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## Eugene Garver, *Confronting Aristotle's Ethics* (Review)

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## Confronting Aristotle's Ethics (review)

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*Confronting Aristotle's Ethics*  
by Eugene Garver

Chicago: University of Chicago Press,  
2006. Pp. ix + 290. \$49.00, cloth.

Readers of this journal are likely to be familiar with Eugene Garver's 1994 *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character*. The main claim advanced in that important book is that for Aristotle rhetoric is an art because it has internal norms and ends. From this, it follows that although any red-blooded rhetor probably does aim at winning a case, advancing a political career, getting rich, and other external goals, what is artful in rhetorical craft (*technikos*), and hence expressive of the distinctive human capacity for human rationality, is timely argumentation that binds premises to actionable conclusions through displays of good character and apt emotional response. This ordered combination of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* recruits, or if you will interpellates, an audience that is uniquely capable of judging cases, proposals, and performances reasonably. In this way Aristotle defends rhetoric as a genuine art—an intellectual virtue—against Plato's *Gorgias*.

To arrive at this conclusion Garver draws more widely on other parts of the Aristotelian corpus than rhetorical scholars normally do. In particular, he contrasts external with internal ends by using Aristotle's metaphysical distinction between movements, processes, or behaviors (*kineseis*), of which the world is chock-full, and actualizations or realizations (*energeiai*) of capacities, which are more rare. Because rhetorical art, qua artful, is an actualization, Garver infers that it is a "practical art" and so brushes up closely against ethical-political *praxis*.

How closely? To be sure, they are not identical. *Praxis* actualizes our rational capacities by issuing in deeds done for their own sake rather than in an ordered series of acts whose intelligibility and worth are, in the end, measured by their outcomes or products, as in arts (*poiesis*) (46). For this reason a rhetor or a doctor can display artfulness by consciously misbehaving as well as by doing his or her job well, whereas willful misbehavior on the part of a moral agent automatically disbars him or her from possessing practical wisdom (*phronesis*) at all (46; see *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE] 1140b22–25). Accordingly, even though moral virtues and technical skills are both acquired by slowly internalizing norms that at first aim only at external ends (29) and are both matched to their distinctive ends through their internal rational norms, Aristotle makes it abundantly clear that “the arts, including rhetoric, do not bring the soul into a good condition” (10). They are not the wellspring or protector of the intrinsically good actions that are constituents of happiness. That role is assigned to moral virtues such as prudence, courage, liberality, and, when these are practiced in relation to others, justice and friendship.

*Confronting Aristotle's Ethics* begins by reviewing the above account of rhetorical art in Garver's earlier book. Precisely because that account posits a greater affinity between ethical virtue and craft knowledge than most contemporary analyses of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Garver feels a need to spell out more carefully than usual why Aristotle thinks that the arts, even at their best, cannot yield the intrinsically good acts that the moral virtues do and why for Aristotle the habitual performance of just such acts is constitutive of happiness (*eudaimonia*). To answer these questions is the aim of the book.

Garver reports that satisfactory answers are surprisingly rare even in otherwise sophisticated contemporary Aristotelian studies (5–7). Now and again he points to one reason why this might be so. Since at least the eighteenth century, Aristotle's ethical theory has been commended by sloughing off its original political integument. Even Hannah Arendt, a devotee of Aristotle's conception of the public life if ever there was one, says that public figures must leave happiness to the private lives of little people. This depoliticization of ethics has allowed contemporary commentators to evade Aristotle's burden of proof. As good readers of Aristotle they may try to distance themselves from people who think that there might be an art of happiness by which one can technically realize one's desires. (Your local Barnes and Noble will show you to the appropriate well-stocked shelves.) They will also take their distance from those who think that the defects of

a technical approach to ethics can be alleviated by laying down categorical constraints on desires, à la Kant. As readers of Aristotle, they will know that this solution is no more Aristotelian than is utilitarianism. Aristotle thinks that virtuous action expresses rather than suppresses one's urges, desires, and passions. Nor, Garver all too briefly argues, is modern communitarianism any more Aristotelian, in spite of its protestations to the contrary (128). Substituting tradition for the vanished *polis* will not do, he says, presumably because it undercuts the rationality that is Aristotle's core commitment. It will give you Edmund Burke, Michael Oakeshott, and Alasdair MacIntyre but not Aristotle.

Garver's main contention is that we cannot even hope to see the synthetic bond Aristotle forges among moral virtues, practically wise actions, and happiness unless we acknowledge that the locus of Aristotelian ethical *praxis* is and must be active participation in political leadership. This kind of leadership, Aristotle argues, is irreducible to technical rationality. An art cannot "decide what arts are to be cultivated in the city, by whom, and how far" (*NE* 1094b30–b2). These issues depend on questions about value that are ethical, not technical. This is why Aristotle says that ethics is a proper part of politics (*NE* 1094a26–b9). It is the part that deals with the character traits (*êthê*) political leaders should cultivate in citizens and heads of households should develop in children who are to be citizens (*NE* 1102a5–10). Leaders who can do this are assumed to be beneficiaries of the same moral training that they impart. In contrast to moderns, however, who praise politicians insofar as they help confer happiness, or its possibility, on those they care for, Aristotle wants to show that it is the political agents who do the caring who will necessarily be happy. In short, he wants to show that "the exercise of the soul's good condition is identical with the best political actions" (94).

I note that this self-imposed task is no easier than Plato having to prove in *Republic* that being just automatically makes the soul happy. Indeed, it is not very different. Garver reports Aristotle as treating justice as the exercise of all the moral virtues insofar as they are referred to other members of one's community. Justice is doing "for its own sake [as an *energeia*] what the law commands [as a *kinesis*]" (140). Still, I would qualify this in a way that makes Aristotle's task a bit easier than Plato's. Aristotle identifies his polysemic conception of friendship (*philia*), not Plato's justice, as the point at which happiness coincides with other-oriented acts performed for their own sake. (He thinks Plato conflates the two.) That is not too far from what we think about love in the personal sphere. Nonetheless, attributing

the happiness we ascribe to affective relationships to political leaders seems a bit of a stretch.

Garver usefully acknowledges this and related problems (69–94). People who practice the virtues are often not happy. Those who are happy, especially the powerful, need not be especially virtuous. The goods of the individual can and do conflict with those of the community. Is Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, then, badly translated as “happiness”? Is it something closer to what moderns call “success”? Garver does not go down this road. Rather, in what is to my mind the most insightful result of his inquiry, he argues that the modern separation of the ethical from the political was more or less coeval with the disqualification of the passion of *thumos*, which plays a pivotal role in both Plato's and Aristotle's ethical psychology, as a natural psychological kind. The reason why this term is best left untranslated is that it means, often at one and the same time, “spirit, ambition, anger, assertiveness . . . affectionateness, power to command, and the love of freedom” (117). It is for Aristotle the source of personal identity itself (120). It makes us be ourselves by enabling us to resist domination by external things, mostly other people. It was out of this passion, I add, that Hegel, that great reader of Aristotle, elicited the master–slave dialectic, which is in both intention and effect a rereading of *Politics* I.

Modernity, however, broke up *thumos* into animallike desires on the one hand and rational self-interest on the other. (Garver rightly cites Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests* for its analysis of this modern amputation.) This has made it difficult for us to understand why doing great deeds in the sight of one's fellow citizens for the sake of their moral nobility, including dying in battle, is not only the highest but the most satisfying human achievement. It is even more difficult for us to understand Aristotle's claim that such actions are paradigmatic expressions of human rationality. For on the modern view reason is just the calculative instrument by which we match our desires to interests. Even a computer can do it. Elsewhere, Garver has rightly argued that what Aristotle's natural slaves lack is not IQ but *thumos*. This is a rich theme, which should not be left to the special pleading of Straussians.

The problem we are left with is that the more Garver gets Aristotle right, the less relevant he seems to our condition. He admits it: “The more I understand him the more unavailable he seems” (2). In his book on the *Rhetoric*, and explicitly in his reflections on contemporary law finding and other arts in *For the Sake of Argument* (2004), Garver could plausibly argue that, in spite of our instrumentalist ideology, we moderns still

actually abide by and benefit from practicing the arts in accord with their internal norms and disdain people who do not. We are not entirely locked up in Max Weber's "iron cage" of technical-bureaucratic rationality. Still, bureaucratic-technical rationality may have invaded politics so far that our appreciations of Aristotle's ethics and politics tend to result in anachronistic misinterpretations either of his arguments or of the ancient *polis* itself, which realistic inquiry will show to be at once too chaotic, too exclusionary, and too totalitarian for us to live in, let alone aspire to.

I highly recommend Garver's book to anyone who wishes to engage in serious inquiry about the facts of antiquity and the condition of modernity. I especially recommend it because I think there are ways of mitigating the problem of relevance that its author acknowledges. For one thing, by concentrating so exclusively on the acts of public figures, Garver neglects to say that for Aristotle the acts of a good head of household (*oikonomikos*) and, albeit secondarily, his wife are as inherently noble, practically wise, happy, and in an important sense political as the acts of public officials (*NE* 1140b10–11, for example). Arendt has Aristotle exactly backward when she writes off his picture of the ancient household (*oikos*) as a site and source of political agency. Well-managed households may even be for Aristotle a good *polis* in exile, preparing for and awaiting the day when, however unpredictably and evanescently, constitutional reform that can move a deviant state toward its nearest accessible good form suddenly becomes possible.

Another source of continued relevance is implicit in Garver's recognition that, while invariant and divine things (*ta theia*) are for Aristotle the highest objects of scientific contemplation, the philosopher also sees human affairs (*ta anthrôpopina*), especially politics, as objects of scientific knowledge (*epistêmê*) and contemplation in their own right. Having acknowledged this, Garver offers an inventive (and sure to be controversial) interpretation of Aristotle's claim that the theoretical life (*bios theôrêtikos*) is more active than the life of action (*bios politikos* [*Politics* 1325b13–26; *NE* 1177a18–27]). Garver is unoffended by Aristotle's slide in this text between action (*praxis*) and actualization (*energeia*). On the contrary, the notion of action qua actualization encourages him to read Aristotle as claiming that "living theoretically means living [one's ethical-political] life as a self-conscious unity" (199). Reflectively repossessing one's life in this almost Proustian way has practical effects. It intensifies our ability to differentiate among ignoble, instrumentally good, and intrinsically noble acts and so may bear good fruit in the sphere of *praxis* itself, even if (or especially if) it does not aim at it. Garver's proposal concentrates on seeing one's own

life in this higher frame. I myself would stress that in *Politics* Aristotle uses this perspectival shift to make political life as such an object of theoretical inquiry. Hegel ran with this point. His famous notion of a unity of theory and practice means in part that moderns can be more surely oriented toward good actions by turning the entire history of political life, which Aristotle was in no position to see as an intelligible whole, into an object of theoretical inspection. This will give you a king-sized metanarrative. For Hegel, too, good actions will flow from good political theory. Still, as with Aristotle, they will flow only as long-run consequences, not as objects of good intentions.

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