

BOOK REVIEW

Aristotle on Prescription: Deliberation and Rule-Making in Aristotle's Practical Philosophy. By FRANCESCA ALESSE. Leiden, NE and Boston, MA: Brill, 2018. Pp. xii + 273. Hardback, \$162.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-38538-2.

Alesse's book fills a gap in scholarship on Aristotle's practical philosophy by offering a much needed analysis of the notion of prescription. With prescription, Alesse translates the Greek *ἐπιταξίς*. She defines prescription as "a single and particular rule of conduct as well as the procedure of formulating rules of conduct" (1). As Alesse points out in the introduction to the book, the notion of prescription is not as central to Aristotle's theorizing as the notion of practical reason. However, it still plays an important role especially given its connections with deliberation.

In Chapter 1, Alesse argues that the prescriptive nature of Aristotle's ethical proposal is evident in his discussion of political deliberation and in the theory of the mean. On her view, in Aristotle's practical philosophy, prescriptive rules as well as experts (such as the *φρόνιμος*) are equally important in guiding the agent on how to act. This reading challenges those interpretations that attribute to Aristotle the idea that "action is mainly the result of experience and sensible understanding of every contingent situation."¹ The major contribution of the book is, in my view, that of establishing a balance between the importance of rules and the role of experts. It goes hand in hand with a controversial aspect of the book, namely the difficulty in defining the domain of prescription: as Alesse notes in Chapter 1, Aristotle does not offer a theory of prescription. In addition, the book leaves undetermined the precise relation between prescription and practical reason. At times, Alesse calls prescription a "character of practical reason" (158); elsewhere, she calls it an "attitude of reason" (159). Her claim that prescription concludes a line of practical reason does not offer enough clarification. Despite these difficulties, Alesse shows effectively that even though there is no universal precept that can guide us in action Aristotle's practical philosophy is prescriptive. As she explains,

¹ Preface, ix.

according to Aristotle, on the political level, we need both normative universality and prescriptive particularity. Prescription is the conclusion of an act of deliberation that is not universal as a law. We need prescriptive rules to apply the norm of right reason to particular circumstances insofar as right reason offers no content for action. Alesse presents this last point as uncontroversial whereas there is much debate on what right reason is and what it prescribes.

Chapter 2 provides a survey of the literature on deliberation and practical syllogism. A recent contribution to the discussion on practical reason - C. Olfert's *Aristotle on practical truth* (OUP 2017) - could be added to this survey. In this chapter, Alesse defends a controversial and yet compelling view that theoretical reason has a role in defining the end of our actions. She emphasizes that we can think theoretically even with a practical purpose. In particular, Alesse distinguishes the path to goodness which is provided by λόγος ἐπιτακτικός and the end of our action provided by theoretical reason. This discussion is completed in Chapter 3, where Alesse distinguishes deliberation from practical syllogism: on her view, only the latter infers the conclusion from premises. On its turn, prescription is different from deliberation because (i) the agent who prescribes certain actions does not experience desire, and (ii) the end of the actions is distant.

In Chapter 4, Alesse turns to an analysis of the roles of prescriptive reason and of practical wisdom that draws abundantly from the *Protrepticus* and from the *Eudemian Ethics*. In elucidating passages from texts that are often overlooked by scholars (only very recently has there been a renewed interest in the *EE*), the book offers a substantial contribution. An example of this is Alesse's interpretation of the very controversial ending of the *EE* where Aristotle discusses two principles. The first principle is practical reason, which is prescriptive and it is compared to medicine; the second principle is theoretical reason, which is normative and it is compared to health. On Alesse's view, practical wisdom differs from other virtues of thinking insofar as it prescribes conduct. She compares this prescriptive role to the one assigned in the *Protrepticus* to practical wisdom.

The concluding chapter (Chapter 5) of the book broadens the analysis of prescription to the political sphere: as Alesse argues, political science is prescriptive insofar as it assigns different tasks to different citizens. She emphasizes that there is a prescriptive aspect also in tools insofar as they need to be used in a certain way in order to fulfil their function.

The book is an important contribution, challenging readings that attribute to Aristotle the idea that there is a primary and, at times, sole role of experts in guiding how we act. In her book, which will prove useful for scholars interested in

Aristotle's ethics and politics, Alesse offers an interpretation that establishes a balance between the role of prescriptive norms and the function of experts in guiding how the agent should act.

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