

Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle, eds. Michael Pakaluk and Giles Pearson, OUP 2011

The editors of *Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle*, Michael Pakaluk and Giles Pearson, cite Elizabeth Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy" as the ancestor of the kind of endeavor they have in mind. Anscombe, on their reading, wanted to "place moral philosophy on a more solid foundation of moral psychology" (1). For followers of Anscombe, this formulation is almost ironic in its recurring use of the term 'moral'. Arguably, Anscombe wanted ethics—as opposed to moral philosophy—to be approached via philosophy of psychology. As she sees it, one cannot read Aristotle without being struck by the absence of anything like the modern notion of morality (1958, 2). In terms more sympathetic to Anscombe's insistence on philosophically interesting differences, the goal of the volume might be re-described: to explore Aristotelian resources for contemporary theorizing about motivation in a good life.

The eleven chapters of the volume differ greatly in method. Robert Heinaman (ch. 1) and Malcolm Schofield (ch. 5), though their papers are among the most insightful of the volume, make no effort to relate Aristotle's views on pleasure and on the role of *phantasia*—'imagination'—in animal movement to contemporary concerns. Jamie Dow (ch. 3) discusses pleasure, pain, and emotion in terms that make Aristotle accessible to those who approach the volume with interests in contemporary rather than ancient discussions. Giles Pearson (ch. 4) goes even further, offering an explicit comparison

between Aristotle and Scanlon. Anthony Price (ch. 6) and Heda Segvic (ch. 7) re-examine long-standing issues, namely choice and deliberation. They do so in a mode familiar since John Cooper's landmark book *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (1975). In decidedly non-Anscombian spirit, Aristotle's ethics is seen as relevant to *moral* philosophy, and yet much that is distinctive about Aristotle is brought to light. Pierre Destrée (ch. 11) also invokes a later framework, the distinction between compatibilism and incompatibilism. But he puts his finger on a problem that is specifically relevant to ancient views of responsibility—responsibility for one's character, rather than for individual actions. Michael Pakaluk (ch. 9) compares Aristotle's 'mixed actions' with the types of action considered in discussions of the Doctrine of Double Effect, thereby adding Anscombe's Thomistic side to the volume. Gavin Lawrence (ch. 10) writes about habituation in Aristotle, in ways that bring back to life the spirit of early Wittgensteinian days of rediscovery—albeit in far subtler ways, building on today's much advanced state of scholarship. In terms of willingness to see connections between Aristotle and what 'we' do 'today', David Charles' two chapters, on desire (ch. 3) and on *akrasia* (ch. 8), are harder to assess. Charles argues, in particular in his paper on desire, that Aristotle's views are worth our attention because his premises are different from ours. In principle, this approach is compelling. Rather than gloss over differences, one may find it philosophically useful to emphasize them. And one may consider it possible that Aristotle gets something right which we fail to see. However, Charles seems to think that 'our' premises are more or less Cartesian. But arguably, and I will say more about this in a

moment, as Pearson's discussion of desire in Scanlon shows, today's metaethics is not stuck in a Cartesian framework.

Taken together, the contributions are representative of a lively field (curiously, though, any number of eminent *female* Aristotle scholars are missing in action). Some of the papers are Aristotelian 'Normalwissenschaft', which is in and of itself a sophisticated matter. Others open up new avenues of investigation. In this review, I focus on three topics—pleasure, desire, and deliberation—with special attention to Heinaman's, Charles's, and Segvic's contributions.

(i) *Pleasure*. By insisting that the concept of pleasure is ill-understood, Anscombe encouraged study of a basic question: what is pleasure? The ensuing debates are in part motivated by objections against hedonistic utilitarianism. Premises like "pleasure is the good" suggest that we know what pleasure is, and that different pleasures are kinds of pleasure. And yet it seems that pleasures differ deeply from each other. Thus defenders and critics of hedonism explore the heterogeneity of pleasure. They ask whether there is such a thing as the nature of pleasure, how to individuate kinds of pleasure, and how to individuate particular pleasures. Heinaman's paper helps to situate Aristotle's proposals vis-à-vis these discussions. In addition to addressing a familiar topic of Aristotle scholarship—what it means that pleasure is an activity rather than a change—he explores how species of pleasures are fixed. This question is among the more metaphysically technical topics of the *NE*, reflective of the state of discussion among ancient hedonists,

anti-hedonists, and Plato. In particular, Aristotle may be responding to a line of argument in the *Philebus* that opens up a radical metaphysical option, namely that pleasure is varied in such a way that there is no determinate number of kinds.

Consider for a moment this view, that there may not be ‘many’—countable, distinct—pleasures. Heinaman discusses what he calls a coarse versus a strict division of pleasures into kinds. According to the former, the pleasure of doing geometry, for example, is one kind of pleasure. According to the latter, proving one theorem goes along with one kind of pleasure, and proving another theorem with another kind of pleasure. Moreover, just as solving different theorems are different activities, so are components thereof. Ultimately, any bit of geometrical thinking might be (or come with) its own kind of pleasure. Thus Heinaman’s ‘strict’ theory might better be called the slippery slope theory. It makes it conceivable that, implausibly, particular pleasures are each their own kind. Moreover, once activities are taken apart and ‘sliced’ into portions that may by themselves count as activities, the question arises whether particular pleasures can be neatly individuated. If that turns out to be difficult, the assumption that individual pleasures are each their own species may fall apart: it is not clear whether there are individual pleasures in the first place. That is, pleasure may be an amorphous phenomenon, neither divisible into species nor such that particular pleasures can be individuated in a straightforward way.

Those who want to know about some more basic matters, such as what Aristotle takes pleasure to be, may prefer to read Dow’s chapter first. At the end of *NE* 10.4, Aristotle

says that pleasure does not occur without activity, and that every activity is completed by pleasure. In reconstructing this proposal, scholars ask how pleasure as an activity relates to the activity that it accompanies. Dow distinguishes between what he calls the activity view and the features view (24). According to the former, pleasure is itself an activity of the soul. Thus there are *two* activities in each instance of pleasure: an unimpeded activity, say, of perceiving X, from which pleasure arises, *and* the activity of pleasure itself.

According to the latter view, which Dow defends, pleasure is an accompanying feature of other activities, such as perceiving, thinking, and so on. There is just one activity, say, perceiving X, and pleasure ‘completes’ this activity as a feature that accompanies it.

Lawrence adds yet another perspective on pleasure. He warns against understanding pleasure in Aristotle as a sensation. Talk of pleasure/pain, he thinks, should be translated into talk of enjoyment/disenjoyment and likes/dislikes (261). These formulations compel one to name, for each pleasure, the activity that is ‘enjoyed’ or ‘liked’—as when one enjoys reading Aristotle—in such a way as to make talk about two activities—say, the reading and the taking pleasure—counterintuitive. So far, this seems in the spirit of Dow’s features view. However, these formulations put the focus squarely on what the agent does, namely, reading Aristotle. They may thus pull toward an account that locates the common feature of different pleasures in the role they play in motivation, rather than anything internal to the feeling or sensation.

(ii) *Desire*. Charles argues that desire for Aristotle is “a boiling-of-the-blood type of grasping that something is to be done” (90). His paper “Desire on Action” is engaging

because Charles does not dismiss this proposal as evidently outdated or misguided. Perhaps, Charles seems to suggest, Aristotle is (roughly and with some provisos) getting things right when he puts forward a boiling-of-the-blood theory. Contemporary theories, Charles thinks, tend to conceive of desire as mental in a Cartesian sense, while Aristotle thinks of desire as inextricably psychophysical. This term, psychophysical, may be a concession to the philosophical framework Charles seeks to undermine: the Cartesian distinction between the bodily/material/physical on the one hand and the mental/immaterial/psychological on the other. If the distinction is presupposed, and desire located in the latter domain, one must ask how desire can move the body. But if one does not think in Cartesian terms in the first place, the puzzle does not arise. According to Charles, the Aristotelian proposal has a significant advantage. It locates desire in a human being, not in its soul or mind. This captures the ordinary assumption that it is an *agent* who, say, is angry or wants a cup of tea, not her mind.

Aristotle, as Charles reads him, holds that there is a ‘bodily instrument’ by which desire moves arms and legs and so on. This instrument is called *pneuma*, the early Greek name for the ‘soul-stuff’ that animates the body. According to Aristotle, the relevant *pneuma*’s nature is such as to expand and to contract, via heating and cooling. Suppose, for example, that an agent thinks about, or imagines, an object of pursuit. This thinking of the object of pursuit, Charles argues, *is* the desire. But it is not a thinking (or imagining) as Cartesians conceive of it, in purely mental terms. It is a psychophysical thinking (or imagining), accompanied by heat or coldness. *Pneuma* expands or contracts, bringing

about the motions of arms and legs and so on that are involved in a person's actions.

Assuming that, instead of *pneuma*, we plug in today's best scientific views about how humans set themselves in motion, the structure of Aristotle's proposal seems worth taking seriously.

And yet, Charles may be engaged in a discussion that is alien to those with interests in contemporary action theory. Others, before us, have asked whether Aristotle can speak to them. The terms they brought to bear were—for a long time—Cartesian. These scholars seem to be Charles' target. Today, philosophers in metaethics and action theory tend to use the term 'mental' in a sense that is closer to 'psychological'. This does not mean that traditional questions in philosophy of mind are resolved. It does mean, however, that Charles' engagement with a third player next to ancient and contemporary thought, namely Cartesian philosophy, may complicate the picture in unnecessary fashion—and that it may be time to move the discussion to more recent frameworks in order to make Aristotle's proposals interesting to 'us'.

This is what Pearson does, comparing Aristotle and Scanlon on desire. Though one may wonder whether the particular exchange he envisages is successful, this may be the kind of conversation we want to have, if we are interested in whether Aristotle offers resources for theorizing today. In *What We Owe To Each Other* (1998), Scanlon devotes his opening chapters to two notions, each of which can be considered fundamental in metaethics: reasons and value. Desire, arguably a third contender, is discussed along the

way to the first premise of Scanlon's theory, namely that the notion of reasons is primitive. In laying out his view, Scanlon subordinates desires to reasons. They are not themselves motivators. "[T]he only source of motivation lies in my taking certain considerations [...] as reasons" (35). Much of twentieth-century metaethics aimed for an account of the nature of value—or, more narrowly, a definition of 'good'—that avoided troublesome metaphysical claims. Scanlon's proposal about reasons aims to assuage such metaphysical worries. As he sees it, talk about value can be explained via metaphysically harmless talk about reasons.

Is it promising to compare what Aristotle and Scanlon say about desire? Consider two hurdles. First, in Aristotle there is no talk about reasons. Without such a notion as common ground between Aristotle and Scanlon, Pearson's comparison may not get off the ground. Second, whether Aristotle shares any of Scanlon's concerns regarding values is an even more complicated question. Both Aristotle and Scanlon think, in one way or another, that the search for something like a Platonic property 'good' is theoretically confused. Nevertheless, Aristotle has nothing against the idea that agents respond to perceived *value*. Accordingly, his talk about desire can be considered talk about desire for the (perceived) good—and Scanlon's cannot. Perhaps, however, Scanlon and Aristotle agree in more implicit, and more basic ways: they presuppose a notion of psychological attitudes that is not under pressure to fit on one side of the Cartesian mental-physical distinction that Charles invokes.

(iii) *Deliberation*. Both Price and Segvic address, from different angles, a vexed issue: how to understand the claim that one does not deliberate about the end. Both point to a current consensus on what this does *not* mean, namely, that one deliberates about means-toward-ends. But what *does* it mean? According to one line of argument, advanced by McDowell and Wiggins and discussed by Price, Aristotle points out that, if one did not have the right upbringing, with the right molding of motivational propensities, the end—as it should be conceived—simply does not come into view. Another solution to the puzzle says that the clause “*ta pros to telos*,” which Aristotle uses to gloss what deliberation is about, includes constitutive parts of an end. But Segvic rightly observes that this does not help, or not sufficiently. “If on Aristotle’s view we deliberate about the constituents of happiness, then we do, in an important sense, deliberate about happiness as well” (168).

Aristotle’s verdict is at odds with a widespread phenomenon: when thinking about what to do, one often reassesses what it is that one wants or what it is one should aim at. A theory of deliberation that has no room for on-going thought about how to live might be rather unattractive. Another long-standing response on behalf of Aristotle is that, in discussing his ethics, we use ‘deliberation’ in a narrow, technical fashion. Thus it may make no sense for us to ask how the kinds of practical thinking that we associate with deliberating fit into the picture; they simply do not, on account of the way terms are defined. And yet scholars aim to reconstruct Aristotelian deliberation in ways that matter to the ways in which we conceive of it. Perhaps one should take a step back here, and ask

whether the relevant quote is less of a verdict than exegetical debates can make it appear. Anscombe's sympathies for scholastic philosophy may continue to characterize scholarship. Some Aristotelian ideas have been discussed as if they were 'principles' set down by 'the philosopher', as the medievals liked to refer to Aristotle. But we are free to read Aristotle as a more discursive philosopher, someone who thinks through and re-thinks a set of proposals in varying contexts.

This is how Segvic approaches the question. She aims to save Aristotle, not individual sentences in Aristotle. In formulating her own solution, Segvic emphasizes that, for Aristotle, deliberation is an inquiry: a *zêtêsis* and a *skepsis* (164), to be compared with geometrical analysis. The point of this comparison, she says, is not that practical reasoning is like theoretical reasoning. What Aristotle takes to be distinctive of geometrical thinking is that one must lay down a hypothesis. Deliberation involves, or so Segvic suggests, a practical commitment, a holding fixed of something, namely a conception of the good life (170). It is not clear to me that, subtle as Segvic's discussions are, she succeeds in resolving the question. But I do think that she puts on the table pieces of the puzzle that are worth pursuing further: a notion of investigation, which may pull away from some prominent strands in Aristotelian ethics, and the question of how precisely one is to think of 'hypotheses' in this context.

Segvic can also make sense of a feature of Aristotle's ethics that is less widely debated, namely that Aristotle takes it upon himself to respond to Protagorean relativism (180).

Scholars tend to hold that, for Aristotle, there is a fact of the matter, determinable from a third-person point of view, of whether someone's life is a good life. But Segvic, in my view rightly, notes that Aristotle considers the *phronimos* the standard of ethical correctness. In Protagorean terms, the practically wise person's reason is 'the measure'. Notably, and here I go beyond Segvic, this is one way of saying 'man is the measure'—not any man, but a human being who is practically wise. This adds, in Segvic's terms, a subjectivist component to Aristotle's conception of a good life (180-181). To lead a good life is something that is done from the perspective of a wise agent, guided by *her* conception of the good life.

Motivation and human psychology belong to those topics where ancient philosophy, without too much bridging of gaps, can be of interest today: it seems possible that the ancients are getting some central things right. If one wants to make up one's mind about a field that, in any number of publications, is arguing for this view, Pakaluk's and Pearson's volume is a fine starting point. Both ends of a spectrum are represented: Aristotle may be worth studying because of how deeply he disagrees with 'us', or alternatively because he shares some of 'our' concerns. Which of these perspectives is more fruitful? The answer will depend on how likely one finds it that we ourselves are in need of rethinking the premises that frame philosophical discussions.