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MICHAEL PAKALUK is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Clark University, Massachusetts. He has published extensively in the history of philosophy, including Plato, Aquinas, Hume, and Reid, as well as in political philosophy, philosophical logic, and early analytic philosophy.

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ARISTOTLE'S *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*

An Introduction

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521520683

First published 2005

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-81742-4 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-81742-0 hardback
ISBN-13 978-0-521-52068-3 paperback
ISBN-10 0-521-52068-1 paperback

For
niko-*Max*

Contents

Preface

I vividly remember my first encounter with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in my first semester of college. I was assigned the text as part of an introductory course in the history of philosophy. My professor, Ed McCann, had said in lecture that it was widely accepted that Aristotle and Kant towered above all other philosophers, on account of their depth and comprehensiveness. So I had the highest expectations as I went off to the library, the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in hand, to grapple with Aristotle's thought.

But lulled perhaps by the soft hum of the heating system in the library, or by the plush comfort of the leather chair into which I had sunk, I simply could not stay awake while reading. I would read a chapter or two of the *Ethics*; then nod off to sleep; then wake up and read another chapter; and then fall asleep again; and so on. During my brief periods of wakefulness, it was my impression that I was following the argument, and that what Aristotle was saying was, after all, commonsensical – a very common first impression of the *Ethics*, as it turns out. And yet really I was hardly understanding the text. What was happening was that the seeming obviousness of Aristotle's claims allowed me to run my eyes over the text fairly quickly, and yet the density and concentration of the underlying argument, to the extent that I did grasp it, caused a kind of intellectual overload, from which I would then escape by falling asleep.

This experience, although not entirely pleasant, gave me a wary admiration for the *Ethics*. It seemed a serious work – difficult and appropriately challenging – while also being congenial and in many respects evidently right. My troubles in understanding the text seemed completely compatible with my professor's high estimation

of Aristotle. But I was impatient with myself: I wanted truly to understand the *Ethics* and *learn* what it had to offer.

Sooner than I could have imagined, I had another chance. In my second semester, not knowing quite what I was getting into, I sought to enroll in and was accepted into a seminar on political philosophy for upperclassmen. One of the first readings for the seminar was Aristotle's *Ethics*. Each member of the seminar was required to give a presentation during the semester, and I rather foolishly volunteered to give the presentation on the *Ethics*. It was unwise, of course, for me to offer to give one of the first presentations of the semester in an advanced seminar designed for upperclassmen, but I imagined that by agreeing to do the presentation I could *force* myself to acquire an understanding of the *Ethics*.

I soon came to realize, however, the bind that I was in. In a kind of panic, and without a plan or system, I started reading quickly through secondary literature on the *Ethics*, hoping to find some interpretative key. I came across an article – I cannot remember exactly what or by whom – which claimed that the *Ethics* is from first to last "teleological" in outlook. That is correct, but I had no idea then what "teleological" meant. No matter: in my presentation to the seminar, I parroted the claim, and I used this theme, which I did not understand, to introduce and summarize the rather vague points I made about the text. Needless to say, I was completely dumbfounded when the professor, Nathan Tarcov, led off the discussion following my presentation by asking me to define what I meant by "teleological"!

I would be assigned the text a third time before my undergraduate years were over, this time, oddly enough, in a course entitled "Nonscientific Knowledge." The professor for this course, Hilary Putnam, a philosopher of science, assigned the *Ethics* as a kind of culmination of the argument of the course, which was directed at breaking down any sharp distinction between "facts" and "values." Earlier we had examined arguments from Iris Murdoch's book *The Sovereignty of the Good* for the claim that words that indicate a person's character (for instance, "kindly," "persevering") are not purely evaluative but are also essentially descriptive. Assertions that use words that purport to say how the world is also carry with them an evaluation. Aristotle's *Ethics*, the professor claimed, was a kind of

star example of this, and the system and intelligence of the *Ethics* showed that ethical discourse of that sort, although not "scientific," could nonetheless constitute a kind of knowledge.

Naturally in such a course we did not read the *Ethics* with great attention to detail. What left a lasting impression upon me, rather, was my professor's high regard for the *Ethics*. He remarked in lecture that the *Nicomachean Ethics* would probably be the book he would take with him to a desert island if he were allowed just one book. He even claimed that one could find in the *Ethics* not merely "non scientific knowledge" but also *wisdom* about human life – the only time in my college career, in fact, that I had heard a professor acknowledge the existence of something like wisdom.

So during college I was taught the *Ethics* from three very different approaches: by a historian, as a basic text in ancient philosophy; by a political philosopher, as a seminal text in political thought; and by a philosopher of science, as a paradigm of organized but "non-scientific" understanding, and perhaps even as an instance of wisdom. My experience, which is not unusual, was a witness to the power and general importance of the *Ethics*. There were any number of other courses in economics, sociology, government, and religion in which I might have enrolled and encountered the *Ethics* yet again.

The *Ethics* seemed a text I personally could not escape. It fascinated me; I continued to admire it, while being intrigued by what I did *not* understand about it. I went on to study it carefully in various courses as a graduate student and eventually, almost against my intention, wrote a dissertation on it. I say "against my intention," because my plan was to write my thesis in systematic political philosophy – an argument, I conceived, for the importance of "civic friendship" in political society. But to do this, I had to study the notion of friendship, as a preliminary. And to study friendship, I needed to master the very best discussion of the subject, which happens to be found – wouldn't you know? – in books 8 and 9 of the *Ethics*. And that turned out to be the topic of my dissertation.

I suppose it is the definition of a fundamental text that it is preliminary: it is what one should ideally read and master before going on to study and think about other things. By this definition, Aristotle's *Ethics* counts as one of the most fundamental texts in Western thought. It lies at the root of moral philosophy, political

theory, behavioral science, and economics, besides being of pervasive and continued influence in literature and culture generally.

Not surprisingly, many books have been written about so fundamental a work. Why, then, am I offering yet another? The explanation is provided by my own experience. I have tried to write a book that would save a student today some of the labor I needed for reading and understanding the *Ethics*. My aim has been to formulate and then pass on something of what I have learned in grappling with the *Ethics* during these years. For instance, there is a particular art or skill of reading Aristotle, which involves being able to see that he is proposing an argument, in a sentence or passage, and then to reconstruct that argument for reflection and evaluation. The density and concentration of Aristotle's thought is difficult for a beginning student to appreciate, not least because hardly anyone else writes in this way; nearly every sentence plays a role in some argument or other, and every word plays a specific role in the sentence, as in a carefully crafted poem. I try to explain how Aristotle writes and give hints for recognizing arguments.

And then there are distinctive methods of analysis which Aristotle employs but which will be alien for us, because although these methods have analogues in ordinary language and commonsense, they are not explicitly formulated or directly relied upon in most systematic thought of the last several centuries, and they seem intractable by the usual methods of logical analysis. The most important of these are Aristotle's notions of "focal meaning," "analogy," "categories" of predication, and reduplicative predication. These are absolutely fundamental for understanding Aristotle, and yet readers whose education has led them to regard either classical mathematics or first-order logic as an adequate framework for reasoning – that is, nearly all of us – will find these notions obscure. We are tempted to pass over, dismiss, or change through reformulation precisely those claims of Aristotle that one must treat as central, if one is to understand his thought. My aim in this book, rather, has been to give special attention to these methods of analysis and the claims which make particular use of them.

It seems to me, too, that a student of Aristotle needs help in discerning what might be called the "high themes" of the *Ethics*. In this work the forest is sometimes just as difficult to see as the trees.

What are Aristotle's intentions? How does a particular difficulty appear to *him* (not to *us*)? Why exactly is he taking the approach that he does? What is the upshot of a particular series of arguments or claims? Aristotle does not mark his text with chapter headings. He rarely announces what he is attempting to show. Frequently, to understand a section of argument requires that we see that a particular presupposition is in place, motivating Aristotle's investigation. A beginning student could easily knock his or her head against the *Ethics* for hours on end and not make much progress in discovering such things. A chief aim of this book, then, has been to clarify as much as possible the proper context and relevant presuppositions of Aristotle's discussions.

On a related point, I should say that I reject, both for the purpose of this book, and as correct doctrine on Aristotle, the common view that the *Ethics* is a collection or cobbling together of separate treatises or discussions, lacking genuine unity. It seems clear to me that the most useful working hypothesis for a student is to presume that the *Ethics* possesses great integrity and is skillfully and intelligently arranged, because surely we will not discover what order the work actually has unless we persevere in looking for it. The error of attributing order when there is not any is not particularly harmful, although it can be philosophically fruitful; but the error of too quickly supposing discontinuities in the text can be harmful and is usually unfruitful. Throughout this book I aim to draw attention to some of the many connections and cross-references which, I believe, bind the *Ethics* together.

As regards passages in which there is no suspicion of disunity or editorial manipulation, it seems similarly the most useful working hypothesis to hold that Aristotle is saying something plausible, interesting, and possibly profound, even when all kinds of objections and difficulties present themselves. It has been said that the sign of a great philosopher is that "the smarter you get, the smarter he gets." Aristotle is certainly a great philosopher. Generally, then, interpretations which would present Aristotle as saying something uninteresting or ill-considered risk revealing more about the interpreter than about the text being interpreted. It is a relatively easy matter to raise problems about what Aristotle says; it is difficult, in contrast, to see how these might be resolved or settled. My approach, then, is

generally to take for granted that students will see difficulties and to presume that what they need particular assistance in, rather, is seeing how, in the face of these, Aristotle may nonetheless be saying something valuable.

Everyone who writes an introductory book in philosophy is aware that some delicate decisions need to be made about how much to bring in secondary literature, and about whether the standard views are to be considered, even when the writer regards such views as mistaken. These determinations, it seems to me, are relative to one's purposes. If one's goal is to prepare students, who already have a grounding in philosophy and some familiarity with the *Ethics*, for graduate study or future scholarly work, then it is quite necessary that they be introduced systematically to the best secondary literature, and that they know which views are the "standard" views, and which prominent alternative positions have been proposed. That a major scholar has put forward a view is reason enough to consider it, then, even if that view appears false.

But my goal in this book is in contrast relatively modest. It is simply to provide a clear, accessible, and comprehensive introduction to Aristotle's *Ethics* for a student with a minimal background in philosophy and ethics, and who will probably go on to do something other than academic work in philosophy. It has therefore seemed wise to keep to a minimum any explicit consideration of secondary literature (apart from the bibliographical notes that follow each chapter) and even in some cases, when this has served the purpose of the book, to give relatively slight attention to interpretations which have nonetheless been widely accepted among scholars.

My reluctance explicitly to discuss the scholarly literature should not be taken as a sign that I consider myself as somehow above or beyond reliance upon it. By no means is this true. At every step of my education I have relied upon the writings of scholars and commentators; I would be a fool and ungrateful not to regard myself as thoroughly indebted to the contributions of others. Moreover, and obviously, it would be self-defeating for someone who has himself contributed publications to the secondary literature – and is now putting forward a new work of scholarship – to depreciate work of that sort. Rather, I conceive of my approach as once again one of economy: I hope to save students some labor in the fields of

scholarship, although without doubt someone must do that work, if not students themselves, then others. And sometimes due respect for scholarship takes the form of, for the moment, passing over it.

Not that I always adequately recognize my indebtedness; in fact, I must confess an intellectual debt that has for a long time needed acknowledgment. When I wrote my Clarendon Aristotle volume on *Nicomachean Ethics*, books 8 and 9, now seven years ago, I thought of that as *not* a "dissertation book" – which was correct. And on those grounds, in something of an adolescent conceit of philosophical independence – which was not correct – I omitted acknowledgment in print of my dissertation supervisors, Sarah Broadie and John Rawls, who had contributed to the book indirectly through their help with the earlier dissertation. Broadie was my mentor; the very rare combination of analytic clarity and philosophical depth in her own work remains an ideal that I would be pleased to imitate. Rawls was an extraordinarily generous teacher and, as is now well known, a remarkable historian of philosophy, who taught me and other students by his own example how to read great philosophical texts with seriousness and integrity. To be able to acknowledge my gratitude to them is itself a cause of gratitude.

I am conscious that particular parts of this book have been shaped by discussions with Victor Caston, Patrick Corrigan, Anthony Price, and Stephen White. I owe a general intellectual debt to Jennifer Whiting, my teacher, and through her to Terence Irwin, in matters of interpreting the *Ethics*. My thought on the *Ethics* has otherwise been particularly shaped by the writings of David Bostock, John Cooper, Robert Heinaman, Richard Kraut, Gavin Lawrence, and Nicholas White. I am grateful as well to students at Clark University and Brown University, where much of the material of this book was first tested.

For financial assistance in completing this work I wish to thank the Higgins School of the Humanities at Clark University and the Earhart Foundation. The book was drafted during a sabbatical leave, generously provided by Clark University. When I needed a sabbatical from that sabbatical, I retreated to The Currier's House in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, where Nancy Lloyd, the Innkeeper and herself an author, provided much appreciated and refreshing hospitality, for which I am very grateful. I additionally thank Gisela Striker

for sponsoring my position as a Visiting Scholar at Harvard during that sabbatical year, and David Sedley for arranging a brief visit too in the Classics Faculty of Cambridge University.

I am much indebted to Hilary Gaskin at Cambridge University Press for her unflagging helpfulness and keen editorial insight. An anonymous press reader gave useful suggestions as regards the penultimate draft. Anthony Price generously read a large portion of the typescript and offered many perceptive comments. My son, Maximilian Pakaluk, to whom this book is dedicated, read carefully and discussed with me the entire typescript, to its great improvement.

Jay Delahanty's friendship proved an indispensable support in the final months of revision.

Above all I thank my dear wife, Catherine Ruth, for her devotion and life-bringing love, and for her willingness to see with me whether it isn't true after all that *amor con amor se paga*.