

C.D.C. Reeve. *Aristotle on Practical Wisdom: Nicomachean Ethics VI*. Harvard University Press 2013. 296 pp. \$39.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674072107).

With *Aristotle on Practical Wisdom*, C. D. C. Reeve offers a guide to that book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which Aristotle discusses the virtues of thought, in particular, practical wisdom. There are four parts: an introduction (41 pages), a translation paired with brief paraphrases on facing-pages (43 pages), a commentary (175 pages), and indexes of topics and passages (15 pages). Like its companion volume, *Action, Contemplation and Happiness* (Harvard University Press 2012), this book links up Aristotle's ethics with his politics, metaphysics, logic, biology, and philosophy of mind in an attempt to give the reader a kind of panoramic view of the Aristotelian corpus. Anyone working on *Nicomachean Ethics VI* will want to take a look.

The volume is written for 'a wide range of readers' (ix), and this presumably accounts for some contradictory features. On the one hand, apart from two footnotes in the introduction, there are no citations to secondary literature on Aristotle. There is also no indication of the status of the various views advanced in the book, i.e., whether they are majority views, minority views, original to Reeve, ancient interpretations, etc. On the other hand, there are copious in-text references to sometimes obscure parts of the Aristotelian corpus, as well as philological discussions of various Greek terms—*hexis*, *diarein*, *horos*, etc. There are also some dense expositions of Aristotle's non-ethical philosophy, which will not be easily understood without some prior acquaintance with the material.

The 'Introduction', which is more or less pitched at an advanced undergraduate level, situates Aristotle's theory of practical wisdom within Aristotle's ethical thought and within ethical thought more generally. There are three parts. First, Reeve summarizes his interpretations of happiness, theoretical wisdom, and practical wisdom. Second, he discusses practical wisdom as it is described in various Aristotelian ethical texts, and here he argues that there is a strong continuity between the *Protrepticus*, *Eudemian Ethics [EE]*, *Nicomachean Ethics [NE]* and *Magna Moralia*. Third, he evaluates Aristotle's theory from the perspective of more contemporary philosophy, and here he discusses Kant, Sidgwick, the debate between ethical generalism and particularism, and the difficulties of translating *eudaimonia* as 'happiness'. Reeve moves quickly from issue to issue, ignoring possible objections and sidestepping longstanding interpretive debates, e.g., how to interpret Aristotle's definition of the human good in *NE I 7*. The material is not organized in support of any one thesis, but Reeve commits himself to many controversial theses along the way: for example, that practical wisdom has a theoretical component as well as a perceptual component (3); that theoretical wisdom is the science of theology (6); that given good legislation, 'an individual citizen's need for deliberation should be minimal' (10); and that ethical particularism is Aristotelian with regard to epistemological priority but ethical generalism is Aristotelian with regard to explanatory authority (34).

Reeve's translation of *Nicomachean Ethics VI* is very good: though fairly literal, it is also succinct and readable. This is not as great an achievement as it could have been, however, did we not already possess very good translations of *NE VI*. Given that *NE VI* is

the same as *EE* V (there being three books common to both treatises), we have in English alone over ten translations, many of which are recent and by leading scholars. Indeed, one not infrequently detects the influence of these translators, in particular, Terrence Irwin (*Nicomachean Ethics: Translated with Introduction, Notes and Glossary*: 2nd ed. Hackett 1999), whom Reeve seems to follow when he uses brackets to indicate words not found in the Greek text, and when he renders many important terms—theoretical wisdom’ (*sophia*), ‘understanding’ (*nous*), ‘scientific knowledge’ (*epistēmē*), ‘supposition’ (*hypolēpsis*), ‘cleverness’ (*deinotēs*), etc., Reeve’s penchant for the succinct and the literal often works to his advantage, but it sometimes creates odd language. Consider, for example, his translation of *NE* VI 7, 1141a18-20: ‘*So theoretical wisdom must be understanding plus scientific knowledge; scientific knowledge, having a head, as it were, of the most estimable things*’. What is it to have ‘a head of the most estimable things’? Reeve’s commentary does illuminate the line, but if the translation is supposed to be intelligible without a commentary, the reader needs more help. Compare Irwin: ‘*Theoretical wisdom is understanding plus scientific knowledge; it is scientific knowledge of the most honorable things that has received [understanding as its] coping stone*’. The second half of this line, though less succinct, is more intelligible. Theoretical wisdom is a specific kind of scientific knowledge, one that is of the most honorable things and that has received understanding as its ‘coping stone’, an alternative translation for *kephalē* (‘head’).

In his commentary, Reeve comes across as a kind of expert tour guide. Though he does argue for some specific interpretive theses (several of which are briefly mentioned in the ‘Introduction’), he spends most of his time drawing the reader’s attention to interesting, related or partially related passages from elsewhere in the Aristotelian corpus. Reeve is rarely critical of Aristotle, and in his zeal to provide cross-references sometimes glosses over what seem to be serious difficulties. For example, in Reeve’s translation of *NE* VI 6, 1441a3-8, Aristotle says that *nous* is a state, but Reeve in his commentary says that this *nous* is a ‘divine substance’ (169). However, according to Aristotle, a state is an item in a non-substantial category (*Categories* 8), and all items in non-substantial categories are ontologically dependent on substances, but not vice versa (*Categories* 5). Thus, if there is a *nous* that is a state, it cannot be the same *nous* that is a substance.

In the eyes of a specialist, the most striking feature of the volume will probably be the near total absence of references to secondary literature. What explains this? The closest thing we get to an answer comes in Reeve’s ‘Preface’: ‘A further component some readers might expect to find would consist of an expository and critical account of other interpretations of *Nicomachean Ethics* VI. So numerous, various, and complex are these, however, that such an account would tax all but the most committed, fail to convince the invested, and soon be out of date’ (x). This reasoning seems dubious. Why think that such an account ‘would tax all but the most committed’? Reeve seems to be assuming that were he to engage with any secondary literature, he would have to engage with all of it and at length. But why suppose this? Scholars often identify the best pieces of secondary literature and engage with them. They also sometimes relegate all such discussions to footnotes. In either case, the reader need not be unduly taxed. Why think that such an account would ‘fail to convince the invested’? I cannot find sufficiently good reasons for this pessimistic opinion. Many scholars seem capable of changing their views when presented with good

evidence. Why think that such a book would ‘soon be out of date’? Reeve presumably thinks that the book would extensively engage with all the secondary literature from the last ten to fifteen years. But if one were to rigorously but judiciously engage with the best secondary literature from the past two millennia, the resulting book could probably stand the test of time.

Moreover, even if one could not find reasons to give ‘an expository and critical account of other interpretations of *Nicomachean Ethics* VI’, one could still find reasons to cite other interpretations. For one thing, selective citations to secondary literature can give the reader some idea of what the author thinks is worth reading. If the interpretations are as numerous and complex as Reeve says they are, then this is precisely the sort of thing that many readers are in need of. Perhaps most obviously, though, citations enable one to acknowledge an intellectual debt. Though Reeve says in his ‘Preface’ that the work of ‘earlier translators and commentators’ has ‘improved’ his book, here listing nine names in particular, the book could easily give a reader the impression that Reeve has no serious intellectual debts to secondary literature. And even if one has no real intellectual debts, one normally adds a citation when one advances a minority view that looks similar to one already espoused. As it is, more than a few passages put one in mind of other recent work on Aristotle. For example, when Reeve notices the deontological character of the virtuous agent’s practical reasons when acting for the sake of *to kalon* (34-5), one is reminded of C. Korsgaard’s ‘From Duty and for the Sake of the Noble’ (in S. Engstrom and J. Whiting (eds.) *Aristotle, Kant and the Stoics*, Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 203-36). And when Reeve emphasizes that the so-called *kinēsis-energia* distinction should be characterized linguistically as a difference of aspect and not of tense (143), one thinks of M. Burnyeat’s ‘*Kinēsis* vs. *Energeia*: A Much-Read Passage in (but not of) Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*’ (in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 34 (2008), pp. 219-92).

Despite its serious breach of scholarly norms, *Aristotle on Practical Wisdom* will remain valuable, mostly to those already interested in the text of *Nicomachean Ethics* VI itself.

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