

Interpretation

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In *Reason and Character*, Lorraine Smith Pangle examines the relationship between reason and virtue in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (books 1–7.10), presenting an interpretation that fully appreciates how the *Ethics* is the first half of a two-part work on political science. According to Pangle, Aristotle aims not merely to describe moral opinions but to construct a “new synthesis” of traditional civic virtue and Socratic wisdom (3). This new synthesis is delivered with great rhetorical skill as Aristotle “prods different kinds of readers to take what steps they are ready to take toward clarity, while also offering them different possible stopping points along the way” (50). The great virtue of Pangle's commentary is her identification of such terminals for different parts of Aristotle's audience. Overall, Pangle presents the *Ethics* as a sober response to the radical claims made by Plato's Socrates. She suggests that Aristotle is correcting Socratic rhetoric, or the lack thereof, because Socrates moves too quickly to the thesis that virtue is knowledge and all the paradoxes that follow from such a radical position. Pangle argues that Aristotle chooses to give voice to the Socratic thesis incrementally, thus laying a more complex foundation for his likewise more complex political project.

In chapter 1, “The Task and the Puzzle of Reason in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE 1 and 2),” Pangle reveals how Aristotle's digressions on method both satisfy his mature audience members and encourage youthful skeptics to listen carefully to the moral opinions of their tradition. Aristotle thus initiates a dual investigation that yields both a more and a less precise teaching about human

nature within the same work. “On this most important and most difficult philosophic subject of our own souls, there is somehow no more direct path to understanding than the long, winding detour that begins at 1.7 and continues into book 6 and in a sense up to book 10” (41). The detour takes what serious people say seriously, and this reveals how morality oversees an independent realm of human affairs requiring its own standard. Pangle explains how this assertion of independence continually frustrates any attempt to clarify morality’s standard; consequently, what it really means to perform an action “for its own sake” or “for the sake of the noble” remains obscure. In chapter 2, “Knowledge, Choice, and Responsibility for Character (*NE* 3.1–5),” Pangle imagines another audience member, someone perhaps more Socratic than the youthful skeptics of chapter 1, who might object to Aristotle’s broad definition of responsibility in book 3, since it holds people responsible for actions that are ultimately determined by unchosen passions and habituation. Pangle helpfully guides the reader through Aristotle’s exchange with this unnamed interlocutor, showing how he avoids any direct criticism of moral responsibility, which, if dimly seen, may lead even his potentially philosophic readers to a certain fatalism and carelessness regarding their own development. According to Pangle’s reading of the exchange, Aristotle subtly argues: “We are as free as anyone could rationally wish to be” (102).

In chapter 3, “Reason and Purpose in the Moral Virtues (*NE* 3.6–4.9),” Pangle describes Aristotle’s enumeration of the virtues and shows how his selection not only clarifies but also revises and reforms traditional morality—Aristotle names unnamed virtues and vices, omits piety altogether, quietly removes indignation, and finally demotes shame. In addition to these major themes, Pangle walks the reader through Aristotle’s strengthening of the individual virtues so that we also see the limits of each virtue within even the most rationally defensible account of morality. In chapter 4, “Justice and the Rule of Reason (*NE* 5),” Pangle explains how Aristotle continues his constructive project with a detailed analysis of justice that uses mathematical language to abstract from the thumotic impulses that typically drive our reactions to what is unjust. The analysis reaches its highest perspective in the famously cryptic account of what is just by nature, but it also endorses the perspective of decent people—those who believe a good judge is flexible and should tend toward forgiveness and selflessness. Pangle suggests that in the background of book 5 is the question, made explicit in the *Politics*, whether it is better to be ruled by wise laws or by a single wise man. “Thus our thoughts on natural justice point us upward to the rule of reason, yet the rule of reason as we try to bring it sharply into focus turns out to take two very different forms” (170).

Sensing this duality becomes even more crucial for understanding Aristotle's complex teaching about intellectual virtue, which Pangle interprets in chapter 5, "Wisdom and Active Wisdom: The Intellectual Virtues (*NE* 6)." Pangle reminds us that Aristotle never fully explained the standard of virtue to which reason looks when we deliberate and choose an action, much less a way of life; instead of supplying the missing explanation, Aristotle proceeds to dissect reason itself in book 6. According to Pangle, the rational soul is still being analyzed from the perspective of the morally serious person because morality continues to resist a clear account of its own standard. *Phronēsis* is assigned to an intermediate part of the soul and separated from *sophia*, which knows universals but is too precise for human affairs. Pangle's translation of "active wisdom" for *phronēsis* is a bit awkward, but I believe it succeeds in capturing the duality Pangle sees in Aristotle's account: what is "active" points toward the city with its authoritative opinions, while "wisdom" points away from mere opinion toward the possibility of knowledge. Ordinary active wisdom frequently mistakes mere opinion for knowledge. Pangle describes this mistake as a "low ceiling of clouds" that prevents someone with active wisdom from seeing clearly so that, from this perspective, "the true end seems to be lost in the clouds" (215, 222). Even more poetically, she wonders if the pairing of active wisdom and moral virtue in the soul is "like two tipsy fellows strolling cheerfully along arm in arm, each saying of the other, 'I'm just following him'" (221). For an alternative to this unreliable form of active wisdom, Pangle refers the reader back to book 3 and the possibility of "natural vision" at the end of Aristotle's exchange with the unnamed Socratic interlocutor. Pangle concludes that active wisdom itself must have two forms: a higher form that sees the truth about human nature with a unified intellect, and a lower form that accepts the authoritative opinions of the city with a soul that is divided.

The detour that begins with the shift from reason to virtue in the function argument of 1.7 and arrives at the two faces of active wisdom in book 6 also contains "signposts for three distinct paths of moral inquiry" (218). First, Pangle sees a false path which listens to those with active wisdom and attempts to derive universal rules of moral conduct. Instead of imposing such rules on the fluctuating realm of morality, a second path observes human nature directly for the purpose of political science. Finally, a third path would investigate opinions dialectically, imitating Aristotle himself in his writing of the *Ethics*. Pangle notes that the third path is essentially a preparation for the second path. This confirms her interpretation of the *Ethics* as the first of a two-part project of political science, and it also prompts her to

exclude Aristotle's discussion of pleasure, friendship, and contemplation in the remaining books. Pangle explains that these discussions "leave the moral life behind" and "venture beyond the scope of political philosophy proper" because they are somehow a transition to the second half of the whole project completed by the *Politics* (11).

Pangle's reading of the first six books of the *Ethics* might be expected to come to an end with her account of active wisdom's duality: there is a natural break between books 6 and 7, after Aristotle has finally conceded the partial Socratic thesis that moral virtues are never without active wisdom, but before Aristotle asserts "another beginning" and revises his method of inquiry. Adding a lengthy discussion of only the first ten chapters of book 7 seems a bit arbitrary, but it does clarify what appears to be the main argument of Pangle's book.

In her final chapter, "Problems of Self-Control (*NE* 7.1–10)," Pangle provides a masterful interpretation of Aristotle's analysis of the "quasi-virtue of self-control" and steadfastness, suggesting that his investigation of this new territory delves into "questions of more fundamental philosophic interest" (11, 236). In other words, Aristotle's sober response to the Socratic denial of *akrasia* might direct some readers to the third path of moral inquiry that Pangle has identified. Therefore, Aristotle's new beginning in book 7 is not only important as a propaedeutic for the politician or lawgiver; it also supports a certain philosophic education. "Perhaps even for the wisest," Pangle advises, "continuing vigilance is necessary to keep in check the unruly inclinations of our composite natures" (264). Aristotle's audience is not simply divided into the civic minded and the philosophic, since there are gradations within each part. Pangle emphasizes the need for many of Aristotle's more promising readers to engage in a certain self-habituation that requires a higher form of steadfastness:

Persistence in pursuing whatever one judges to be worth pursuing does require a willingness to endure pain and an ability not to be unstrung by it, either innate or acquired by training. But even this ability is perhaps not simply subrational; it seems to involve opinions about what is worth risking for what and about one's own capacity to make the best of whatever fortune or inquiry may turn up. Especially for making progress in philosophy, such opinions seem to be a critical prerequisite. (241)

Throughout her commentary, Pangle highlights the moments when Aristotle is addressing his most philosophic readers with an eye to their development

and the need for some self-knowledge regarding their own progress. And she also notes that the same text supports many rich, though perhaps less philosophic, ways of living. In general, Aristotle aims to improve traditional morality to the extent that some morally serious individuals can handle a reformation of their own accepted opinions, but he simultaneously attempts to train future philosophers to the extent that some readers are able to emulate Aristotle's own habits of inquiry. From the perspective of Aristotle's new synthesis, Pangle shows us that moral virtue itself strives to transcend civic virtue but ultimately falls short of philosophic virtue (234).

I have sketched what I see as the main argument of *Reason and Character* but have provided only a few examples of the detailed interpretation Pangle offers, to say nothing of the placement of that interpretation within the tradition of Aristotelian scholarship in her substantive footnotes. Given the complex audience Aristotle is addressing, the *Nicomachean Ethics* will reward multiple readings and rereadings. Pangle's commentary, with its "careful, political mode of reading," is a worthy companion for those who endeavor to notice the signposts that Aristotle has left behind (10).