

Mark A. Young: *Negotiating the Good Life: Aristotle and the Civil Society*. Burlington, Vt: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005, 234 pp, 0-7546-5135-5, \$79.95 (Hb).

Mark A. Young's *Negotiating the Good Life* is an important book. Young attempts to synthesize an Aristotelian concern for individual *eudaimonia* and community with a liberal devotion to individual autonomy and pluralism, thus developing a type of liberalism that can answer communitarian objections. Young eschews developing yet another statist model of politics and draws on narrative and negotiation theory to provide a practical framework for our joint searches for *eudaimonia* and for conflict resolution. In attempting to transcend the debate between liberals and communitarians by drawing on the ethical and political thought of Aristotle, Young contributes to a growing tradition of neo-Aristotelian liberalism. *Negotiating the Good Life* is not without its flaws, however, all of which have roots in modern skepticism of metaphysics and objective morality. The lack of a sound foundation to which his skepticism leads threatens to undermine Young's position.

In Chapter One, Young identifies a major problem of modernity: the breakdown of social order and community. The contemporary world increasingly evinces the symptoms of “alienation, disorientation, a loss of identity and a deepening sense of philosophical bankruptcy” (p. 1). The most prominent theories of liberalism seem to have nothing to offer against such a trend and, while the charges of atomism and excessive normative neutrality made by communitarians against liberal theories have been incisive, communitarians have been unable to provide alternatives that are clearly defensible and avoid paternalism and totalitarianism. Young's solution to this inconclusive debate is to return to Aristotle to provide a new grounding for liberalism and to focus not on the role of the state but on the role of civil society in the

pursuit and achievement of our ends. Young is sensitive to the deficiencies of political philosophies that are grounded in an atomistic, non-social, and non-historical view of human nature, and that focus excessively on rights, political liberty, and normative neutrality. Yet Young has an equally healthy distrust for statist politics: “We have learned from painful experience that the path that we tread when first we presume to know what is good for others leads naturally through paternalism to coercion and, ultimately, to the totalitarian state” (p. 9).

We might wonder, however, how an Aristotelian form of liberalism could safely avoid both atomistic liberalism and paternalistic or totalitarian communitarianism. Is liberalism even compatible with Aristotle’s views? Independently of the work of other Aristotelian liberals who also answer the question with a qualified affirmative, such as Ayn Rand, Tibor Machan, Chris Matthew Sciabarra, Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, Roderick T. Long, and Fred D. Miller, Jr., Young draws upon Aristotle’s ethical and political theory to provide a foundation and purpose for liberal politics. Young’s interpretation of Aristotle seems to be uncontroversial, although there are a few exceptions. Where Young departs from Aristotle in the areas of metaphysics, epistemology, slavery, and the role of women in society he is explicit about their differences. Young accepts as a given modern critiques of Aristotle’s metaphysics and epistemology.

Following Aristotle, Young views human beings as having an inherently political and social nature. On such a view, community is not merely an artificial construct but a natural phenomenon, having both instrumental and intrinsic value for human beings. Like Aristotle, Young views the natural end of human beings and of politics and the *polis* as being individual human flourishing, *eudaimonia*. The *polis* exists for the benefit of all of its members, not the other way around. The difference, between the views of Aristotle and Young, lies in Young’s

liberal commitment to individual autonomy, pluralism, and diversity. Although, Aristotle is committed to valuing individual autonomy, pluralism, and diversity, and there are liberal as well as communitarian tendencies in Aristotle's thought, Aristotle cannot be called a liberal.

To a greater degree than Aristotle, Young sees *eudaimonia* and virtue as being pluralistic. While we all possess a universal human nature, our identities and goals are in large part personally constructed within a social context and in negotiation with our fellow human beings. In our modern, complex, and swiftly changing world we all have the challenging yet rewarding task of searching for something to be, of becoming our own unique person. Our identities and goals are not laid out for us in advance by accident of birth into particular countries, cultures, ethnicities, races, religions, families, or economic classes. The social context we are born into certainly influences who we ultimately become, but we should not be coercively controlled by others because of such a context.

Drawing upon such thinkers as Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur, Hannah Arendt, and Jurgen Habermas, Young asks us to think of the tool of narrative as a path to *eudaimonia*. We can think about our lives as “stories that we tell about ourselves to others, and also judge those stories for their intrinsic and instrumental worth,” which “can then provide the normative foundation under our ongoing quest for happiness” (p. 47). As naturally political and social beings, we engage in a search for *eudaimonia* together with others. Other people necessarily play a role in our lives: challenging, guiding, supporting, enriching, and simply sharing in them. We all have a need for psychological visibility, a rational sense of self-esteem, and to strive for excellence. Such things cannot be achieved in isolation. In our search for *eudaimonia*, we are often called to justify our life stories to others by providing good reasons for our choices and actions. Frequently, we must negotiate with other people over our interests,

goals, and responsibilities. For example, we might think of how much negotiation goes into a typical marriage. For the sake of a higher value, their love for each other and the new family they are creating, the individuals entering into such a relationship inevitably have to make mutual adjustments to various facets of their lives.

Reason requires that we tolerate and respect other people, at least up to a point. Liberals may wonder whether everything is negotiable for Young. But like Thomas Jefferson, Young gives central place to our inalienable individual rights, which “cannot be superseded by any other considerations” (p. 114). He argues that “precisely because we all enjoy inalienable individual rights, we have no choice but to take each other's interests seriously, and together to craft institutions that are most likely to do justice to as many of them as possible” (p. 115). He continues: “So we must work with one another to live together effectively with our mutual and divergent interests in mind. As we do so, our individual rights remain unquestioned, and provide the moral foundation for the discussion” (p. 115).

Like Jefferson, however, Young takes our individual rights to be self-evident and does not attempt to provide a justification for them. This is a curious omission given the many contentions over the meaning, content, scope, justification, and validity of rights. What is even more curious is that Young even brings rights into his account, since at the start of *Negotiating the Good Life* he mentions “bracketing all talk of rights” (10). Since Young takes rights to be self-evident and does not explain just what he means by them, we are left to wonder about their meaning and scope in his theory.

Young recognizes that the ancient *polis*, a necessary condition for *eudaimonia* according to Aristotle, no longer exists and that we probably could not return to it even if we so desired. Yet he does not see a necessary connection between the ancient *polis* and *eudaimonia*. Instead,

he reconceives the *polis* in light of modern conditions and possibilities. Aristotle lived in a time in which the boundaries of the state and of society were nearly one and the same, such that it was easy to identify the two. In light of modern globalization, economic interdependence, and technological advances in transportation and communication, it need no longer be the case that society and other forms of association be confined to the limited territorial borders of states. Indeed, it is now possible to conceive of a global society composed of an uncountable number of other societies, communities, and other forms of association with overlapping memberships and jurisdictions that need not be territorially defined.

Young locates the notion of modern Aristotelian *polis* within civil society, which he defines as a “globally linked community of [shared] values” (p. 202). The global civil society may, in turn, be termed a modern *cosmopolis*. Instead of looking to the bureaucratic state to help its citizens live a *eudaimonic* life through coercive legislation, regulations, and education, Young turns to his notion of modern *polei*, civil societies, to help their members or citizens aim at and achieve *eudaimonia* by providing them with the necessary conditions, opportunities, and capabilities through voluntary cooperation and exchange. Not just any association will do, however. Young argues that only “communities which help their citizens aim at this true Good can be considered viable candidates for a modern Aristotelian polis” (p. 150).

Young treats his modern *polis* as an ideal type, a standard by which to judge all existing communities. But perhaps we should go further, and not only look to individual communities to provide all by themselves the full function of an ideal *polis* for their members. Most human beings hold memberships in a multitude of associations over the course of their lives, many of them simultaneously. Each association provides some value that the others do not. Perhaps membership in multiple communities, taken together, could perform the function of a *polis* by

compensating for the deficiencies of any single community. Young does not discuss such a possibility, though it seems a fruitful one to explore.

It is unfortunate that Young's position threatens to collapse for lack of a sound foundation. He hopes to be able to find foundations without foundationalism. Such a goal might be possible with negative coherentism, an epistemological position according to which our beliefs count as knowledge and are epistemically justified as long as they do not conflict with each other. However, as Aristotle made clear in *Posterior Analytics*, there can be no scientific understanding except through demonstration from true first principles. On the issue of scientific explanation, Aristotle can be classified as a foundationalist. At the same time, a case can be made that Aristotle was a negative coherentist with regard to knowledge and justification. For Aristotle, our reputable beliefs count as knowledge as long as they can withstand dialectical scrutiny and cohere in the manner just described. But the justificatory process ultimately proceeds through dialectical ascent up from reputable beliefs to first principles. We might read Young as being skeptical about the existence of non-arbitrary first principles, at least with regard to values, and as seeking foundations primarily in mutual agreement. Without non-arbitrary first principles it seems we must still become mired in infinite regress or vicious circularity, neither of which will enable us to justify our lives. Narrative and negotiation theory are useful tools in the search for *eudaimonia* and for resolving conflict, but without recourse to first principles and an objective moral standard they cannot serve these functions properly, much less enable us to arrive at some sort of non-foundationalist foundations. Indeed, Young's account presupposes an objective moral standard, since without such a standard it is not clear what makes an Aristotelian form of liberalism better than other ways of life, what makes liberalism desirable, or that individual rights are unquestionable. Young cannot respond to such concerns, except by asserting

that liberalism is desirable and that individual rights are unquestionable. But he has not given enough reason to believe him if we are not already inclined to do so. A case can be made that an objective moral standard, properly conceived, need not stifle individual autonomy, pluralism, and diversity.

Young takes many of the fashions of modern philosophy of science for granted. In this vein, for instance, the universe is mechanistic and not intelligibly ordered. Young seems unaware of thriving philosophical traditions that still have strong arguments in favor of there being teleology and intelligible, logical structures in the universe, including followers of Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, and Ayn Rand as well as realist phenomenologists, some modern neo-Aristotelians, and Austrian economists. Young seems to think that unless some higher being had planned out the entire structure and purpose of the universe for some unitary end then there could not be intelligible order in the universe; but this just is not the case. Friedrich Hayek's distinction between planned order and spontaneous order is useful here. The case can be made that there are essential and intelligible structures in the world obtaining from the identities or natures of things and their relations.

It is perhaps Young's skepticism that leads him to make his worst misinterpretation of Aristotle. He recognizes that for Aristotle *eudaimonia* is objective. Yet he argues that rightness for Aristotle “is a far more open-ended and indeterminate concept. There is no right answer to the question of justice. It is, in the end, a trait of character, developed (as are all the virtues), in a political context” (p. 89). This is an odd and unfounded interpretation of Aristotle's conception of virtue and justice. For Aristotle, virtue and justice simply are right, and they are a constitutive part of *eudaimonia*. Virtue is right action, a mean between the vices of excess and deficiency. Virtuous action is action conducted “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward

the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b21). Moreover, the rightness of virtue and justice is not simply reducible to the product of custom or public deliberation. A partial clue to Young's interpretation might be this remark: “Tellingly, nowhere in Aristotle do we find a clear argument for an objective standard either of Justice or for any attempt at an exhaustive list of the determinate rules and principles that would help to define and guide its application in a political community” (p. 87). We may ask, however, why such a list is a necessary feature of objective right. Young seems to have forgotten that *eudaimonia* and what is right are both objective and agent-relative for Aristotle as well as inseparable. We possess a universal human nature, but we also have unique characteristics and must act in specific contexts. Virtue and justice are no less objective for being agent-relative and contextual. This is why Aristotle places such great importance on the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom.

Two other interpretive oddities occur in *Negotiating the Good Life*. Young asserts that the notion of responsibility is foreign to Aristotle, yet for Aristotle *eudaimonia* and virtue must be desired and freely chosen for the right reasons to count as moral, and ignorance of them is inexcusable. Young also asserts that the emphasis on valuing oneself is Kantian but not Aristotelian. Such an assertion is odd given that Aristotle makes self-love the basis of friendship and love of others. The notion that an individual's humanity is not a source of normativity for Aristotle is equally odd, given that it is the quintessentially human faculty of reason that for Aristotle determines a human being's natural end.

Despite its flaws, *Negotiating the Good Life* is an important and insightful volume. While other persons may have been more successful at developing an Aristotelian form of liberalism, we can still profit from Young's work in this area. Young's focus on civil society as the locus of political discourse and individual human flourishing is a marked improvement over traditional

statist models of politics and a step in the right direction. Finally, Young makes a good case for the usefulness of narrative and negotiation theory in an Aristotelian form of liberalism as practical tools in the search for *eudaimonia* and for conflict resolution. An Aristotelian form of liberalism is not about atomistic freedom but “freedom in community” (p. 15).

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