

## Introduction

Aristotle's political philosophy determines much of the political thinking in the history of Western philosophy and politics. However, precisely how his theory on the nature of politics has mattered over the ages has varied a great deal. Even today, approaches to political theory by means of an Aristotelian perspective can differ from one another enormously. For obvious reasons, then, the present volume cannot pretend to offer an overall view of the whole fortune of Aristotle's political philosophy. Instead, we concentrate on two segments of this rich history of reflections, reconstructions and interpretations: the ancient beginnings and the modern developments.

Again, the essays dealing with the ancient beginnings cannot attempt to cover every aspects of this theory. They pick up certain moments which seem to be important for later interpretations as well. As is well known, on Aristotle's account ethics and politics constitute what is called practical philosophy. Among others, it implies that ethics provides certain basic theses and starting points for political theory.

One of the most important Aristotelian ethical theses is the so-called function argument (*Nicomachean Ethics* I 7). Its aim is to show that human good is tied to the excellent exercise of the proper function of man, and the function of a human being is an activity of the human soul in accordance with reason. Jakub Jirsa shows that the argument can be used to settle an important question about the relation between theoretical and practical life, which intrigued so many interpreters of Aristotle's ethical theory. He thinks that the argument offers a good ground for interpreting human happiness as *theória* and that the argumentation is coherent with the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as well. If we think with Aristotle that excellence is a fine activity of human soul according to reason, then we also have to admit that excellent human praxis also involves the activity of a kind of reason, which Aristotle calls *phronesis*, practical insight.

As a specifically human activity, politics also has to make room for the exercise of practical insight. Is there any difference between ethical and political *phronesis*?

sis? Péter Lautner argues that in the account of *phronesis* in the *Politics* Aristotle is willing to distinguish between the two cognitive states; statesmen possess practical insight in the full sense because they know not only the facts but also the reasons (a distinction taken from *Posterior Analytics*), whereas ordinary citizens are familiar with the facts only. Thus statesmen are endowed with a cognitive element which explains and justifies their leading position in the state.

The aftermath of Aristotle's theory in Hellenistic times has been a subject of highly diverse approaches. To take but one sample, from Petrarch's times onwards it was a kind of common opinion that Cicero deviated from Aristotle's political philosophy a great deal. Walter Nicgorski shows that this claim should not be taken for granted. On careful examination, he shows that the tension between Cicero and Aristotle in matters of politics is much less than has been assumed hitherto. Cicero can be usefully read as an illuminating commentator on and extender of the practical philosophy of Aristotle and his school. Theophrastus offers a nice example of his reading of the practical philosophy of the Peripatetics. In his distinctive way and in the context of the late Roman Republic, Cicero has appropriated and represented the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy in a number of respects.

Certainly, ways to make use of the legacy of Aristotelian political theory – itself a mixed package – may vary depending on context, political biases, philosophical presuppositions and many other accidentals. This selection of the reception tries to show the relevance of similarities as well as dissimilarities within the broad Aristotelian tradition, mainly in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and politics.

But the first author in this section, Iwona Barwicka-Tylek needs a deeper historical excavation when she tries to show the basic elements of a continuous Aristotelian line within the Polish tradition of political thought. Her argument is interesting both methodologically – as she relies on Richard Dawkins's concept of *memes* when describing the nature of receiving Aristotelian ideas by later generations in different political cultures – and substantially, when she claims that the Polish tradition on the whole takes for granted Aristotelian ideas, like *zōon politikon*, *politeia* and virtue.

Next, we have three papers that are closely linked together by common interests of the thinkers discussed in them, concerning themes, authors and traditions. They have returning heroes of a Neo-Aristotelian inclination like Maritain or MacIntyre, religiously minded thinkers who still use Aristotle for their reflections, and secular Aristotelian thinkers, who – sometimes surprisingly – use their reading of Aristotle for their own purposes – including Yves Simon and Martha Nussbaum, respectively.

Kelvin Knight is interested in the differences between his cherished author, Alasdair MacIntyre's Aristotelian vein and Maritain's earlier and rather differently motivated appropriation of Aristotle – as far as their views on human rights are concerned. The approach used by Knight is contextually informed, and most surprisingly compares the early MacIntyre with such analytical thinkers, as the young Rawls and Searle. Knight finishes his paper with considerations of the new phenomenon of the institutionalisation of human rights, as it relates to the Aristotelian legacy.

Balázs Mezei also uses Maritain as his reference point in an introduction of some Aristotelian remnants in Yves Simon's philosophy. While Mezei's analysis is already thought provoking when he gives a revisionist re-evaluation of Simon, it is the more interesting as he shows the relevance of the different layers of reception within the Aristotelian tradition: Simon read his Aristotle both directly and indirectly, through – and in dialogue with – the Aristotle interpretation by Maritain. While Knight focuses on the issue of human rights, Mezei discusses the problem of democracy, as it was laid out by Simon in his philosophy deeply touched by Neo-Aristotelianism.

Another author who takes account of rather diverging interpretations of Aristotle in her paper is Catherine Zuckert, who looks at contemporary political interpreters' views of how to foster Aristotelian virtue politics in a modern liberal democracy. She does not find some of the answers provided by such diverse thinkers, as those of Nussbaum, MacIntyre, den Uyl and Rasmussen satisfactory. She points out that the common mistake of these different authors is a disregard of the educational activity "in which they, like Aristotle, are engaged."

Finally, Ferenc Hörcher aims at rethinking some of the basic components of an Oakeshott-like conservative political theory – while reflecting on the inner tension within the heart of this very effort – through a reliance on some Aristotelian concepts. He recovers a close conceptual connection between *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *kairos* (the right time for action) in connection with the political agent. He claims that the time constraint inherent in political activity makes virtues (excellences that can be mobilised in crisis situations without a time-consuming process of deliberation) and practices (common practical knowledge within a political community) seem necessary within a conservative political horizon.

Taken together, these essays represent an effort to recapture Aristotelian political thought in a contemporary philosophical context by a group of authors, coming from rather different backgrounds (classical studies, philosophy, political theory), but sharing an interest in Aristotle's ideas; thus, they prove both the wide horizon and continuing relevance of the legacy of Aristotelian political theory.

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