

## Book Review

Roger E. Bissell and Vinay Kolhatkar. *Modernizing Aristotle's Ethics: Toward a New Art and Science of Self-Actualization*. Cambridge, UK: Ethics International Press, 2023.

### 1. Introduction

Roger E. Bissell and Vinay Kolhatkar are nothing if not ambitious. With *Modernizing Aristotle's Ethics: Toward a New Art and Science of Self-Actualization*<sup>1</sup> they have set out to establish not only “a universalizable ethic that promotes the best within us,” but also “a universalizable politics for a free society that can make everyone’s personal best easier to achieve” (p. 256). They propose to accomplish this goal by “bringing about a merger between science and philosophy and crafting a fact-based teleologic ethic” undergirded by “a testable model for why it works—a comprehensive theory of human nature” (preface).

This is a tall order, indeed. Although the authors do not claim to have provided the final word, at the same time they seem fairly confident that their “new integration” (preface) is on the right track. Because they cover so many topics, a brief review cannot do justice to the full range of their insights. Here, I will focus primarily on two areas of interest. First, I will address some core issues in Aristotelian ethics and the propriety of building, or at least adding onto, what the authors call an “Aristotelian skyscraper” (p. 6) fit for life in the modern world. Second, I will assess their contributions to a more scientific and more humane ethics in the Objectivist tradition.

### 2. Aristotelian Foundations

The authors state up front that their “goal is not merely to *modernize* Aristotle’s ethics, but to reformulate Aristotle’s *eudaimonism* and transform it into an ethics of self-actualization that is relevant and powerful for people living today” (p.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger E. Bissell and Vinay Kolhatkar, *Modernizing Aristotle's Ethics: Toward a New Art and Science of Self-Actualization* (Cambridge, UK: Ethics International Press, 2023). All subsequent references to this book will be in-text citation.

22).<sup>2</sup> Although it is true that Aristotle provides a deep and comprehensive analysis of eudaimonia, this does not necessarily mean that he advocates what today we think of as eudaimonism. Because the risk of anachronism looms large here, it is important to proceed with scrupulous care.

In contemporary philosophy, the primary source for an ethics of eudaimonism is David Norton's book *Personal Destinies*.<sup>3</sup> For several reasons, it behooves us to take a closer look at Norton's account in the context of Bissell and Kolhatkar's project. First, Norton treats eudaimonism and self-actualization as equivalent.<sup>4</sup> Second, psychological theorists of self-actualization and personal expressiveness (also treated in the psychological literature as equivalent), including Alan Waterman, Carol Ryff, Richard Ryan, and Edward Deci, have considered Norton's book to be the canonical account not only of philosophical eudaimonism but of eudaimonia itself, and thus by extension Aristotle's conception of human flourishing. Third, Bissell and Kolhatkar frequently cite Norton for support, such as when they state that if "living well becomes second nature . . . [y]ou have actualized

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<sup>2</sup> Although Bissell and Kolhatkar mention that their goal is not to produce a complete exposition of Aristotle's ethics or broader philosophy, one might wish that they had more carefully represented some of his positions. Their erroneous or questionable claims include: that dialectics was "Aristotle's signature philosophical method" (p. 15), that the goal of the *Historia Animalium* was to build a "biological taxonomy" (p. 18), that the highest good for human beings is defined in terms of desire-satisfaction (p. 21), that all living things can be *eudaimon* (p. 22), that the "highest good for living beings [including even human beings] is . . . to get and have what one needs" (p. 22), that under Aristotle's doctrine of the mean the virtue of courage is "a middle ground or 'mean' between rashness (too much courage) and cowardice (too little courage)" (p. 39), that Aristotle identified "four primary ethical virtues: courage, temperance, justice, and prudence" (p. 43) when in fact he did not subscribe to a theory of cardinal virtues and he considered prudence (one rendering of *phronesis*) to be an intellectual virtue, that "Aristotle postulated eudaimonia as an 'ought'" (p. 183) in the modern meaning of the term, and that Aristotle held happiness as a subjective emotional state to be the goal of ethics (pp. 183, 213).

<sup>3</sup> David L. Norton, *Personal Destinies: A Philosophy of Ethical Individualism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

the fully adult, humane, productive self that was potentially there as you were learning and growing as a child and as a young person” (p. 24).

Given that Aristotle is the ultimate source for our concepts of potentiality and actualization, we might assume that the notion of a “self that was potentially there” is straightforward Aristotelianism. But not so fast. On closer inspection, one sees that Norton derives his eudaimonism from Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism, Friedrich Nietzsche’s will to power, Soren Kierkegaard’s Christian theology, Gottfried Leibniz’s monadology, a bizarre interpretation of Plato’s metaphysics in which each individual’s daimon is a Platonic Form, and an unjustifiably universalized reading of Socrates’s intellectual midwifery in which every person possesses the same kind of daimon and personal truth that Socrates attained only through decades of philosophical labor. Conspicuously missing from this list is Aristotle. Indeed, after praising “those respects in which Plato’s metaphysics justified Greek moral individualism,” Norton laments that “it is these very respects that are immediately undermined by the metaphysics of Aristotle.”<sup>5</sup>

What is going on here? Could it be that contemporary eudaimonism is not quite as Aristotelian as everyone has thought?

Aristotle defines eudaimonia as living well.<sup>6</sup> Building on that foundation, Bissell and Kolhatkar make the bold statement that “in common sense terms, there is not much of a conceptual gap between living well or human flourishing (eudaimonia) and self-actualization” (p. 25). Yet the nature of this gap is precisely the issue—and one of paramount importance, for which common sense is insufficient evidence. Highly relevant is the fact that, for Aristotle, the self is an achievement.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, for recent theorists of eudaimonism and self-actualization, the self somehow exists *in potentia* from birth or perhaps even before, if Norton’s quasi-Platonic metaphysics is to be believed. More specifically, following in the footsteps of Socrates and Plato, Aristotle seems to have held that a stable self is achieved only by those who pursue a philosophical way of life, who commit to deeply

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.4, 1095a19.

<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), p. 25.

understanding the human good, and who put in the long-term work of self-examination. This all can be seen in the surviving fragments of Aristotle's dialogue *Protrepticus* as well as Pierre Hadot's groundbreaking revival of philosophy as a way of life, especially his book *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*.<sup>8</sup>

Where does this leave Bissell and Kolhatkar's Aristotelian skyscraper? At the least, further work is needed to understand whether its foundations are quite as Aristotelian as they imagine. Yet we can go further and wonder whether a time-travelling Aristotle would really strive to build a philosophical "skyscraper" in the first place.

Less metaphorically, there are tensions at the heart of any project that aims to modernize Aristotle. Three of the highly relevant ones are, briefly, as follows: (1) Aristotle and the ancients considered understanding the world to be an end in itself, whereas we moderns value knowledge primarily as an instrument of power over nature and, increasingly, over human nature and society. (2) They saw the maxim "know thyself" as leading ideally to self-mastery, whereas we care primarily about personal expressiveness. (3) They prized the activities of leisure (festivals, music, dramatic performances, great conversation, intellectual inquiry, philosophical speculation, and the like), whereas we are driven primarily by productive work in the service of material progress.<sup>9</sup> We could even say that, on these matters, modernity has rejected Aristotle, so perhaps an Aristotelian would be justified in rejecting these aspects of modernity in favor of a more contemplative life. (What that might look like, though, is far beyond the scope of this review.)

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<sup>8</sup> Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> With regard to material wealth, Bissell and Kolhatkar quote Ayn Rand's disciple Leonard Peikoff as saying that "there is no limit to man's need of wealth. . . . [E]very material achievement contributes to human life by making it increasingly secure, prolonged, and/or pleasurable" (p. 121). This is a decidedly un-Aristotelian perspective, for in *Politics* I.9 Aristotle explains that those who seek wealth without limit do so because they have set no limit to their desires and that this is a corrupted state caused by caring about merely living rather than living well.

These tensions come to a head in Bissell and Kolhatkar's continued use of Ayn Rand as the modern exponent par excellence of Aristotelian philosophy. It seems to me that, at least on the foregoing three issues—and likely more, for instance, Rand's criticism that Aristotle did not consider ethics to be a science—reports of Rand's Aristotelianism have been greatly exaggerated.

### 3. Objectivist Integrations

With all that having been said, Bissell and Kolhatkar also explore, within a neo-Objectivist or post-Objectivist framework (p. 47), many fascinating topics at the borderline between psychology and philosophy. Indeed, "Buttressing Ayn Rand's Ethics" might have been a more appropriate title for their book, because they engage much more directly with Rand than with Aristotle (except, interestingly, in their chapter on politics). It is here that they come into their own and make a number of truly original contributions, both theoretical and practical. Their initiative to mesh philosophical principles with recent scientific research will undoubtedly be debated for years and deserves to be folded into the kind of broad-minded Objectivism that is, to use one of their preferred adjectives, more humane than ever before. In what follows I can give only a flavor of what they have achieved in this sphere.

In their third chapter, Bissell and Kolhatkar describe twelve psychological needs that human beings "must satisfy . . . if they are to achieve a psychic state that's serene in equilibrium, and excited by choice or chance" (p. 60). A number of these needs go back to Marie Jahoda's 1958 integration<sup>10</sup> of prior thinking by social, psychodynamic, and humanistic psychologists such as Gordon Allport, Erik Erikson, Erich Fromm, Heinz Hartmann, Abraham Maslow, and Carl Rogers. In Jahoda's phrasing, the six fundamental needs are autonomy, accurate perception of reality, attitudes toward the self, personal growth and self-actualization, psychological integration, and environmental mastery. (This last is a broad category that includes competence in practical affairs and human relationships, with the latter often separated out into a distinct component by subsequent psychological theorists.) To these six, our authors add a belief in one's own goodness (perhaps part of "attitudes toward the self"), discovering or creating a "true self" (perhaps part of personal growth and self-actualization), recognition and

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<sup>10</sup> Marie Jahoda, *Current Concepts of Positive Mental Health* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1958).

reward for one's achievements, inspirational experience, and for many but not all people creating a genetic or nongenetic legacy (similar to what Erik Erikson called "generativity").

Bissell and Kolhatkar re-use Maslow's definition of a need as "something whose absence demonstrably worsens the organism's mental and/or physical health, and whose presence in optimal quantities becomes necessary (but not *by itself* sufficient) to reach a flourishing state" (p. 159). However, it is unclear to what extent the twelve psychological needs are meant to align with the psychological literature. For example, in their two-page overview of autonomy (pp. 81-82), they do not reference definitions of this construct proposed by theorists from Carl Jung's concept of individuation and Heinz Hartmann's ego psychology in the 1930s through Carol Ryff's construct of psychological well-being as well as Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's self-determination theory in the 1990s and beyond.

Moreover, it is an open question whether all of these good things are really *needs* and whether something must be a need in order for it to matter or be valued in life. Consider that Aristotle's psychological theory describes not one but three kinds of reaching out into the world: needs, wants, and (among humans) deliberate resolutions to act. Aristotle also explores aspirations such as wonder (the starting point of philosophy), yearning to understand the world (the foundation for learning and science), and love for what is beautifully right (the aim of character development). For Aristotle, these are not needs but noble ideals open only to people who have been properly brought up and, at the highest levels, who have been exposed to a philosophical way of life. Does modern psychology add something over and above Aristotle's insights by labeling everything valuable a need? The authors do not offer the kind of philosophical analysis that would make this clear.

In addition to the twelve psychological needs, the authors posit seven key faculties—or "abilities, natural or acquired, for a particular kind of action" (p. 97)—of the human person: rationality, introspection, tenacity, the capacity for joy, goodwill and empathy, wisdom, and resilience. Here again, it is unclear whether these faculties are intended to align with the scientific literature or with Aristotle's analysis of various human capacities. As an example of the latter, Aristotle considers practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to be a capstone virtue, for he argues that "it is not possible to be fully good without practical wisdom

nor practically wise without virtue of character.”<sup>11</sup> Aristotle also describes various component skills of practical wisdom—such as comprehension, sensitivity, insight, and know-how—that come together to form a stable trait or intellectual virtue and help a person understand how to size up a given situation and to act appropriately given the circumstances. Yet nothing of this is reflected in the authors’ single paragraph about wisdom (p. 98).

Because Aristotle conceives of virtue as the activation of a capacity, it is surprising that Bissell and Kolhatkar do not mention Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman’s massive volume *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*.<sup>12</sup> This tome, produced with the help of over fifty scholars, was intended to function as a “manual of the sanities” and an equivalent of the standard Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) but for positive psychology. Although the untimely death of Peterson in 2012 seems to have slowed further progress in this realm, another noteworthy theorist here is Blaine Fowers, who uses virtue ethics as the basis for his research at the intersection of psychology and the virtues.<sup>13</sup>

It might seem that my comments up to this point have been overly critical. However, I mention these gaps and omissions because they provide intriguing opportunities for the authors (and like-minded others) to further knit together the art and the science of self-actualization, as their subtitle has it. There is plenty of work still to be done, and Bissell and Kolhatkar have laid much of the groundwork for fruitful exploration. Here, I particularly point out their identification of four levels of humaneness, their conception of a “life mission” as broader than Rand’s “productive work,” the idea of individualized value equilibrium, and their proposal that meaning or mattering (not survival or even flourishing) is the end goal of human life.

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<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.13, 1144b31.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> See esp. Blaine Fowers, *Virtue and Psychology* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2005).

As the authors emphasize, to live a good life we need not only theoretical insights but also practical guidance. Sprinkled liberally throughout *Modernizing Aristotle's Ethics* are numerous actionable suggestions for formulating a personal mission in life, building healthy relationships, strengthening one's character, finding greater joy, resolving value conflicts, and integrating the many domains of one's existence into a seamless whole. They have truly lived up to the promise that Rand made years ago of defining a philosophy for living on earth.

Unfortunately, I fear that not enough people, whether philosophers, psychologists, or intellectually inquisitive members of the general public, will benefit from Bissell and Kolhatkar's laudable efforts, for *Modernizing Aristotle's Ethics* is currently available only in hardcover at a price of over \$100. This will greatly limit its audience, to the detriment of authors and readers alike. Perhaps eventually a paperback edition will be forthcoming; in any case, we can hope that their insights will have a long-term impact through continued scholarly engagement and practical application.

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