CHAPTER 1

Setting the Broader Background

Having now specified the focus and the aims of this book, I dedicate this short chapter to discussing the broader theoretical context that underlies the ideas discussed so far. I have suggested that Aristotle gives special emphasis to the idea that rational or intellectual understanding is crucial for living an ethically good human life. In the following section (section 1), I will explain these ideas at greater length. In doing so, I will also specify the differences between ancient and modern treatment of understanding and its importance for ethical life. More broadly, I want to suggest that in ancient philosophy generally, and in Aristotle in particular, a close connection is seen between epistemology and ethics. Through this discussion, section 1 also helps to explain at more length my choice of title for this book, as briefly discussed in the Preface.1

In section 2, I will explain how the framework of thought on this subject is also relevant for the interpretation of Menandrian drama. To speak about the theory of knowledge and ethics in connection with comic works risks transforming a piece of literature made for entertainment into an artificial expression of serious philosophical ideas—and this is not the view I want to convey. I believe that Menander, like any other playwright, wrote his plays with the intention of appealing to his audience and giving them an enjoyable dramatic experience. The aim of section 2 is precisely to explain the kind of pleasure that, I believe, Menander’s comedy is meant to convey.

1 Understanding, Ethics and Ancient Philosophy

In contemporary philosophy, epistemology is the discipline that focuses on issues related to knowledge and, more generally, the process of understanding. As a discipline, contemporary epistemology attempts to answer such questions as: “What are the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge? What are its sources? What is its structure, and what are its limits?”2 Typically, epistemology is seen as the study of justified belief. We know something because we first believe something. However, in order to be classified as true knowledge,

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1 See p. xi.
our belief needs to be i) true and ii) justified. Justification is an important element that enables true belief to become knowledge. We might just be lucky in believing something that finally turns out to be true; therefore, if we want to claim knowledge, we should give a justification for our beliefs. Hence, generally speaking, in contemporary philosophy “knowledge is a belief of a special kind, belief satisfying certain conditions. These necessary conditions for knowledge, on the traditional approach, are the truth of what is believed and the justification or evidence of what is believed”.4

In ancient Greek philosophy too, there is a concern with making sense of the interrelationship between knowledge, belief and truth.5 For instance, the distinction between belief (δόξα) and truth (ἀλήθεια) is discussed in Xenophanes6 and Parmenides7 while Anaxagoras’ fragments contain reflections on human intellectual power and the ability to infer from signs, and to understand what is invisible from what is visible.8 Thus, the question of the nature of the difference between belief and knowledge was already a major issue in early Greek philosophy; and belief was, typically, regarded as an inadequate source of knowledge, because it was variable and qualitatively different from knowledge. However, it is not until the time of Plato and Aristotle, in the fourth century BC, that we find fully developed theories about human intellectual ability, the possibility and prerequisites of scientific knowledge, the problem of the distinction between knowledge and belief and the question of the possibility of error.9

It is, however, worth noticing that the characteristic approach of ancient philosophers to epistemology is different from the contemporary approach outlined earlier. Justified belief, in Plato and Aristotle, does not have the same status as knowledge as it has, typically, in the contemporary approach. In ancient philosophy, to know is not just to justify a belief: to know something means to raise one’s own understanding to a level which is qualitatively different from that of mere belief. In this framework of ideas, to understand also means to realise that the higher status, that of understanding, epistēmē,10 is

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3 On the concept of ‘epistemic luck’ see Pritchard 2005.
6 DK 21, B 34.
8 DK 59, B 21b.
10 My translation of this word ἐπιστήμη as ‘understanding’ follows Burnyeat 1981. See chapter 3.2 for extended discussion on this topic.