
Book Reviews

Aristotle's Ethics as First Philosophy

Claudia Baracchi

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Writing a book on Aristotle from a continental perspective with scant reference to either Heidegger or Levinas would seem a daunting task, but not for Claudia Baracchi. In doing so, she makes a case for re-envisioning Aristotelian ethics, one that "...undertakes to demonstrate the indissoluble intertwinement of practical and theoretical wisdom (*phronesis* and *sophia* as well, as, concomitantly, *praxis* and *theoria*)." Along the way, she provides a good commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*).

Baracchi's book is easily read by any astute reader of ancient philosophy. There is liberal use of transliterated Greek, with no interpretation other than context. In some instances, she does use the Greek, without immediate translation, especially in the extended quotes that she uses quite liberally throughout the book. Baracchi's writing style can be quite clear, but in other instances, it tends to be verbose, when clarity would better serve her making her point. This is a very interesting read, but one that needs some clarification if the argument is to be convincing.

Baracchi begins by giving a short history of Aristotelian interpretation, one by the Scholastics and the other by Persian-Arabic scholars. The principle difference is their approach to knowledge; the latter opts for an emphasis on the ethical-political meaning, while the former treats "cognitive concerns." Her thesis reflects her agreement with that school of thought, as she "undertakes to show how ethics in the Aristotelian texts... is disclosed as *philophia proto*—ethics, it is 'praxical,' intuitive, indeterminately a-logical or pre-logical features, as first philosophy, out of which (meta)physical, epistemologi-

cal, and psychological reflections unfold in intimate connection with each other." She begins her argument in *Metaphysics A* and in the *Posterior Analytics*.

From the *Metaphysics*, Baracchi indicates that Aristotle believes that desire is the basis for the human quest for knowledge. That leads to the search for perceptual knowledge, or as Aristotle would say, sensation. Hence, even in the logical works, Baracchi claims that at the level of the knowledge of universals, the basis for knowledge is experience.

This idea is compatible with the presentation of the *Posterior Analytics*. First principles come from induction (*epogoge*), which is itself an abstraction that cannot be demonstrated (the definition of a "first principle"). But scientific knowledge (*episteme*) is not derived from sensation, but from this same repetition of experience. I find Baracchi's use of the etymology of *episteme*, from *histemi* and *ephistemi*, "setting up repeatedly, over, and steadfastly" interesting. This repetition is not necessarily from one individual, but could well take place in a community, as members of the *polis* build on past experiences.

From these two ideas, Baracchi feels that the requirement for a "first principle" has been met. It is the "first known", in that it is the most immediate. At the same time, being the result of intuitive knowledge, it can be the basis of all other knowledge, the ethos, the living, that undergirds all other inquiry. It is not the result of demonstration, but instead, it is intuitive, the result of consistent experience.

This summary gives only the bare bones of Baracchi's complex argument, but it does show her justification of her claim that ethical principles are first principles. She then begins the heart of her project, which is to provide a commentary of the NE with her rather unique view in mind.

The basis of much of Baracchi's consideration in the commentary on Books 1-7 concerns the two-fold meaning of ethos, as it concerns both "demeanor revealing character" and "psychological conformation wherein an individual as well as a community find their home." Again, we see the combination of praxis and theory which is the basis of her thesis. It is her contention, once again, that experi-

ence (specifically, the practice of living) is the basis for all theoretical knowledge, hence ethics is then a “first principle.” This leads to some very intriguing and thought provoking ideas. In looking at the virtues, Baracchi points out that her thesis would lead to a sort of infinite regress, for the “psychological conformation” determines the action, which is based on habituation, which, for it to be a virtuous action, must be based on a prior intention and so on. Other virtue ethicists have considered the same issue (Rosalind Hursthouse for one). Baracchi uses Hursthouse’s answer, that it is in the context of a community that one can determine the parameters of a moral act. But then she goes on to address an issue that Hursthouse does not. How does the community define the virtue aside from the consideration of the individuals? Baracchi does not give a real answer either, only pointing out the issue, which may best be considered in either in terms of an anthropological or biological answer. Hursthouse, however, is more than happy to trace it back into the “domain of those animals proximate to the human animal,” especially those that even Aristotle agrees, “live by habit.”

Perhaps the most interesting point Baracchi makes concerns the consideration of the “thinking part” of the soul. She uses the outline that Aristotle provides at the beginning of Book 6, and explicates in some detail the intellectual virtues he lists. *Techne* ultimately rests in *phusis*, as does *episteme*, so they cannot be a part of first principles. They can, however, be the raw materials for first principles when considered in conjunction with the use of *logos*. When an individual has the “conviction or trust (*pisteuein*),” those become first principles. Baracchi quotes from both the *NE* and the *Posterior Analytics* to support her view.

So if indeed we know [ismen] and also have conviction [pistethomen] [of a fact or conclusion] through the first [principles], then we know we’re convinced of these to a higher degree [than the fact of conclusion], since it is through these that we also [know and are convinced of] what follows (*PA*, 72a 32-33).

This leads to an interesting comparison with more contemporary epistemologies, for it seems that in this case, first principles could be infinitely revisable (perhaps even comparable to the suggestions made by WVO Quine).

We are, thus, bound to conclude, with Aristotle, that only concerning the eternal and divine, that is, the cosmos, the spheres, their circular motion, the first mover(s), can there be science, strictly speaking.

To further tie the intellectual virtues to experience, Baracchi sees the connection between *nous* and *aesthesis*, and divorced from *logos*. In simplistic terms, *nous* strictly understands the natural world, the *phusis*, but at the same time, she says that it is in the rational part of the soul. To explain this apparent problem, she proposes a very Heideggerian idea that the *nous* is that border where “discourse (*logos*) meets silence, and its own end (or origin), the way in which speaking (in its very articulation) is traversed by the unspoken and unspeakable.”

Phronesis, then is that rational ability that “orients the living toward its highest achievement and self-realization (its own good).” So, it would determine the best of the desired actions in accordance with one’s conception of happiness, for which virtue would then actualize in action. This fits nicely with the “virtue before virtue” dilemma previously posited, including the propensity toward infinite regress, for the action would be a part of the determination, the *telos* toward which one is moving, but it would be determined by *phronesis*. It seems that Baracchi makes this regress more of an issue in her interpretation that it seems to be in more traditional approaches to Aristotle, and thus this seems to be an issue for which she must have a better explanation for her ideas to have credibility.

The last of the intellectual virtues Aristotle mentions in *NE* Book 7 is *sophia*, “knowledge in its perfection, completeness, and regality.” It is the kind of knowledge that is transcendent, including the realization of the good without qualification. As such, it is synonymous with *theoria*, generally understood as a more transcendent knowledge. In it, the totality of the knowable is realized. Baracchi takes great pains to point out that this does not mean we are in any way forsaking the practical foundation of knowledge. As a case in point, she cites a passage from the *Eudemian Ethics* where Aristotle states that “medical art is a principle in a way, and health in another way, and the former is for the sake of the latter (1249b12-13). She then explains, “theoretical knowledge, wisdom, is inherently practical, and

the practical is pervasively theoretical.” *Sophia*, then, is the connection between knowledge and intuition, or the difference between being wise and merely ‘knowing’.

And we have thus come full circle to the considerations laid out at the beginning: on ethics as first philosophy; on science as that which structurally *cannot* account for *nous*, for it rest on it; on metaphysics itself, qua investigation into the divine (*nous*), as irreducible to science; on *nous* in its non-rational and non-discursive character, that is, as only liminally speakable, marking the limits of *logos* while remaining *beneath the limen of logos*, subliminal with respect to the threshold of knowledge, provoking discourse from out of its literally sublime imperviousness; on *nous* as relating to embodied experience of what is primary and what is ultimate—as ultimately belonging in life, with the living, in action.

Baracchi interrupts her commentary on the *NE* to take a brief look at *Metaphysics* Book 3. It is a bit puzzling (at least initially) why she does. She says in her brief introduction that she wishes to explore “Aristotle’s thoroughly practical argumentation regarding noetic axioms...”, but how it relates to her argument is very vague. The consideration of the law of non-contradiction is a very interesting argument, and perhaps Aristotle’s use of dialectic at its finest. Although Baracchi mentions that use of the dialectic, it is by no means the purpose of her argument. Her primary point only comes late in that short chapter, when she uses the law of non-contradiction as a way of combating moral relativism. If her initial view is correct, and first principles are infinitely revisable, it does little to help the charge of relativism, only providing proof that at the same time, an action cannot be moral and immoral. Baracchi recognizes this.

Not only is the ethical inquiry not dependent on an a priori determination of the good, but the inquiry pursuing such a determination, that is, first philosophy, is grounded, clarified, and brought to completion by the examination of ethical structures. We are therefore left with a bit of a quandary. Does the application of this principle really shed little light on the absolute empirical nature of Aristotelian ethical thought?

Baracchi returns to the final two books of the *NE* in the final chapter. Her consideration of friendship is also rather unique, not

focusing on the three deepening types of friendship, but on the role that strong, trusting interpersonal relationships play in determining one's sense of morality. In that way, she sees Aristotle's view of friendship as a way that people relate in the *polis*. Per her comments on Book 5, justice emerges as a legal relationship, and friendship, a personal one. It is through the latter relationship that the *polis* is strengthened.

So strong are the bonds of friendship that Baracchi sees Book 10 as a continued explication of this virtue. The type of friendship discussed in Book 10 is between mortals and the gods, or at least the divine. Baracchi points out a change in terminology—from the emphasis on the *logos* of the former books, to the language of *nous*, *theorein*, and *sophia* in Book 10, with *nous* identified as the “most outstanding of human activities...” but that *sophia* is the “comprehension of beautiful and divine beings.” She interprets that dichotomy as indicating Aristotle vacillating between the good and the good *simpliciter*. Living life with the understanding of the ultimate good is the divine life, the most fulfilling life, according to Baracchi's interpretation. It is a transcendent state, where the individual fully integrates the *nous* and thereby, her own individuality. It is a rather pantheistic claim, one that has been made through the ages as the ultimate in self-realization.

Baracchi has some very interesting ideas, particularly in the explication of *NE* Book 6. Her emphasis on Aristotle's empiricism, however, seems to ignore many key passages in both the *Organon* and the scientific works. Most obvious is the lengthy discussion in the *Metaphysics* concerning substance and form. She gives little attention to the extended dialectic as Aristotle explores the relationship of those two ideas to first principles. Hence, the most extended treatment of first principles in the Aristotelian corpus of that topic is almost totally discounted. Perhaps one would be well served to contrast her work with T.H. Irwin's *Aristotle's First Principles*, where the emphasis is on the dialectic arriving at first principles, and not empirical evidence alone.