

Action, Contemplation, and Happiness: An Essay on Aristotle. By C. D. C. Reeve. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. xiv + 299. \$49.95 (hardback) ISBN 978-0674063730.

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Action, Contemplation, and Happiness (hereafter *ACH*) is a magisterial exposition of both central and obscure texts from throughout Aristotle's writings which aims to elucidate the terms in its title by showing their foundations in Aristotle's natural and metaphysical writings. Reeve assembles supportive texts from throughout the corpus in support of an interpretive holism, viz. one in which the various interpretations of an Aristotle text are narrowed by drawing upon other texts in the corpus which shed light on the passage. Although holism is not necessarily inconsistent with developmental readings of Aristotle, Reeve at least initially claims that the texts he is concerned with provide little evidence of development. Reeve's current volume draws upon his previous books, *Substantial Knowledge* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), a holistic study of the problem of primary substance in the *Metaphysics*, and his *Practices of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1992), a study of the epistemological bases of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But *ACH* aims at reworking the various texts and Reeve's previous treatments of them, with occasional reference to the landmark works of scholarship that have influenced his interpretation along the way ('recording such...as I can remember' [ix]).

The investigation in *ACH* begins with the problem of the transmission of form since desire, perception, and understanding—which control action, contemplation and truth—involve such transmissions. The first two chapters thus take up the epistemological and

metaphysical foundations of *ACH*. Chapters III-V examine theoretical wisdom, ethical character, and practical wisdom—the aretic bases, as it were, of action and contemplation. Finally, the last three chapters take up the nature of happiness. Chapter VI explores the metaphysical and epistemological bases of happiness—ranging over discussions of humans as substances, the nature of god, and the possibility of human immortality. Chapter VII then takes up the nature of the activity of happiness and Chapter VIII takes up its institutional or political setting in the *Politics*.

The first two chapters present different perspectives on the same phenomena, namely how it is that perception, understanding, and desire relate to action and truth (a claim enigmatically made at *EN* VI.2.1139a17-18). Whereas chapter I examines the underlying material or perhaps metaphysical bases of how form is transmitted from the world to us (for instance, in perception and understanding) or from us to the world (in desire and action), chapter II looks at the phenomenon from the side of the various psychological faculties which participate in such transmissions. In the former case, Reeve's analysis ranges over objects as tiny as human embryos to as large as the celestial cosmos in order to understand how understanding (viz. a psychological faculty unique in that it lacks a sublunary bodily correlate) takes in or cognizes its intelligible object. In the later case, Reeve offers a chapter-length reconstruction (based on the natural scientific writings, especially *De Anima* and *De Sensu*) of the nature of perception, understanding, and desire so as to elucidate the claim of VI.2 that they are the three things in the soul concerned with action and truth. The analysis of desire focuses on the problem of locating 'wish' as a rational desire; the analysis of perception focuses on how perception can originate desire and control truth; and the analysis of understanding

tries to bridge the gap between the accounts of understanding in the theoretical works and its relationship to practical understanding as a part of deliberation. In all three instances, the analyses rely very heavily—sometimes almost entirely—on passages from *De Anima*. A presupposition of Reeve's holism is that the psychology of the natural science works undergirds that of the political and ethical works.

Chapters III-V ground Reeve's analysis of action and contemplation by devoting individual chapters to theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), ethical virtue, and practical wisdom (*phronêsis*). The treatment of theoretical wisdom follows the model of the two previous chapters: although the analysis starts with a claim from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (viz., the definition of wisdom as science and understanding of the highest objects [EN VI.7.1141a18-20]), the remainder of the chapter ranges over the issue of 'starting points' (*archai*), the nature of truth, valid forms of syllogism, and the four forms of causal explanation, drawing heavily from the *Organon* and the *Metaphysics*. Building upon a central claim of *Practices of Reason*, Reeve articulates a notion of unconditional scientific knowledge concerning that which can be otherwise which he will make use of in his construal of practical wisdom. By contrast with the first three chapters of *ACH*, the chapter devoted to ethical virtue largely delimits its holistic treatment to passages derived from the ethical/political writings. Although Reeve enters into brief discussions of the fine and external goods, the majority of the chapter is devoted to Aristotle's doctrine of the mean and his claim that action is especially concerned with pleasure and pain. Although obviously the doctrine of the mean is a central component of Aristotle's account of ethical virtue, Reeve's focus upon it seems driven by the explanatory role he thinks

the account plays—something which anticipates his narrowing of the gap between theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom.

ACH's chapter V concerning practical wisdom—a chapter more than twice as long as most of the other chapters in the book—presents one of the most robust analyses in the book. The internal progression of the argument within the chapter is less than transparent. The chapter begins with remarks about the intelligibility of right reason to unethical persons, and then ranges over the topics of the *skopos* ('target') and *horos* ('defining mark') of practical reason, the difference between action and production, the difference between particulars and universals, the various branches of practical wisdom, the question whether practical reason is scientific, several subsections concerning deliberation, and a closing section on whether Aristotle is a particularist. The analyses of each sub-topic is clear and thoughtful, but the sub-topics are not mapped onto any explicit textual progressions (as one would find in a commentary on *EN*) nor are they marked with transitional landmarks to let the reader see the internal structure of the chapter. My suspicion, based in part on my familiarity with Reeve's earlier *Practices of Reason*, is that the first third of the chapter (the discussion of target and defining mark) connect practical reason to the doctrine of the mean, the middle third of the chapter establishes the quasi-scientific nature of practical wisdom, and the last third of the chapter specifies the ramifications for such a view of practical wisdom with respect to the limits of deliberation (for instance, concerning the nature of the practical syllogism or the place of understanding in practical wisdom). But all of these are complicated and controverted aspects in Aristotle's account, and a simple road-map of the chapter would have been most welcome (a situation reminiscent of not a few of Aristotle's own chapters).

Chapters VI-VII mark a break in the book and turn to the articulation of Aristotle's account of happiness. Chapter VI, entitled 'Immortalizing Beings,' lays down what Reeve takes as the metaphysical basis for Aristotle's remark in *EN* X.7 that 'we should as far as possible *athanatizein*, and do everything to live in accord with the constituent in us that has most control' (1177b32-34, Reeve trans.). The first part of the chapter takes up the question of the nature of primary substance in the *Metaphysics* and *Categories* to address Aristotle's repeated claims that there is a part of humans—the 'constituent in us' mentioned above, namely disembodied understanding—that is substantial even if it is not the sort of substance described in the *Categories*. Reeve identifies that part as what *De Anima* III.5 calls 'productive nous' and examines its relationship to the divine nous described in *Metaphysics* Lambda. Such exegesis lays the ground for the ways in which humans are described as 'literally immortalizing of ourselves as something we can intelligibly do by theologizing' (Reeve's gloss on *athanatizein*, 213) in *EN* X.7, being loved by the gods in X.8, or partaking in immortality through contemplative friendship in *EN* IX.4 and IX.9.

The penultimate chapter endorses the claim that Aristotle's notion of the highest good in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is an exclusive rather than inclusive good. Chapter VII surveys alternative ways to render the term *eudaimonia*, the debate between Kraut and Ackrill over the interpretation of *EN* I.1-2 concerning whether the highest good is inclusive or exclusive (Reeve offers essentially a running commentary on the text), criteria for the highest good in *EN* I.7, and the human function argument (which Reeve illuminates by means of substantial passages from the *Protrepticus*). In the closing pages of the chapter, Reeve's holism begins to fray: As others such as Anthony Kenny have argued, the *Eudemian Ethics* rather clearly articulates an inclusivist

notion of the highest good. Reeve acknowledges that the criterion of *teleion* in *EE* picks out a notion of 'wholeness' that supports an inclusivist notion of the good, but in *EN* it picks out a notion of telic completeness that supports an exclusivist notion of the good. Reeve fails to identify developmental or audience-related reasons for the difference between *EE/MM* and *EN*; but if the three ethical treatises differ on one of the most basic problems of ethics, viz. the nature of the human good, then it seems incautious to draw upon *EE/MM* texts to illuminate *EN* problem texts. At the least, one needs to provide a more explicitly comparative approach which is sensitive to the apparently different contexts of the various treatises.

Reeve concludes *ACH* with a chapter on the institutional aspects of the happy life, namely the place of happiness and the conditions for its establishment in Aristotle's *Politics* (especially in *Politics* VII and VIII). *Politics* VII.2 claims that the best constitution is that order according to which anyone whatsoever would act most excellently and live blessedly (1324a23-25). But if happiness consists in contemplation, then the political community must prepare all of its citizens to contemplate through a system of education. Such a predicament poses a dilemma for interpreters: does Aristotle expect all citizens to contemplate at the level of rigor which characterizes philosophy or does he water down contemplation or philosophy in such a way that it would be accessible to the general citizenry? Reeve surveys the different senses of the term *philosophia* throughout the corpus to show that although Aristotle possessed a notion of philosophy as a specialized and rigorous science, he also holds out a notion of *philosophia* as a general science which is available to the liberally educated person and which allows its practitioners to possess and understand the fundamental, indemonstrable, and trans-categorical first principles (*archai*) of the specialized sciences (for instance, like the law of non-

contradiction). Once again, Reeve illuminates familiar texts in the *Politics* and *Ethics* with less familiar (at least to those laboring over the practical works) texts in the *Metaphysics*, *Parts of Animals*, and the *Organon*.

Reeve has translated and assembled a broad array of texts to illuminate obscure but central passages in Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*. It seems churlish to quibble over the interpretation of particular passages. Nonetheless, I do have my reservations about Reeve's holistic approach to the corpus. As noted above, Reeve both draws upon different ethical treatises (*EE*, *MM*, the *Protrepticus*) to illuminate the *Nicomachean Ethics* and notes the major inconsistencies between those treatises concerning the highest good. Although I sympathize with Reeve's disavowal of developmental approaches to such inconsistencies, there remain irresolvably inconsistent treatments in the ethical corpus (for instance, concerning natural justice in *EN* V.7 vs. *MM* I.33 or concerning god as a model for self-sufficiency in *EN* X.7 vs. *EE* VII.12/*MM* II.15). Holism as an interpretive method has no recourse in these instances. But more broadly, holism runs afoul of what might be called the methodological autonomy of Aristotle's practical philosophy. Throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle acknowledges as an alternative to his accounts those of the *phusikoi*, viz. the natural philosophers whom today we call the 'pre-Socratics' (see, for instance, *EN* VII.3.1147a24, VIII.1.1155b8-9, IX.1170a13). Perhaps the clearest instance of practical 'autonomy' concerns the account of soul-division in *EN* I.13, one which is the basis for the analyses of the virtues in *EN* II-VI (and beyond). Aristotle explicitly characterizes his account of the soul in *EN* as one germane to the *politikos*; it is also unclear whether that account is consistent with the criticisms of soul division made in *De Anima* (see *EN* I.13.1102a7-15; cf. *DA* I.4.411a30-b5, III.9.432a22-433a8). Although the *Ethics* shares

the conceptual resources of Aristotle's scientific works, it seems an overstatement to view the *Ethics* as based in Aristotle's natural science. Both within the *Ethics* and elsewhere in his writings Aristotle distinguishes the practical science of ethics, which is concerned with action or doing, from the contemplative sciences of metaphysics and physics, which are concerned with knowledge for its own sake. Reeve's holism tends to narrow that distinction, making practical science a form of explanatory science. Reeve's holism may involve far deeper and more controversial presuppositions than he acknowledges.

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