

Scott, Dominic. *Listening to Reason in Plato and Aristotle*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 288pp. Hardback, \$99.00.

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As Plato tells it, Socrates was deeply troubled by the ignorance and moral decay he found around him. Most people shamelessly sought money, fame, and power, and if anyone professed to be otherwise, Socrates would question him, regardless of his age or political standing. If that person turned out not to pursue the virtuous life in earnest, Socrates would rebuke him for valuing things which mattered little, then try to persuade him to attend instead to the improvement of his own soul. As is well known, Socrates and his missionary zeal did not make many friends and, in the end, he was sentenced to death. What is not so often remembered is that Socrates won quite a bit of support at the trial: among the five hundred jurors, he was only thirty votes shy of acquittal. Socrates himself was surprised by just how much support he had garnered. To anyone who reflects on the life of Socrates and his trial, the question naturally arises: what sorts of impact can arguments have on people's ethical beliefs and behavior?

In his latest book, Dominic Scott offers careful readings of the *Republic (Resp.)* and *Nicomachean Ethics (Eth. Nic.)* in order to expound Plato and Aristotle's respective answers to this question. The book is intended as a standalone monograph, but it is also a sequel to Scott's previous book, *Levels of Argument*. In that book, Scott investigated the philosophical methods exhibited in the same texts of Plato and Aristotle. The present book explores related questions of what audiences Plato and Aristotle thought amenable to ethical argument, and how those audiences would consequently benefit.

According to Scott, both Plato and Aristotle consider three broad audiences that might be persuaded by, and so benefit from, ethical argument: the many, the well-habituated few, and the even rarer philosopher. The many differ from the well-habituated insofar as they have not been properly raised so as to take pleasure in what is truly good. They consequently do not think that things like justice and virtue in general are valuable for their own sake. The well-habituated in turn differ from the philosopher insofar as they do not yet have a properly philosophical understanding of the genuine goods they take pleasure in. On account of these differences, the three audiences are not likely to be persuaded by the same sorts of argument, nor do they all benefit in the same ways. The arguments appropriate to each audience vary not just in their level of sophistication, but also in their subject matter. There are political arguments about the organization of the ideal city and who should rule it. There are also ethical arguments about, for example, what the virtues are and why they are intrinsically good for individuals to pursue.

In the *Resp.*, the story of who listens to what reasons goes roughly like this. So-called perfect philosophers (486e-1, 487a2-5) follow complex arguments leading them to knowledge of the Forms, and especially of the Form Good, and that knowledge equips them and them alone to rule. Well-habituated men like Glaucon and Adeimantus do not yet have such knowledge, but they are nevertheless receptive to ethical and political arguments that require at least some familiarity with Forms. The ethical arguments serve to "reinforce" their moral beliefs about the intrinsic goodness of justice and virtue and the like, and this reinforcement prevents them from "having their values undermined by bad argument or by non-rational desires" (p.7). (Scott is inclined to

think that philosophers might also benefit from reinforcement arguments, since they do not seem to have *entirely* rid themselves of irrational appetites; p.24 n.10) The political arguments are intended to convince the well-habituated of what a truly just city looks like and, perhaps above all, why philosophers should be appointed its rulers. The many, by contrast, need a rather different diet of argumentation. All ethical and political arguments must be stripped of premises involving Forms, since such metaphysical truths lie beyond their abilities of comprehension. Moreover, the ethical arguments should not aim at reinforcement, since the values of the many – their prizing of the sorts of things for which Socrates admonished them – are not values deserving reinforcement. Ethical arguments for the many should instead aim to “convert” them, to get them to appreciate justice and the other virtues as intrinsically valuable. Yet given all the cognitive and affective impediments that beset the many, their conversion rates will be low.

The *Eth. Nic.* is not so much a polished piece of literature aspiring to be transmitted to posterity, but rather a collocation of lecture notes intended for a specific audience: well-habituated Peripatetic philosophers who, as Scott puts it, “might one day advise or educate political leaders” (p.123). The arguments contained in the lectures are not supposed to lead those philosophers to the highest first principles (and certainly not the spurious Form Good!), but only to those principles specific to political science. In so doing, those arguments clarify the nature of the happy (*eudaimōn*) individual, and that clarity helps these future advisors understand the aims of politics and presumably better help rulers achieve those aims. Scott also defends the more controversial view that Aristotle provides in the *Eth. Nic.* ethical arguments aimed at moral reinforcement. On Scott’s reading, reinforcement is useful because, like Glaucon and Adeimantus, the members of Aristotle’s well-habituated audience may “still retain some strong *pathē*” (p.133), and their good habits may be “undermined” by bad argument (p.134). Whereas in the *Resp.* reinforcement arguments are principally concerned with the intrinsic value of justice, in the *Eth. Nic.* they appear to be more wide-ranging. They reaffirm the belief that the virtuous life really is to be pursued, that ethical virtues like courage and temperance really are necessary for achieving happiness, etc. Aristotle, however, denies in the *Eth. Nic.* that there is any place for ethical arguments aimed at moral conversion. Moral skeptics and agnostics will not benefit from his lectures, since they lack the moral intuitions from which ethical inquiry with Aristotle begins. Scott argues that, despite the absence of conversion arguments in his ethical works, we do find one (about the most choiceworthy life) in a passage from *Politics* VII.1. Scott suggests that this discrepancy between the texts reflects Aristotle’s changing views about the ability of reason to reform bad habits (p.163). Aside from Aristotle’s explicit remarks about the beneficiaries of the *Eth. Nic.*, Scott also finds evidence in the text that the young and incontinent – both excluded from attending his lectures – are nevertheless amenable to ethical argument. Since the young and incontinent both have an “emotion of aspiration towards the noble” (p.181), they should be receptive to conversion arguments exhorting them to the truly noble and admonishing them for acting otherwise. To that extent they have been raised sufficiently well so as to receive some benefit from ethical argument. By contrast, the many are not similarly (minimally) receptive, since they do not even aspire to the truly noble, but rather to goods like wealth and reputation.

Scott’s interpretations of these texts are each heterodox in their own way. The *Resp.* is often read as drawing a dichotomy between the philosophically inclined, who alone are amenable to moral improvement through ethical argumentation, and all others, who are doomed to a life without virtue and happiness because they “entirely fail to value what is genuinely good or fine in itself” (Bobonich 2017, 302). On Scott’s telling, however, Plato regards a much wider swath of humanity as able to benefit from moral argument; even the many, despite their base desires, stand

a (small) chance of reaping some benefit. Scott's take on the *Eth. Nic.* is also controversial, but not so much on account of the audience Aristotle supposedly deems fit for moral argumentation, but rather the *kinds* of argumentation appropriate for them. Very few scholars have argued, as Scott does, that Aristotle offers reinforcement arguments. Yet among those few, nobody else seems to argue that any of Aristotle's reinforcement arguments are "external" ones – that is, arguments whose premises do not appeal to the "internal" moral intuitions of its intended recipients. This will seem objectionable to all those who read Aristotle as disinclined to "provide any sort of foundation or justification for the correctness of the substantive moral outlook" he articulates (Vasilioiu 2007, 75). If Aristotle's arguments are supposed to reinforce the values to which the audience is committed, they consequently need only appeal to moral intuitions the audience already has (Lane 2021, 71).

In order to defend his provocative readings, Scott divides the book into two halves, each consisting of six chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. The first half focuses on the *Resp.*, and its initial three chapters discuss the beneficiaries of three "levels" or "routes" of ethical argument. Chapter 1 concerns the philosophers who take the "longer route" up to the Form Good. Scott argues that, according to Plato, "every human soul has the underlying capacity to attain knowledge" of the Forms (p.21), but most do not for two reasons: (i) their appetites lead them to believe that the sensible realm is what is most real; and (ii) they do not undertake the necessary preliminary studies in mathematics. As a result, perfect philosophers are rare birds. Chapter 2 concerns the "middle route" taken, for example, by Socrates and his interlocutors in the dialogue (viz., in Bks. V-VI). Their route does not ascend all the way to knowledge of the Forms, it only involves arguments referring to them. Scott contends that there are two versions of this route: an ethical one about the intrinsic value of justice, and a political one about the fitness of philosophers to rule. Both versions are only available to the well-habituated since they, unlike the many, are able "to countenance the existence of Forms (493e2-494a4)" (p.39).

Arguments appropriate for the many belong to the "shorter route," which Scott examines in the meatier Chapter 3. That chapter begins by acknowledging that there are grounds for pessimism about the benefits of argument for the many. For one thing, in the dialogue Socrates speaks principally to the concerns of the well-raised Adeimantus and Glaucon; Socrates does admittedly take on the challenge of Thrasymachus – a challenge echoing the sentiments of many – but his failure to convince Thrasymachus seems to indicate that the many will be similarly impossible to convince. Furthermore, Socrates suggests that the many have acquired all manner of false ethical beliefs from the poetry in their education, and, even if those beliefs were purged, their irrational appetites would likely erode their conviction in any true beliefs presented to them. However, according to Scott, none of these grounds for pessimism is dispositive. They show that persuading the many is tough, not impossible.

The next trio of chapters consider other textual evidence bearing on this question as to whether the many can, indeed, benefit from argument. Chapter 4 examines the role of education, honing in on Socrates' discussions of the deleterious effects of poetry and music (esp. 400c8-402c9), and of tragedy and comedy (esp. 602c1-608b2). The upshot of Scott's analysis is that these aspects of education are doubtless damaging, but the damage is not so complete as to render the many incapable of moral persuasion. Chapters 5-6 examine the four deviant characters – the timocrat, oligarch, democrat, and tyrant – discussed in Bks. VIII-IX. Scott argues that only the timocrat is, strictly speaking, able to be persuaded about moral matters. Although one might suspect that the oligarchs, democrats, and tyrants would together constitute the many, Scott denies that his reading undermines the possibility of the many being capable of moral persuasion. These

deviant characters are, after all, *types*, and most individuals are mixtures thereof; so long as the many all possess some degree of timocratic character, they, like the timocrat, will not be deaf to moral argument.

The second half of the book turns to the *Eth. Nic.* In Chapter 7 Scott argues that Aristotle in that text aims above all to provide clarity about the human good in order that his well-habituated audience might not only better understand their own virtuous aims, but also advise others as to how best to cultivate those virtuous aims in an entire city. In addition to this clarificatory aim, Aristotle offers “protreptic” arguments intended not to convert Thrasymachus and other moral skeptics, but rather to reinforce the noble values of the well-habituated (p.135). Scott first identifies protreptic arguments in X.3-6 about which pleasures are, in fact, good. In Chapter 8 – arguably the meatiest chapter of the second half of the book – Scott tries to show that such reinforcement arguments are neither rare in the *Eth. Nic.*, nor do they always contain premises appealing to the moral intuitions of Aristotle’s audience. Even though Aristotle clearly does not think that arguments can convert moral skeptics, his willingness to entertain “external” reinforcement arguments shows that he was keen to prevent the well-habituated from being led astray by bogus reasoning. According to Scott, most of Bks. I-V and the extended “*ergon-meson* argument” contained therein serve, at least in part, that prophylactic purpose. That extended argument reminds them, for example, that “what we intuitively call virtues really are the qualities necessary for *eudaimonia*” (p.159).

Chapters 9-11 consider four demographics that supposedly cannot benefit from the philosophical arguments of the *Eth. Nic.*: the young, the incontinent, the many, and women. Chapter 9 considers the arguments benefiting the young, who for Aristotle appear to include anyone up to the age of thirty-five (p.167). Scott argues that although they are not yet ready for the arguments Aristotle presents in his lectures, they are still responsive to moral encouragement and admonishment. In Chapter 10 Scott treats the incontinent and the many, both of whom in some sense “live by feeling (*pathos*)” (p.178). The bulk of that treatment is dedicated to resolving interpretive difficulties concerning each demographic before comparing Aristotle’s views about them. Chapter 11 leaves the *Eth. Nic.* in order to address Aristotle’s infamous remark about women possessing a deliberative faculty that is “without authority” (*akuron*, *Pol.* I.13, 1260a13). On Scott’s view, Aristotle does not mean that women’s deliberative faculty lacks “executive control” in the sense that its decisions are overridden by unruly passions. He instead means that the faculty is without “intellectual” authority outside the household; women are naturally bad at legislative, executive, and judicial deliberations (p.202).

In Chapter 12 Scott elaborates on Aristotle’s view about the role of habituation in moral education in order to compare it with Plato’s. Both thinkers agree that habituation is an essential first phase of education, in part because it makes the young open to the teachings they receive in the second phase of their education. Where Plato and Aristotle disagree most, according to Scott, concerns the sources of habituation. Whereas the *Resp.* “focuses almost exclusively on the arts, specifically music and poetry” (p.212), Aristotle seems to place greater emphasis on the habituation acquired from repeated practice, not aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, whereas Aristotle agrees with Plato that experiencing the beautiful in art helps cultivate in the young an appreciation of what is morally noble, he does not also see a causal connection because he denies the homonymy between *kalon* art and action. The book’s concluding chapter sums up the foregoing arguments before taking up Plato’s *Laws* and drawing connections deemed salient by Scott between it and the *Resp.* and *Eth. Nic.*

This book is apt to reward seasoned scholars and graduate students alike, and particularly on account of the way in which it breathes new life into well-known passages as well as uncovers other valuable but oft-overlooked ones. Quibbles could be raised here and there about points of interpretation. For example, at one point Scott addresses a passage (viz. *Resp.* 605b3) in which Socrates talks about the destructive effects of poetry on the rational part of the soul. There is a debate about this passage: when Socrates says that poetry *apollūsi to logistikon*, does he really mean that poetry *utterly* destroys our reason? Or does he mean, as Paul Shorey translates, that poetry merely *tends to* destroy it. Scott opts for the former without much argument, as if the text simply cannot bear an alternative meaning. But why not understand the aspect of the present-tensed *apollūsi* as giving the verb a progressive (“is destroying”) or conative (“tries to destroy”) spin?

More substantive concerns about the book are few but deserve mention. With respect to his interpretation of *Resp.*, Scott freely ascribes to Plato all sorts of views espoused by Socrates in the dialogue. But this transference of views is unjustified, even if it is common practice. Replacing “Plato thinks” with “Socrates thinks” would help a great deal. Yet that slide reflects a more general disinterest in letting considerations of genre influence textual interpretation. If one reads the *Resp.* as a protreptic rather than declaration of doctrine (and for a long history of such readings see Press 1996), then the veracity of the philosophical claims defended in it would be secondary; regardless of whether Plato genuinely believed those claims, he had his Socratic mouthpiece give voice to them in order to incite readers to the *vita contemplativa*. Such a protreptic reading would also render Scott’s comparisons with Aristotle disappointing, for without presupposing that Socrates = Plato, one will not be terribly moved by Scott’s subsequent discussions of Plato ↔ Aristotle. With regard to Scott’s reading of the *Eth. Nic.*, the biggest weakness lies in how little consideration is given to the ways in which Aristotle’s arguments are, as the Stagirite himself professes, supposed to make his audience better (see I.3, 1095a5-6; II.2, 1103b26-29; X.9, 1179a35-b4). That is, his arguments are supposed to foster moral improvement, not just prevent moral decline. But what exactly does Aristotle mean by this? Are clarificatory arguments about the human good supposed to help the audience become virtuous (see DaVia 2022, 153)? Do they make the audience more *phronimos* (see Moss 2012, 189)? Such questions are difficult, and there is doubtless a long route needed to answer them, but we can be grateful to Scott’s book for pointing us in the right direction.

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