

Guest Editor's Preface

[Pierluigi Donini](#)

Università Statale di Milano

Dipartimento di Filosofia

Why is Aristotle's ethics still of such great interest to us? For many of us a good answer, or better still a series of good answers, is probably offered by the first pages of Franco Trabattoni's work, which appears in this review issue. The fact that the author of these pages does not consider those same reasons as really valid is another matter, on which we may or may not agree; but the existence of these reasons and their complex nature is proof of the fact that the interest in Aristotle is not only diffused, but is also grounded on significant philosophical arguments.

It is of course legitimate (beside being comforting for a classical scholar) that even nowadays there are philosophers and professors interested in what Aristotle has to say: some of them actually indicate him as a guide to life in this chaotic world of ours.

However a scholar of the history of philosophy should find this situation uncomfortable: at least if he still thinks that, before being applied, Aristotle should be thoroughly understood, and that to attribute him something which (perhaps) to him was extraneous is wrong; and that it is equally wrong to eliminate those aspects which for him (perhaps) were essential but that for us are no longer necessary.

The scholar of the history of philosophy whose duty is to present the essays collected in this issue of the review finds himself in just this uncomfortable situation; on the other hand that same scholar would have no difficulty in admitting that this collection of essays indicates no single direction for a further interpretation of Aristotle and no clear theory which can embrace all the contributors: the authors of the different articles differ far too much from one another and each of them has had the possibility to freely express his personal opinion on Aristotle.

Nonetheless the editor thinks that the contributions collected can, in different ways and from different perspectives, satisfy the above mentioned need to understand Aristotle, without either adding or omitting too much of his original thought.

A first step forward should indeed be the consideration of the Aristotelian doctrines reception in the course of time and of the tradition of exegesis thereafter developed: the awareness of the gaps between the original formulation and its later interpretations will be certainly increased. Recent and relevant examples can be quoted in this sense; I'd like to remember only one of them: in her book *Morality of Happiness* (Oxford-New York 1993) Julia Annas studied -among a lot of things- the development and transformations the Aristotelian moral fundamentals (the notions of virtue, happiness and good) had to undergo during the age of Ellenism and in the imperial period. R.W. Sharple's essay which is here presented accomplishes precisely this operation with regard to a limited but important text, the VI book of *Nicomachean Ethics* which deals with the reciprocal implication (or is it a unity?) of virtues: a theme of Socratic/Platonic derivation which was reformulated by Aristotle and then studied in this form by his disciples, followers and commentators during the Ellenistic age, then in the late classical period (when a confrontation

with Stoicism, be it implicit, was still inevitable) and until the Byzantine age.

However, if we set out to read Aristotle with due respect for what he probably intended to say, further caution should be to remember that he did not make a clear distinction between ethics and politics, and that his fundamental book on ethics (but even the other one, the *Eudemian Ethics*, presents a situation similar to the one of the *Nicomachean Ethics*) is presented as a book on politics. This is the reason why the editor of this collection has considered it necessary to include some articles regarding questions and themes directly present in *Politics*.

A warning is again needed: the authors of these essays did not have a precise task and certainly they did not aim to demonstrate that Aristotelian morality was firmly rooted, in its creator's mind, in the *polis* culture and environment.

One of these articles (that of Paolo Accattino) deals with virtue as fundamental connotation and discriminating criterion for belonging to the social class which, in Aristotle's opinion, was the most suitable to rule the *polis*; Lucio Bertelli's essay shows that the education to virtue is, already in the *Protrepticus* and even more distinctly in the two *Ethics*, the task of legislation, and that the man of politics multifunctional figure, at least in its highest expression, is absorbed by the legislator-educator figure. On the other hand Mario Vegetti's analysis on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, even if it does not deal principally with parts of *Politics*, can be collocated in that same perspective that the editor's presentation is recommending.

The editor holds indeed that the Aristotelian link between ethics and politics is the other important fact which must not be neglected when discussing (as is frequent nowadays) the possibility of proposing a morality of Aristotelian inspiration: the editor is indeed convinced (although not everybody will agree) that an Aristotelian morality can hardly be integrated within a philosophical perspective centred on the individual: the individual with his need for freedom, his requirements of self-fulfilment, his fear of defeat due to a lifelong competition which compels him to continuous and merciless confrontations in every moment and situation, be it at the workplace or in sentimental relationships -or, let's be frank, even in the simply sexual relationship.

It is useful at this point to quote at least one example from the recent Aristotelian literature, not in order to recommend the editor's perspective, but in order to declare as explicitly as possible his intentions. In Trabattoni's essay reference is frequently made to the currently widespread idea (almost a common opinion, as the author underlines) that in Aristotle's doctrine man is not fully responsible for his character, because his character has not been the object of a voluntary choice: in this perspective character is the result of habits which date back to childhood, which have been absorbed from the environment or which, in the best of cases from Aristotle's point of view, have been imposed by the educators. This opinion is however open to debate, because (when a correct distinction is made between autonomy of will, i.e. *hekousion*, and choice, i.e. *proairesis*, operation which does not appear problematic knowing the text of *Nicomachean Ethics III* and *Eudemian Ethics II*) it should seem obvious that Aristotle (at least in *Nicomachean Ethics*) defines autonomy of will in such broad terms that voluntary actions can be both those accomplished as expression of the character which has been formed under the influence of habit, environment, educators, and also those which have led to that character's formation.

The above mentioned common opinion has moreover recently been called into question in an article which appeared in the latest issue of *Phronesis* (volume XLV, 2000: Gianluca Di Muzio, *Aristotle on improving one's character*): the article is certainly well-balanced and it might disappoint only those Italian readers who can easily recognise that the author - whose origins seem obvious - shows no knowledge of what has been written in his native language in the last fifteen or twenty years. Obviously the fault lies with those Italian scholars who, compared to

their European and extra-European counterparts, insist on using a marginalised language. Di Muzio's reasoning is well balanced and, although he correctly remarks that Aristotle does not admit that one can suddenly change his character only if he wants to, he observes that there are sufficient grounds in *Nicomachean Ethics* to assure also that Aristotle's intention was not to make of character a cage or a prison from which there was no escape and that however difficult a transformation in character might be it was still possible. This seems to be well-founded and might appear relatively new to the english-speaking world; what is surprising is the author repeating observation that in any case Aristotle excluded that this transformation in character could be due to "external" influences or initiatives: an idea which is even more surprising if we think that it is the author himself who draws attention to the text of the treaties on friendship (*Nicomachean Ethics* IX, 1165b 13-22), in which Aristotle holds that it is the duty of a friend to take care of a friend who has fallen into vice and immorality (as long as the case does not appear to be incurable). How to intervene and the chances of success as suggested by Aristotle are not relevant here; what is relevant is to remember that the aid (Aristotle actually says *boethen*) given when a friend's character is at risk constitutes the educational (or re-educational) intervention that Aristotle recommends in the last chapter of book X of *Nicomachean Ethics* on behalf "of children and of friends" (1180a 30-32) when faced with a situation in which legislators and social community do not take enough care of the citizens' education to virtue (which would indeed be his first preference).

In other words a transformation in characters is however possible, but only thanks to an external initiative; moreover this transformation is possible only in the cultured and educated social environment of a community of citizens in which, even if the common care for customs is absent, there still exist individuals as the Athenian gentleman Vegetti speaks of (but also, outside Athens, the upholders of a similar education) - figures who for tradition, education and culture are capable of transmitting fundamental values and approved behaviour at least within the bounds of family and friends. In this perspective the Aristotelian concern for the legislator's work, which Bertelli often refers to, and the philosopher's preference for the aristocratic government Accattino deals with, find an explanation and, in my opinion, a confirmation: it should also be clear that the question of autonomy of will and responsibility was not, for Aristotle, a specific moral problem (it is therefor also licit -perhaps- to ask oneself what possibilities this conception has of adjusting to our world, when any civilised country possesses structures of education and public instruction which can even be imposing -something that Aristotle would have appreciated- the results of which can be daily observed by crossing a park of any European city or by watching the students come out of any high-school of our cities).

The editor of this issue knows of course that by underlining that such an interpretation of Aristotelian ethics may be made, he runs the risk of confirming once again its limits, of underlining once again its "parochial" nature (according to a famous definition remembered below by Vegetti), its disposition to accept the traditionally recognised values, the ones upheld by the higher classes.

To some extent, the criticism some scholars who are more sympathetic with the Socratic/Platonic tradition (as Trabattoni and Vegetti are) move to the Aristotelian doctrine is clear to the editor. More than a defence of Aristotle (which seems, even to him, quite ingenuous, let's be frank) the editor would rather question whether the criticism ought to be limited to Aristotle. Better still: the criticism could be more radical and the comparison with Plato could be developed to such an extent that Aristotle himself would appear to be, at least in some aspects of his anthropology, much more archaic than his teacher (in *some* aspects, not in all of them. This is not the place nor the time to discuss about it, but I'd like to remember that *On the Soul* and *Poetics* should be considered as well as the two *Ethics*). However, these considerations would to some extent render less legitimate the frequent question posed by the moderns to Aristotle: in this sense

Trabattoni's survey of modern opinions is particularly instructive.

Aristotle is actually completely justified in saying that virtue and vice are "voluntary" (see observation above), as he is in saying that "it is our choice to be men of virtue or men of vice": this must not lead us to think that in his ethic's latest version Aristotle considered possible a "choice of life" of each single individual -this perspective can be traced only in *Eudemian Ethics* 1214b 6-11, a text which is probably ancient (although this may be reflected, with a limited but interesting significance in *Metaphysics* Gamma 1004b 24). Truth is that it depends "on us" (i.e. on the community of cultured and rich citizens) to transmit to the fellow-citizens of the same class or, at worst, to family and friends at least, those values and that particular behaviour which have already been absorbed by each member of the educated and well-to-do upper class. To the above mentioned modern common opinion Aristotle would have answered that, if it is debatable that the individual is not responsible for his character, it is absolutely certain that "we are all" responsible for our characters.