

# Book Review

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*The Good Life and the Good State: A Neo-Aristotelian Theory of Government*,  
Katharina Nieswandt, Anthem Press, Published January 2025

Amidst the contemporary resurgence of interest in Aristotle, one topic has been conspicuously missing: political theory. The lacuna is especially striking given the Philosopher's own interest in the topic: the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which of course has been the center of tremendous interest, begins with a statement of the subordination and inferiority of ethics to politics. Yet whereas ethics has been transformed by its 20th-century contact with Aristotle, political theory has chugged on almost entirely without a backward glance at his works.

In her excellent new book, *The Good Life and the Good State: A Neo-Aristotelian Theory of Government*, Katharina Nieswandt seeks to rectify this oversight. She argues that an Aristotelian view of the role of the state in the life of the individual provides a much-needed alternative to the views that have otherwise dominated the study of politics.

The Neo-Aristotelian theory of government Nieswandt develops she calls “constitutivism” because its central claim is that the public good and the private good are *constitutive* of one another. Constitutivism is opposed to what Nieswandt calls “collectivism” on the one hand—the view that the interests of the individual are subordinated to the good of the state or collective—and “privatism” on the other—the view that the organization of the state is subordinated to the good of the individual. The former is embodied by various totalitarian political theories, and is largely out of fashion today; the latter by classical and Rawlsian liberalism, so dominant as to be the very air that contemporary political theory breathes. It is thus in contrast to privatism in particular that the central insights of constitutivism are developed.

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Constitutivism, as an Aristotelian theory, maintains as a centerpiece a robust and objective conception of human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). Aristotle and his inheritors maintain that there is a determinate shape that a good human life must have and that this shape might come radically apart from what an individual *wants* from her life. The central claim of Nieswandt's constitutivism, then, is that it is an essential part of human flourishing that man should exist within a well-functioning state. This is a metaphysical claim: the good of the individual is metaphysically dependent on his living within a good state; the reverse dependence—that a good state depends on being made up of flourishing individuals—also obtains.

Nieswandt argues in the book for the possibility of the metaphysical bidirectionality characteristic of constitutivism (Ch. 3, "What is a common good?") and the necessity of positing it (Ch. 1, "My good against the common good?"). These arguments are no doubt essential for getting constitutivism into the conversation. But at its heart, *The Good Life and the Good State* is a book about reasons: the main advantage of the Aristotelian paradigm is that it recognizes certain considerations as legitimately justifying in a way that other paradigms cannot.

At the most abstract level, as Nieswandt puts it, constitutivism forces us to understand human flourishing as being not an external goal of political or practical reasoning, but as conditioning the valid forms of that reasoning, or providing the "standard of evaluation for practical ... inference patterns" (33). Contemporary theorizing about (political) reasons for action tends to treat every action as necessarily aimed at producing some outcome. But just as it would be a distortion to think of the validity of *modus ponens* as being dependent on the thinker's desire to form true beliefs, so too it is a distortion to conceive of the force of considerations of benevolence as deriving from the agent's desire to live well. Rather, an action's being benevolent counts as a reason in and of itself, *because* of the nature of human flourishing.

Once we reject the idea that practical rationality must always be aimed at *producing* some flourishing-conducive outcome, we become able to appreciate reasons that simply go missing on that outcomes-based or "instrumentalist" conception of practical reason. In Chapter 5, Nieswandt works carefully through two kinds of examples. The first is the way that *histories* can serve as reasons—that is, that something that happened in the past can *by itself* be a reason for a present action. Consider, for example, the concept of *revenge*. If someone has killed my brother, I can only be taking revenge on that person if I do them evil *because of that past killing*. Contemporary outcomes-based accounts of vengeful action are, as Nieswandt shows, unable to countenance genuinely vengeful actions: because an action is rational only if it is aimed at producing some outcome, such accounts must re-imagine vengeance as concerned with deterrence, or counterbalancing some loss. That is simply not vengeance.

Another example is that of *identities* as reasons. Consider Jonathan Haidt's famous "moral dumbfounding" experiments, in which he found subjects unable to give "supporting reasons" for their (nonetheless persistent) negative judgments about things like cannibalism and incest. The very identification of the phenomenon depends on an inability to countenance things like "disgust, or a relationship, or the fact that we're talking about a human being or a corpse" (83) as genuine reasons, presumably because none of these justifications is suitably outcomes-related. As Nieswandt shows, the revival of non-instrumental Aristotelian reasons allows all of those things to be the expression of a deeply human form of rationality.

Political reasons, or the reasons we have for constructing the state in one way rather than another, very often have the character of these recovered kinds of reasons. Justice, Nieswandt emphasizes, very often depends on understanding past events as in themselves reasons for action; group membership and kinship relations obviously depend on taking our very identities as reason-giving. All of these reasons are unavailable to the instrumentalist conception of reasons that predominates in political theory.

What Nieswandt does not emphasize is that determining what kinds of considerations are genuine non-instrumental reasons depends on having a very robust conception of the good life. Aristotle, of course, had such a conception; he had the kind of cultural confidence necessary to articulate that conception and to allow it to condition his works from the ethical to the biological. But it is precisely this aspect that makes us squirm when we teach Aristotle to undergraduates: the confidence with which his view deems some lives good and, more to the point, others bad. In order to make a Neo-Aristotelian theory of government more than schematic, we are going to have to make some very determinate judgments about the good life ourselves. We are going to have to say that some people are worse people, that some choices that decent people make are serious mistakes, and that some people with good hearts and good intentions are simply living bad lives.

Obviously, there are errors to be made here—Aristotle himself famously thought that some people were "natural slaves." And it is understandable to be worried about these kinds of errors becoming ascendent. But the thought that the potential for error here is a *decisive* objection is, I think, just another part of the problem that Nieswandt's book aims to elucidate. In Chapter 7 ("Constitutivism as a Holistic Alternative"), Nieswandt points out that in post-Rawlsian political theory, every position is forced to show that "epistemically constrained, egoistic utility maximizers" would choose its particular set of norms over any other. "I am regularly surprised," she writes, "at the widespread acceptance of the following principle among political theorists: the disagreement about X renders X unusable as a justification" (122). Accepting this principle is a mistake on a par with thinking that a cardiologist has to justify a diagnosis

to Descartes at the end of the first Meditation. Nieswandt's Aristotelianism is meant to allow us to see that.

I think that the importance of this humble little book cannot be overstated. It does not answer all the questions we will have about what the "good state" should look like, but it will certainly broaden our horizons as we go on to answer those questions. It is a necessary intervention in contemporary political theory, with the potential to bring about a major gestalt switch in its readers and in our political discourse generally.