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Review of "Aristotle's Ethics"

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Book Review

Aristotle's Ethics. David Bostock. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. (ix + 256 pp., including References, Index of Persons and Places, Index of Subjects, Index of Passages), \$24.95.

Bostock's *Aristotle's Ethics* is a commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Although there are other ethical writings within the Aristotelian corpus, referring to the *Nicomachean Ethics* as Aristotle's Ethics seems warranted: the *Nicomachean Ethics* has long been regarded as Aristotle's most mature ethical work, and it is certainly his most thorough one. Bostock's commentary is of interest as an interpretation and as a critical appraisal of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In what follows I discuss Bostock's general assessment of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*), and then some specific merits and demerits of Bostock's commentary. I conclude with some thoughts on which audiences might find Bostock's book helpful, and which might not.

I. Bostock's Assessment of the *NE* and Some Implications

Bostock poses the following question in his introduction, "why *should* one wish to be introduced to Aristotle's views on ethics?" (p. 2). We learn at least two things from this question. First, Bostock intends his commentary as an *introduction* to Aristotle's views on ethics. Second, the worth of studying Aristotle's views on ethics is questioned from the outset. This may not immediately be evident from the question itself. An author or teacher often poses a question such as Bostock's as a rhetorical device segueing to a list of reasons for studying a particular work or philosophical approach. It soon emerges, however, that Bostock's question is more than rhetorical, and his list of reasons for studying Aristotle is unusually short: "What makes him worth studying, especially on this topic, is largely that his problems are our problems too, and that is why his attempts to solve them are worth our close attention. For even if we cannot in the end agree with his solutions, still we shall learn a great deal by working out just why we disagree" (p. 2). It often happens -- though there is no reason that it must be this way -- that the author of a commentary has a great deal of sympathy with the approach and views of the text on which he or she is commenting. We may be surprised, then, by what is missing from Bostock's list of reasons for studying Aristotle's *NE*. One significant omission from this list is a suggestion of why it might be more profitable to study Aristotle than, say, Epictetus. Also missing is any claim that Aristotle achieves success in the way in which he approaches ethics, or that any of Aristotle's more prominent ethical positions are correct. The reasons for these omissions emerge soon enough. As one works his or her way through Bostock's text, it is soon discovered that in fact Bostock "cannot in the end agree with [Aristotle's] solutions". Neither does he agree with Aristotle's way of posing ethical problems, nor the metaphysical background Aristotle utilizes to solve them, nor even Aristotle's methods for finding solutions.

Bostock summarizes his assessment of the *NE* in the following way: “I think we must conclude that in its overall structure Aristotle’s *Ethics* is disappointing: either it is radically innovative but immoral, or it is a recipe for unthinking moral conservatism, or its argument contains gaps which it does not appear that he could fill. (I prefer the last alternative.)”(p. 240). Despite this assessment, Bostock does grant that some of Aristotle’s discussions may still have appeal in a general sort of way. As examples he lists Aristotle’s notion that human goodness has something to do with what it means to be a human, that ethics has something to do with virtue, that justice is pertinent to ethics, that one might explain voluntary actions without relying on a notion of free will, that one can distinguish between different types of pleasures, and that the conjunction of belief and desire has something to do with action. But again, Bostock finds Aristotle’s own solutions to these general notions inadequate.

As one might expect from his general assessment, much of Bostock’s book is devoted to exposing what he considers unsolved gaps throughout Aristotle’s *NE*. Several of the most significant gaps that Bostock seeks to expose concern what can be thought of as the backbone to Aristotle’s *NE*: (a) the connection between *eudaimonia* as it is presented in I.1-5 and the function argument of I.7, (b) the connection between the function argument of I.7 and the division of virtue into intellectual and moral in I. 13, (c) the division within intellectual virtue in VI and its implications for the account of *eudaimonia* in X.6-8, and (d) the connection between the function argument of I.7 and the account of *eudaimonia* X.6-8. In chapter I of Bostock’s book he argues, against (a), that there is no basis for Aristotle’s claim that there is some one final end at which we are all aiming. He then argues, against (a) and (b), that Aristotle’s introduction of the function argument in I.7 is flawed for several reasons, most notably because Aristotle’s presupposition of a common human nature is unwarranted: “What, then, *is* this supposed ‘human nature’, and how are we to discover it? But this leads naturally to a second question: is there really such a thing? I would say that there is not”(p. 29). Since there is no human nature, the division between intellectual virtue and virtues of character is in doubt, contra (b), as is the notion that both virtues of character and intellect are predicated on a set number of capacities in our nature: “[Aristotle] adds that we have our capacities by nature, but not our virtues. But this apparently ignores the fact that we can, if we wish, set out to *develop* capacities”(p. 37). Further, contra (c), it is impossible to distinguish between wisdom and practical intelligence (*phronesis*) by their respective objects, as Aristotle does in VI.1, 7, and 13, because theoretical knowledge often considers things that are not eternal and unchanging, and practical thought sometimes deliberates about things that are not related to action. Moreover, we often think about theoretical objects from a practical perspective, and practical actions from a theoretical perspective (pp. 77-79). Bostock is quite emphatic, even hyperbolic, about his rejection of this division within intellectual virtue: “It is therefore perverse of Aristotle to posit two different parts of the reasoning soul, one for the first case [theoretical] and one for the second [practical]”(p. 79). Finally, contra (d), with no human nature on which to rest the function argument, and no distinction between theoretical and practical thinking to be made, there is no basis for Aristotle’s promotion of contemplation as the best sort of life in X.6-8 (see pp. 195-212 for a host of objections to Aristotle’s account of *eudaimonia*).

Bostock does not just think that these pivotal ideas in Aristotle’s ethical theory need to be reworked and refined, he thinks they ought to be abandoned altogether. He is less dismissive of some other positions that Aristotle promotes in the *NE*. For example, he thinks that Aristotle has made a good initial analysis of the various types of justice (pp. 54-66); that Aristotle’s discussion of voluntary

and involuntary actions -- though not without problems -- gives us something to work with (pp. 118-119); and that Aristotle has something to offer in regard to the value of pleasure, if not to an analysis of what pleasure is: “there is little to be said in favour of his account of what pleasure is (though I add that the same verdict would seem to apply to all other accounts too). He has more to offer us in his views on the value of pleasure”(p. 165).

II. Merits of Bostock’s *Aristotle’s Ethics*

Bostock does not attempt to address every chapter of Aristotle’s *NE*. Instead, he endeavors to deal with the most important topics in the *NE*. I think he succeeds in doing so, relegating discussion of some of Aristotle’s concerns (such as the case against the Platonic notion of Good in I.6) to appendixes at the end of several of the chapters, and leaving others (like the whole of IV) out entirely. Bostock also deals with the books of the *NE* in a slightly different order than that in which they are found. After commenting on *NE* I and II in the first two chapters of his book, Bostock turns to consider Aristotle’s account of justice in *NE* V in the third chapter. Bostock then addresses *NE* VI, on virtues of intellect, in his fourth chapter, and then returns to *NE* III for a commentary on responsibility in chapter five. He follows his discussion of responsibility in his fifth chapter with one on self-control in the sixth chapter. Bostock devotes his seventh chapter to pleasure, dealing there both with *NE* VII.11-14 and X.1-5. He deals with friendship in his eight chapter, and then returns to his criticisms of Aristotle’s main views on the human good in chapter nine. Bostock’s tenth, and final, chapter addresses Aristotle’s method in ethics. I thought this an interesting chapter, though I found, and no doubt many other readers will find, plenty to argue with Bostock about here. Nevertheless, I thought that some reflection on Aristotle’s method an appropriate way to conclude a commentary on the *NE*. So, on the whole, I thought Bostock’s arrangement of chapters, and of topics within those chapters, useful.

Bostock makes an important contribution to the debate on how to interpret *NE* I.7. He argues quite persuasively that Aristotle’s description of the most complete or perfect (*teleion*) virtue in *NE* I.7 is intentionally ambiguous, and sets up Aristotle’s division of *eudaimonia* into primary and secondary types in X.7-8. Although many of Bostock’s other interpretative and critical points are not especially original -- it is a truly remarkable thing to say something original about a text that has received so much attention for so many years -- his book does provide an exceptionally good source for getting up to speed on major trends in Aristotelian scholarship over the last forty or so years. Moreover, his frequent footnotes, and suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter, leave a well-marked trail for those wishing to investigate matters more thoroughly.

III. Demerits of Bostock’s *Aristotle’s Ethics*

One of Bostock’s frequent charges against various views of Aristotle is that they are based on inexplicit and unwarranted presuppositions. We, however, are not privy to an explicit formulation of the presuppositions upon which Bostock bases many of his objections. Perhaps this is because he assumes that we, the present-day readers of Aristotle’s *NE*, share a basic set of presuppositions about ethics. Perhaps we do. But, Bostock assumes too much. For example, when in his first chapter he rejects Aristotle’s claim that all humans share a common nature within which we can recognize some uniquely distinguishing function *qua* human, Bostock asks two questions, the answers to which he presumes are obvious to all:

When we add a little historical perspective, and look back on, say, the Aztecs of Mexico, or the ancient Egyptians, or indeed the primitive hunter-gatherer people from whom we descend, does it not seem less likely that there is a basic ‘human nature’ which we all share, and which is substantial enough for it to make sense to say: *that* is how you ought to live? Taking an even longer view, and looking at things from our own perspective within the theory of evolution (which, of course, Aristotle did not share), would one *expect* to find some shared ‘human nature’ in all who are counted as human beings? (p. 29).

Bostock imagines us all responding “yes” to the first query, and “no” to the second. But surely these matters are not so clear. To the first, one could respond that ancient cultures did promote variations on what Aristotle describes as the best sort of life. Moreover, an Aristotelian easily could argue that the fact that other peoples or individuals did not live or even recognize the best sort of life counts nothing against there being a best sort of life for human beings. To the second, one could answer just as easily, “Yes. In fact, that is how we demarcate human beings from hominid predecessors”. The point is that it is not settled for us, as Bostock assumes it is, that anthropology and evolutionary theory leave no room for a theory of human nature. Aristotle, of course, bases his entire ethics on his theory of human nature. So, by rejecting this basis, Bostock undermines the entire Aristotelian approach to ethics. But Bostock’s dismissal of this basis is too quick and insufficiently supported.

I have already mentioned how Bostock uses his rejection of human nature to dismantle the main features of Aristotle’s *NE*. If Bostock was wrong to reject entirely Aristotle’s theory of human nature, as well as any Aristotelian inspired account of human nature, then all of his subsequent criticisms based on this rejection are subject to doubt. I have only argued that Bostock was too hasty in rejecting Aristotle’s theory of human nature. Arguing that certain features of Aristotle’s theory of human nature are salvageable requires far more work than can be undertaken in a book review. Nevertheless, enough argumentation has been provided at least to call into question Bostock’s general assessment of Aristotle’s *NE*.

Bostock certainly is entitled to his own views concerning human nature, and other features of Aristotle’s views on ethics. However, he intends for his book to be an introduction to Aristotle’s ethics. Towards this aim, he should have done a better job separating his criticisms from his explications of Aristotle’s positions. Instead, he interlaces criticism with interpretation throughout, with the result that Aristotle never has a chance to speak for himself. Bostock pulls the legs out from Aristotle’s approach to ethics before we learn what those legs support. Bostock’s double aim of making his book an introduction to Aristotle’s views on ethics, and a critical assessment of those views, would have been better served if he consistently separated interpretative from critical sections.

From a stylistic point of view, the piling up of his objections, coupled with his conviction that “there is no straightforward way of pulling all of [Aristotle’s] Ethics together in a coherent whole”(p. 234), makes Bostock’s *Aristotle’s Ethics* a rather disjointed book to read. There is no common theme tying together Bostock’s chapters, and the lack of demarcation between his interpretations and criticisms confronts the reader with what seems at once a jumbled and exceptionally unsympathetic reading of Aristotle’s *NE*.

IV. Bostock's Audience

There are, in general, three groups of readers who might be interested in a book such as Bostock's: other scholars working in the field, those who are setting out to tackle Aristotle's *NE* for the first time, and those who are familiar with Aristotle's *NE* but want to further their investigation. The first group may find many points of interest in Bostock's book, particularly if they are interested in adopting or arguing against Bostock's reasons for dismissing Aristotle's most prominent ethical positions. In regard to the second group, I would strongly advise first-time readers of the *NE* to avoid Bostock's book. They are likely to get lost amidst Bostock's flood of criticisms, and, worst of all, might miss out on the chance to experience the rich appeal of Aristotle's approach. If first-time readers make recourse to commentary at all, they would be better served by a more sympathetic reader of Aristotle such as Cooper, Hardie, or Aquinas. Finally, I think that Bostock's book would be most useful for the third class of readers. Graduate students, for instance, would find in Bostock's *Aristotle's Ethics* a good source for beginning to catch up on many of the interpretative issues and criticisms that have shaped recent Aristotelian scholarship. Such readers could learn from Bostock, while at the same time having something to bank against the impression one could have while reading Bostock's book that Aristotle has surprisingly little to offer ethical inquiry.

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