Aristotle’s Other Ethics: Some Recent Translations of the Eudemian Ethics

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Aristotle


Aristotle’s Eudemian Ethics [hereafter ‘EE’] has had a hard time of it in the modern period. From being regarded as not by Aristotle at all, it graduated to being Cinderella: doing a useful job, somehow, but not enjoying the limelight like its sister the Nicomachean ['NE']; recognized as thoroughly worthy, even as in some respects more workmanlike, less showy than NE, but usually only noticed when NE, or perhaps the Politics, or the Rhetoric (or the Magna Moralia) were being discussed. In the circumstances, all of this is understandable: not only were some parts of the text of EE corrupted in the process of transmission (in a way that NE generally was not), but from Bekker and his foundational 1831 edition of Aristotle onwards, the treatise has typically been
printed with Book VII following directly on Book III, on the assumption that IV-VI, though according to the evidence of the manuscripts ‘common’ to both works, actually belonged to NE. Once thus relegated, it was for most purposes hardly missed: there are differences, and important ones, between EE and NE, but with a few notable exceptions they tend to be differences of nuance and of style that it takes a trained eye to spot. It is no surprise, then, that the Eudemian tended to be spurned while the Nicomachean had a ball.

It is now clear, however, that for about four centuries after Aristotle EE, not NE, was the standard text. Moreover, as most now agree, the ‘common’ books were in all probability composed in the context of EE. Thus, strictly speaking, it is NE, not EE, that is lacunose – or rather would have been, had not someone, presumably Aristotle, filled the gap by loaning it the three central books of the Eudemian; and there is no hiding the fact that they do not altogether fit in NE, since the introduction of the Eudemian books meant, among other things, that the Nicomachean ended up with two distinct, and significantly different, treatments of pleasure.

One should not, however, be tempted to compensate for the injustices committed against EE by proposing to downgrade NE. There are signs that work may have been done to adapt the three books in question to their new location; if so, and if that work was done by Aristotle himself, then maybe he intended NE actually to displace EE, at least for some purposes. It may not be coincidental that NE, in its undisputed books, is probably the most fluent and finished of all Aristotle’s works, and the only one that even begins to illustrate, in parts, the sort of mastery of style that Cicero attributed to him, presumably on the basis of his reading of works now lost to us. Nor, of course, is NE any philosophical slouch; it is unlikely that, even with the common books restored to EE (and its textual problems resolved), many will prefer to read the Eudemian version of Aristotle’s Ethics when they can read the Nicomachean. Cinderella will remain in the kitchen.

At least, now, this prediction will be put to the test. The last quadrennium has seen the appearance of no fewer than three new translations of EE into English, and all of them include the common books as part of the work.1

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1 As, so far as I know, no translator into any other language has yet done; certainly none of those I shall introduce in the next paragraph (one, Catherine Dalimier, would probably exclude the common books anyway, regarding them as ‘mobile’, compatible with both EE and NE, but not decisively attributable to either [p. 43]; another, Marcello Zanatta, has special reasons for wanting to keep them exclusively for NE: see below).