

Bobonich (C.) (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Ethics*. Pp. 395. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Paper, £23.99, US\$29.99. ISBN: 9781107652316.

‘Greek Ethics’, an undergraduate class taught by the British moral philosopher N. J. H. Dent, introduced this reviewer to the ethical philosophy of ancient Greece. The class had a modest purview—a sequence of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—but it proved no less effective, in retrospect, than more synoptic classes for having taken this apparently limited and (for its students and academic level) appropriate focus. This excellent Companion will now serve any such class extremely well, allowing students a broader exposure than that traditional sequence, without sacrificing the class’s circumscribed focus. The eighteen chapters encompass some of what went before, and surprisingly much of what came after, those three central philosophers—including, for instance, a discussion of Plotinus and his successors, as well as a discussion of Horace. The book will therefore be useful in many different types of class on ethical philosophy in the ancient world. This Companion will be useful not only to students, but also to at least three further groups: specialists in ancient Greek philosophy (since some contributors advance significant new positions, e.g. R. Kamtekar on Plato’s ethical psychology and D. Charles on Aristotle’s ‘*ergon* argument’ as already implicitly invoking ‘*to kalon*’); scholars working in academic subjects adjacent to ancient Greek philosophy; and contemporary moral philosophers.

Following B.’s concise but illuminating introduction, the book is divided into five parts: ‘Origins’, ‘Plato’, ‘Aristotle’, ‘The Hellenistics and Beyond’, and ‘Themes’. Part 1 comprises two helpful chapters which provide, *inter alia*, a nice historical backdrop to the volume as a whole: ‘What is Pre-Socratic Ethics?’ (A. Laks) and ‘The Historical Socrates’ (D. C. Wolfsdorf). Parts 2 and 3 share an identical structure, gesturing at the intimate philosophical and historical proximity of Plato and Aristotle: there are three essays in each part covering the topics of ‘virtue and happiness’, ‘ethical psychology’, and ‘love and friendship’. The three respective authors here are D. Devereux, R. Kamtekar, and F. Sheffield (for Plato); and D. Charles, J. Moss, and C. A. Gartner (for Aristotle). Part 4 has five chapters on the Hellenistics ‘and beyond’: ‘Epicurus and the Epicureans on Ethics’ (R.

Woolf), ‘The Stoics on Virtue and Happiness’ (K. M. Vogt), ‘The Stoics’ Ethical Psychology’ (M. Graver), ‘Skeptical Ethics’ (L. Castagnoli, whose discussion nicely distinguishes, throughout, the Academic skeptical tradition from the Pyrrhonist), and ‘Ethics in Plotinus and His Successors’ (D. J. O’Meara, who protests that such later Platonists have ‘typically been ignored in English-language handbooks covering ancient ethics’ [p. 240]). The volume ends, in Part 5, with a change of perspective, a helpful stepping back from the individual. This part contains four chapters on general ‘themes’ of philosophical and historical interest—eudaimonism, impartiality, elitism, and ‘becoming godlike’—as well as a final chapter on ‘Horace and Practical Philosophy’ (T. Irwin). This final part of the book strikes me as the real gem of this collection, although the earlier, more specifically detailed chapters are also of great value.

This highly accessible Companion provides a resource for contemporary moral philosophers, who may be disinclined to delve into the invaluable, but significantly larger, studies on ancient Greek ethics which have appeared in recent decades, among them M. Nussbaum (1986), S. Broadie (1991), and J. Annas (1993). Chapters that illuminate the idea of an ethical ‘function’ argument are noteworthy in this respect (i.e., as a resource for contemporary moral philosophers, who sometimes mishandle the idea): for instance, Charles’s deeply insightful reading of Aristotle and Graver’s chapter on Stoic psychology, whose arresting first sentence proclaims almost paradoxically that, ‘The best point of entry for the ethical psychology of the Hellenistic Stoics is to be found not in the surviving utterances of those philosophers, numerous though they are, but in the works of Plato, and above all in the function argument of *Republic* Book I, 352D-54A’ (p. 200). These strong interpretive chapters are representative of the collection as a whole, one that should indeed be (as B. hopes it will be) ‘of particular interest to philosophers working on contemporary ethics, along with those more focused on ancient philosophy’ (p. 1).

The four lead chapters in the final section on recurring philosophical ‘themes’ will be especially helpful to anyone exploring the connections between contemporary moral philosophy and ancient Greek ethics, maybe especially when it comes to ‘eudaimonism’. In ‘Ancient Eudaimonism and Modern Morality’, J. Annas aims to correct various misunderstandings of eudaimonism: for instance, the wrong-headed belief that eudaimonism must be objectionably ‘conservative’, or that it lacks important

‘deontological’ notions. She also rejects two other common objections that are somehow still advanced in contemporary discussions, viz. that eudaimonism is objectionably ‘egoistic’ and that it remains inadequate in terms of ‘action guidance’ (not telling us what we should do, but instead relying on vague appeals to being virtuous). As Annas rightly says, one major obstacle to an accurate understanding of eudaimonism is that the concept of happiness is ‘often discussed in oddly narrow terms’. That is: ‘Theories of happiness (or more broadly well-being) are supposed to think of it in terms of *either* pleasure (hedonism) *or* getting what you want (desire-satisfaction) *or* “the objective list theory”, according to which happiness requires getting various things that are valuable (health, success, etc.)’ (p. 276). But Annas insists that this restrictive classification ‘ignores any form of eudaimonism’ (p. 280, n. 15). Indeed, she argues that eudaimonism is ‘a radically distinct kind of theory, one whose advantages cannot be obtained by inserting parts of the theory into other ethical theories (requiring virtue in utilitarianism, for example)’ (p. 279). I believe it is fair to say, as my own recent work aims to indicate, that contemporary moral philosophers have not adequately appreciated this point.

Like Annas, the following three authors take a wide perspective on the ethical philosophy of the period. In ‘Partiality and Impartiality in Ancient Ethics’, R. Kraut discusses the Stoics, Plato, the Epicureans, and Aristotle (in that order), arguing that, ‘The history of ethics from Plato to the present is no simple progression from an era of partiality to one of impartiality’ (282-3). That is, it is not a progression *to* a conception of ethics as impartial, as weighing up practical reasons independently of the individual parties involved (me, you, my family, etc.). Kraut defends, instead, the following four-fold thesis: that Stoic ethics is ‘thoroughly’ impartial, that the case is ‘almost as strong’ for the same conclusion about Plato’s ethics, that Epicureanism is an ethics of partiality, and that in Aristotle’s ethics impartiality plays at least ‘an important role’ (p. 282). Kraut’s chapter illustrates different concrete specifications of *eudaimonia* and shows how eudaimonism (in agreement with Annas on this point) need not be objectionably partial or egoistic. Nor does eudaimonism need to be objectionably elitist about who can acquire the virtues necessary for *eudaimonia*. In ‘Elitism in Plato and Aristotle’, B. argues that for Plato acquiring the ethical virtues requires genuinely philosophical knowledge. Non-philosophers fare poorly, then, in Plato’s middle-period dialogues (for instance in the

Republic), since they lack the capacity for attaining such knowledge. But in the later dialogues Plato has a ‘more positive’ view of non-philosophers: they can attain, with the appropriate education, ‘a partial and indistinct grasp of the same principles that philosophers grasp fully and distinctly’ (p. 304). According to Aristotle, philosophical wisdom is not necessary for ethical virtue, although practical wisdom is. B. argues that ‘normal Greek males’ can ‘in principle’ acquire practical wisdom (*phronêsis*)—and with it a ‘secondary’ form of *eudaimonia*—hence even manual workers (*banausoi*) can live virtuous lives, though not, on Aristotle’s view, women or natural slaves. ‘Manual workers’, B. says, ‘are handicapped because of their way of life, not—if they are normal Greek males—because of some innate feature’ (p. 306). Philosophical wisdom is nevertheless the ‘best and the most complete’ virtue for Aristotle, since it exercises the most ‘godlike’ element in us. In ‘Becoming Godlike’, D. Sedley argues that Aristotle’s commitment to the life of contemplation in the *Nicomachean Ethics* reveals continuity with Plato’s views, especially as evidenced in the *Timaeus*. ‘Plato and Aristotle differed on many questions’, Sedley writes, ‘but one substantial area of agreement between master and pupil was godlikeness. While both advocated the virtuous life as a primary route to human happiness, both saw even greater value in their own alternative chosen life, the pursuit of philosophical understanding’ (p. 336).

Some will justifiably wonder why this Companion devotes a final chapter to Horace. B. says that Irwin’s chapter on Horace takes up ‘a general and highly practical problem facing any student of ancient ethics’ (pp. 7-8), namely what to make of it all, especially given (as Irwin notes) the different and conflicting ethical outlooks, the counter-cultural currents within these outlooks, and their potentially oppressive commitment to reflection and self-examination. Irwin considers Horace’s views on Epicureanism, Stoicism, the Cyrenaics, and the Cynics, and he helpfully investigates what Horace might have meant by his profession of philosophical ‘non-alignment’. But the final chapter also provides a potential explanation for a perplexing aspect of the volume as a whole—its title. Does the inclusion of the chapter on Horace (along with the intermittent appearance of Latin authors, mainly as sources) explain why this Companion is not marketed as a companion to ancient *Greek* ethics? That might help to explain the book’s overly broad title. But the title remains misleading nevertheless, especially given the profusion of

current work on non-Western philosophy, for example the growing interest in Confucian and Buddhist ethical philosophy. Indeed, this Companion appears to contain only a single reference to non-Western philosophy in the ancient world—a passing reference to ‘oriental sapiential literature’ (p. 11)—in a formulation that will hardly be reassuring on this point. Others will also have misgivings about the book’s title, but this should not overshadow a more remarkable fact, that it is difficult to imagine many other improvements to this impressive Companion. It will be a continuing resource for many different types of students, and for many of their professors.

Wichita State University

NOELL BIRONDO
noell.birondo@wichita.edu