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Review of *Aristotle on the Concept of Shared Life* by Sara Brill

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Aristotle on the concept of shared life

Sara Brill, *Aristotle on the concept of shared life. Classics in theory*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 304. ISBN 9780198839583 \$100.00.

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Preview

Sara Brill uses the dynamics of shared living (*suzên*) to display the continuity in Aristotle's thinking between life (*zôê*) and the human possibilities for living well or failing to do so. She conceives this approach in opposition to those who sharply distinguish the animal from the human, and she endeavors to reveal that human sociality amounts to an intensification of animal forms rather than a sharp break from them. Reading Aristotle this way, she says, requires us to engage with "the ancient sources of some of the most vital concepts of contemporary critical theory" (3). Against Giorgio Agamben's opposition between bare life and political power, Brill reads Aristotle as understanding life as "an especially clear expression of power" (4) because soul stands to body as ruling to ruled (*archon, archomenon*). Whereas Aristotle tends to distinguish between legitimate authority and simple dominance or control (*kratos*), Brill tends to speak generally of *power*, and politics emerges in Aristotle's view (and Plato's) as the power to generate life both in the sense of *zôê* and in the sense of *bios* (manner of life). Humans actualize their capacity for shared life sometimes well but often badly, and Brill details the fragility and the pathologies of human shared life against a zoological background to bring out Aristotle's "alienated stance toward human natality" (6), that is, toward our birth under conditions beyond our control. Aristotle, she argues, comes to see the primary task of politics as the management of the human generation of life (6, 198).

Brill draws primarily on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics*, *History of Animals*, and *Politics*. The argument unfolds in three parts, each consisting of two chapters. The first chapter explores Aristotle's account of friendship as the most vivid expression of human living together and living well, and the second chapter turns to the *Politics* (especially Books One, Two, and Five), where she considers the human impulse to live together and the inescapably disruptive "pathologies of self-regard" (107).

Whereas the first part considers the ethical and political manifestations of shared life, the second part considers the ways of life and characters of animals by reference to where they live: on land, in water, or in the city. Chapter Three reviews Aristotle's analysis of the bodies, lives, and habitats of non-human animals, with particular

emphasis on bees. And in Chapter Four, Brill returns to the *Politics* (primarily Books Three and Four) to consider the various regimes as the precariously unstable habitats in which human animals live together. Animals have *bioi* too, some of which are political, and the human animal is distinguished by the ability, within limits, to choose or construct a *bios* as organizing *zôê*. Aristotle locates “the pathologies of human political life in the very mechanisms of attachment that make it possible and in their production of forms of life that are, paradoxically, unlivable” (6).

The third part turns more directly to engagement with contemporary critical theory. In Chapter Five, Brill argues that Aristotle’s view of the good life that is worth living for its own sake, especially in his accounts of property and of the natural slave, requires the commodification of life and, ultimately, eugenics legislation. In Chapter Six, Brill examines Aristotle’s treatment of mothers as paradigms of active love and develops the mother-child bond as responsible for both the possibility and instability of political life (244) and as necessary for understanding Aristotle’s account of friendship and his conception of thought thinking itself (232).

A long introduction situates the book relative to the reception of Aristotle’s political thought in the last hundred years or more. Here Brill criticizes those who sharply distinguish the human from the animal, as if *animal* meant *beast*. Because *zôion* includes beasts, human beings, and the divine, *zôê* should not be conceived as *bare life* that lies somehow beneath a properly human life. The book establishes continuity for humans from living (*zên*) to living together (*suzên*) to living well (*eu zên*). The manner of living (*bios*) belongs to the category of means, as the form or arrangement of one’s life, but the end (*telos*) is the activity of living (*zên*) through that arrangement. Contrary to some contemporary usage, “we cannot simply align *bios* with political life without overlooking Aristotle’s efforts to point out that there are certain manners of life that are decidedly antisocial, that pull in the opposite direction of the *hormê* for political community” (12).

The introduction also connects contemporary concerns with natality to evidence from Greek literature on mothers and birth. This introduction is an important complement to Chapter Six, which appeals to these “larger cultural fantasies” (24). The book concludes with the short “Coda: Unlivable Life.” In this Brill states very concisely the correction of Agamben’s distinction between *zôê* and *bios* in favor of a reading that is more accurately Aristotelian, although Aristotle still emerges the villain responsible for rendering life unlivable. For Brill appears to approve of Aristotle’s emphasis on the centrality of life as a cosmic principle spanning the difference between the divine, for whom *zôê* and *bios* are the same, to the various kinds of animals, each of which exercises a *bios* determined by its kind in relation to its place. The variously political animals share life, and humans are the most intensely political of animals, distinguished by their need to choose a *bios*. And here Aristotle’s anti-natalism, which lies at the heart of Brill’s critique, emerges in his reaction against the impossibility of choosing one’s own birth or life.

“For Aristotle, the best way of contending with this dimension of human natality is to bring coming-to-be under the umbrella of civic legislation, such that one’s *genesis* belongs to the *polis* itself, an entity that exercises its ownership of citizens in a variety of laws, but especially in laws pertaining to the production of human beings, in which it arrogates to itself the creation of *zôê* as an act of choice on the part of the city, and a civic duty on the part of its residents, who are required to farm out their sperm and wombs as liturgy to the polis” (260).

The wish to choose life means that life is an object of desire, and the effort to live as nearly as possible in imitation of perpetual divine life requires also the subjugation of many others, principally women and slaves, and thus contains the “seeds” of hatred of life (261). This *bios* makes life unlivable.

One thing that is not clear to me is whether Aristotle himself is responsible for this or is merely reflecting “larger tropes in the Greek philosophic imaginary” or “larger cultural constructions of motherhood,” among other similar formulations (232, 246). See 193 n. 22 for the suggestion that Aristotle is responsible for using these views even if he did not invent them. Perhaps, but matters could be clearer.

For example, Chapter Three includes a longish account of Aristotle’s observations of bees and his speculations about their manner of reproducing. One paragraph summarizes the contemporary view, which helps to show what Aristotle got wrong, especially in designating the queen as a king. Brill quotes the passage where Aristotle says his account is the work of *logos* (theory) where *aisthêsis* (perception) is admittedly inadequate. Aristotle calls for more and better observation, but Brill reads him as filling the gaps with “fantasies,” as if he is not thinking for himself at all:

“That is, the attribution of generative power to the king is in keeping with larger cultural forces that would deny generativity to the female, and to^[1] Aristotle’s own relegation of the female principle in sexual reproduction to the provision of matter; that is, the self-generation of the king feeds the fantasy of generation without a female” (166-7).

It is perfectly fair to wonder why Aristotle speculates beyond what he perceives with the account that he does. The question is whether we are justified in attributing Aristotle’s account to fantasies or anxieties (as occurs here and in Chapters Five and Six).

Brill exercises imagination in interpreting Aristotle. In one case, this is said to be “invited” by the text itself (243), but other and “further” uses of imagination in the same context are given no justification. In that case, Brill gives us *possible* ways to read the text rather than *the* way to read the text, and the strength of the speculative reading depends on its ability to illuminate. To be sure, at various points Brill claims to identify ways the text *must* be read. The most successful of these surround the central aim of the book, which is to restate the significance of *zôê* in Aristotle’s political thought (e.g., 174).

Perhaps the least successful such claim appears in Chapter Six, where Brill says that Aristotle's understanding of "maternal action and affect is necessary . . . for understanding the perpetual self-actualization that is thought thinking itself" (232). Later, this seems to be reduced to a suggestion: "I am suggesting, however, that in theorizing the relation between mind and its proper objects, in conceiving of thought thinking itself, Aristotle asserts a form of reflexive generation, and that in doing so he is locating himself within a broader cultural and philosophical trajectory which asserts that in philosophizing we become mothers to ourselves, realizing the fantasy of self-creation" (252). Similarly, and more importantly, Brill takes Aristotle to be necessarily committed to a global teleology (223) on the basis of the famous passage in *Politics* book one suggesting a hierarchy among living beings (1256b7-22). This is another "fantasy" (215), but Brill does not explain how Aristotle could entertain it, especially given his recognition of natural scarcity and the warring of hungry animals against one another (148-50). Brill's Aristotle has no irony.

The first chapter on friendship has many interesting insights and observations, successfully providing an illuminating reading of the texts, and in this chapter Brill moves deftly between the *Nicomachean* and the *Eudemian Ethics*. Both here and in the two chapters devoted primarily to the *Politics*, Brill draws out the importance of Aristotle's indications of the obstacles to friendship and political life, citing Aristotle's understatement: "In general, to live together [*to suzên*] and be partners in any human matter is difficult" (1263a15-16). Brill quotes Aristotle extensively and attends carefully to the usage of particular terms, but the text is not overburdened with meticulous parsing. Generally, Aristotle is allowed to speak for himself. Brill does not in every case acknowledge a controversial reading. For example, in Chapter One, Brill reads Aristotle as presenting a quasi-Aristophanic interpretation of friendship as the restoration to a prior unity of what has been sundered (61; cf. 1245a29-34). That is one way this difficult text is read, but some translators and interpreters take the text very differently. This approach, together with the reference to "the polysemy of the text" (32), reinforces the sense that Brill's book is largely an invitation to think through the connections afforded by the zoological, ethical, and political lenses rather than an effort to close off debates.

Greek text appears in footnotes but not on every occasion. Key words and phrases are transliterated in the text, but one need not have Greek. Still, this is a book for graduate students and specialists in philosophy and classics. Brill engages with the secondary literature primarily by identifying where to look for supporting, competing, or supplementary views. Although Brill counters Agamben, the book is not polemical in spirit, except perhaps toward Aristotle. Brill's introduction describes reading Aristotle as, in a word, exasperating (31), but "not reading Aristotle does not allow one to escape the effects of Aristotelianism" (32). Philosophy, as Brill apprehends it, "entails the active exercise of its capacities for understanding and resisting oppression" (34).

Notes

[1] Probably this should read *with*. I noticed more than a dozen typos, none of significance.