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Book Review

Mary P. Nichols: *Aristotle's Discovery of the Human: Piety and Politics in the "Nicomachean Ethics."* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2023. Pp. x, 344.)

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"All happiness is political happiness." So Alfarabi is reported to have interpreted Aristotle in his now-lost commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In her comprehensive commentary, as bold as it is witty and profound, Nichols draws inferences from the *Nicomachean Ethics* that resonate with that of Alfarabi. She asserts early on that "we have no home in the cosmos unless we have a home in a political community" (21). Of course, this conditional thought might carry Nichols and her Aristotle in a negative direction, homeless and alienated from both community and cosmos. Indeed, she considers this possibility in relation to "the tragic presentation of political life" (124) that she attributes to Socrates in the *Republic*. "The individual who orders his soul may imitate the cosmos and its order but he is no part of a cosmos, just as he is no part of a city" (125). (For a different view of Socrates, compare Nichols, *Socrates on Friendship and Community* [Cambridge University Press, 2009].) Nichols's Aristotle is clearly not leading her down the path of alienation from community and cosmos, something that puts us in mind of Kierkegaard's "infinite resignation." "My emphasis," she writes, "is less on how Aristotle is disappointing hopes than on how he is teaching ways in which they can be satisfied" (45n34). She interprets Aristotle in explicit contrast to the teaching of the Athenian Stranger according to which the city is "the truest tragedy" (124n2). For Nichols, we have no cause for indignation at the human lot (126).

There are some thorns on this rose. When introducing the discussion of the voluntary and the involuntary in book 3 of the *Ethics*, Nichols makes an odd comment about undeserved punishments that are nonetheless necessary to prevent crime (63). But this unhappy possibility would arise only if human beings were not free and responsible for their own actions. Even so, the unwary reader is taken aback when she comes to the discussion of corrective justice. If a merchant has overcharged a customer, corrective justice can return the amount that was taken unjustly. Aristotle, however, lists a number of offenses at least some of which cannot be corrected, cannot, as Nichols emphasizes, be rectified so that "what was done could be undone, as if the crime had never been committed" (131). "If Aristotle's account of justice stopped here, he would have an insufficient answer to tragic conflict, and like Plato would teach that political life is tragic" (132). Nichols goes on to

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discuss reciprocity, natural justice, and equity, each of which ameliorates the tragic aspect of human and political life. In discussing natural justice, Aristotle notes that it is a part of political justice. If natural justice is part of political justice, is natural happiness also a part of political happiness? Was it perhaps this passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that caused Alfarabi to infer that all happiness is political happiness?

Reciprocity can also diminish the unhappy aspects of political life. Reciprocity can come in the form of gratitude as well as punishment. It is at this point that Nichols discusses the Shrine of the Graces, which reminds us to show gratitude. Nichols's thought here seems to be that gratitude "holds the city together" even more than money (135). The Shrine of the Graces reminds us that we have neglected Nichols's discussions of piety and the divine, though her subtitle indicates that they are an important theme. What does piety mean in the context of Nichols's commentary?

The only time in the *Ethics*, we are told, that Aristotle calls something pious is when he says, "Although both truth and one's own are dear, it is pious to honor the truth first" (37). One should honor the truth above one's friends. Would Aristotle say the same of other things that are dear, such as the ancestral? Should one honor the truth above the ancestral? If so, have we not turned the meaning of piety upside down? As Nichols points out, in book 7 the discussion of spiritedness takes a curious turn. The son who beats his father displays a spirited desire for independence and freedom that is "common to all" (217–18). Freedom is not listed in the otherwise extremely helpful index, but freedom is as much a theme in Nichols's account of Aristotle as it was in her earlier book on Thucydides (*Thucydides and the Pursuit of Freedom* [Cornell University Press, 2015]).

Piety might suggest either obedience to the divine or imitation of the divine. Whatever may be said of Plato, for Aristotle the legislator is not divine and his law is not a revelation (142). It is perhaps for this reason that it is not impious to point out or even to correct "the defect of the law stemming from its universality" (146–47). Aristotle introduces the concept of equity (*epieikeia*) in order to correct this defect (147; one of the most delightful aspects of Nichols's book is the way she points out Aristotle's novel usages and coining of new words, e.g., 46–47, 69–72, 108, 115–16). "Law remains incomplete" (137). Law and obedience to law cannot make us virtuous: "we are not virtuous unless our actions originate in ourselves" (62). Human beings can be the beginning of their actions (136, 214). Goodness and happiness "cannot be simply bestowed on us"; we must "make our goodness our own" (53, 58). When I said above that Nichols's commentary was bold, I was thinking of the following passage: "To the extent that the human condition requires healing, human beings must heal themselves" (201). Is there a trace here of Ajax spurning Athena's help (cf. 105n16)?

Nichols is not an admirer of the self-sufficient Ajax or an unqualified admirer of Aristotle's great-souled man. Indeed, her Aristotle sees the great-souled man as a bit of a boaster (100). The great-souled man tends to

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forget the benefits others bestow on him (104). He does not recognize the need for friendship and community. The great-souled man deems himself worthy of honor, and "honor is what we assign to the gods" (101). Nichols presents Aristotle as the educator of the great-souled man, shaming him by letting him see the folly of his own boasting (100). The people of Amphipolis offered sacrifices to Brasidas, honoring him as a god. For Nichols's Aristotle, worshiping a human being as a god is one of the forms of impiety (142). The simple and eternal pleasures enjoyed by gods "not even Aristotle can know by experience" (226–27).

In this way, Nichols brings together the piety of her subtitle and the discovery of the human in her title. "Piety preserves the distinction between human and beast, on the one hand, and human and divine, on the other" (142). It is sometimes said that humanism is not enough, but Nichols seems to think otherwise. "The same things are not fitting for gods and human beings" (97). Nichols's Aristotle leads the reader to discover humanity. It is a good read.

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