

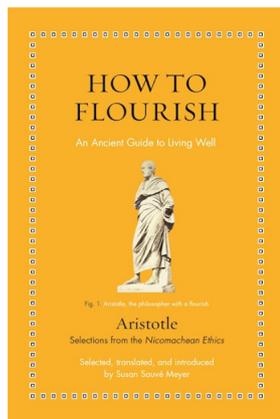
## Book Review

### How to Flourish: An Ancient Guide to Living Well. Aristotle: Selections from the Nicomachean Ethics

Sauvé Meyer (S.) (ed., trans.) Pp. xxii + 302.  
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023.  
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John Godwin

Independent Scholar, UK  
drjohngodwin187@gmail.com



This book is the latest in Princeton's 'Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers' series. As with previous titles, the format is a Greek text with a facing English translation, a decent introduction at the beginning and selective notes at the end. There is also a useful list of key Aristotelian terms, some diagrams on the Aristotelian soul, and a short guide to further reading.

The book's title is well chosen for this author, whose aim in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not the disinterested search for logical truth

but rather a practical guide to good living or what he calls *eudaimonia* ('flourishing'). Aristotle takes us through the notion of virtue, the doctrine of the mean – whereby virtue is the midpoint between two opposing vices, so that (for example) courage is midway between cowardice and rashness – and then a whole series of desirable qualities in the flourishing individual. Some of these desirable attributes are the usual suspects – courage, generosity, justice, self-control and so on – while others (such as 'wit' and 'magnanimity' in the sense of having a proper estimation of one's worth to society) will be less predictable to modern readers. Who knew that being able to tell jokes of the right kind, at the right time, and in the right way was the mark of a person of moral virtue (as opposed to the 'buffoon' at one extreme and the 'boorish person' at the other)?

The Greek of Aristotle's *Ethics* is not always straightforward and some paragraphs feel a long way from the more mellifluous writing of (say) Plato. That said, Aristotle's text is far from being the dusty lecture notes which some readers imagine: he laces his philosophy with literary quotations, with historical references and with plenty of questions to keep us on our toes (see e.g. p. 267). His conclusions are always drawn from his observation of human beings and generalities are illustrated with copious examples from the 'real world'. Sauvé Meyer succeeds in the main in giving us an English version which is readable and aware of what works in modern English. To take one

obvious example: previous translators used to render Aristotle's term *akrasia* as 'incontinence' (with all its unfortunate connotations) but Sauvé Meyer has defined it sensibly as 'losing control'. Readers may disagree on some of her English equivalents for key terms: I would prefer the translation 'brutishness' (for *theriotes*) to her 'beastliness' but both are better than the Loeb's 'bestiality'; I could not see why she used the word 'amateur' in the definition of *atechnia* (literally 'non-art') at 6.3.4 (p. 183). I was surprised at her use of 'give-and-take' for *homilia* on p. 150 ('meeting people' is Irwin's translation) but she applies it consistently and it hits a better note than the Loeb's 'society'.

To get a flavour of the translation, look at her version of part of Aristotle's words on friendship among young people (8.3: 1156a-b):

ἡ δὲ τῶν νέων φιλία δι' ἡδονὴν εἶναι δοκεῖ· κατὰ πάθος γὰρ οὔτοι ζῶσι, καὶ μάλιστα διώκουσι τὸ ἡδὸν αὐτοῖς καὶ τὸ παρόν· τῆς ἡλικίας δὲ μεταπιπτούσης καὶ τὰ ἡδέα γίνεται ἕτερα. διὸ ταχέως γίνονται φίλοι καὶ παύονται· ἅμα γὰρ τῷ ἡδέϊ ἡ φιλία μεταπίπτει, τῆς δὲ τοιαύτης ἡδονῆς ταχεῖα ἢ μεταβολή.

'Friendship among the young seems to be based on pleasure. Young people live by their passions and mostly pursue what is pleasant to them and immediately available. At this inconstant stage of life, what pleases a person will fluctuate as well. That is why people become friends quickly at this stage, and quickly stop being friends, since their love alters along with their pleasures [and this sort of pleasure changes rapidly].'

Sauvé Meyer certainly spells out the meaning of the original (although she omits to translate the final phrase of the Greek), and her version sticks close to the text without losing fluency or sense. In other places she fills out the translation with a view to making the meaning clearer: so, for example, at 1100a1-2, where the Greek simply mentions 'activity like this' (τοιαύτης ἐνεργείας) she gives us: 'the kind of actions that good people perform'. Reading her version of the sketch of the obsequious man ('they praise everything you do or say, in order to be pleasant...') reminds us that Aristotle draws his conclusions with a slight satirical edge, and that Theophrastus' *Characters* came from the same stable as this more austere text. Her English is natural and even conversational, using the impersonal 'you' and (for example) translating the generalised τοῦ λυπεῖν (1126b15) as 'making someone feel bad'. Earlier on (1121b23-4: p. 141) she brings Aristotle's wonderfully expressive terms ἀνελευθερία ... φειδωλοὶ γλίσχροι κίμβικες bang up to date with her 'moneygrubbing... miser, tightwad or skinflint', just as elsewhere she brings in 'people-pleasers' (p. 155) and 'anger management' (p. 145).

Our world is a very different one from that of Aristotle, but the call to live our lives in the most flourishing way is ever more insistent in this age of self-help books and online influencers. Sauvé Meyer wisely ends her selection (p. 273) with Aristotle's curtain-call (10.9) marking the end of this inquiry with a call to action:

'Well, if we have given an adequate sketch of happiness and virtue, as well as friendship and pleasure, have we accomplished what we intended? Or is it rather that... when we investigate what is to be done, our goal is not simply to theorise and learn what to do, but to do it?'

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