

Aristotelians and Neo-Aristotelians

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Fred Miller's book *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics*¹ was hailed by leading Aristotle scholars as a valuable contribution to scholarship on Aristotle, and Miller himself is regarded as a leading Aristotle scholar.² What this means is that Miller offers a close reading and careful analysis of Aristotle's *Politics* that helps us to understand Aristotle's main arguments about key topics and issues in political philosophy. Sometime between 1259 and 1265, Thomas Aquinas wrote on the theme of the purposiveness of human action, arguing that the end (in the sense of purpose) of human action is happiness.³ This general theme is something Aquinas found in Aristotle, but Aquinas's goal was not to explain Aristotle to us. Rather, he advanced an argument about his theological position using an Aristotelian framework, methodology, and concepts. Hence, we can make a distinction between interpreting Aristotle (as Miller does) and using Aristotle (as Aquinas does). As it happens, Miller takes up this issue in *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics*, when discussing interpretive methodology. I will analyze this distinction, concluding that Miller is right to stress it, that different forms of interpretation are important to philosophy, and that they have different criteria for success and failure.

Miller differentiates three ways of interpreting Aristotle's writing, which could also be applied to the work of other thinkers.

¹ Fred D. Miller, Jr., *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

² I have had the pleasure of meeting Fred Miller on several occasions, and he was kind enough to write an introduction for a collection of essays I edited.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1975).

Miller refers to the first as “literal exegesis,” which “is to try as far as possible to explicate his thought in his own terms and within his own context.”⁴ This means trying to “state the problems as Aristotle understood them and to explicate concepts and [fill out] arguments using notions and techniques that would have been familiar to him.”⁵ The second is what Miller refers to as “reconstruction” or “philosophical scholarship,” which involves trying to “understand the text not only on its own terms but also by applying external concepts, theories, and techniques.”⁶ This may include “exploring similarities or differences with other modes of thought, such as modern viewpoints,” or consideration of the “further implications of a philosopher’s thought.”⁷ The third interpretive method Miller distinguishes is the sort that warrants the “cautionary prefix ‘neo-,’ e.g. ‘neo-Aristotelian.’”⁸ His understanding of this approach is philosophizing “in the tradition, more or less broadly understood, of a given philosopher. One adopts certain distinctive principles or methods and treats them as points of departure, not concerning oneself overly with issues of accurate exegesis or anachronism.”⁹ Miller stipulates that there are not necessarily sharp distinctions between these three methods, and that plenty of recent Aristotle scholarship has combined exegesis and reconstruction. He says that *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle’s Politics* can primarily be classified as reconstruction, although it combines all three approaches.

Miller observes that Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl make a similar distinction in their book *Liberty and Nature*.¹⁰

⁴ Miller, *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle’s Politics*, p. 21.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., citing Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *Liberty and Nature: An Aristotelian Defense of Liberal Order* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1991), p. xv. Their taxonomy is, in turn, inspired by an approach to

Rasmussen and Den Uyl call “originative” work “the personally developed thought of Aristotle as expressed in his writings,” while “continuative” or “school-tradition” work is the work of “thinkers who analyze . . . teachings of Aristotle within the framework of his own principles and methods.”¹¹ These are contrasted with what they call “recurrent-thematic-classificatory-polemical” work, by which they mean “work which involves the novel use of positions of Aristotle, but without necessarily being historically linked with Aristotle . . . [and thematizing] Aristotle’s ideas within a new intellectual context.”¹² They refer to this last category, which corresponds to Miller’s “neo-Aristotelian,” as “Aristotelian,” which seems less clear than using “neo-Aristotelian.” However, in a later book, *Norms of Liberty*, Rasmussen and Den Uyl switch to using “neo-Aristotelian” to describe this sort of work.¹³ In any event, the essence of their taxonomy is to highlight the same point Miller makes: one might be exploring Aristotle’s thought or one might be using his approach as a launching pad for additional philosophizing.

Mindful of Miller’s claim that there may not be rigid dividing lines between these interpretive methods, it will nevertheless be useful to consider some examples of them. We could imagine loose groupings of works that are mainly a mix of the literal exegesis approach and the reconstruction approach, which we can call “Aristotelian.” Those would be in contrast to works that are mainly a mix of reconstruction and new thinking in the tradition or general framework of Aristotle, which we can call “neo-Aristotelian.”

interpreting modern-period philosophy, namely, that of James Collins, *Interpreting Modern Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974).

¹¹ Rasmussen and Den Uyl, *Liberty and Nature*, p. xv.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *Norms of Liberty: A Perfectionist Basis for Non-Perfectionist Politics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

I would classify John Cooper's book *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* as Aristotelian.¹⁴ Cooper explicates concepts in Aristotle's thought and tries to understand the text largely on its own terms; he does nothing especially polemical nor does he seek to "apply" Aristotle's ideas to some other framework. Cooper is interested in questions such as: What does Aristotle mean by *eudaimonia* (flourishing)? How does this connect to the theory of virtue in Aristotle? What role does Aristotle think practical reason plays in the intellectual life? Contrast that with the aforementioned Aquinas, who is clearly interested in showing how the use of Aristotelian categories and concepts can be brought to bear on Catholic theology. For example, there is no particular reason we should think that Aristotle's "unmoved mover" is the Abrahamic God, but it is also easy to see why a thinker like Aquinas might use the "unmoved mover" as a way to illustrate something about his Catholic understanding of the divine.

Similar to Cooper, Martha Nussbaum's translation of Aristotle's *De Motu Animalium* is accompanied by 300 pages of interpretive essays, which are clearly of the exegetical-interpretive variety.¹⁵ Nussbaum explores questions such as: What does Aristotle mean by *telos* (end)? What role does *phantasia* (imagination) play in Aristotle's understanding of action? How does Aristotle understand the body-soul distinction? Contrast that with Nussbaum's later work, such as *Creating Capabilities* or *Frontiers of Justice*, in which she draws from Aristotelian concepts for a novel set of arguments that she deploys in contexts external to Aristotle's work.¹⁶ Here, we see Aristotelian ideas like the actualization of human potential used in the service of present-day problems in social and political philosophy.

¹⁴ John Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1975).

¹⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

¹⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

In Nussbaum's *De Motu* essays, she pays a lot of attention to issues in translation and language use. We are always liable to misunderstand authors whose work is in a language not our own, so of course this problem is magnified when we're dealing with ancient thinkers. Exegetical-reconstructive work necessarily involves some attention to those issues. However, in her more recent work on human development, Nussbaum does virtually no such work beyond the occasional parenthetical use of a Greek word. This last point is not a criticism; it illustrates a key difference between doing exegetical scholarship *about* Aristotle's work and doing novel philosophizing that *incorporates* Aristotle's insights.

One corollary of this difference is that while we would expect greater degrees of convergence (though not, perhaps, complete consensus) about exegetical scholarship, neo-Aristotelian scholarship might not converge at all. There is not a tremendous amount of heated controversy about Cooper's scholarship on *eudaimonia*, yet neo-Aristotelian scholarship can go in wildly divergent directions. Aquinas drafts Aristotle's philosophy into the service of Catholic theology, while Ayn Rand, also clearly influenced by Aristotle,¹⁷ develops a wholly secular interpretation. For another example, Nussbaum's recent work on human development is neo-Aristotelian in Miller's sense and points toward policies that in contemporary jargon would be thought of as politically progressive. The work of Rasmussen and Den Uyl is plainly neo-Aristotelian, but it instead points toward a model of classical liberalism in "that protecting liberty, understood in terms of basic negative rights, should be the paramount aim of the political and legal order."¹⁸ Then there is Alasdair MacIntyre, whose work also uses Aristotle as a starting point for novel philosophizing, yet he comes to politically conservative conclusions.¹⁹

However, shouldn't neo-Aristotelian thinking also converge? If Aquinas is right that Aristotle's unmoved mover is like a

¹⁷ See, e.g., Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: New American Library, 1964), pp. 13–35.

¹⁸ Rasmussen and Den Uyl, *Norms of Liberty*, p. xiv.

¹⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

monotheistic God, then wouldn't Rand's atheism be mistaken (or vice-versa)? For political philosophers, one might think that three arguments appealing to Aristotelian framing and concepts should not, if they reason correctly, lead to progressive *and* conservative *and* classical-liberal conclusions. Wouldn't at least two of the three have to have made some kind of mistake? I suspect that the answer to this question is that they would not *have to* have made a mistake (though they may, in fact, have done so), precisely because the goal is not to "get exactly right" what Aristotle said. Rather, the goal is to deploy ideas or framings from Aristotle in the service of an argument that presumably stands or falls on its own merits. Even if, say, MacIntyre is mistaken about what Aristotle thinks is the human *telos*, MacIntyre's argument would not *therefore* be wrong, though it could be wrong on other grounds. Nevertheless, one can have fruitful discussion about the extent to which one neo-Aristotelian or another is making *better* use of Aristotelian concepts.²⁰

Despite Miller's admonition that the lines between "Aristotelian" and "Neo-Aristotelian" may get blurry, it is a useful distinction, if for no other reason than in figuring out how to engage with a thinker's work. If the argument is something like "By 'final causation,' Aristotle means XYZ, and here are the textual extractions and etymological evidence to support my contention," we would have a different mode of engagement from one in which the argument were something like "Following Aristotle in thinking XYZ, I will now show that XYZ supports my conclusion about the purpose of government." Both sorts of arguments can succeed or fail, of course, but the criteria for success and failure are different. Indeed, the purpose of the argument is different to begin with. Miller's own book is, as he notes, some of both. It is mostly exegetical-reconstructive, with a neo-Aristotelian concluding chapter. Most of the book is concerned with his establishing that "it is not anachronistic to attribute to [Aristotle] a concept of rights . . . even though it may not be articulated in terms corresponding precisely to ours."²¹ However, even if it is true that something like a liberal concept of rights is "in" Aristotle's thought, it

²⁰ See, e.g., the various responses to Rasmussen and Den Uyl (and their replies) in *Reading Rasmussen and Den Uyl: Critical Essays on Norms of Liberty*, ed. Aeon J. Skoble (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

²¹ Miller, *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics*, p. 22.

would not follow that Aristotle is a classical liberal—*that* would be anachronistic. Miller’s exegetical thesis being true would be a useful supplement to a classical liberal making a neo-Aristotelian argument about political philosophy, which is what Miller does in Chapter 10.

Miller says that his exegetical-reconstructive discussion in *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle’s Politics* “reconsiders the prospects for neo-Aristotelian political philosophy, i.e. the attempt to recover important Aristotelian insights and apply them to modern issues of political philosophy.”²² His elaboration on this point appeals to and clarifies his distinction from the introduction:

I use ‘neo-Aristotelian’ for modern theorizing which incorporates some central doctrines of Aristotle, e.g. teleology. . . . Such theorizing should critically assess his claims in the light of modern philosophical theory, scientific research, and practical experience, revise or reject them where necessary, and consider their applications to social and political contexts not envisioned by him.²³

In other words, arguing that Aristotle was a classical liberal (or a progressive) in the modern sense might be a silly exercise, but arguing that Aristotelian concepts of teleology, virtue, and human nature might well support a classical-liberal (or progressive) position is not. Miller reminds us: “One should distinguish Aristotle exegesis from neo-Aristotelian theorizing, although the two activities are frequently connected.”²⁴ While Chapters 1 through 9 are engaged with the former project, Chapter 10 is the latter.

The footnotes in Chapter 10 show engagement with Aristotle scholars (such as Allan Gotthelf and Terence Irwin), other neo-Aristotelians who hold contrary views (such as MacIntyre) or similar views (such as Rasmussen and Den Uyl), and thinkers who are not connected to Aristotle one way or the other (such as Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, John Stuart Mill, John Rawls, and Robert Nozick). This means that Miller is, in this section of the book, constructing an independent normative argument about the nature of

²² Ibid., p. 336.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

the political order. This argument is informed by Aristotelian concepts, but it also unfolds according to its own logic. In other words, supposing Miller's exegetical-reconstructive argument about what Aristotle means were flawed (though I have no reason to suppose this), his neo-Aristotelian argument in Chapter 10 would not thereby collapse.

Making a distinction between Aristotle scholarship and neo-Aristotelian theorizing is not to judge one as preferable or superior to the other. Both sorts of philosophical arguments are important parts of how the discipline of philosophy proceeds. We need scholarship that does the work of explaining, clarifying, and interpreting what ancient thinkers were actually saying, or else we wouldn't be well-grounded in taking them seriously. We also need independent, normative arguments about ethics and political philosophy because, at the end of the day, philosophers tend to care about (and want to have opinions about) what is actually the case. I might want to know both what is the best way to understand Aristotle's political philosophy, but also, *whatever Aristotle thought*, I would want to know how *I* should understand political philosophy. If classical liberalism (or progressivism, conservatism, communitarianism, or socialism) is true, it is true whether or not we can show that Aristotle would or would not have sympathized with it. The last two sentences of Miller's book express this felicitously, so I will close this appreciation for both aspects of Miller's scholarly contributions by quoting them: "In the end, however, a neo-Aristotelian theory will have to stand on its own two legs—philosophical argument and empirical evidence—and not fall back on quotations from Aristotle. None the less, for those engaged in such a project, the texts of Aristotle will undoubtedly continue to be a source of inspiration and insight."²⁵ I hasten to add, as will those of Fred Miller.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 378.