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978-0-521-51448-4 - Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: A Critical Guide

Edited by Jon Miller

Excerpt

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Introductions to scholarly books can serve different ends. One of these might be to convince prospective buyers of the value of the volume before them. In the present case, since the contents of this volume are about another – Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* – a dual pitch might seem necessary. About the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*N.E.*), Jonathan Barnes has written: "I shall not attempt to extol the merits of the *Ethics*: a good wine needs no bush; and it is mere impertinence to advertise the rarest of vintages."¹ Barnes is so obviously right that I shall not talk at all about Aristotle's book. As for this one, I shall speak briefly to the importance of the papers it presents toward the end of my Introduction. For the most part, however, I must let those papers sell themselves. Only by reading them can their value be fully appreciated.

A different end that introductions might serve is preparing readers for what they are about to encounter. Here, too, I will distinguish between the *N.E.* and the present volume. A number of superb introductions to the *N.E.* are already in print.² I could add little, if anything, to them, so I shall not try. On the other hand, I will sketch the general contours of this volume as well as provide a precis for each paper. These can be found in section v of my Introduction. For fear of being long-winded, I have kept the synopses short. It is to be hoped that they will be useful summaries of the book's contents but they are no substitute for them.

A possible third goal of introductions is to complement the main body of the work, not by previewing it but by covering different and related material. That is what I have chosen to do with my Introduction. The papers constituting this volume are analytical and, for the most part, ahistorical, in the sense that they reconstruct and evaluate Aristotle's

¹ Barnes (1976), p. 10.

² For brief primers, see, inter alia, Barnes (1976), Crisp (2000), and Broadie (2002). For monographs, Urmson (1988) and Pakaluk (2005).

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arguments without either (a) situating them in their time and place or (b) taking into account any but the most recent history of scholarship on Aristotle. There is certainly nothing wrong with this kind of history of philosophy. On the contrary, it has the virtue of keeping the philosophical importance of the subject matter front-and-centre, something which can be lost in historicist approaches. At the same time, I think this volume would be enhanced by consideration of these subjects, for which reason I devote the bulk of my Introduction to them. Or rather, to one of them. I cannot possibly do justice to both (a) and (b) in the space available. So I will dip into (b). This is also a vast subject, far exceeding my abilities. Hence I will selectively deal with what now appears to be a surprising episode in Aristotle's long history: the time – not too long ago – when he did not matter much.³

I

As a survey of major works from the period shows, Aristotle did not play a major role in Anglo-American moral philosophy for nearly 100 years, starting in the 1870s.⁴ His prospects might have seemed high at the beginning of this period. Henry Sidgwick, who brought out the first edition of his magisterial *The Methods of Ethics* in 1874, was an excellent classical scholar who thought very highly of Aristotle. For example, Sidgwick tells us in the Preface to the sixth edition of *Methods* (there would eventually be seven editions altogether) that great admiration for Aristotle's method led him to emulate aspects of it:

What [Aristotle] gave us there [i.e., in Books II–IV of the *N.E.*] was the Common Sense Morality of Greece, reduced to consistency by careful comparison: given not as something external to him but as what “we” – he and others – think, ascertained by reflection.

Might I not imitate this: do the same for *our* morality here and now, in the same manner of impartial reflection on current opinion?

Indeed *ought* I not to do this before deciding on the question whether I had or had not a system of moral intuitions? At any rate, the result would be useful, whatever conclusion I came to.

³ For more extensive accounts of the reception and influence of Aristotle's ethics, see Hoffman *et al.* (in press); the pertinent sections of Irwin (2007–09); and Miller (in press).

⁴ There is inevitably some arbitrariness in starting with the 1870s as opposed to a decade earlier or later. Still, at least three events make this decade pivotal for the history of Anglo-American ethics: Mill's death in 1873, Sidgwick's publication of *Methods* the following year, and Bradley's release of *Ethical Studies* two years after that. With these developments, the stage was set for a new generation of Utilitarians as well as a new powerful anti-Utilitarian movement. Together, they would determine the course of moral philosophy well into the next century.

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So this was the part of my book first written (Book iii., chaps. i.–xi.), and a certain imitation of Aristotle's manner was very marked in it at first, and though I have tried to remove it where it seemed to me affected or pedantic, it still remains to some extent.⁵

Sidgwick was not merely an admirer of Aristotle's; he also studied him carefully, acquiring a fine-grained knowledge of the *N.E.* that would be the envy of many philosophers nowadays. For instance, he goes so far as to pass judgment on the compositional integrity of the *N.E.* in his *Outlines of the History of Ethics*. There he argues that Books v–vii of the *N.E.* are not “Aristotle's work in the same sense in which the rest of the treatise is” but rather “they were intended by the disciple who composed them to convey pure Aristotelian doctrine.”⁶

All of the foregoing notwithstanding, when Sidgwick actually developed his ethical theory, he did not incorporate many Aristotelian ideas into it. None of the three “methods of ethics” that Sidgwick investigates in detail could be called Aristotelian – certainly, Sidgwick does not describe them as such. Additionally, Sidgwick flatly contradicts Aristotle on the nature of philosophical ethics. Aristotle famously held that “We must be content, then, when talking about things of this sort [i.e., fine things and just things and good things], to show what is true about them roughly and in outline” (*N.E.* 1.3, 1094b20–21). By contrast, Sidgwick's whole purpose in *Methods* was to raise ethics to the level of a science.⁷ Besides important disagreement on the aspirations of ethical inquiry, Sidgwick differed from Aristotle on substantive issues. I shall come to these in section III of my Introduction, so for now, let me offer a quotation from Sidgwick's *History of Ethics* that encapsulates, to the extent that any single sentence can, his appreciation of Aristotle: “On the whole, there is probably no treatise so masterly as Aristotle's *Ethics*, and containing so much close and valid thought, that yet leaves on the reader's mind so strong an impression of dispersive and incomplete work.”⁸

If Sidgwick allowed Aristotle at least some role in his ethics, most of his successors entirely wrote him out of their theories. For example, two years after the initial publication of Sidgwick's *Methods*, F. H. Bradley released a very different piece of moral philosophy. Called *Ethical Studies* (first published 1876), it consists of seven essays, each of which examines a different moral proposition. I shall provide a further account of Bradley's

⁵ Sidgwick (1907), p. xxii. ⁶ Sidgwick (1902), p. 61n.1.

⁷ See Sidgwick (1907), pp. 1–2, together with Schneewind (1977), p. 191.

⁸ Sidgwick (1902), p. 70.

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work below. At this juncture, I want just to note how little Aristotle matters to Bradley. Aristotle comes up only twice in the entire work and in neither of those places does Bradley actually engage him. In the first passage, he simply cites *N.E.* 1.13 in support of the claim that “present grief for a past event” is evidence of the prior existence of “a presumable will to the contrary” of what actually transpired.⁹ In the second, Bradley writes that “If ‘happiness’ means well-being or perfection of life, then I am content to say that, with Plato and Aristotle, I hold happiness to be the end.”¹⁰ There are reasons, which I shall discuss soon enough, why Bradley does not engage Aristotle. For now, the point to notice is how incidental Aristotle is to his ethics.

The same was true of C. D. Broad, who flourished a couple generations after Sidgwick and Bradley.¹¹ In his *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, Broad set out to expound on those moral theories which “give a very fair idea of the range of possible views on the subject.”¹² While he admits that the five he selected may not “exhaust all the alternatives,”¹³ Broad argues that they are the most important contenders. Noticeably absent from Broad’s list is Aristotle. Indeed, the only allusion to Aristotle in the entire volume is to his *Metaphysics*, which Broad hails as “the most important philosophical work” to appear in Europe prior to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*.¹⁴ This remark underscores Broad’s respect for some of Aristotle’s accomplishments. It is not a sense of the failure of Aristotle’s total system that led Broad to exclude him from his study so much as a conviction that Aristotle’s ethics weren’t important enough.

A contemporary of Broad’s was Sir William David Ross. To philosophers in the twenty-first century, Ross is mainly remembered as an outstanding editor, translator, and commentator of Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle. In addition to this, however, Ross also made important contributions to moral theory. In particular, his *The Right and the Good* has been hailed as the “pinnacle of ethical intuitionism.”¹⁵ Given his unsurpassed knowledge of Aristotle, it is to be expected that Aristotelian ideas would make their way into Ross’s book. And indeed, it has recently been argued that some of “Aristotle’s meta-ethical commitments have a close affinity to the theory of *prima facie* duties developed by” Ross.¹⁶ For

⁹ Bradley (1962), p. 43. ¹⁰ Bradley (1962), p. 140.

¹¹ In case anyone is worried about the jump in time, let me ask for patience. I will soon talk about other philosophers who thrived in the gap between Sidgwick/Bradley and Broad/Ross.

¹² Broad (1930), p. 1. ¹³ Broad (1930), p. 1. ¹⁴ Broad (1930), p. 10.

¹⁵ Stratton-Lake (2002), p. ix. ¹⁶ Nielsen (2007), p. 292.

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both Aristotle and Ross, “moral rules of thumb are sometimes overridden by claims stemming from particular features of the situation.”¹⁷

I do not wish to dispute the coincidence of views on this important if rather narrow issue. I do, however, want to maintain that Ross's overall theory is not indebted to Aristotle. Quite apart from the scarcity of overt references to Aristotle in *The Right and the Good* (only three versus; at least ten for Kant), there are obvious conceptual differences between the two philosophers' ethical systems. A couple of examples will have to suffice to make my point. Ross's moral epistemology is firmly committed to the idea that the value of an act such as fulfilling a promise is “self-evident just as a mathematical axiom, or the validity of a form of inference, is evident. The moral order expressed in [this sort of action] is just as much part of the fundamental nature of the universe ... as is the spatial or numerical structure expressed in the axioms of geometry or arithmetic.”¹⁸ Aristotle's moral epistemology, which supposes that our perception of moral truths is affected by our characters, could hardly be more different.¹⁹ The second example concerns the orientation of Ross's system. While it is true that Ross (like Aristotle) emphasizes the complexity of moral life,²⁰ it is also the case that Ross does not make moral life as a whole the locus of his discussion. Instead, he is (like Kant) much more concerned with understanding and enumerating our duties. As Stuart Hampshire puts it, whereas “Aristotle is almost entirely concerned to analyse the problems of the moral *agent*,” Ross (like other contemporary philosophers) seems “to be primarily concerned to analyse the problems of the moral *judge* or critic.”²¹

Toward the end of the era that I am canvassing, Kurt Baier published *The Moral Point of View*. At the beginning of this work, Baier proposes that there are “three fundamental questions of ethics”: “(a) Should anyone do what is right when doing so is not to his advantage and if so why? (b) Does anyone do what is right when doing so is not to his advantage and if so why? (c) Can anyone know what is right and if so how?”²² After an initial examination of these questions, Baier concludes in frustration that none of them “has so far been satisfactorily answered.”²³ The problem has to do with the “double nature of moral judgments,” which are (1) “obviously designed to guide us” but also (2) “meant to tell us something.”²⁴

¹⁷ Nielsen (2007), p. 293. ¹⁸ Ross (2002), pp. 29–30.

¹⁹ For more on Aristotle, see Broadie (1991), p. 168, and Darwall (1998), pp. 200–01.

²⁰ See, e.g., Ross (2002), p. 16. ²¹ Hampshire (1949), p. 467.

²² Baier (1958), pp. 4–5. ²³ Baier (1958), p. 45. ²⁴ Baier (1958), p. 46.

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Insofar as moral judgments are supposed to guide us, the “emotive theory” of ethics is plausible. But insofar as such judgments are meant to tell us something and not merely influence our behavior, those theories of ethics which maintain that “there is something to know in morality” become attractive. The fact that moral judgments are supposed to both guide and inform us leads Baier to elevate a fourth question as logically prior to the others. That question is “What ought I to do?”²⁵

As he grapples with the issues, Baier does not ignore or overlook the views of philosophers from the past. Given how seriously he takes self-interest and the need for the justification of morality, it is not surprising that Baier should make ample use of Hobbes.²⁶ And since he aims to show how morality can be rationally grounded, it is natural for him to take on Hume’s skepticism about the practical abilities of reason.²⁷ Likewise, Baier discusses with critical admiration Kant’s conviction that “Reason must be, at least at times, the master and not merely the slave of the passions.”²⁸ Baier’s extensive use of great moral philosophers from history makes the absence of Aristotle, who does not even merit a line in the index to Baier’s book, all the more striking. Like other philosophers of his day, Baier was well read in the history of philosophy, including the writings of Aristotle. Despite this, he didn’t see the value of bringing Aristotle to bear on contemporary moral theory.

In 1960, Mary Warnock published the first edition of her *Ethics since 1900*. This slender volume, which went through two subsequent editions as well as multiple reprintings, attempts to tell the story of philosophical ethics in England, France, and the United States until the end of the period that I have been discussing. Though opinionated, it is helpful. When read with the aim of understanding how Aristotle factored into philosophical ethics of the time, it is striking just how *unimportant* he was. Whether the subject was G. E. Moore, ethical intuitionism, the emotive theory of ethics, Sartre, or even moral psychology, Warnock does not deem it necessary to relate the issues or philosophers under consideration to Aristotle. From her perspective, philosophical ethics just did not use or need Aristotle.

II

This sketch of Anglo-American ethics in the nearly 100 years starting with Sidgwick will not prove anything about Aristotle’s importance – or lack

²⁵ Baier (1958), p. 46. ²⁶ See, e.g., Baier (1958), pp. 310–15.

²⁷ See especially Baier (1958), pp. 258ff. ²⁸ Baier (1958), p. 277.

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thereof – to the articulation and defense of moral theories propounded during that period. I am, however, building on the work of others.²⁹ With their assistance, I hope that my overarching point will be plausible. With few exceptions,³⁰ Aristotle was not central to philosophical ethics during the era under consideration. The next and obvious question to ask is why. What were the reasons for his sidelining?

For some philosophers, the answer undoubtedly had to do with their low opinion of Aristotle. In the previous section, I said that C. D. Broad greatly respected Aristotle's metaphysics if not his ethics. By contrast, Bertrand Russell thought that all aspects of Aristotle's legacy were disastrous. He wrote in *The History of Western Philosophy* (first published 1945) that since "the seventeenth century, almost every serious intellectual advance has had to begin with an attack on some Aristotelian doctrine."³¹ Though Russell subjected Aristotle's metaphysical and logical ideas to criticism, he seemed to regard the ethical doctrines as especially odious:

Those who neither fall below nor rise above the level of decent, well-behaved citizens will find in the *Ethics* a systematic account of the principles by which they hold that their conduct should be regulated. Those who demand anything more will be disappointed. The book appeals to the respectable middle-aged, and has been used by them, especially since the seventeenth century, to repress the ardours and enthusiasms of the young. But to a man with any depth of feeling it cannot but be repulsive.³²

Now, Russell is admittedly an unusual figure in the canon that I am addressing. But he was not alone in thinking that Aristotle's ethics were problematic.

For example, Russell's occasional collaborator G. E. Moore did not have much to say about Aristotle in his *Principia Ethica* (first published 1903). To the extent that the Greek did draw the Englishman's attention, however, it was because of an alleged banality or worse. Thus, Moore allows that Aristotle's official definition of virtue "is right, in the main, so far as he says that it is an 'habitual disposition' to perform certain actions."³³ Yet, Moore continues, there is a nuance to the meaning of virtue that Aristotle does not explicitly mention. In addition to being a

²⁹ For extensive analysis, see Irwin (2009), §§81, 84, 86–87. For briefer overviews, see Donagan (2003) and Welchman (in press).

³⁰ One such exception may be found in the work of Thomas Hill Green, such as Green (1883), Book III, Chapter v. For discussion, see Irwin (1992), esp. pp. 290ff.

³¹ Russell (1972), p. 160.

³² Russell (1972), p. 173. At risk of stating the obvious, we need not be concerned about the reliability of Russell's history. It is Russell's opinion of Aristotle's ethics that is germane.

³³ Moore (1962), p. 171.

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descriptive term, it can also be an “ethical term” – when we use “virtue” and “vice,” we can “mean to convey praise by the one and dispraise by the other.”³⁴ The normative dimension of virtue raises a new possibility: now a virtue can be a thing that is “good in itself.”³⁵ Although Aristotle may not have overtly embraced this idea, Moore argues that he did construe virtue as “having intrinsic value.”³⁶ Because Moore thinks that virtues are dispositions that are valuable as means, he holds that “to maintain that a virtue ... is good in itself is a gross absurdity.”³⁷ Since Aristotle thinks that virtues have this property, Moore concludes that “Aristotle’s definition of virtue is not adequate and expresses a false ethical judgment.”³⁸ While Moore’s critique of Aristotle centers on the concept of virtue, he does not restrain himself from offering a broader assessment. Aristotle’s overall “treatment of ethics,” Moore writes, is “highly unsystematic and confused, owing to his attempt to base it on the naturalist fallacy.”³⁹

Russell and Moore are still well known. A number of philosophers to whom history has been not so kind also had little regard for Aristotle. In words presaging those that Russell would use three decades later, Hastings Rashdall had this to say in a book from 1916:

[I]t would be quite unfair to look upon Aristotle as representing the highest ethical thought of the ancient world. Some writers – notably the revered Thomas Hill Green – have at times encouraged the notion that such was the case ... As a matter of fact, Aristotle represents not the highest ethical standard of the ancient world, but in some respects one of the lowest among highly civilized Moralities. His is the least modern, the least universalistic, the least humane – the most intensely aristocratic, particularistic, and intellectualistic – of ancient Moralities. It is the Morality of the little slave-holding aristocratic class in the autonomous City-state.⁴⁰

Writing in a more philosophical vein, H. A. Prichard asks “Why is the *Ethics* so disappointing?”⁴¹ The answer is not

because it really answers two radically different questions as if they were one: (1) “What is the happy life?” (2) “What is the virtuous life?” It is, rather, because Aristotle does not do what we as Moral Philosophers want him to do, *viz.*, to convince us that we really ought to do what in our non-reflective consciousness we have hitherto believed we ought to do, or, if not, to tell us what, if any, are the other things which we really ought to do, and to prove to us that he is right.⁴²

³⁴ Moore (1962), p. 171. ³⁵ Moore (1962), p. 171. ³⁶ Moore (1962), p. 176.

³⁷ Moore (1962), p. 176. ³⁸ Moore (1962), p. 177. ³⁹ Moore (1962), p. 176.

⁴⁰ Rashdall (1916), pp. 240–41. ⁴¹ Prichard (1912), p. 33. ⁴² Prichard (1912), p. 33.

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Other less-remembered philosophers who shared Prichard's sense of "disappointment" with Aristotle's ethics include C. I. Lewis and Richard Perry.⁴³

III

The dawn of the twentieth century was philosophically exciting, as advances in evolutionary theory, psychology, logic, and physics had the potential to revolutionize all of philosophy. During periods of extreme upheaval, those who identify themselves with the vanguard can want to dispense with all that previously existed. For some in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Russell and Moore, Aristotle's ideas were wrong, false, or worse. Not all who turned away from Aristotle, however, did so because they thought he was grotesquely mistaken. Instead, for many, Aristotle was simply irrelevant.

Bradley is an interesting example. In a reprinting of *Ethical Studies* published near the end of the era that I have been speaking about, Richard Wollheim provides an Introduction that tries to sell Bradley to a contemporary audience. Wollheim writes:

One of the most interesting aspects of Bradley's ethical philosophy is the way in which he constantly endeavours to relate morality and its leading ideas to the study and analysis of the mind. In this respect Bradley may have a special significance for our day. For it is a very marked feature of the moral philosophy of the recent past that it has sedulously separated questions of philosophy from questions of psychology. This has been a very important thing to do, and has resulted in the careful distinction of differences traditionally obscured. But now that the differences have been firmly noted, it may well be the task of the moral philosophy of the immediate future no longer to hold apart the two aspects of human behaviour so distinguished.⁴⁴

As Wollheim goes on to say, Aristotle is another philosopher who did not sever questions of ethics from questions of moral psychology. Yet, although Bradley and Aristotle are alike in this vital respect, Bradley still did not call upon Aristotle to make the case for his conception of ethics. This fact demands explanation.

Part of the explanation is obtained by placing Bradley in his context. When he wrote *Ethical Studies*, moral discourse – both within philosophy and in the broader public – was overwhelmingly Utilitarian. Bradley

⁴³ For more, see Donagan (2003), p. 143, and Welchman (in press).

⁴⁴ Wollheim (1962), p. xvi.

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regarded Utilitarianism as rebarbative, and he took as a primary objective the dislocation of Utilitarianism from the apex of philosophy and the public realm. Aristotle would not have been a suitable partner in these polemics and so Bradley didn't enlist him.

Bradley's antipathy towards Utilitarianism does not entirely explain the scarcity of references to Aristotle. To the extent that Bradley is remembered nowadays, it is for being the progenitor of idealism, both metaphysical and ethical. In *Ethical Studies*, this idealism manifests itself partially in the avowedly dialectical structure of the book, where Bradley goes through various erroneous moral propositions in order to arrive at a correct one. But it is also evident in the first-order moral theses that Bradley examines. As one example, there is the conception of the moral life, presented in the fifth essay, "My Station and Its Duties." Here Bradley considers the idea of "the community as the real moral organism, which in its members knows and wills itself, and sees the individual to be real just so far as the universal self is in his self, as he in it."⁴⁵ While Bradley ultimately rejects this notion, he enthusiastically holds it as a necessary step in the progression toward truth. To unpack this idea as well as the others which hold his attention across the book's seven essays, Bradley understandably draws upon the great German idealists, especially Hegel. It is also understandable that he would not turn to Aristotle, for Aristotle simply was not an idealist.

So, even though Aristotle and Bradley both thought that ethics should pay heed to psychology, there were other grounds on which Bradley could and did regard Aristotle as irrelevant. A similar story can be told of Sidgwick. As some commentators have noted, Sidgwick did address a number of topics from moral psychology.⁴⁶ Even so, as I said in section 1, Sidgwick did not see himself as reviving Aristotle – he did not make Aristotle central to his project. The reason here is that Sidgwick found himself in deep disagreement with Aristotle on basic questions of ethics. For example, Sidgwick thinks that Aristotle's conception of happiness was incapable of yielding a discernible moral thesis. Like other Greeks, Aristotle thought of happiness as self-realization. Self-realization, however, is inherently vague. So this idea "is to be avoided in a treatise on ethical method."⁴⁷

To cite another example, Sidgwick allows that Aristotle (and Plato) exerts more "influence" over his thinking about the nature of virtue than

⁴⁵ Bradley (1962), p. 187.⁴⁶ See, e.g., Schneewind (1977), pp. 206ff.⁴⁷ Sidgwick (1907), p. 91.