REVIEW ARTICLE

Aristotle, the Action Researcher

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This article discusses Olav Eikeland’s The Ways of Aristotle, a book that takes stock of a whole range of Aristotelian themes and communicates various complex Aristotelian ideas to impressive effect. What is distinctive about the book is, amongst other things, that it provides valuable exegetical material for the kind of interpretation that makes Aristotle’s significance for action research stand out most convincingly. The article approaches the material of the book with an eye to those Aristotelian ideas and connections that usually pass unacknowledged in dominant accounts. Thus, the article aspires to show that it is possible, with the aid of Eikeland’s book, to defend the relevance of Aristotle to present-day educational concerns in hitherto unexplored but henceforth fresh and fertile ways.

The Ways of Aristotle reconstructs Aristotle’s philosophy as political, educational and learning-oriented (p. 450) and deploys its significance for action research innovatively and insightfully. The intersection of the terms ‘political’, ‘educational’ and ‘learning-oriented’ makes Olav Eikeland’s approach to his material valuable for philosophy of education. This is not only because all three of them are central to the discipline, but also, and more, because politics, education and learning are nowadays often connected in a rather impoverished discourse about knowledge- and learning-societies. Thus, a book that enriches this discourse in such a reflective, methodical and masterful way is very welcome.

Eikeland’s reading of Aristotle is refreshing in many respects. It adds the necessary complexity and intricacy that is often missing when the Aristotelian influence on educational action research and educational philosophy is limited to a handful of concepts whose meaning is usually taken to be uniform or well-worn. It sets the record straight regarding many points of Aristotelian philosophy that have been misinterpreted in ways crucial for our understanding of educational notions and for the polemics we establish around them. It shows that those approaches to Aristotle that favour a dichotomous thinking do not do justice to the richness of Aristotelian thought, which resists reductive polarisations. And
it demonstrates how Aristotelianism may help us set education centre-stage in an age of limited direct philosophical interest in education’s liberating and emancipatory potentials.

A most straightforward connection of education and politics can be inferred negatively. Lack of education (**apaideusia**), combined with authority (**exousia**) (p. 444) produces a mindlessness of extremely dangerous implications. But although a sense of lack is the point of departure for any Aristotelian endeavour toward knowledge and virtue, it surely is not its endpoint. Apart from countering the disabling repercussions of ignorance, a more positive task of political education is to cultivate the enabling possibilities that are inherent in the ethical formation of the human character. Yet, such Aristotelian ideas often appear tarnished either by a supposed moralism and conventionalism or by a supposed detached rationalism. It is no wonder that, for some contemporary thinkers, Aristotle’s thought seems to deserve little more than historical attention or even to attract sweeping and dismissive comments. Eikeland’s penetrating look into the role that Aristotelianism has, historically-educationally, played, sets the parameters within which the corresponding schooling has moved and makes the necessity for revisiting our views on Aristotle stand out more clearly:

Western institutions, and their divisions of labour, are undoubtedly partly a product of how Aristotle has been interpreted through the centuries. But his emphasis on practical experience and dialogue, as the ‘way’ to all basic principles and ends, has hardly been understood nor heeded. Hence, schools have been insulated from practical settings and filled with didactic, deductive teaching much more than with dialogical learning (p. 461).

Against such interpretations or supposed applications of Aristotle, Eikeland’s book constitutes an excellent exposition of the Aristotelian philosophical architectonic and a springboard for philosophers of education who may wish to examine various discussions—of theory and practice, particularism versus universalism, means-ends rationality and other such problems—from another perspective, one that Eikeland convincingly presents as not yet adequately mined and perhaps inexhaustibly rich.

The desire and the demand for wisdom both theoretical (**Sophia**) and practical (**phronesis**) and for happiness as well-functioning (**eupraxia**), have all in many ways reappeared as a serious concern for supporting sustainable, well-functioning, reflecting, and learning communities of practice in professional work . . . and social life in general (p. 464).

Therefore, what renders the *Ways of Aristotle* so topical is that the issues raised within this context, far from being outdated, re-emerge as focal points of praxis-based epistemology and action research, communicative ethics, eudaemonist contextualist liberalism, transcendental pragmatics and even redemptive politics and emancipatory, critical pedagogy. Being
exegetical in its aims, the book itself avoids spelling out such implications. But it invites them, nevertheless: through its compelling and all-round exposition of those Aristotelian ideas that crop up in most contemporary debates—surrounding *phronesis* in action research, the epistemic status of the reflective practitioner, the relevance of philosophy to contemporary educators qua researchers and the impact of postmodernism on educational research methodology.

In fact, Eikeland’s demanding yet accessible work on Aristotle’s ideas goes beyond the merely exegetical by offering a powerful interpretation that brings theory and practice closer. Away from conventional interpretations, we find in this book a reconstruction of the inherently ethico-political content of theoretical philosophy (p. 24). That there is no dichotomy between general knowledge and contextualism in Aristotle’s thought regarding virtuous action (p. 176) is one of the main arguments of the book—and one well-documented by references gleaned from the entire *Corpus Aristotelicum*. Around it revolves a dynamic defence of the Aristotelian coupling of reason and praxis and of the One and the Many. For, much against the time-honoured depiction of the thinker as an isolated, inactive, solitary and self-absorbed figure (consider, for instance, the familiar reception of Rodin’s *The Thinker*), for Aristotle, ‘although able to think alone, even the wisest individual will be better able to think with the aid of others’ (p. 450). Likewise, against much current individualisation and de-spiritualisation of happiness or against simplistic treatments of ideas of the good life and collective wellbeing, the book rehabilitates the neglected affective, supra-individual and ethico-political dimension of thought. I will organise my brief commentary on how this is performed around three dichotomies (and, indirectly, around their intersection): theory versus practice, *logos*/*knowledge* versus experience, and discursive procedures regarding justice versus conceptions of the good.

Eikeland argues against current approaches to action research (Stephen Toulmin’s among others) so long as they assume rigid segregations of *episteme* and *phronesis* (p. 41) and theory and practice, and so long as they claim that the province of action research is practice rather than theory, privileging the local over the general (p. 42). By contrast, what we gain from the Aristotelian framework is that, within it, ‘action research cannot be just *phronesis*. Nothing can be merely *phronesis*, since *phronesis* is the ultimate, practical perfection of the other virtues—ethical and intellectual’ (p. 464). More broadly, it is shown that, compared to Aristotle’s refined and complex philosophy, modern concepts of theory and practice appear to be too simple and coarse (p. 71). For Eikeland, a more desirable and acceptable relation of theory and practice is realised better by the common cause of the intellectual and the ethical. To account for it, Eikeland introduces a neologism, ‘theorethics’, which denotes the ‘ethical and relational import of the theoretical practice and attitude’ (p. 345): ‘A truly political life is actually concurrent with a life of theoretical and practical wisdom, a life of theorethics’ (p. 417). It embodies the happy co-ordination of the *logos* and the *alogon* (outside reason) as indissoluble parts of a unique life-history.
Yet what about the *logos* that is familiar to us from the attacks on logocentrism? Eikeland’s aim is not to confront this charge head-on; however, he indicates that such criticisms misfire when directed at Aristotelian thought. *Logos* in Aristotelian philosophy is a rich concept that cannot be reduced to ‘the modernistic, one-dimensional, formal-rationalistic, and non-lingual concept of reason’ (p. 57). Just to give an example: standards (*horoi*) are evidently a form of universality and generality justified by means of reason. At first sight there seems to lurk some absolutism and finalism in the idea of context-transcending givens to which people are expected to aspire. But it is a more interesting point, evident through deeper exploration, as Eikeland pertinently shows, that for Aristotle the generality of standards is not always valid. It is rather true for the most part (p. 74). This certainly leaves space for what we describe today as fallibilism and proves how Aristotle’s philosophy is equidistant from both, from the collapse of criteriology and from the finalism that takes standards to be absolute and infallible. Moreover, it retains an insight that is extremely useful for any research and for educational action research in particular, namely, that ‘practical thinking cannot abandon or dismiss truth any more than practice can abandon vision or perception in general’ (p. 71). As for the modern, misleading association/identification of *logos* with calculation or with the statistical element of modern science, Eikeland points out that the implicit confusion here lies in the mistaken translation of *logismos* as calculation (p. 69). For Aristotle, *logismos* is something like *bouleusis* (deliberation), which does not carry the connotations that calculation bears today. I would add, here, that modern Greek retains the connection of logismos and deliberation, and the modern Greek word for calculation is *hypologismos*, a term whose preposition (*hypo*) might initiate an interesting philosophical discussion as it has connotations that are unavailable in the international term ‘calculation’.

Then again, even if *logos* were immune to the charge of absolutism and finalism, and not necessarily identical with calculation, could it still be defended against the charges of isolated contemplation implicit in *bios theoretikos*? Eikeland is well aware of this difficulty, and, to meet such an objection, he introduces another important distinction. He concedes that theory may take the form of a distant and disinterested gaze. And it may lack practical import, although not all theory suffers from this sliding into abstraction. The abstract kind of theory he calls—and dismisses as—*theorēsis*, yet without abandoning the other kind (which he calls *theorēia*)—that is, the kind that does not fall into the trap of abstraction. The choice of terms here is very felicitous because, amongst other things, the Greek word *theorēsis* does carry connotations of a distant and disinterested viewpoint.

Unlike *theorēsis*, which relies on transcendentalism and applies from a distance (pp. 72, 310), Eikeland’s Aristotelian theoretics promotes *theorēia* along with dialogue, feelings and the cultivation of humanity. The knowledge that accompanies it is not disengaged or disinterested (p. 360). Another binary opposition, one that concerns deep down the opposition between the private and the public, is thus dismantled here. Eikeland’s
account of the distinction between the oikos qua private household and the polis (see also pp. 392–5) can be expanded to turn it into an effective critical tool for analysing contemporary emphases on anti-political and apolitical (p. 467) modes of being-with-others privileging management and securitisation. Against the modern disconnection of involvement and interest in knowledge that demarcates the theorisation of reason as drastically apart from practice and depoliticises learning, Aristotelian empiricism presupposes that knowledge go hand-in-hand with trial and error, with recurring testing and spirited controversy in real dialogue with others. Instead of being a privatised acquisition or an amassed possession in the sense of household provisions, knowledge is acquired, experienced and tested publicly and politically. Experience in the Greek context is involvement in a situation, and not disengaged perception (p. 170). The corresponding Aristotelian (and, more generally, Greek) word for experience, empeiria, signifies that which results from repeated practice and accumulated, common knowledge. It must not be confused ‘with the modern, empiricist-methodological reduction of experience to sense-perception’ (pp. 144–5). Consequently, what Eikeland, following Aristotle, theorises as gnosiss appears to be a wider category of knowledge than episteme, since gnosiss comprises, amongst other things, also perception (aesthesis), habituation (hexis) and even self-conscious human living (p. 80).

This has important implications for the issue of different forms of knowledge and ways of knowing, since, as Eikeland explains, forms of knowledge, being various hexeis, are also forms of gnosiss rather than forms of episteme. Therefore, their presentation is a gnoseology, not an epistemology (ibid.). As I see it, this would reinvigorate the ongoing debate over scientific borders and the conflict of the faculties. Also, it would make common cause with those theories (e.g. Habermas’s) which have defended the embeddedness and reconnection of science with the lifeworld against tendencies to over-formalise scientific knowledge and detach, disconnect and dissociate it from everyday life structures. On the one hand, the Aristotelian position facilitates a respectful treatment of the limits that separate forms of knowledge, much against contemporary tendencies to fuse discourses and promote a facile interdisciplinarity. On the other hand, the Aristotelian position eases the passage to ethics and its reconnection with knowledge and learning, thus facilitating the conception of a unity of reason. To explain this, let us return to Eikeland’s text. As he informs us, ‘the common genus (genos) of both ethical virtue (are̓ête), episteme, and the other intellectual virtues’ is habitus and disposition (p. 80). Hence, although distinct, they are all hexeis and all share the common ground of gnosiss. To illustrate just indicatively, contra Socratic and Platonic positions that assume a quick passage from knowledge of the good to ethical action, for Aristotle, it is not only significant to know what virtue is but also, perhaps even more importantly, to know what is generative of virtue (p. 339). This gap is filled with the kind of forged habit that becomes character, habitus (i.e. hexis) (p. 53) and second nature through training (p. 182), teaching and dialogue.

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In fact, much unlike mentalist, modern readings of ancient philosophy, Eikeland’s reading of Aristotle makes innovative connections between forms of knowledge, noesis and dialogue that undo the older impression of noetic disengagement of inquiry from hexis as habituating learning through a critical and testing (peirastiki) approach to experience. One of the most important tasks of dialogue is ‘the apprehension of the primary principles of each discipline and each kind of activity. As a definable activity distinguishable from others, dialogue is called the way (he hodos) to arrive at basic principles in all inquiries’ (p. 217). Apart from showing how appropriate the title of Eikeland’s book (The Ways of Aristotle, emphasis added) is and apart from offering us the chance to single out the kinetic dimensions of route and method (meta+hodos) that are often missed in sedentary perspectives that sacrifice route on the altar of routine (and routinisation of methodology), this conception of dialogue offers us another possibility to theorise noesis. The tasks of dialogue are tasks of ‘the virtue of nous’ (p. 218). Nous is also a habitus, a hexis (p. 214), and this, once again, accommodates the element of practice as indissoluble rather than as oppositional to thought. To follow the implicit equation through to its end, noesis as critical, reflective thinking (p. 222), as work of nous, goes hand-in-hand with dialectics and dialogue. It breathes more intellectuality in dialogue, and, although nous and dialogue are not burdened with identical tasks (p. 222), noesis helps them meet, nevertheless, in a reflectivity that does not leave the self unaffected and over-protected. The noetic, the theoretical and the leisurely (skhole) join forces in making dialogue something more than agonistics, beyond some contemporary Arendtian, Lyotardian or poststructuralist (e.g. Laclau’s) interpretations of ancient dialectics or theorisations of dissent. This is especially important in the current context, where agonistics frequently fascinates postmodern discourse and blocks more nuanced versions of discursive formation and of learning (rather than points-scoring) through dialogue. ‘Dialectics is not merely competitive, although certain aspects of it could be’ (p. 218); nor is it negotiation—and, here, we may recall the difference of the oikos and the polis and of the managerial and the political. Negotiation, coming from the Latin negotium, means business—in Greek askhelia, i.e. a+skhole = no leisure—and a negotiator means a businessman. By contrast, ‘dialogue is thinking and speaking freely. It belongs to logos unbound by the necessity of speech to serve doing this or that’ (p. 233). I believe that, if, when dealing with world problems and global conflicts today, we wish to inculcate some vision, justice and spirituality into the political discourses of resolution, reconciliation and peace education, it is especially important to keep this in mind. I believe, further, that the political element realisable in dialogue becomes apparent also in yet another instance, that is, when we come to see that, for Aristotle, dialogue critically examines not only doxai—i.e. opinions that are relevant to a topic—and not only the immediate phenomena—i.e. what appears ‘first-for-us’ and what things look like (dokounta) (p. 255)—but also prevailing opinions (ta endoxa). We could mobilise another meaning of endoxa (in modern Greek the word means ‘glorious’) and argue that
dialogue should entail, amongst other things, a critical questioning of prevalent opinion or of thinkers who are held in high esteem. And dialogue should involve the reflective attention that is owed not just to prominent ideas or influential figures but also to the undercurrents of thought, to whoever or whatever society neglects, preoccupied, as society usually is, with what it takes to be its higher achievements. We could theorise this as another dimension of the politics of thought and as another way of searching for the justice that can be done to thinking.

A person accustomed to searching for justice—which is relational for Aristotle (p. 55)—needs first descriptively to analyse and understand (synesis) the situation that invites justice and then to deliberate about (phronesis) the necessary action for the realisation of justice in that specific context (pp. 112–3). Deliberation is ‘reasoning in order to choose and realize some specific action’ (p. 211). For this kind of choice even pure theory may prove valuable, as it comprises ethico-political aspects. Instead of the right being at odds with happiness, it could be said that in certain ways it is intrinsically directed at contributing practically to the good life (p. 75). As to the general impression that Aristotle’s position on the issue of eudaemonia is one that sees it as one highest good for general compliance, Eikeland’s response achieves the complexity that is necessary in order to prove that Aristotle neither developed a liberal-like formalism of the good as merely external and devoid of content nor a communitarian-like specific and substantive ethical homogeneity (p. 300). A most salient, contemporary objection—which, given the notorious Aristotelian position on slavery and exclusivist conception of citizenship, comes up when one discusses Aristotle’s ideas of happiness, the common good and justice—is, however: what or whose justice?

Eikeland is well aware of this, but, instead of addressing the whole issue in perfunctory detail, he opts for a very nicely-judged turning of Aristotelianism against itself. He argues cogently that Aristotle’s philosophy itself cannot sustain Aristotle’s prejudices or concessions to the ‘realism’ of the times. In Eikeland’s own words, Aristotle’s ‘attempts at keeping “natural slaves”, manual workers, and women outside full membership in the primary and best political constitution of he hodos, is impossible to defend even within the limits of his own system of thought’ (p. 493). For, despite his ideas about slavery and limited political participation, his philosophy ‘lends itself quite easily to emancipatory thinking’ (p. 452). That this is truly the case, and not just the wishful thinking of a proponent of Aristotelianism, is proven by the whole book—that is, by this lengthy and thorough study of Aristotle in which all claims of Aristotle’s enduring significance are not simply stated but argued point for point.

Before I conclude this overview, I would like to draw attention to some side issues to which, although they merit mention on grounds of their relevance to and bearing on philosophical-educational debates, full justice cannot be done within the confines of a review essay. These issues can be seen as touching upon the following question: would this reinterpreted Aristotelianism entail a new dichotomous logic, now separating the
thinking and acting subject from desire and fulfilment? Eikeland’s implicit answer is negative. The theoretical does not force lived experience and life-planning into a false dilemma between the pleasure-seeking life, on the one hand, and the life of active citizenship and insight (p. 417), on the other. The following issues indicate that Eikeland’s answer opens plausible, new connections with established debates.

A necessary presupposition for the deployment of phronesis for truth, felicitous action as well as fulfilment is free time. Eikeland’s discussion of it can be expanded to further a critique of current educational or societal considerations of time. The Aristotelian idea of skhole (leisure) can be contrasted to the contemporary exploitation of leisure by the culture industry and the false, drastic choice between the supposedly pleasurable waste of time and the rather ascetic and dry dedication of time to phronetic purposes. From another perspective, Aristotle’s argument that phronesis takes time (p. 152) can be used for criticising the emphasis on saving time that underlies much concern about performativity for the sake of productivity and at the expense of dedicating time to lived, rich experience.

An exceptionally helpful clarification that Eikeland offers us is that for Aristotle both theory and practice need theoria and skhole. Theoria is the studying and learning that people need in order to gain general competence and insight, not just so that they can fix something. Skhole is the free space and time that relieves people from immediate action requirements. Embedded in practical contexts theoria and skhole are constitutive for action research rather than being its polar opposites (p. 47).

Free time spent with others enhances sociality beyond mere socialisation. According to Aristotle, ‘living in the company of good people is like training for virtue (askesis tis tes aretes), becoming constantly better by activating their friendship and correcting each other (diorthountes allelous)’ (p. 375). It seems to be the kind of friendship that draws you into something better in the sense that we know from Stanley Cavell and other contemporary philosophers, a friendship that functions, in Eikeland’s parlance, as a reflective mirror (p. 351). Colleagues who research in the idea of friendship (especially those who work from a Derridean perspective) may find many instances where the book provides valuable Aristotelian exegesis (pp. 344, 391) and background knowledge. Now, sociality comprises various other relational concepts such as equity and forgiveness. Regarding equity, and in a move that is exceptionally significant for contemporary philosophy and its dilemmas over formal and social justice (and the corresponding problem of the appropriateness of a moral principle to a specific context), Eikeland explains that Aristotle’s equity (epieikeia) does not operate outside justice or as a degeneration of justice but rather as its corrective. Equity ‘produces a higher justice. Equity is more just since it is needed in order to ad-just more precisely to the nature and particulars of the concrete cases at hand’ (p. 178).

Regarding forgiveness, Eikeland discusses how it falls into place in the Aristotelian architectonic, offering ample textual evidence (pp. 179, 380, 406–7) that can be used to counter contemporary claims that antiquity supposedly lacked the idea of forgiveness.
Dialogue is equally, on the one hand, framed within this overall emphasis on relationality and, on the other, defended as both educational (p. 269) and erotic (p. 448). Deliberation is not an isolated activity, devoid of passion and other-orientedness. Even deliberation over standards of practice is connected with eros, since standards operate as attractive powers, which Eikeland demonstrates in an interesting and highly original manner (p. 67). This may provide a useful backdrop for discussing both the fact that we often forget the motivational, psychological significance of order and the fact of its degeneration into obsessive and pathological commitment to rules, practices and laws. The account of the relational element is also supported by the fact that, as I have already mentioned above, Eikeland provides some very important distinctions in the light of which it becomes clear that politically significant dialogue is not exhausted in the agonistic mode but also takes place for the sake of inquiry, the quest for truth (p. 239) and con-sensus (agreeing and feeling-with the other). And, even when the inescapable horizon of dialogue as educational experience is tradition—theorised neither in liberal nor in purely communitarian terms (p. 425)—the latter does not carry inherent authority beyond critique (p. 321), dialogical reconsideration, reform (p. 323) or even revolution (p. 322).

Nor are relational concepts and sociality themselves beyond critique. Even care and consideration are not independent from the context within which they are enacted: in the despotic oikos of unequal membership they are condescending; within the context of the polis—that is, within a context of free deliberation and discursive public shaping of the course of life—they acquire their true ethico-political significance and role (p. 472). Finally, the aspirations of such a critique transcend any specific locality: in discussing the perfect city that extends beyond the limits of one’s immediate concern, Eikeland uses the neologism koinopolis (pp. 370–1), which he finds far more accurate for describing Aristotle’s view than the Stoic cosmopolis—and which surely is a possible alternative for theorists interested in the possibility of a non-toxic universalism of cosmopolitan significance.

The whole book, on my reading, seems premised on the idea that ‘the main task of ethics and politics is educational’ (p. 280). The Ways of Aristotle presents the philosophy of an Aristotle as hodopoios (i.e. a thinker introducing new methods, sensibilities and ways of thinking) as not only indispensable to action research, but also thoroughly ‘political, learning oriented and educational. Ultimately, it is all about paideia, the personal and practical formation of character (ethos) and the individual and collective mastering of life and work’ (p. 33).

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A prodigious researcher and writer, Aristotle left a great body of work, perhaps numbering as many as two-hundred treatises, from which approximately thirty-one survive.[1] His extant writings span a wide range of disciplines, from logic, metaphysics and philosophy of mind, through ethics, political theory, aesthetics and rhetoric, and into such primarily non-philosophical fields as empirical biology, where he excelled at detailed plant and animal observation and description. In all these areas, Aristotle’s theories have provided illumination, met with resistance, sparked debate, and general... [ii] Practical sciences are less contentious, at least as regards their range. These deal with conduct and action, both individual and societal. The ways of Aristotle: Aristotelian phronesis, Aristotelian philosophy of dialogue, and action research. Bern: Peter Lang. Google Scholar. Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). Papastephanou, M. (2010). Aristotle, the action researcher. Journal of Philosophy of Education, 44(4), 589–597. CrossRef Google Scholar. Papastephanou, M. (2013). We are familiar with Aristotle the researcher, the founder of sciences, the logician and the philosopher, the master of those who know. But we know little of Aristotle the educator. Historians have not been greatly interested in what he has to say about education. The opinion expressed by H.I. Marrou in his Histoire de l’Éducation dans l’Antiquité (History of Education in Antiquity) is indicative: Aristotle’s work on education does not seem to me to be as original and creative as that of Plato or Isocrates. The goal of human action is leisure;[18] moreover, happiness is thought to depend on leisure.[19] And one of the essential goals of education that should always be borne in mind is precisely leisure or schole (which is the etymological root of the word school).