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Eugene Garver’s *Confronting Aristotle’s Ethics* is a fascinating and bewildering book. Fascinating because it raises fundamental questions about what lessons — if any — a contemporary reader can draw from studying Aristotle’s moral philosophy, and it does so in a way that draws on the author’s wide reading in political philosophy and deep engagement with Aristotle’s philosophy (including not only the standard ethical treatises but also the *Rhetoric, Politics*, and *Metaphysics*). Bewildering because its scope and ambition are not well served by its prose. Garver is brimming with ideas but he is not a master of lucid presentation, and so the reader — if my experiences are representative — must struggle to make sense of this impressive work.

Garver is deeply ambivalent about Aristotle’s moral philosophy. He is attracted by the ideal of a morally excellent citizen fully engaged in the life of his community, a person with a strong sense of what is noble, someone who sees worldly success and such external resources as wealth and honour as valuable but nonetheless secondary in worth to the values of agency, practical wisdom, and emotional fulfilment. He appreciates the depth and systematicity of Aristotle’s ethical theory, but he thinks that its attractions are no longer available to us, because Aristotle’s thought is inextricably tied to the peculiar conditions of the cultural and political environment of fourth century Greece, and too much in the world has changed since then.

He argues, furthermore, that what is appealing in Aristotle’s moral philosophy often has a dark side. If I understand him correctly, this means that Aristotle’s ethical doctrines cannot be extracted from him and put to work in our own philosophical reflections and practical undertakings, because we would be entitled to believe them only if we also accepted the larger framework of which they are a part, and that larger framework is no longer credible. There is no section in Garver’s book that might be called ‘What is still living in Aristotle’s ethics’, presumably because his answer would be: nothing. He wishes he could agree that the ethical virtues are something like the qualities Aristotle described, and that these are the most important qualities for anyone to
cultivate at any time or place. But he cannot bring himself to believe this. So, he takes Aristotle to have failed in his attempt to make his moral philosophy an adequate system not merely for his world but for all human beings.

Many elements of Aristotle’s ethics trouble him: the unity of the virtues, the equation of justice and lawfulness, the supremacy of philosophical contemplation, the devaluation of craft knowledge, the appeal to practical wisdom as the standard of right and wrong, the confidence that being a good person guarantees that one will never become unhappy, the assumption that one must live at leisure in order to be virtuous, and the attempt to justify slavery. (Not all of these ideas received equal emphasis; what exercises Garver most of all is Aristotle’s demotion of the value of craft knowledge, and his attribution of supreme value to the peculiar qualities he counts as virtues.) With so much in Aristotle that is repellent or questionable, why should we continue to read him? ‘We read Aristotle to know ourselves. We inevitably read him through contrasts between his thought and modern morality’ (p. 125). What Garver perhaps means by this is that one good way to lay bare the tacit assumptions that guide our own practical thinking is to confront an alien way of organizing ethical life: we know ourselves better by recognizing how strange this other way of thinking is. But I confess that I am uncertain that this is what Garver does mean, because it would commit him to a closed-minded form of conservatism, according to which nothing could be amiss in modern moral ideas.

Garver makes it clear, however, that he is no uncritical fan of the modern world. He speaks, for example, of ‘the modern separation of the ethical from the political, which makes politics a matter of amoral cleverness and cunning, and the corresponding morality apolitical and, usually, sentimental’ (p. 11). Modern individuals, as he perceives them, make few moral demands on themselves or others; they are generally acquisitive, wanting not to rule but ‘to be left alone to consume’ (p. 122). He cites Alasdair MacIntyre more than any other contemporary philosopher, and seems sympathetic to MacIntyre’s dissatisfaction with the fragmented cultural framework of liberal societies. But Garver does not present Aristotle as a philosopher whose ethical philosophy is valuable because it provides a corrective of or viable alternative to our modern prejudices. The upshot, I am afraid, is that Garver’s engagement with Aristotle is entirely negative. He tells us how to understand him better, in order to see more clearly why we must reject him. He offers no suggestions about how to use Aristotle to build a better moral framework. ‘Practical self-understanding’, he says, ‘is increased by seeing something both attractive and impossible’ (p. 3). But how can the contemplation of impossibilities, however attractive, properly be called practical?

Garver’s first chapter, ‘What Aristotle’s Rhetoric Can Tell Us about the Rationality of Virtue’, introduces the reader to his basic framework for understanding Aristotle’s whole system of practical thought. He finds in Aristotle a