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**Aristotle and the Higher Good**

**By HARRY V. JAFFA**

**ARISTOTLE’S NICOMACHEAN ETHICS**

Translated By Robert C. Bartlett And Susan D. Collins

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Some time in the 1920s, the Conservative statesman F. E. Smith — Lord Birkenhead — gave a copy of the “Nicomachean Ethics” to his close friend Winston Churchill. He did so saying there were those who thought this was the greatest book of all time. Churchill returned it some weeks later, saying it was all very interesting, but he had already thought most of it out for himself. But it is the very genius of Aristotle — as it is of every great teacher — to make you think he is uncovering your own thought in his. In Churchill’s case, it is also probable that the classical tradition informed more of his upbringing, at home and at school, than he realized.

In 1946, in a letter to the philosopher Karl Löwith, Leo Strauss mentioned how difficult it had been for him to understand Aristotle’s account of magnanimity, greatness of soul, in Book 4 of the “Ethics.”

The difficulty was resolved when he came to realize that Churchill was a perfect example of that virtue. So Churchill helped Leo Strauss understand Aristotle! That is perfectly consistent with Aristotle’s telling us it does not matter whether one describes a virtue or someone characterized by that virtue. Where the “Ethics” stands among the greatest of all great books perhaps no one can say. That Aristotle’s text, which explores the basis of the best way of human life, belongs on any list of such books is indisputable.

In his great essay “On Classical Political Philosophy,” Strauss emphasizes the continuity between pre-­philosophic political speech and its refinement by classical political philosophy. It is part of the order of nature (and of nature’s God) that pre-­philosophic speech supply the matter, and philosophic speech the form, of perfected political speech, much as the chisel of the sculptor uncovers the form of the statue within the block of marble. Before the “Ethics” men knew that courage was a virtue, and that it meant overcoming fear in the face of danger. Aristotle says nothing different from this, but he also distinguishes true virtue from its specious simulacra. The false appearance of courage may result, for instance, from overconfidence in one’s skill or strength, or from one’s failure to recognize the skill or strength of his opponents. The accurate assessment of one’s own superiority of strength or skill, which means one really has no reason to fear an approaching conflict, is another false appearance of courage. A false courage may also result from a passion that blinds someone to the reality of the danger he faces. In short, the appearance of courage may be mistaken for actual courage whenever the rational component of virtue is lacking.

The existence of politics before political philosophy is what makes political philosophy possible. Politics is inherently controversial because human beings are passionately attached to their opinions by interests that have nothing to do with the truth. But because philosophers — properly so called — have no interest other than the truth, they alone can bring to bear the canon of reason that will transform the conflict of opinion that otherwise dominates the political world.

Unfortunately, what has been called philosophy for more than a century has virtually destroyed any belief in the possibility of objective truth, and with it the possibility of philosophy. Our chaotic politics reflects this chaos of the mind. No enterprise to replace this chaos with the cosmos of reason could be more welcome. The volume before us is much more than a translation. The translators, Robert C. Bartlett, who teaches Hellenic politics at Boston College, and Susan D. Collins, a political scientist at the University of Houston, have provided helpful aids. Many Greek words cannot be easily translated into single English equivalents — for example, the Greek word *techne*, which appears in the first sentence of the “Ethics.” It is here translated as “art,” as it usually is. But the Greeks made no distinction, as we do, between the useful arts and the fine arts. The most precise rendering is probably “know-how,” but that does not seem tonally right. The best solution is to use an approximation like “art” and supplement it with notes. This is what the translators have done, in this case and others, with considerable thoroughness.

They have also supplied an informative introduction, as well as “A Note on the Translation,” a bibliography and an outline of the work. All this precedes the main text. Afterward comes a brief “Overview of the Moral Virtues and Vices,” a very extensive and invaluable glossary, a list of “Key Greek Terms,” an index of proper names and at last a detailed “general index.” Together these bring the original text within the compass of every intelligent reader.

Thomas Aquinas, writing in the 13th century, believed that in the “Ethics” Aristotle had said everything needful for happiness in this life. Thus Aquinas did not write his own book on ethics, but instead wrote a commentary on Aristotle. This tradition was extended by the greatest political philosopher of the 20th century, Leo Strauss, who wrote that all his work had no other purpose than to address “the crisis of the West.”

But what is the West? And what is its crisis? According to Strauss (and many others), the West is the civilization constituted at its core by the coming together of classical philosophy and biblical revelation. The vitality of Western civilization results from the interplay of these alternative principles, though each contains within itself what claims to be exclusive and irrefutable authority. Symbolic of this authority are Athens and Jerusalem. In “The Second World War,” Churchill remarks that everything valuable in modern life and thought is an inheritance from these ancient cities. The debunking both of Socratic skepticism (“the unexamined life is not worth living”) and of biblical faith (“Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”) has led to the crisis of the West, a chaos of moral relativism and philosophic nihilism in which every lifestyle, no matter how corrupt or degenerate, can be said to be as good as any other.

In their brilliant and highly readable “Interpretive Essay” Bartlett and Collins suggest, without positively asserting, that Aristotle offers a solution to the problem, or crisis, of human well-being. But they seem to doubt whether it can meet the challenge of the God of Abraham. But these two principles are not adversarial in all respects. Indeed, much of Strauss’s work is a radical attack — made with the greatest intellectual competence — against the latter-­day enemies of both the Bible and a Socratic Aristotle. Strauss maintained that Athens and Jerusalem, while disagreeing on the ultimate good, disagree very little, if at all, on what constitutes a morality both good in itself and the pathway to a higher good.

Aristotle’s greatness of soul (magnanimity) may seem to resemble pride, the greatest of sins described in the biblical canon. But Thomas Aquinas’s interpretation of the “Ethics” offers proof against theological negativism. And in the “Summa Contra Gentiles,”Thomas made the case for sacred doctrine on the basis of Aristotelian premises. It is an assumption of Aristotle’s philosophy of nature that the highest good of each species is accessible to all, or nearly all, its members. For man the highest good is wisdom. But since few if any human beings attain it, Aristotle’s nature requires a supernatural correlate: the afterlife. Whatever one thinks of this argument, it points to a dialectical friendship between Athens and Jerusalem. All the more reason for them to join forces in the desperate struggle, still going on, between civilization and barbarism.

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