

A. W. Price

Virtue and Reason in Plato and Aristotle

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A. W. Price's new book (VR) deals with Platonic and Aristotelian ethics and moral psychology. The text's four parts map four key concepts: *eudaimonia*, virtue, practical reasoning, and *akrasia*. Each part is comprised of a chapter on Plato and chapter on Aristotle. Price offers no overarching interpretative thesis, presenting instead "the windings of [his] reflections" (5) on the focal concepts and their puzzling aspects. In what follows, I shall trace out the contours of some of these windings; I will then provide a brief evaluation of the work as a whole.

A1 offers an interpretation of Plato's conception of *eudaimonia*. According to Price, Plato holds that *eudaimonia* is (i) the ultimate end of action and (ii) to be identified with "acting well" (23–25). "Acting well" is an abstract determinable end in need of determination (23). One way of supplying this determination – discernible in the *Protagoras* – appeals to the desirable consequences of the action (20); another, found in other "Socratic" dialogues, appeals to the "ethical character" of the act. Price judges the *Protagoras*'s hedonism un-Platonic and opts for the intrinsic model. *Eudaimonia* is an ultimate end to be achieved *within* action (85; italics in the original). This intrinsic model is "overlaid" but not dislodged in the *Republic*. Price appeals to the *Gorgias* (503e6–504a1) in fleshing out the content of *eudaimonia*. For Plato, "[to] act well is to act in a way that achieves within action a structural value that also exists outside action, being a feature of nothing less than the natural but structured *kosmos*" (31).

In A2, Price attributes a circumscribed Platonic conception of *eudaimonia* (33) to Aristotle. On this analysis, Aristotle shares Plato's identification of *eudaimonia* with "acting well" (42) but differs from his teacher in eschewing cosmic patterning for values intrinsic and unique to action (cf. 3). Aristotle's model is also distinguished by its reliance on the terminology of parts and wholes. An agent's doing well "counts as a component within his *eudaimonia* (42). "This fits it to be an element within the agent's *eudaimonia*, taken concretely" (42), that is, as, "a whole that is made up of specific parts" (35). In response to the question of how "honour, pleasure, intelligence, and every virtue" could be valued for themselves without being instances of acting well" (43; EN 1.7 1097a33–b5), Price suggests that Aristotle may be "writing loosely", having in mind "not possessing 'intelligence and every virtue', but *exercising* it" (43; italics in the original). This leaves the problem of understanding how we could be said to select honour, pleasure, intelligence and every virtue "for the sake of *eudaimonia*, judging that through them (*dia touton*) we shall be *eudaimon*" (N.E. 1097b2–5). Price presents two explanations without adjudication: the first is a consequential relation between the good and action: the agent values pleasure, for example, because it conduces to acting well; the second is a "non-consequential relation": "[while] virtue, intelligence, and pleasure are not instances of acting well, they are essential aspects of it." (45)

The identification of *eudaimonia* with acting well leads into a discussion of virtue. In B1, Price distinguishes two ways in which virtue facilitates acting well (85). The first is a guiding

role in setting the appropriate ends to be achieved in action; the second is an executive function in ensuring that agents are motivated to act in accordance with practical reason. Virtue's double function raises questions about its unity: "[if] virtue is to play [both guiding and executive] roles fully, it needs to achieve some sort of unity" (86). Price's overall conclusions are that the Socrates of the early dialogues "taught that ... all virtues are really identical, or are only distinguished externally by their field of application" (107); by contrast, although the *Republic's* theory of the soul "excludes [the Socratic] strong form of unity" (108), the unity of mutual entailment is retained: "[To] be just is to possess the other virtues also" (111).

The discussion of Aristotle on virtue (B2) covers the emotions, the doctrine of the mean, and the unity of the virtues. Price says that Aristotle's distinction between the rational and non-rational parts of the soul "is not a demarcation between independent states but a distinction between complementary aspects" (122). This is of significance because it allows ethical virtue to occupy a "unique position at the interface of perception and judgment" (122). Price goes on to distinguish "one-dimensional" and "many-dimensional" conceptions of the mean (127). In the former case, the mean is calculated from the perspective of one specific virtue; in the latter case, the mean is the object of a wide and more encompassing perspective, which "looks beyond the characteristic dimension of the [relevant virtue]" (131). Aristotle's conception of virtue's unity—"to have *one* ethical virtue is to have *all* ethical virtues" (137; italics in the original)—depends on the possibility of attaining a wide conception of the mean and reflects the dependency of virtue on practical wisdom.

C1 and C2 examine the forms of deliberation exhibited by the virtuous person in acting well. Price suggests that Plato's early dialogues are concerned with the uncodifiability of virtue: "concrete rules of conduct cannot define how one should act from occasion to occasion" (174). The theory of Forms is then to be understood as a response to uncodifiability (178). "Part of the lesson of the ascent to Forms is that we have to discard any mechanical dependence upon rules that merely prescribe acts of certain concrete types, and fail either to make a unity of the virtues, or to ensure that we always act well" (180). Price proposes that Plato seeks to remediate the deficiency in general rules by means of "some art of measurement" (182). He suggests the mathematical education programme of the *Republic* is designed to instil practical knowledge which is not dependent on codified rules (186). "What is demanded is a situational appreciation of practicalities that presupposes, but cannot mechanically apply, an abstract appreciation of desirable ratios and proportions. The best practitioner of the impure sciences possesses a soul that has been structured by the exact ones." (186)

The discussion of Aristotle's conception of practical reasoning in C2 turns on the question of "starting points". If deliberation aims at *eudaimonia*, then it may seem that some complete "blueprint" of *eudaimonia* is required as a starting point of deliberation. But Price dismisses this "Grand End" interpretation of Aristotle, maintaining instead that deliberation derives its starting points from a kind of moral intuition (226). "The agent finds some feature of the situation *salient* in seeing it as demanding or inviting some sort of practical response (where 'seeing' signifies not just perception, but also noetic apprehension)" (226; italics in the original).

Part D is focussed on *acrasia* in Plato and Aristotle. Price distinguishes between synchronic *acrasia* ("weakness of judgment") and diachronic *acrasia* ("weakness in

perseverance”). In the former case, the agent judges it “right to ψ even as he intentionally omits to ψ ” (253); in the latter, the agent judges “it right to ψ ” and prefers to ψ ” but “changes his judgment, and with it his preference, for no good reason” (253–254). Price advances a reading of *Protagoras* according to which Plato’s point is that “cases commonly misidentified as one of weakness of judgment are in fact cases of weakness in perseverance (254). In D1.III, it is argued that that the *Republic* is not specifically concerned with acrasia, but with “the nature of mental conflict and our need for the virtues” (273). Nevertheless, the “analysis of the soul accommodates acrasia in forms alien to Socrates” (273), specifically, the possibility of synchronic acrasia.

In D2, Price offers a “traditional” (286) interpretation of Aristotle on acrasia (especially *NE* 1146b–1147b). On this account, the acrat agent is “cognitively deficient at the moment of action, and does not then really comprehend that he ought to act otherwise” (286). This is not because of any failure in logic but because “an affection that cannot stomach a practical conclusion loosens the agent’s grasp upon one of the particular premises”, precluding his “genuinely drawing the conclusion” (297). Price defends his position against objections before criticising alternative readings. In the last section of the book (D2.V), Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia* is revisited in the light of problems presented by acrat action.

Now that the specific contours of the text have been traced out, some remarks may be made on the work as a whole. To begin, it is worth noticing that VR is written for scholars working in the contemporary analytical tradition in ancient philosophy. Readers who are not substantially acquainted with some rather arcane debates in the contemporary Anglophone scholarship will find it very difficult to follow the “windings” of Price’s reflections. Furthermore, readers whose research is conducted from within alternative hermeneutic traditions will be left feeling dissatisfied. Two examples of Price’s tendency to parochialism are these. Part A1 begins by identifying the “first friend” of the *Lysis* with *eudaimonia*. Price offers no argument for this identification: apparently, there is no other plausible candidate (11). No attempt to engage with the numerous scholars who identify the “first friend” with the form of the good. Another example would be Price’s handling of the “sight-lovers” argument in *Republic* V (476e7–479e1). Price’s reading is inadequate because it assumes that Socrates is concerned with propositional knowledge of forms (176 ff.), an assumption which has been effectively refuted in recent scholarship (see, e.g., F. J. Gonzalez, “Propositions or objects? A Critique of Gail Fine on Knowledge and Belief in *Republic* V”, *Phronesis* 41:3 [1996], 245–275).

VR’s handling of the Platonic dialogue is very problematic. Price assumes “developmentalism” and a mouthpiece theory without comment or argument (cf. 268). Readers who doubt these assumptions will find it difficult to read the Platonic half of the book. One might suppose it possible to take the discussion on its own terms, in relation to the author’s hermeneutic assumptions; but this is easier said than done. The interpretive framework determines the nature of the questions asked and this reviewer, for one, was inclined to reject the presuppositions of many of these questions. For example, the attempt to extricate Socrates from a troubling inter-textual equivocation (11ff.) is uninteresting to the reader who does not expect inter-dialogical consistency. One has the sense when reading Price’s book that Plato “is being put in the difficult position of being expected to answer questions that he himself does not pose”

(H.-G Gadamer, “Reply to Nicholas P. White”, in C. L. Griswold, ed., *Platonic writings/Platonic readings*. [London: Routledge, 1988], 258–266, at 264).

Despite the above reservations, VR is a closely argued and densely packed work which is likely to become an essential point of reference for certain research programmes in Platonic and Aristotelian ethics and moral psychology. Price exhibits significant mastery over the ancient texts and at least one important strand of contemporary scholarship. In addition, the author’s lack of commitment to any overarching interpretive thesis – which some may consider a weakness – has some possible advantages. The interpretations offered are relatively independent of one another: so it should be possible to learn from Price on many points, if not on all.

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