

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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## Book Reviews

*A Companion to Aristotle's "Politics,"* edited by David Keyt and Fred D. Miller, Jr. (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1991), xiv + 407 pp., \$59.95 cloth, \$26.95 paper.

LESLIE G. RUBIN

*Society for Greek Political Thought*

A spate of interesting books on Aristotle's political views has recently appeared. Among the early contributions to this renaissance is Keyt and Miller's collection, *A Companion to Aristotle's "Politics."* While one might have expected from a "companion" a series of essays meant to produce a general interpretation of the *Politics*, this collection concentrates on a few selected issues. While serving the reader as a guide through some of the intricacies of these key questions, the book is a "companion" to the *Politics* also in the sense of being a friend to Aristotle's work. A number of the essays set out to defend Aristotle against various contemporary critics. This aspect of Keyt and Miller's project puts its articles in the forefront of this surge in Aristotle scholarship, much of which re-establishes Aristotle's political science or political philosophy as appropriately scientific or genuinely philosophical.

Many of the authors in the *Companion* attempt to rescue Aristotle from various common misinterpretations, e.g., the excesses of Jaeger and his followers (Rowe); reading the *Politics* as separate from the *Ethics* (Rowe and Adkins); judging Aristotle's economics as if he should have anticipated and agreed with Schumpeter or Marx (Meikle); or the breathtaking assumptions either that Aristotle has not read Plato's *Republic* (Stalley and Irwin) or that he is not familiar with the principle of noncontradiction (Miller). They may then go on, as is fair, to present criticisms of or to find difficulties in Aristotle's views (Adkins, Irwin, inter alia), but they generally take the time to show that he was more astute in political observation and more adept at logical argument than the mainstream of his twentieth-century interpreters has admitted. T. H. Irwin and David Keyt, for example, do Aristotle the additional honor of pitting his points against most worthy opponents, i.e., Plato and Hobbes.

The papers' titles do not always reveal the connections among their subjects, but they do exist. After whetting the appetite with an overview of the *Politics* via A. C. Bradley's classic essay of 1880, the collection digs into a few key topics. Though Bradley's concern to show both the similarities and differences between Aristotelean and Hegelian (organismic) political analysis is not taken

up by the others, his attention to the naturalness of the *polis* and the meaning of practicing a “science” of politics creates a context for many of the articles to come. The natural status of the *polis* and the meaning of “natural” when referred to political things, the issue of private versus public property in the best regime or the best possible regime, and the discussions of justice and its relationship to law are each addressed in at least three essays from disparate viewpoints within the philosophy and classics communities.

Most of the essays (eleven) were originally published elsewhere; four were written for this volume. As they are also representative of the two primary strengths of this collection discussed above, I will mention briefly the articles first appearing here: R. F. Stalley, one of Aristotle’s “companions,” makes a solid case for taking the Book II criticism of the *Republic* as addressing a specific problem and making “a valuable contribution to political philosophy,” rather than dismissing it as a superficial and incomplete account of the whole dialogue. To demonstrate that Aristotle really can understand Plato at least as well as we modern readers can, Stalley clarifies the Book II critique of Socratic community and even turns the tables and criticizes Plato for inconsistency in not communizing his whole city. Unfortunately, Stalley, like many commentators, ignores the fact that Book II is not the only part of the *Politics* that contains a criticism of the *Republic*. The critique of Socrates’ notion of political unity is far from the only flaw Aristotle addresses—consider the problems of *pambasileia* and the analysis of revolutions, to name only two others.

In a similar vein, Richard Mulgan argues that Aristotle’s analysis of oligarchy and democracy is not “merely practical” in either of the commonly critical senses—i.e., insufficiently colored by the “idealistic” aspirations of Books VII and VIII or lacking in theoretical rigor. In Mulgan’s treatment a number of the suggestive contrasts between these fundamental types of regime emerge, as well as possible lacunae in Aristotle’s analysis.

Ronald Polansky makes a very useful contribution to the understanding of *stasis* and *metabolē* in the *Politics* by both careful analysis of the text and apt reference to the *Physics*. Showing an awareness of the difficult position of the moral man in times of revolution, he nonetheless rightly emphasizes the ethical dimension of political change not present in the analysis of natural change.

In his essay on Books VII and VIII, David J. Depew wrestles with the puzzling argument that the contemplative life is an active life, spinning out from his interpretation of the passage both logical and political consequences concerning the meaning of contemplation and the place of philosophy in the ideal state.

In addition to assisting the Aristotelean scholar, this companion would make a handy addition to a graduate course focusing exclusively on the *Politics*. Keyt and Miller have done considerable legwork, particularly useful for students without ready access to all the world’s classics and philosophy journals. These pieces could give a student a sense of some of the important questions involved in examining certain significant sections of the *Politics*.