BOOK NOTES

Aristotle: Hellenistic Philosophy

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The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle\(^1\) will become a standard guide for students in their initial encounters, stimulating them to read Aristotle for themselves (as Jonathan Barnes in his introduction stresses they should, xi-xiv); there are both suggestions for further reading and an 84-page bibliography. The self-avowed aim of the book is not to engage in controversy but to indicate where it exists; the six contributors follow these guidelines, though some (e.g. Christopher Taylor on politics) adopt a more critical stance towards Aristotle than do others (e.g. D.S. Hutchinson on ethics). Numerous problems are formulated with exceptional succinctness and in ways which will both prompt and clarify future debate (such as Stephen Everson’s treatment of the relation between the psychic and the physical; and Barnes’ clear framing of ‘individual forms’ is one which future specialist interpretations would ignore to their own loss).

Inevitably there will be points with which individuals may disagree. Everson apparently attributes to Aristotle (46) the claim that a true future-tense prediction of an event still in the future now is necessary because the prediction is now in the past; the extension of the principle “all that is past is necessary” from past events to past statements about future events was central to Prior’s interpretation of Diodorus’ Master Argument, but it does not seem certain that it plays exactly this role in Aristotle’s Sea-Battle. Barnes, criticising the interpretation of the being of the Unmoved Movers as a focal sense of being, remarks that “Aristotle cannot imagine that for horses to exist is for the unmoved movers to be in such-and-such a state”. But might Aristotle not suppose that to be a horse, and to produce horse offspring, is one way (being a fish is another, being an oak-tree a third) of achieving (a sort of) continued existence, and that just because this is a sort of continued existence, involving potentialities as well as actualities, it is derivative from continued existence simpliciter? (To argue thus is indeed to regard continued being as primary, temporary being as secondary.) This may not be a good argument, but it does not follow that Aristotle may not have envisaged it or something like it. Did Philoponus hold that heavier objects did not fall more rapidly (147)? His argument is rather that

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the speed of fall, in a medium at any rate, is not proportional to the weight. Hutchinson (204) follows Antiochus of Ascalon (cf. Julia Annas, The Morality of Happiness, 420) in the questionable interpretation of EN 1.10 as allowing that one can be eudaimon even if not makarios.

Timothy A. Robinson outlines Aristotle for the contemporary U.S. student. A striking feature of the book is the proportion of space devoted to politics, 33 of the 107 pages of exposition; by contrast, I recall being told in my own student days, by Guthrie, that the Politics was an optional extra. R.’s account of the Ethics begins, interestingly, not with book 1 and happiness but with book 2, virtue-ethics and emotional reactions, and some of the material that might come in a discussion of book 1 is deferred to the section on politics. R. warns the reader both generally and on specific issues that interpretations are subject to dispute; even so, there are points one might question, such as the treatment of everything existing by nature, right down to the elements, as a self-mover (26, cf.52 – “the nature of every natural object is an unmoved mover”). Such points do not however detract from the liveliness and clarity of the book. There is a full and useful bibliographical survey.

Aristotle’s ethics and politics are also the focus of Solange Vergnières’ contribution to the series Foundations of Politics. She investigates the place of nature, ethos and law in Aristotle’s treatment of the moral development of the individual and of constitutions of different types, against the background of earlier Greek thought and with pertinent contrasts to more recent philosophy, Kant and Rousseau being particularly prominent. Character may change even in the adult; perfect virtue and perfect vice are equally rare, and most people oscillate between self-control and lack of self-control (104); the idea of a sudden moral conversion is significantly absent (123). Law is the necessary second-best for the majority of people, enabling them to live together in cities; development of a good ethos remains the ideal achieved by a few, the concept in this at least being true to its aristocratic origins. In democracy it is matter that preserves form rather than vice versa (249). Political sovereignty is not natural or fundamental, but a contingent creation of human society, though one aimed at achieving a natural goal (209-10). V.’s book will be important both for students of political thought in general – we moderns who, in V.’s view (282) are “past-masters of the art of euphemism” and “heirs of the sophists”) – and for students of Aristotle in particular; there is not room here to mention all the aspects of Aristotle’s ethical and political thought (such as his treatment of slavery) that it encompasses.

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