

BOOK REVIEW

Aristotle's Teaching in the Politics. By THOMAS L. PANGLE. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013. Pp. 343. Hardcover, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-226-01603-0.

At first glance, Aristotle's *Politics* is a repository of dry, professorial lecture notes. Although the work contains the occasional literary reference or historical digression, analysis, argumentation, and socio-political taxonomies predominate. Beneath the surface of such prose, Pangle locates an Aristotle who seeks to involve the reader in dialogical exchange—much like as in a Platonic dialogue—by means of dialectical, rhetorical and literary devices.

Pangle—a student of the political theorist Leo Strauss, a translator of Plato, Aristophanes and Sophocles, and the author of books on modern political theorists such as Montesquieu, Locke, and the *Federalist Papers*—has written a study of the *Politics* informed not only by a close reading of the text, but also its relationship to modern republicanism, and the conflict between rationalism and religion. A previously published introduction presents what Pangle takes to be Aristotle's rhetorical strategy in the *Politics*; it is followed by chapters organized around individual books in the *Politics* (a chapter each for *Politics* I, II, and III, and consolidated chapters for *Politics* IV-VI and VII-VIII—the last of which had been previously published in part).

The text is followed by almost 50 pages of notes, in which Aquinas is cited as frequently (and sometimes more frequently) than contemporary Aristotle scholars like P. Simpson, R. Kraut, and E. Schütrumpf and al-Farabi is cited more frequently than F. Miller (although by far the most frequently cited authorities are the 19th century scholars F. Susemihl, R.D. Hicks, and above all, W. Newman). The book is clearly a mature work of scholarship, informed by extended reflection on Aristotle's *Politics* and the subsequent western tradition of political theory and philological commentary which has responded to it.

The strategy which Pangle attributes to Aristotle is grounded in the discussion of intended audience in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.3–4, and consists in the claim that Aristotle “has constructed his text in such a way that—if the puzzles he has placed on the surface are taken seriously and then wrestled with, in good-

humored doggedness, so that we become his partners in the dialogue that Aristotle means to draw us into—we are put on a trail that leads...to an eventually purified knowledge of the nature of politics as shaped by the aspiration to virtue” (3). Such a hermeneutical approach seizes upon textual contradictions, real and apparent *aporiai* within the text, ironic literary citations which depart from the original context and meaning of the quotation, surprising silences, and humor as Aristotle’s way of provoking thought in his more astute or hard-working readers.

Examples of such an approach proliferate throughout Pangle’s book, but one that seems to combine a number of features is his treatment of the constitution of Crete (analyzed in *Politics* II.10). *Politics* II examines those regimes thought to be best and it includes critical commentary on the constitutions of Sparta and Crete, the latter being an older and less refined or finished version of the former. Why study Crete and Sparta? According to Pangle, “the veneration of Crete and Sparta rests above all on these regimes having the strongest claims to being the products of lawgivers who were guided by kindred *divine revelations*, from the most authoritative deities” (86, italics in the original). Minos—the founder of Crete—purportedly received the constitution he promulgated directly from Zeus, and Lycurgus purportedly studied lawgiving at Crete. But Pangle calls “deafening” Aristotle’s silence about the religious origins of the Spartan and Cretan constitutions and appears to identify his silence as part of Aristotle’s general political rationalism, viz. his displacement of traditional Greek polytheism with a deistic god personified as nature.

But further, Aristotle’s withering criticisms of the Cretan constitution (in effect, he dismisses Crete as a dynasty whose periodic outbreaks of faction call into question whether it even has a *politeia* [2.10.1272b1-11] are not for Pangle refutations of divinely revealed law; rather—citing Christian scripture (1 Corinthians 1:25–27: “the foolishness of God is wiser than men”)—he claims that “proving the lack of wisdom of Cretan law may only prepare us to appreciate the wisdom of another, perhaps more recent, revealed law” (87). For Pangle, Aristotle appears to be a proponent of a kind of “natural law”—perhaps a law comprehensible only within the framework of the eternal law (see 5–6 with 270 note 9). But it is hard to see how such an *argumentum e silentio* in *Politics* II.10 can establish such a claim.

Pangle’s treatment of Crete is by no means a major claim of his book; but it highlights the way that his analysis of literary devices in Aristotle’s text are meant to problematize what Aristotle does say (or even what he remains silent about). The passage also brings out an element of Pangle’s treatment not often found in

contemporary scholarship on the *Politics*, namely the extent to which Aristotle's treatment of political subjects is in fact motivated by a sort of rationalism which is sensitive to albeit critical of ordinary religious beliefs (both in Aristotle's time, and I suspect—Pangle would hope—in our own times). I found much to disagree with in Pangle's book, but also much which challenged me to look at the *Politics* in a light almost entirely unlike that which shines from contemporary Aristotle scholarship. Even if Aristotle may not always be the teacher Pangle claims he is—using clever rhetoric to provoke thought in his readers—Pangle himself often is.

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