Like Doctor Who, Aristotle Needs a Companion

Howard J. Curzer
Philosophy Department, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409-3092 USA
howard.curzer@ttu.edu

Polansky, Ronald (ed.)

The Companion consists of 19 articles plus an awesomely detailed, ‘Topical Bibliography to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics’ compiled by Thornton Lockwood. All 19 articles are solid pieces of scholarship, yet accessible – indeed well-written and useful – to non-scholars. Quite an achievement! The first 16 articles generally follow the order of the NE. The Companion’s last 3 articles discuss the relationship between the NE and the Politics, the Protrepticus, and the EE, respectively. Since gender distribution is a current issue in the profession of philosophy, I’ll mention that seven of the twenty pieces (35%) are authored by women.

Polanski remarks that the length of NE v indicates ‘the significance and difficulty’ of the virtue of justice (p. 151). Perhaps Polanski’s remark generalizes. If the length of authors’ and editors’ treatment of a subject is a rough indication of their view of its difficulty and significance, then Polanski’s view of what is difficult and significant in the NE mostly, though not completely corresponds to Aristotle’s view. The differences are that the Companion dwells longer than the NE on phronēsis (practical wisdom) while giving comparatively short shrift to moral virtue and friendship.
I suspect that the Companion’s distribution pattern is in-line with contemporary scholarship. Natali offers an alternative hypothesis for the disproportionate attention to phronēsis. Much of what Aristotle says about phronēsis is concentrated in NE vi.12-13. Natali says, ‘These two concluding chapters have been much discussed in modern scholarship, mostly because modern readers do not happen to like what Aristotle prima facie is saying’ (p. 195).

Although the first piece is entitled, ‘Introduction: Ethics as a Practical Science’, it is not an introduction to the succeeding articles. Instead, Ronald Polansky introduces the readers to the NE by providing several general cautions about the intellectual virtues. For example, noting that Aristotle firmly separates theoretical and practical sciences, Polansky warns that Aristotle does not utilize the conclusions of his theoretical inquiries as premises in his practical inquiries. Consequently, Polansky scolds MacIntyre and Williams for damning Aristotle’s ethics because of the failures of Aristotelian science. MacIntyre and Williams might reply that although Aristotle distinguishes the methods of the theoretical and practical sciences, he does not refrain from comingling their results.