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978-1-107-13485-0 - Aristotle's Ethics and Medieval Philosophy: Moral Goodness and Practical Wisdom

Anthony J. Celano

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ARISTOTLE'S *ETHICS* AND MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* had a profound influence on generations of later philosophers, not only in the ancient era but also in the medieval period and beyond. In this book Anthony Celano explores how medieval authors recast Aristotle's *Ethics* according to their own moral ideals. He argues that the moral standard for the *Ethics* is a human one, which is based upon the ethical tradition and the best practices of a given society. In the Middle Ages this human standard was replaced by one that is universally applicable since its foundation is eternal immutable divine law. Celano resolves the conflicting accounts of happiness in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, demonstrates the importance of the virtue of phronesis (practical wisdom) and shows how the medieval view of moral reasoning alters Aristotle's concept of moral wisdom.

ANTHONY CELANO is Professor of Philosophy at Stonehill College, Massachusetts. He is the author of over forty scholarly articles on medieval and ancient philosophy and is a member of the Leonine Commission, which is responsible for critical Latin editions of the works of Thomas Aquinas.

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Preface

The topic of this study originated from my initial reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) more than thirty years ago. Perplexed by the two accounts of happiness in books I and X of Aristotle's work, I was unable to reconcile the idea that happiness consists in a mixture of intellectual and political activities with the notion that true happiness is constituted by intellectual contemplation alone. The scholarly attempts to explain the discrepancy proved unsatisfactory, since they assumed different dates of composition, interpolations of later editors or a development of the theory of happiness within the work itself. These explanations posited assumptions that were impossible to demonstrate and were often contradictory. The modern accounts of the two notions of happiness reflect the very same approaches that the medieval commentators used to explain Aristotle's concept of human goodness. Still the reader of Aristotle is left to wonder whether the Philosopher himself did not notice the different accounts of an essential moral idea that appeared in his most important work on moral philosophy.

In the course of the study of the text I came to the conclusions that Aristotle's primary moral concept was not that of happiness (*eudaimonia*) but one of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). In elevating *phronesis* to the central theme of the Ethics I was able to construct a way in which the contradictory nature of the text might be explained. I believe that while Aristotle certainly attempted to explain the meaning of human goodness, he had in fact constructed a text concerned primarily with the proper way to attain it, and that practical wisdom governs all activities of the soul that lead to moral and intellectual excellence. Despite Aristotle's clear assertion that the supreme virtue of the human soul is intellectual wisdom (*sophia*), the primary human, and hence moral, virtue is practical wisdom. In itself the uninterrupted contemplative activity of the intellect elevates human

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beings to a divine state in which the object and subject of the process of knowledge are united in the act of the intellect (*nous*). Human beings, however, are not purely intellectual beings like the gods, and regardless of their participation in the intellectual life they must arrange various pursuits properly in order to achieve the state that Aristotle calls happiness. Wisdom may be the supreme virtue, but practical wisdom regulates all human activity including theoretical pursuits in order that the practically wise person may recognize what is good and how best to attain it. In elevating *phronesis* to the most important virtue, Aristotle offers a human standard of conduct by which a life is measured against the practices of the best citizens, and rejects any universal moral imperatives that do not arise from human action.

In the first chapter of this work I examine various medieval and modern interpretations of some important concepts in Aristotle's moral philosophy. In Chapter 2 the meaning of happiness in Aristotle's Ethics, especially in light of its relation to the virtues of practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom, is considered. In Chapter 3 the works of William of Auxerre and Philip the Chancellor reveal a new understanding of moral principles in light of the ideas of natural law and *synderesis*, which is an innate habit by which universal moral commands are recognized. In Chapter 4 the partial commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* composed before 1248 provide a second stream of interpretation of Aristotle's text, in which the main intention of the authors is to explain carefully the meaning of Aristotle's words. The subsequent two chapters consider the contributions on the topic of Albertus Magnus, whose commentaries on Aristotle were the most influential instrument in directing the medieval understanding of ancient ethics. Albert's work influenced nearly all the later medieval expositors of Aristotle, even when his most famous student, Thomas Aquinas, disagreed with some of his teacher's conclusions on the meaning of happiness. Chapter 7 examines these theories of Thomas and those of Bonaventure, which have significant differences from the doctrines of their predecessors. The discussion on Thomas is relatively short because every aspect of his moral philosophy has provoked a great number of studies in the past century. In the questions considered here Thomas' influence is not quite so great as that of his former teacher.

In all these medieval commentaries a constant theme emerges, one that insists upon the idea of the eternal existence of immutable moral laws and the ability of all human beings to recognize them. In the acceptance of natural law and *synderesis* the medieval authors transform Aristotle's Ethics from one based upon a human standard into one that depends upon a divine foundation. In so doing they change the range of practical

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wisdom in that it no longer determines independently moral universals, but merely deduces logically correct means that follow from predetermined ends. The development of the concepts of happiness, natural law, prudence and virtue in two late thirteenth-century commentaries on the NE forms the greater part of Chapter 8. Two sets of questions on Aristotle's text, those of an anonymous author in a manuscript in Erfurt and those of Radulphus Brito, a Parisian Arts master, show how later medieval commentators were content to explain carefully the text and to determine Aristotle's intention. They generally avoided controversy and were greatly influenced by the work of their Dominican predecessors, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. Finally in the Conclusion I examine ideas concerning the transformation from Aristotle's morality of practical wisdom to the medieval acceptance of prudential reasoning from the eternal principles of action. Aristotle recognized the difficulty in defining practical wisdom but he did not leave us without guidance, since he advises us that the best way to understand practical wisdom is to identify those persons to whom we attribute it.

I would like to thank the Fulbright Program, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, the National Endowment for the Humanities and Stonehill College for their support of my research. I would like to express my gratitude to the faculty and staff of the departments of Philosophy and Catholic Theology, and of the Bibliotheca Amploniana and the University of Erfurt for their gracious hospitality and assistance during my several stays in their beautiful city. I am also very grateful to Doctor Hilary Gaskin of the Cambridge University Press for her helpful and insightful comments on my work.