

BOOK REVIEWS

Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: on the Nicomachean Ethics. BY RONNA BURGER. (Chicago UP, 2008. Pp. viii + 309. Price £24.00.)

On the last page of her book, Ronna Burger claims that 'in the treatment of almost every topic covered in the course of the [*Nicomachean*] *Ethics*, one can hear the echo of a discussion in the Platonic dialogues'. True; in fact, Aristotle's treatment does not merely echo Platonic discussions, it is in large part an assimilation of and a direct response to them. To take just three examples: Aristotle's function argument in *NE* I 7 is a sophisticated elaboration and rearrangement of the argument found at *Republic* 52D–54A, his concept of the mean is a systematization of concepts deployed in *Statesman* and *Philebus*, and his treatment of friendship in *NE* VIII–IX is in several respects a response to *aporiai* generated by *Lysis*. Given this, Burger seems to have landed on very rich philosophical territory indeed.

Unfortunately, as her book unfolds, the chances of the territory's being adequately mapped steadily recede. The reasons for this are at least threefold. First, Burger believes one should not distinguish between Socrates and Plato when interpreting the Platonic dialogues. But no direct argument is given for this, merely a brief citation from Leo Strauss (see p. 288 n. 55). This is unhelpful, since most commentators (not least Aristotle himself) take some distinction between Socrates and Plato to be interpretatively vital. Secondly, the book tries to straddle two *genres*, that of step-by-step exposition and commentary, and that of thematic analysis and criticism. Given its brevity, however – only 215 pages of text – it fails to satisfy either *genre*, moving far too quickly to cover *NE* as a whole, while also tackling material strictly irrelevant to Aristotle's 'dialogue with Socrates'. Thirdly, and more substantively, Burger approaches *NE* fundamentally not as an engagement with Socrates' *arguments*, but as an encounter with and an affirmation of Socrates *the philosopher*. In doing so, she mounts a series of her own arguments which bear little discernible relation to those of Socrates or Aristotle.

To take two salient examples from her chapter on 'Virtues and Vices', Burger first notes that if 'Aristotle intends to be the defender ... of ethical virtue as ordinarily understood', he has reason to deny Socrates' view that virtue consists (exhaustively) in 'some kind of knowledge of good and bad'. True enough, and borne out by Aristotle's conclusion at the end of *NE* VI, 'Socrates ... thought the virtues were forms of reason (for he thought they were, all of them, forms of knowledge), while we think they *involve* reason' (1144b 28–30). According to Burger, however, this belies both Socrates' actual view and Aristotle's relation to it. For in point of fact 'the

alternative that Socrates embodies is not a science of good and bad: it is the courage of the philosopher pursuing his quest for wisdom in the face of his knowledge of ignorance' (p. 78; cf. p. 128). In other words, if we attend not to Socrates' arguments but to his life, we discover the true Socrates – a modest individual, for whom the equation of virtue with moral knowledge is never a theoretical possibility, let alone a practical one. It follows, on this view, that Aristotle's criticism (see above) is a criticism of 'Socrates', not of the true Socrates – with whom Aristotle, allegedly, agrees. But not only does this supposedly revelatory mode of argument bypass the sense in which Aristotle *adopts* the Socratic aspiration to moral knowledge (in the form of φρόνησις), it assumes that whereas Socrates' philosophical commitments can be serviceably read off his (tendentiously described) 'quest', they cannot be inferred from his explicit arguments and claims. Burger offers us no reason to accept this highly controversial heuristic principle.

Burger's analysis of Aristotle on moderation [σωφροσύνη] constitutes a variation on this *ad hominem* theme. To begin with, she claims that the moderation of desire by λόγος is encapsulated in Aristotle's notion of 'choice', *viz* desiring reason or rational desire (1139b 4–5). 'But the real possibility of ... desire that is itself rational', she continues, 'looks as if it is to be found above all, or perhaps only, in philosophical eros' (p. 81; cf. p. 115). If so, then once again we can see Aristotle is under the impress of a (true, not pseudo-) Socratic paradigm, for this 'eros of wisdom' is a function not of 'an ἐπιστήμη of good and bad', but rather of 'the knowledge of ignorance'. But more than one *non sequitur* is involved here. First, the virtue of σωφροσύνη involves the moderation by reason not of any desire, but of unruly desire, so it cannot be assimilated to choice (which it presupposes). Secondly, we are told that 'perhaps only' philosophical eros displays rational desire – a claim which would rule out all the ethical virtues (while simultaneously relying on a notion, 'eros', which, as Burger admits, Aristotle rarely invokes). Thirdly, all this is wielded in support of a conception of 'philosophy' which matches neither Socrates' ethical ἐπιστήμη nor Aristotle's ideal of disinterested contemplation of the cosmos (as outlined in *NE X*).

None of this would much matter if Burger's arguments for a Socratic Aristotle got better, but so far as I can tell, they get worse, resting on little more than word-association and stretched analogies (see especially pp. 129–30, 174–6, 187–9). In short, Burger never manages to rebut the obvious objection that perfect happiness, according to Aristotle, lies not in some ethical-*cum*-aesthetic eros proper to the philosopher, but rather in θεωρία, *viz* disinterested contemplation of the eternal and necessary workings of the universe. (She maintains that Aristotle's privileging of θεωρία is ironic, on the grounds that *NE X* is heavily outweighed by the preceding nine books on the ethical virtues: see pp. 9, 214–15. But this by itself does not establish *irony*, especially since Aristotle's use of continuous sequential argument is hardly hospitable to irony in the first place.)

In sum, Burger's book conjures up a Socratic (or Platonic?) Aristotle, on the basis of very little evidence. A lively discussion of ἀκρασία at pp. 135–53 hardly offsets this defect, a defect compounded by a predilection for solecism, e.g., 'deliberate beautifully' (p. 117), 'thusly' (*passim*), 'sharing speeches and thoughts' (p. 8), and mistranslation, e.g., 'decent' for ἐπιεικής (*passim*), 'practice' for πρακτική τις (pp. 34, 43, 69).

It seems that those hoping for a systematic and well founded investigation of *NE* in the light of its Platonic antecedents have more time to wait.

University of Kent at Canterbury

TOM ANGIER