

Judith A. Swanson and C. David Corbin

Aristotle's Politics: A Reader's Guide.

London and New York: Continuum 2009.

168 pages

US\$95.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-8264-8498-7);

US\$24.95 (paper ISBN 978-0-8264-8499-4)

A reader's guide to Aristotle's *Politics* would certainly be a very useful thing. The *Politics* is one of Aristotle's more immediate and obviously rewarding works. At the same time, its ties to Aristotle's broader philosophical concerns and to 4th-century Greek society lie readily at the surface, prompting closer inspection and heightened appreciation. Furthermore, while much valuable work has been done recently on all aspects of Aristotle's political philosophy, balanced overviews remain scarce, probably because current controversies cut right to the heart of how we are to understand it. A chapter-by-chapter guide that hews closely to the text while revealing something of its riches would be a positive boon.

Unfortunately, this book does nothing to fill the need. Its engagement with or even acknowledgement of, existing scholarship is minimal, skewing heavily in the direction of Straussian interpreters. And while that might be excused by this being simply a guide to the text itself rather than to its scholarly reception, in truth even students are likelier to benefit from a guide that at least acknowledges alternative readings even when it privileges one in particular. The tone here is authoritative, but it covers up too much, obscuring from view important questions that should be asked and alternative interpretations that should be presented for consideration.

Most disturbing is the almost complete lack of Aristotelian documentation and contemporary context. In the introduction, for instance, which promises to situate Aristotle's *Politics* within a broader framework, Aristotle's exquisitely argued and quite unique brand of virtue ethics is never even raised as a topic, let alone analyzed. This leaves newcomers altogether in the dark regarding a crucial preliminary to understanding Aristotle's practical philosophy. The tight link between ethics and politics is barely even brought up. Smaller missteps abound: when explaining Aristotle's conception of nature and his hylomorphism, why not fall back on the clear and concise *Physics* B—nature is form rather than matter, 2.1.193b6-7—rather than engage in a hazy and confusing detour regarding categorical theory and the limits of science (8)? And when advancing the sensible point that Aristotle charts a middle course between conventionalism and naturalism, why not evoke the Greek debate regarding *nomos* and *physis* instead of relying on caricatures of ancient poets and Enlightenment social engineers (12-13)? These are not trivial issues: a reader's guide should situate a work, not transplant it onto foreign ground. There are other statements in the introduction that distract or misinform. To call the *History of Animals* (HA) a work in bioethics (7), in addition to perplexing the student, is

plainly erroneous in the scholarly sense. And to imply that the *HA* imparts an anthropocentric perspective on Aristotle's theory of nature is equally wrong-headed.

Still, here we have at least references to Aristotle's actual words. In the main part of the book, 'Reading the Text' (15-127), there are none. Instead, we are treated to the authors' interpretive paraphrases of chapter after chapter, in what amounts to a ramble through whatever catches the authors' eye. Not a single Bekker line is referenced, not one work of Aristotle's cross-referenced in any serious attempt to elucidate further the Stagirite's thinking (a couple of vague gestures in the direction of the *Nicomachean Ethics* do not count). While this results in the occasional pithy summarization, it once again fails to provide even a rudimentary map of the work's contours or—most telling—of those aspects of Aristotle's writing that do not fit the picture the authors wish to present, one that focuses on regimes and rulers along strictly authoritarian lines. One would never know on the basis of this book that *Politics* I already explicitly undermines any notion that political rule, which occurs among equals, could work along the same lines as rule between unequal parties (master and slave, father and child, man and woman: see *Pol.* 1.7.1255b16-20). Similarly, one would never suspect that Aristotle's criticism of Plato goes beyond the more outlandish proposals of the *Republic* and extends to the central methodological thesis that the wise would always know the correct principles of rule and thereby be justified in herding the rest. The authors in fact present Aristotle as upholding a variation of this thesis, which is not only false but distorts the very nature of the Aristotelian political enterprise. What is so interesting in Aristotle is precisely his deep engagement with issues surrounding the possibility and limits of political participation. By some distance, this has to be the book's most serious failing.

The lack of Aristotelian language or proper references renders the authors' own phrasings and emphases suspect throughout. What in Aristotle, for example, could justify the invocation of 'hope and prayer' in association with achieving the good life (35)? Or the evocation of 'policy or ideology' in the context of constitutional deliberation (45)? A frivolous yet telling example comes from a section on the natural character of rule, where the authors discuss Aristotle's suggestion that inanimate as well as animate things can hold sway over one another. The authors contend that Aristotle's claim is not only politically sagacious, but scientifically prescient, hinting that it foreshadows the modern concept of forces or natural laws (24-25). The suggestion is ludicrous, however, and Aristotle explicitly says that all this is popularizing talk anyway (1.5.1254a29-33). What the authors have done is effectively convert the polarities of Aristotle's argument: the Stagirite loosens the analogy between natural 'rule' and political command, whereas the authors seek to strengthen it. Their hope is that our established modern belief in 'natural laws' will carry us in the direction of accepting natural political dominance as well, and the chosen form of presentation allows for the deception.

The final section, which purports to track Aristotle's influence through history, is a severe letdown as well. For the ancient world, the authors merely collate a few potted

opinions of the man, while the medieval section is rife with egregious errors and misrepresentations. To pick some nits, al-Farabi was not a Platonist (132), nor did Avicenna ascribe the world's coming into existence to random contingency (133). Also, devoting a full page (133-134, out of a scant 168) to Maimonides' vacillations regarding the eternity of the world mystifies (at least, that is, until one flips to the endnotes and sees the near-exclusive reliance on a single Straussian textbook). Aquinas most certainly did not 'reintroduce Aristotle into Western thought' (136), nor did his peers in any way uniformly 'denounce Aristotle as a pagan' (135). Bizarrely, there is no treatment at all of the actual medieval reception of Aristotle's *Politics*, even though Latin scholastics from Aquinas onwards wrote proper commentaries on it—something one would not know from reading this book—and major thinkers like Ockham, as well as minor ones like Summenhart, built on it. This is in contrast to the Arabic world, which receives plenty of attention though the *Politics* was virtually unknown to it—again, not something this book tells you. When it comes to the modern reception of Aristotle's *Politics*, the book reverts to received impressions and facile comparisons, with little heed paid to actual uses of Aristotle and none to the plentiful modern scholarship that exists on the topic. This section, which represents the sloppiest, most outdated scholarship, I would not wish upon any student anywhere.

A disappointment, then. Fortunately, there are alternatives.

Taneli Kukkonen

University of Jyväskylä