Brad Inwood


This slim volume, based on a series of five lectures delivered at Harvard University, makes an unparalleled contribution to understanding the essence of Aristotelian philosophy as it developed in the half a millennium after the death of Aristotle.

The Hellenistic Peripatos was a late comer to the scene of contemporary philosophical analysis and appreciation, but after decades of intensive spade-work on the texts and their interpretation, the historical and philosophical significance of Aristotle’s heritage in the Hellenistic and early Imperial periods has come into focus. Integrating the insights of the Post-Aristotelian Peripatetics into the broader history of ancient philosophy was set in motion, when Julia Annas in *Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) considered their contributions in detail in her broad investigation of the major philosophical issues of Hellenistic ethics. Now Brad Inwood has taken another decisive step forward by showing the coherence and the creativity of the followers of Aristotle in their approach to ethical philosophy.

Inwood asks the question (p. 4): ‘What is it that most properly characterizes an approach to moral theory as Aristotelian?’ To answer the question he reviews and analyzes the Aristotelian philosophers from Aristotle’s successor, Theophrastus, down to Alexander of Aphrodisias in the third century AD. He concludes that what makes their ethical philosophy Aristotelian is not the virtue ethics that has for some time been recognized as an important part of Aristotle’s philosophical legacy, but rather its ‘naturalism’, its attempt to derive a theory of the moral life from the place of human beings in the natural world. Specifically, he identifies the role played by the assumption that the primary object of human desire corresponds to the ultimate goal of life and that this goal comes to be realized naturally in the rational life of a fully developed human being.

The meagerness of the surviving testimonies to the thought and writings of the various followers of Aristotle and the fact that many of the witnesses are hostile has presented major obstacles to recovering the precise details of the Aristotelian arguments or even their conclusions; but Inwood does a remarkable job of penetrating the polemics and articulating a plausible, coherent account of the twists and turns of the discussion as it proceeded through the series of Hellenistic and early Imperial Aristotelians, some known by name, some known through anonymous texts or fictionalized dialogs, and some only conjectured from their opponents.
Inwood focusses on the role of interschool debate as the driving force for philosophy in this period. The role of interschool debates among the Athenian schools, especially the Academic, Peripatetic, and Stoic schools, in the third to the first centuries BC, has not received the attention it deserves for its role in stimulating philosophical creativity in the period when Athens was the primary venue for philosophy in the Mediterranean world. After the philosophical schools were mostly abandoned during the siege of Athens by the Romans and Aristotle's books were transported to Rome, the Aristotelians took a new interest in editing and interpreting the texts of Aristotle's treatises and began to make commentaries the locus of philosophical creativity and discussion. The Hellenistic debates of the preceding centuries were eventually forgotten. Inwood has now brought them to light again and has shown not only how the dialectic of these debates shaped Peripatetic ethical theorizing, but also how the interschool debates and their underlying dialectic continued through the first century AD and still shaped the essays of Alexander of Aphrodisias in the third century AD.

The stage for this dialectical mode of philosophizing, Inwood points out, was set by Theophrastus, when he challenged some of Aristotle's positions and began to explore the tensions in Aristotle's discussions, making dogmatic assertions on ethical issues that Aristotle had left open or ambiguous. In the Hellenistic period debates with other schools kept the focus of the Peripatetics on proving such dogmatic assertions, even while allowing for flexibility and for the changes needed to defend and advance Aristotelianism in the face of challenges from other schools, provided these changes remained within the philosophical boundaries established by the school's founder, Aristotle.

Inwood identifies six topics on which Aristotle's successors explored possibilities that Aristotle himself had left obscure or undetermined: the role of pleasure in ethical motivation; the uniqueness of humanity's rational nature in the application of the function argument; the role of luck and the availability of non-character goods; the relationship of the contemplative virtues to the practical virtues; the relation between the control of the passions and the conception of virtue as a mean state; and the relative status of political and ethical philosophy. Over the course of the centuries these topics provided opportunity for a rich, variegated tapestry of philosophical reflection.

In tracing the discussion of these various issues Inwood shows how the primary dialectical opponents shifted over time. Though the Epicureans seem to have been among those with whom Peripatetics interacted in the third century, they dropped out in the second century BC. The Peripatetics and Stoics thereafter remained each other's primary interlocutors through the first century AD when Plutarch in his essays engaged in debate on behalf of Platonism.