settled interpretations, the collection’s accumulation of arguments and evidence conveys the richness and elusiveness of Aristotle’s moral and political thought.