

BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Price, Anthony W. (2016) Book review: Henry (D.), Nielsen (K.M.) (edd.) *Bridging the Gap between Aristotle's Science and Ethics*. Pp. xiv + 304. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Cased, £70, US\$110. ISBN: 978-1-107-01036-9. *The Classical Review* 66 (2), pp. 368-369. ISSN 0009-840X.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/14580/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively

HENRY (D.), NIELSEN (K.M.) (edd.) *Bridging the Gap between Aristotle's Science and Ethics*. Pp. xiii + 304. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Cased, £70. ISBN: 978-1-107-01036-9.

Aristotle declares in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.3, 'It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits' (1094b23-5). This has commonly been taken to invite readings of the *NE* that detach it from any metaphysical or scientific background. Devin Henry and Karen Nielsen have put together a compilation that corrects that, and perceives or provides more philosophical underpinning in or for the text than is evidently present or indicated. Given the excellence of the thirteen contributors (besides the editors, Allen, Charles, Gill, Karbowski, Devereux, Natali, Lennox, Leunissen, Shields, Johnson, Witt), the upshot is often illuminating, and will help those who wish to read the *NE* (or the *Eudemian Ethics*) in the light of other and more central Aristotelian texts.

Some doubts may nonetheless arise. It should help to distinguish two questions (though one may be uncertain how best to formulate the second): (1) Can themes in the *NE* be significantly illuminated by drawing upon other works? (2) Does Aristotle intend the reader to grasp and assess the argument of the *NE* through an understanding of those connections?

It is possible to answer (1) positively, but (2) negatively. I select a single example. Christopher Shields focuses upon the function argument in I.7, which demands that any candidate human *ergon* be *idion* to human beings. What here is the sense of *idion*? Shields suggests four possibilities (p. 144): (i) being unique; (ii) being more deeply characteristic; (iii) being a *proprium*, viz. 'a non-trivially necessary but non-essential feature'; and (iv) being essential. (iv) is a significant notion, but not an attested sense of *idion*. (i) can be trivialized: it is 'unique to human beings, as a species, that some of its members design and build nuclear power plants'. No doubt Aristotle intended no such piece of artifice, and so (ii) may capture more of his thought: he wants something that is *koinon* to all, and only, non-defective human beings. Yet there is no ground to narrow the sense of *idios* beyond the contrast with *koinon*; and what his actual argument requires, for its exclusion of digestion and even perception from the human function, is a necessary condition, and not a sufficient one. Hence, for his immediate purposes, sense (i) suffices.

Perhaps more pertinent is another observation by Shields. Evident within the broad options which are all that I.7 surveys is Aristotle's own stratification of the human soul into three layers, vegetative, perceptual, and rational. Less clear is whether the great sketchiness of its adumbration here points the reader elsewhere, or, at most, anticipates what is set out more explicitly in I.13. (Shields accepts as genuine the sentence at 1098a4-5, which can only be read as a cryptic reference forward; however, editors other than Bywater have plausibly read it as an intrusion from a marginal note.) One might say that I.7 insinuates what the *De Anima* elucidates; it proceeds on its way without inviting any deeper immersion.

So just what is at issue? The editors take issue (p. 2) with two statements by Richard Kraut that I distinguish: (a) '[Aristotle] never proposes that students of ethics need to engage in a specialized study of the natural world ...'; (b) 'His project is to make ethics an autonomous field, and to show why a full understanding of what is good does not require expertise in any other field.' Surely (a) is true of the *NE*, where he writes, 'Further precision is perhaps something more laborious than our purposes require' (I.13 1102a25-6, and cf. I.3 1094b11-14, I.6 1096b30-1). However, (b) seems imprudent unless we replace 'full' by 'adequate' (sc. for those purposes). The editors intend this volume to explore how far 'Aristotle's ethical treatises make use of the

concepts, methods and practices developed in the *Analytiks* and the other scientific works' (p. 12). That they make *use* of such concepts – one may be more doubtful of 'methods and practices' – is certain.

Coincidentally, this collection emerges in the same year as a related monograph, Dominic Scott's *Levels of Argument: A Comparative Study of Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (OUP). That has the advantage in clarity of a single author; and its distinction, after Plato, between a 'longer' and a 'shorter' route for political science, and its thesis that the *NE* prefers the second, are unlikely to be unsettled by any of the minuter discussions in the present volume.

This has a concise index and a composite bibliography; it lacks the utility of an *index locorum*.

Birkbeck College, London

A. W. PRICE
a.price@bbk.ac.uk