Peters, Julia, ed. *Aristotelian Ethics in Contemporary Perspective*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 238 pages. ISBN: 9780415623414. Hardback: $125.00

This volume comprises fourteen original essays and is divided into two thematically distinct parts. The first part contains eleven essays that address a variety of themes central to Aristotelian ethics. The second part contains only three essays that deal with non-Aristotelian accounts of virtue. This review will give substantive treatment to the first half only, since its essays form a thematic unity. I’ll just mention the latter essays, and note that they are worthy of equal attention. Christine Swanton envisions a Heideggerian-Humean theory in “A New Metaphysics for Virtue Ethics: Hume Meets Heidegger”; Lorenzo Greco argues for a traditional Humeanism in “Toward a Humean Virtue Ethics”; and finally Erasmus Mayr makes a surprising defense of virtue from a Kantian perspective in his superbly argued, “A Kantian Plea for Virtues?”.

Though it appears at the end, Timothy Chappell’s “Kalou Heneka” is an instructive starting point, as it presents a provocative challenge to most contemporary approaches to practical reason, including many versions of Neo-Aristotelianism. Chappell argues that most theories of practical reason are monist or dualist. Monists attempt to take one category of practical reasons—such as The Moral or The Prudential—and reduce all reasons to instances of this privileged type. The Prudentialist (including Neo-Aristotelians like Foot and Hursthouse) seeks to show that moral reasons find their explanatory ground in prudential reasons, while the Moralist runs the reduction in the opposite direction. Dualists do not attempt to reduce, but accept both categories as mutually exclusive and exhaustive of the space of practical reason. Chappell argues for a fourth way: pluralism. He claims there are many actions done on romantic or aesthetic grounds, which shows that we sometimes act for the sake of the *fine* or the *beautiful*—considerations that are neither moral nor prudential. Chappell’s trenchant critique of contemporary theories merits careful study. He argues (successfully, to my mind) that “cross-infection” of the moral and the prudential is inevitable if we adopt a reasonably thick conception of eudaimonia like Aristotle’s.

Christoph Halbig’s essay, “The Benefit of Virtue,” further problematizes any attempt to reconcile the moral and the prudential in neat and tidy fashion. Halbig’s question is: How we can say that the virtuous life (the moral life) is the happy life (a life that benefits its possessor)? He presents many options one might take to show this, and finds them all wanting. It is noteworthy, however, that Halbig disqualifies an Arisotelian approach as question begging, since it defines virtue in terms of eudaimonia. It may be that the Aristotelian is unable to answer the question as Halbig poses it, but it may also be that the question as posed reflects assumptions about reason and value that an Aristotelian has good grounds to deny.

Julia Peters’ essay, “Virtue, Personal Good, and the Silencing of Reasons” takes up similar themes. Following McDowell, Peters argues that virtue always silences considerations of personal goods. For example, the courageous soldier does not value his life in conditions that demand its sacrifice; if he did he would not be truly courageous, but merely continent. Pace McDowell, Peters does not want to say that the courageous soldier suffers no genuine loss in sacrificing his life. She argues that when the virtuous agent suffers, the cause is bad circumstances rather than virtuous activity.

Mark LeBar and Daniel Russell’s, “Well-Being and Eudaimonia: A Reply to Haybron” also takes up issues of virtue and personal welfare, and relates them specifically to Aristotle’s naturalism. They argue that the virtues benefit their possessors in an agent relative sense: it is good for the individual, and it concerns her goals and the meaning of her own life. But this well-being is also of a distinctively *human sort* and thus invokes a norm that holds not simply for individuals, but for all members of the species. In this sense, the authors contend, Aristotelians are welfare externalists, and they conclude their reflections with an impressive defense of welfare externalism over its internalist rival.

In “Good (as) Human Beings” Philipp Brüllmann makes trouble for the kind of naturalism invoked by LeBar, Russell, and many other Aristotelians. Aristotelian naturalism is summarized nicely as committed to the following three theses: (1) that moral judgments can be grounded in judgments of human nature; (2) that good is always the goodness of a kind; (3) that consequently moral goodness is being good *as* a human being. The appeal of (1), Brüllmann notes, is that it grounds our account of the virtues in something that purports to be independent and objective. This is related to (2) which gives an account of the good such that if one knows what a thing is one knows its good. Therefore, if we know what ‘a human being’ is we know the human good. The trouble is that Neo-Aristotelians like Hursthouse also insist that ethical reflection is Neurathian: it begins from an ethically robust conception of human life and submits this to a human nature test one belief at a time. Brüllman argues effectively that a Neurathian procedure is incompatible with a semantics of good that rests on an external foundation in nature.

John Hacker-Wright’s essay, “Human Nature, Virtue, and Rationality” goes some way towards addressing these worries. He seeks to defend the appeal to human nature but to correct the account in two important senses: (1) to show that the appeal is inescapable and (2) to show that the appeal is already inherently practical and ethically robust, and thus not external in the sense that worries Brüllmann. Hacker-Wright argues that Aristotelian naturalism is best understood as a theory of practical reason. Nature is normative over our practical reasoning because such reasoning is inescapably tied to our human needs and desires. Drawing on the work of Michael Thompson, he argues that knowledge of this nature is not empirical but achieved from within the perspective of action and practical reflection; we inevitably appeal to such knowledge insofar as we reflect and act intentionally at all. Furthermore, this conception of human nature is robust enough to supply standards of right practical reasoning. This is an incredibly interesting proposal that gives Aristotelian naturalism a contemporary constitutivist spin by grounding practical norms in the constitutive role they play in practical thought and action; I am skeptical, however, of its final and most significant claim. The argument from rational agency does not show that robust norms like individual and species survival are a necessary part of a theory of rational agency. It’s no doubt true that we necessarily see one another as human beings acting intentionally, as opposed to rational fish or wolves, but it is not clear that our humanity is adding anything important to the story about our capacity to form intentions and execute them. More work is needed to show that Aristotelian naturalism significantly alters the familiar constitutivist project.

The next trio of essays concern the acquisition of virtue. Edward Harcourt and Nancy Snow take an empirically informed approach to the topic. In “Attachment Theory, Characer, and Naturalism,” Harcourt argues that attachment theory, one of the leading theoretical orientations in developmental psychology, ought to garner the attention of Aristotelians because it promises to display the continuity between our second and first natures. In “Notes Toward an Empirical Psychology of Virtue” Nancy Snow also turns to the empirical psychology literature in order to show that CAPS (the cognitive-affective personality system) provides a promising empirical grounding for our concept of virtue. She also shows how this theory might respond to the situationist critique of virtue ethics.

Candace Vogler takes a more traditional approach to these questions in “Natural Virtue and Proper Upbringing.” She argues that proper upbringing is neither necessary nor sufficient for virtue since one can be vicious in spite of a good upbringing, and one can be virtuous in spite of a terrible upbringing. But how can we explain this? Vogler’s strategy is to adopt a conception of the mean she finds in the work of Anselm Müller, who has argued that the doctrine of the mean implies the unity of the virtues. Such a conception of the mean allows us to formulate a corrective account of the virtues, which in turn would allow for the sort of self-correction one would need in order to overcome a bad upbringing.

The most critical piece in the volume is Thomas Hurka’s “Aristotle on Virtue: Wrong, Wrong, and Wrong.” Unfortunately I do not have space to do this essay justice, but I will note that many of his objections are adequately addressed in the other essays in this volume. In particular, Vogler’s essay is helpful in rebutting his claim that virtue is not legitimately praiseworthy or blameworthy, while the arguments by Chappell, LeBar and Russell, and Peters can help to take the sting out of his charge that Aristotelianism is inherently egoist.

Anthony Price, in his direct response piece, argues that Hurka misunderstands the structure of Aristotle’s theory of action and practical reason. Price suggests that we mark a distinction between internal and external goals. An agent’s external goal picks out the end he seeks in doing whatever he is doing, here and now—for instance, saving a friend’s life by mortally dangerous means. Such choices, Price argues, are always highly contextualized, and ultimately bring into view an agent’s general sense of how his life ought to be lived on the whole. The latter brings out the agent’s internal goals or motives: his relatively stable ideas about why he acts in certain ways. Hurka mistakenly thinks that these considerations of eudaimonia enter at the level of the choice of external goals, when in fact it enters in to our selection of internal goals which delineate our conception of acting well. Finally, Price argues that our conception of moral responsibility demands that it be the agent’s life that pre-eminently concerns him. Virtue demands that evil may never come through the agent’s intentional activity. The first personal stance of ethical agency is therefore not a sign of egoism, but the bedrock of any intelligible attributions of praise or blame.

Jennifer A. Frey

University of South Carolina

freyj@mailbox.sc.edu