

Aristotle's *Ethics* and Medieval Philosophy: Moral Goodness and Practical Wisdom by Anthony Celano (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), ix + 263 pp.

ANTHONY CELANO'S *Aristotle's Ethics and Medieval Philosophy* is a recent collection of studies from a veteran scholar of medieval philosophy who has conducted more than thirty years of research into the ethical doctrine of Aristotle and its reception by thirteenth-century Latin thinkers. Celano observes that Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is the seminal kind of cultural achievement that admits of numerous interpretations and developments (7). At the same time, Celano promotes a central thesis in this volume that underscores that the content of the *Ethics* must be differentiated from how it was understood by medieval commentators. The hermeneutical key that should be used to understand Aristotle's original doctrine, Celano contends, is one that recognizes practical wisdom (*phronesis*) as having a broader scope than that which was admitted by the medieval commentators, a scope that includes the ability to originate moral norms (viii–ix). In contrast, Aristotle's medieval commentators were influenced in their reading of the *Ethics* by the natural law doctrine found in Scripture and Patristic thinkers (5) and as found in the works of Cicero and Seneca (238). The medieval commentators, Celano maintains, read Aristotle with an "acceptance of natural law and *synderesis*" and, due to these presuppositions, subsequently "transform Aristotle's Ethics from one based upon a human standard into one that depends upon a divine foundation" (viii). The interpretational result is a truncated understanding of practical wisdom that is no longer recognized as able to originate "moral universals," that is restricted to the prudential ability to apply the "eternal principles of action" (ix). Elsewhere, Celano refers to this as "the evolution from practical reason to prudence" (241). He points to Albert the Great as the primary medieval thinker who significantly restricted the scope of practical wisdom in this regard (169).

Celano's volume is divided into nine chapters. The work includes selections from Aristotle's Greek and extensive Latin quotations, as well as frequent citation of relevant English and international secondary sources. Celano begins his study by briefly outlining certain moral topics that can affect one's interpretation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. These topics include how one understands the nature of happiness (*eudaimonia*), the relation of Aristotle's ethical doctrine to a natural moral law, and the structure of moral acts. Celano then provides a longer treatment of the issue of happiness in connection

with Aristotle's doctrine of practical wisdom. The study then shifts and proceeds chronologically through the works of important thirteenth-century thinkers. His third chapter begins this chronological survey by focusing on William of Auxerre and Philip the Chancellor. The fourth chapter examines commentaries on the *Ethics* authored prior to 1248 (an anonymous commentary, a commentary ascribed to Robert Kilwardby, and the pseudo-Pecham commentary). Celano then dedicates two chapters to Albert the Great and his treatment of Aristotle's *Ethics*. This discussion is followed by a chapter focused on Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, and then a chapter examining two late-thirteenth-century commentaries, one of which is ascribed to Parisian arts master Radulphus Brito. Celano closes the volume with a short concluding chapter that returns to discuss in part the themes outlined in his first chapter (namely, the issues of natural law and practical wisdom).

Celano states that he developed this book out of a desire to understand what he describes as Aristotle's two different accounts of happiness that are found in separate sections of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (vii). These distinct accounts, Celano maintains, also indicate different understandings of human goodness (23). He contends that one account, in book 1, describes happiness as resulting from a combination of contemplative and practical activities (2). Reading the *Ethics* in light of this first account results in what Celano (appropriating terminology from W. F. R. Hardie) calls the "inclusive" interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine of happiness (2 and 16). In contrast, a second account that Aristotle provides, in book 10, describes happiness as the result of contemplative wisdom only (see especially 1178b8–9 in 10.8, which Celano discusses on 24, perhaps as read along with 1177a13–25 in 10.7 of the *Ethics*). Reading the *Ethics* in light of this second account results in what Celano calls the "dominant" interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine of happiness (2 and 16). These interpretive differences, he maintains, can also be found in the various medieval commentaries on the *Ethics*: Thomas Aquinas, Celano states, subscribed to the former viewpoint, while Albert the Great to the latter (3). Albert's doctrine of happiness, Celano notes elsewhere, involves a reinterpretation of Aristotle (241) that Aquinas rejected (169 and 174).

Celano observes that, over time, he realized that treating practical wisdom as "Aristotle's primary moral concept" and "the central theme of the *Ethics*" enables an interpreter better to understand how

Aristotle affirmed these two accounts of happiness simultaneously (vii–viii; see also 16–17). Contemplation should be construed as one part of overall human practical activity (20). While contemplative wisdom might be “the supreme virtue of the human soul,” Celano maintains that Aristotle should be read as affirming practical wisdom as “the most important virtue,” since it “regulates all human activity including theoretical pursuits” (vii–viii). In this way, Celano argues, Aristotle’s account of practical wisdom should be understood apart from how it was transformed and limited by his medieval commentators. For example, practical wisdom does not, for Aristotle, receive universal moral norms from contemplative wisdom: “[Aristotle] rejects any universal moral imperatives that do not arise from human action” (viii). At the same time, Celano respectfully treats Aquinas’s reading of the *Ethics* that proceeds in accordance with a natural law account (187–92 and 240–242).

I cannot agree with every interpretation that Celano gives to the authors under consideration (for example, supporting W. F. R. Hardie’s nominalist reading of an important passage in 2.6 of the *Ethics*). Likewise, I believe much more extended consideration must be given to Aristotle’s ethical doctrine in relation to the topic of whether he acknowledged a natural moral law. At the same time, Celano’s chronological survey of the medieval reception of the *Ethics* illuminates the different ways in which thirteenth-century authors approached this work. His discussion of the previously unedited commentary of Robert Kilwardby (ms. Cambridge Peterhouse 206 [C], fols. 285ra–307vb) is particularly helpful for scholars who do not have access to this manuscript (79–98). In general, Celano’s central thesis in this volume is one that encourages readers to revisit the *Ethics* on its own grounds. And rather than leading one to dismiss medieval readings of the *Ethics* as aberrant, the spirit of Celano’s discussion can also encourage one to appreciate the careful reflection that medieval thinkers gave to the *Ethics*. Celano’s work recognizes that such commentaries are valuable and illustrate how a philosophical tradition can be revitalized and enriched in a different cultural context. His volume requires careful consideration and makes a substantive contribution to existing scholarship concerning the thirteenth-century reception of the *Ethics*. N.V

Matthew R. McWhorter
Divine Mercy University
Arlington, VA