

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 1992

Volume 19 Number 3

- 225 John Ray *The Education of Cyrus as Xenophon's "Statesman"*
- 243 Theodore A. Sumberg *Belfagor: Machiavelli's Short Story*
- 251 Robert Horwitz
Edited by
Michael Zuckert *John Locke's Questions Concerning the Law of Nature: A Commentary*
- 307 John H. Herz *Looking at Carl Schmitt from the Vantage Point of the 1990s*
- Book Reviews*
- 315 Aristide Tessitore *Aristotle on the Human Good*, by Richard Kraut
- 319 Will Morrisey *Liberal Democracy and Political Science*, by James W. Ceaser

Interpretation

- Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin
- General Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth • Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987) • Howard B. White (d. 1974)
- Consulting Editors Christopher Bruell • Joseph Cropsey • Ernest L. Fortin • John Hallowell (d. 1991) • Harry V. Jaffa • David Lowenthal • Muhsin Mahdi • Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) • Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Kenneth W. Thompson
- European Editors Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
- Editors Wayne Ambler • Maurice Auerbach • Fred Baumann • Michael Blaustein • Mark Blitz • Patrick Coby • Christopher A. Colmo • Edward J. Erler • Maureen Feder-Marcus • Pamela K. Jensen • Ken Masugi • Grant B. Mindle • James W. Morris • Will Morrisey • Aryeh L. Motzkin • Gerald Proietti • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G. Rubin • Bradford P. Wilson • Hossein Ziai • Michael Zuckert • Catherine Zuckert
- Manuscript Editor Lucia B. Prochnow
- Subscriptions Subscription rates: see last page
Single copies available

CONTRIBUTORS should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th ed. or manuals based on it; double-space their manuscripts; place references in the text, in endnotes or follow current journal style in printing references. To ensure impartial judgment of their manuscripts, contributors should omit mention of their other work; put, on the title page only, their name, any affiliation desired, address with postal/zip code in full, and telephone. Please send THREE clear copies.

Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,
Binghamton, N.Y. 13905
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603

Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

Book Reviews

Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). 379 pp., \$37.50.

ARISTIDE TESSITORE
Assumption College

Richard Kraut's *Aristotle on the Human Good* is an ambitious book. Kraut takes issue with two influential interpretations of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: (1) The "intellectualist" view of Cooper and Nussbaum, which takes its bearings from the concluding book of the *Ethics*, maintains that happiness consists in contemplative activity *simpliciter* and that happiness has no intrinsic or necessary connection to the practice of moral virtue. (2) The "inclusivist" position of Ackrill and Hardie is grounded in Aristotle's argument in Book 1 and asserts that happiness consists in a composite of different goods, only one of which is contemplation. Participants on both sides of the divide agree in questioning the consistency of Aristotle's teaching in the *Ethics* as a whole. Kraut's book seeks to settle this longstanding debate about Aristotle's teaching on human happiness.

Kraut maintains that the *Ethics* is free of internal conflict in its teaching about the human good. He explains that Aristotle offers "two good ways of answering the question, 'What is happiness?'" (p. 5). The best answer is that happiness consists in the virtuous activity of theoretical reason (*theōria*). The second best answer is that happiness consists in virtuous practical activity (*ethikē*), the exercise of virtues such as courage, magnanimity, and justice. The conflict between these two answers is only apparent. On the one hand, the philosophic life presupposes the development and practice of the ethical virtues (p. 6, see chaps. 3–4) and, on the other, Aristotle "intellectualizes" practical virtues, regarding them as "approximations of the theoretical virtues" (p. 7, see chap. 6). In both cases, the proper function of human beings is to use reason well. The common core which unites Aristotle's twofold teaching is that human happiness consists *solely* in excellent reasoning activity (pp. 7, 324). This provides the single standard by which the whole range of human actions is to be evaluated. All other goods are or should be desirable only as means to this end; they possess "no direct weight at all in determining how close a person is to happiness or misery" (p. 261).

Kraut is especially concerned to take on Ackrill's inclusivist interpretation of Aristotle's ethical teaching because of its influence on the current generation of scholars (pp. 210–311). Ackrill argues that happiness is a composite of all

goods desirable in themselves and that this all-inclusive good is better than any one of its components no matter how valuable that component may be. The problem with this view, as Kraut sees it, is that either it waters down Aristotle's insistence that happiness be *identified* with virtuous activity and particularly the virtuous activity of reason, or it requires one to conclude that Aristotle's apparently inclusivist argument in Book 1 cannot be reconciled with his identification of happiness and contemplation in Book 10.

Against the first consequence of Ackrill's position, Kraut argues that Aristotle consistently maintains the absolute priority of the intellectual life. Although a life devoted to theory requires other goods as well (e.g., ethical virtue, friends, financial resources, etc.), and although it may sometimes be appropriate to cut back on one's theoretical activity for the sake of others, the fully happy person is one who engages in the best activity of contemplation. Kraut writes, "His formula, as I understand it, is that the more contemplation, the better one's life; there is no such thing as a human being who has studied philosophy too much for his own good" (p. 27). Kraut returns often, and in a way that preserves the sharp edge of Aristotle's teaching, to the priority which he assigns to intellectual virtue. For those not in a position to philosophize, it is still possible to develop intellectual excellence through the practice of moral virtue. Indeed, Kraut argues that the ethically virtuous person is sometimes made by Aristotle to sound like a philosopher, devoting himself to the activity of practical reasoning in a way that parallels a philosopher's devotion to contemplation (p. 325).

With respect to the second consequence of Ackrill's position, the apparent discrepancy between Books 1 and 10, Kraut provides a razor-sharp analysis of Aristotle's use of the "for the sake of" relation in these books (pp. 200–210) and a helpful distinction between imperfect, perfect, and most perfect virtue (pp. 237–51). In this part of the book, Kraut weaves together a careful critique of Ackrill's inclusivist position with a passage-by-passage elucidation of an alternative reading which preserves the unity of Aristotle's argument as a whole.

Kraut's thesis is immediately appealing both because it attempts to preserve the internal coherence of the *Ethics* and, in its resistance to an easier inclusivist interpretation, it is more faithful to a literal reading of the text. The plausibility of Kraut's thesis gains considerably by the painstaking care with which he presents rival interpretations and seeks to adjudicate differences by appealing to the text. If Kraut's general argument is at times in danger of being overwhelmed by detailed exegeses of particular passages, this textual scrutiny, together with his exemplary effort to give alternative readings their due, is also a great strength of the book. Kraut's writing is characterized by clarity and precision throughout.

If Kraut's approach to the *Ethics* is in many ways refreshingly sensible, it is not completely devoid of problems. An initial weakness is that he is insufficiently sensitive to the particular way in which Aristotle develops his teachings, especially in his political writings. Aristotle often only gradually discloses his

meaning through successive arguments, each of which qualifies what has preceded it. The “organic character” of Aristotle’s argument in the *Ethics* has been noted by other scholars (e.g., Strauss, Jaffa, Faulkner) and requires attentiveness both to the immediate context within which an argument appears and to the particular place which an argument occupies within the succession of arguments that comprise the whole. Kraut tends to underestimate the importance of this dimension of the *Ethics*; he easily lifts passages out of their context, as if they were simply detachable from their position in the book as a whole. In doing so, he abstracts from the pedagogical effect which the particular order of argument might be expected to have on readers, and sometimes mistakenly identifies one stage of an argument with Aristotle’s own position.

An example of the former problem can be seen in the way Kraut moves back and forth between Book 1, Chapters 5 and 7, and Book 10, Chapters 7–8. In the course of his argument, he gives little weight to the specific position which these passages occupy at the beginning and end of Aristotle’s study. Kraut does acknowledge the incomplete but foundational character of Aristotle’s argument in Book 1 (pp. 3, 323), but this does not prevent him from beginning his study with Aristotle’s conclusion in Book 10 (chap. 1) and then working back to Aristotle’s “foundational” argument in Book 1 (chap. 6). Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this procedure, it is symptomatic of Kraut’s tendency to neglect an important pedagogical feature of the book, that is, Aristotle’s gradual effort to educate the ethical sensibilities of his readers.

A more serious consequence of this approach is that it sometimes leads Kraut to misrepresent Aristotle’s view by tying it too closely to one stage of his argument. This problem is exemplified in the use Kraut makes of passages from the *Politics* to support his thesis, in itself sensible, that Aristotle cannot properly be regarded as an “egoist” in the modern sense of the term. Kraut cites Aristotle’s arguments about justifiable ostracism (*Pol.* 3, 13) and sharing rule in the best regime (*Pol.* 7, 14) to counter the charge that Aristotle is an egoist (pp. 90–103). On the basis of these passages Kraut concludes that Aristotle teaches both the possibility of conflicting goods (and is therefore not a “benign egoist”) and the priority of the common political good over the good of any particular individual (not a “combative” or “pure egoist” either).

Although these claims surely reflect part of Aristotle’s teaching, a more adequate understanding of his argument in the *Politics* reveals that he was also aware of the problematic character of these teachings. Aristotle’s teaching about justifiable ostracism in Book 3, Chapter 13 must be taken together with his teaching on kingship in Book 3, Chapters 13–17. This latter teaching culminates in the argument that the one truly superior individual takes priority over the common political good, insofar as the political good is understood to involve some kind of shared rule (*Pol.* 1284b25–34; 1288a15–29). (Kraut does allow Aristotle’s treatment of kingship to influence his view of ostracism [nn. 19, 20, 23], but he does not give it the full weight that it warrants.) Similarly, Aristotle begins his discussion of shared rule in the best regime by pointing to

the flawed character of any investigation of the best regime which has not first answered the question about the most choiceworthy life (1323a14–17). The consideration which follows takes up precisely this question and, as such, constitutes a lengthy preface (7, 1–3) to Aristotle's teaching on the best regime (7, 4 ff.). What is most striking about Aristotle's consideration of the most choiceworthy life in the present context is that he leaves the question *unresolved*. Nevertheless, Aristotle devotes the remainder of his study to an outline of the best regime, one that recommends the rotation of offices among equals.

Aristotle does acknowledge the possibility of justifiable ostracism, and he does argue for an equal sharing of power. However, the contexts within which these arguments arise reveal that these assertions cannot be identified in an unqualified way with Aristotle's own view. Kraut's use of these passages, among others, inadvertently narrows the scope of Aristotle's teaching about political justice. Kraut restricts Aristotle's teaching to one particular understanding of justice, one that favors equality (see also pp. 98–99). A fuller appreciation of Aristotle's argument suggests that he is bringing to light the essentially problematic character of all understandings of political justice (especially in Book 3) and then, without retracting this radical perspective, offering in the books that follow some practical guidance for those who are primarily responsible for the welfare of the city.

A second and briefer criticism concerns one of the strengths of Kraut's book. His attempt to reconcile Aristotle's teaching on moral and intellectual virtue may go further than Aristotle himself. That Aristotle seeks to harmonize ethical and theoretical virtue and that he places theoretical virtue at the top of this hierarchy is indisputable. But this teaching does not require, nor does Aristotle insist, that moral and intellectual excellence are in every respect reconcilable. Indeed, Aristotle's text reflects an awareness of the problematic character of the relationship between intellectual and moral excellence while, at the same time, it makes the best possible case for their compatibility. Kraut's attempt to dissolve this tension seems to impose a greater precision on the study of ethics than Aristotle would accept (cf. 1094b12–27).

Despite these problems, *Aristotle on the Human Good* marshals considerable scholarly vigor in support of a sensible and appealing interpretation of the *Ethics*. Indeed, neither my summary nor criticisms do full justice to the intricate and nuanced character of Kraut's writing. His study contains many particular discussions which are insightful. In addition to those already mentioned, I would call attention to his treatment of the kinship between moral and intellectual virtue (pp. 55–62), the "real self" (pp. 128–31), the relationship between philosophy and friendship (pp. 170–75), the uselessness of contemplation (pp. 192–96), and the defense of practical virtue (pp. 322–34). More significantly, Kraut's book draws our attention to important, perhaps the most important, issues. It has the further merit of requiring the reader to return in a serious and rigorous way to the text itself. As such, Kraut's book is bound to have an influence; it both merits and rewards serious study.