Pavlos Kontos
Aristotle's Moral Realism Reconsidered: Phenomenological Ethics.
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Pavlos Kontos' *Aristotle's Moral Realism Reconsidered: Phenomenological Ethics* is a unique and interesting book. It begins with a reconstruction of Aristotle's moral realism that is both technically proficient and generally elucidating. It moves on to an interesting discussion of Kantian ethics that merits similar praise. The second half of the book then utilizes the (Aristotelian) account of moral realism developed in Part 1 to critique three prominent 'continental' approaches to Aristotle and the issue of moral realism (Heidegger, Gadamer, and Arendt).

This book has many merits. First, Kontos is delightfully silent in regard to any contrast between analytic and continental philosophy. Judging from the authors Kontos explores and critiques, he is unconcerned with the tradition in which a thinker operates; he is interested, rather, in whether or not work stands up to careful scrutiny. One thus finds interesting critiques of both 'analytic' approaches to moral realism (John McDowell) and 'continental' approaches to moral realism (Arendt, Gadamer). In my view, this is a significant accomplishment itself. We do not often see these traditions put into conversation, or considered with equal seriousness and with the clear recognition that both traditions have important contributions to make to philosophical inquiry.

This leads directly to a second merit of Kontos' work. While not without technical discussions of, e.g., key Greek terms (*prakton*), the book is much more than a book on Aristotle's moral realism. This is a work that attempts to construct and defend a compelling picture of a shared moral world that is accessible to us perceptually. Aristotle provides us with a point of departure, and while it is important to Kontos to get Aristotle right, it is more important to get a workable conception of moral realism.

This book thus offers contributions to a good number of debates: the idea of moral perception; how best to understand and articulate moral reality, as well as our access to it; how to assess Aristotle's claims about the ends of actions, as well as the use of the term *prakton* in Aristotle's texts; how to assess Heidegger's famous lectures on Aristotle's ethics; how to understand Kant's aim in the *Critique of Practical Reason;* how to assess the appropriation of Aristotle by thinkers in the phenomenological tradition; how to determine what the merits of the phenomenological approach to moral realism are, as well as the shortcomings of the majors contributions in this literature.

Despite dealing with a broad range of topics and literature, Kontos' book is by no means disjointed. Guiding each discussion is the attempt to articulate a perceptual model of moral realism deriving from Aristotle's thinking on the issue. In this respect, each debate Kontos enters advances his discussion, as well as our understanding, of

phenomenologically-grounded ethics. Given the range of topics covered, presenting the rigor and breadth of Kontos' research in the space of a review is simply impossible. Rather than attempting to paraphrase Kontos' nuanced and persuasive reading of Aristotle's moral realism—a reading that emphasizes moral reality disclosed through *phronetic* perception, literally construed—I will briefly discuss one criticism Kontos makes of Heidegger which I find unconvincing.

The central criticism Kontos levels against Heidegger is that, on his reading of Aristotle, moral perception becomes, in essence, clarity regarding one's own being. As Kontos puts it, 'any reduction of perceptual experience to the manifestation of one's own self, no matter in how sophisticated a way the wordliness of Dasein may be described, is phenomenologically mistaken' (117). Moreover, Kontos claims that 'Heidegger's dissembled intention seems to be to transform the ontological character of *prakta* into an existential feature of Dasein itself,' and that 'the outcome of [Heidegger's] interpretation is nothing less than the annihilation of any form of exteriority proper to *prakta*' (117).

At the risk of seeming like a Heidegger apologist, I find myself reluctant to accept Kontos' charge against Heidegger, despite finding Kontos' analysis of Aristotle's moral realism quite compelling. In brief, my worry is that Kontos has not recognized the full implications of the claim that Dasein is being-in-the-world. If Heidegger's insistence that we are not to separate the world from that being for whom the world is present is correct, then Kontos' charge is rather bizarre. After all, when one investigates the being of Dasein, one also investigates the way the world is disclosed to Dasein. If the two things—world and Dasein—really are not to be separated, then, in some sense, *every* investigation of our phenomenology will ultimately involve an investigation of Dasein's being. Kontos repeatedly reads this as equivalent to saying that all investigations are ultimately only investigations of Dasein. But such an assertion plainly ignores the implications of Dasein as Being-in-the-world. There is no such thing as an investigation of the world apart from Dasein, and there is no investigating Dasein apart from an investigation of the way the world is disclosed to it. To thus accuse Heidegger of a kind of ethical solipsism which maintains that ethics only needs to examine Dasein's being seems to me to ignore the most important claim Heidegger makes about Dasein: namely, that it is nothing apart from its world; that to investigate the one is necessarily to investigate the other.

Given Heidegger's sensitivity to being misread, one might rightly fault Heidegger for expressing his view about ethics (in his lectures on Aristotle) in a way that obviously invites misreading (this is evidenced by the sheer number of philosophers who see a kind of solipsism in Heidegger's account of *phronesis*). But this is a fundamentally different kind of criticism than the one mounted by Kontos. It's one thing to claim Heidegger invites misunderstanding by expressing himself as he does; it's quite another to claim that Heidegger has a view that amounts to solipsism in ethical matters. On a related note, if Kontos is right to read Gadamer as inheriting much of Heidegger's view of Dasein, then Gadamer can also arguably be read as inheriting the defense of Heidegger given above as well (at least in response to the charge of ethical solipsism).

I want to emphasize that this is really a rather small matter in a book with the aim and scope of *Aristotle's Moral Realism Reconsidered.* I think one can probably salvage a great deal of Kontos' insights into moral phenomenology—and into Aristotle's moral realism—without jettisoning as much of Heidegger as Kontos wants to. The central features of *prakta*—their stability, visibility, and materiality—are not, I would argue, anathema to Heidegger's reading of Aristotle, provided we read this analysis in light of Heidegger's later analysis of Dasein, and provided we read with a good deal of charity. I don't pretend to have done that in this review—space is simply too limited; I only assert that this reading is possible once we appropriately interpret Heidegger's claim that the moral life involves understanding one's own being. Indeed, Aristotle advocated something very similar: without knowing what kind of Being one is, one can hardly aspire to arête, as arête is always indexed to ontology. Put otherwise, fulfilling one's function with excellence depends crucially on *what kind of being one is.*

It is with some guilt that I raise this objection in this review. The guilt stems from my clear recognition of the value of Kontos' analysis, and from a recognition that Heidegger makes it all too easy to misunderstand his remarks on the moral life. It is also somewhat unfair to hint at an analysis that might save Heidegger without actually giving that analysis—particularly when responding to a book that is as careful and meticulous as this one is.

To ease my sense of guilt, I'll end by noting again what a fine book Kontos has written. It will surely be of use to a great many scholars working in many different areas. It is a book I admire a good deal, not only for its clarity and rigor, but also for its willingness to navigate disputes on both sides of the English Channel.

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