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Aristotle, Democracy and Political Science

Delba Winthrop. Chicago:
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Delba Winthrop (1945—2006) was the student, colleague, and wife of Harvey C. Mansfield, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Government at Harvard University. *Aristotle, Democracy and Political Science* was originally her doctoral dissertation in 1974, and was published by her husband in 2019, 13 years since her death. Some naturally may harbor doubts that we should read such an out-of-date book, but we should remember that her book is not as old as Aristotle's thought and that her thinking and ours can go beyond the limits of our time.

Mansfield is known to have been influenced by the works of Leo Strauss (1899—1973), so Winthrop was also likely so influenced. Strauss is famous as a political philosopher who directed modern thinkers' attention to ancient political philosophy. He asserted especially for the wandering thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that they needed to learn from ancient philosophers like Plato in order to understand and solve the issues and problems of their times. He also suggested the need for "deep reading," which is finding and understanding "the author's intentions hidden between the lines," when we read what we call "the classics." It is in reference to and as a result of such a reading method that concentrates on the text itself that Leo Strauss and his successors are called the Straussians and sometimes named "the Inner circle," since only its members could understand what was said and written esoterically. Of course, not all of these works are esoteric.

In this book, Winthrop displays several features of the Straussian. First is her argument that the *Politics* of Aristotle is intentionally written in an ambiguous manner because not all its truths or speculations can be baldly announced, though philosophers do not tell untruths. It is one of basic presuppositions of the Straussians that philosophers, especially in politically dangerous times, wrote in an intentionally ambiguous manner of this sort and for this reason. Although Mansfield stated that she herself did not take Strauss's presuppositions for granted, and that "her procedure in translating is not a presupposition but a conclusion painfully arrived at," it is difficult to imagine that her argument could hold without such a presupposition. Just as Mansfield wrote in his foreword, she was indeed a Straussian.

The second is the structure and the scope of this book. This book mainly concerns the translation and interpretation of Book III of Aristotle's *Politics*. Winthrop's dissertation is limited to this narrow scope and to opening up the possibilities of diverse profound reasoning and plausible interpretations within that scope. For example, she sought to clarify the meaning of sentences by considering the different meanings of important concepts and selecting those that best fit the sentences, such as Greek *phemi* (assert) and *arche* (first principle, beginning, office, etc.). She states this process of translation and interpretation in "A Note on the Translation" (Appendix One). That all of her elaborateness is the consequence of "serious reflection," that is, diverse profound reasoning, is hardly to be denied. As Mansfield was convinced, when we read through the book, we become aware of her maturity and quiet insistence, as well as boldness.

The third is her intention to restore the superiority of Aristotle's philosophical interpreters over the philological ones, for which she adopts a method of translating and interpreting the text literally. She seems to believe that nonliteral translations are the consequence of a lack of serious reflection that is not compensated for by a superior knowledge of Greek, and then seems convinced that literal translation can correct the errors of previous philological translators. The philological translators' superior knowledge of Greek is presumably helpful for understanding the Greek

context of the times, but that is a different matter from interpreting the author's intentions or insights that might go against or beyond that contexts; if the author's intention or insight was hidden between the lines, this will be even more true. A literal translation, however, needs literary imagination, which can be said to be a form of serious reflection. According to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, reasoning can be said to be the actuality of reason in potentiality, and since imagination and reason in soul sometimes work together to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish each realm and function, it is clear that the literary imagination will lead reason to its actuality.

In his foreword, Mansfield summarizes six features of Winthrop's understanding of Aristotle's *Politics*. Some have already been mentioned above, and others are for the reader to read and judge, but it would be good to mention the most distinctive and notable one again: Winthrop's emphasis on the relationship between philosophy and politics. Of course, this emphasis is also in line with Aristotle's intentions. Aristotle examines the definition of democrats and oligarchs while attempting to define democracy (logos of democracy). This process is repeated in the discussion of the entitlements or qualifications of citizens, the good man and good (or great) citizen, and regimes in actuality and as an ideal. This discussion stems from an approach following Aristotle's hylomorphism that all things are a composite of matter and form, which is distinct from Plato's emphasis on the form or "the idea of the good." In general, political scientists seek to understand Aristotle's theory of democracy and forms of government by mainly concentrating on his *Politics*, *Constitution of Athens*, and *Nicomachean Ethics*, while they do not go on to examine how such discussions were based on his metaphysics (the philosophy of hylomorphism). Winthrop's is one of the few studies that persistently demonstrates such a process. Mansfield's assessment that "one can say with some confidence that no other study of Aristotle is quite like it" is indeed appropriate.

There are a few points to keep in mind when we read the works of Aristotle, as well as translations and interpretations like this book.

First, all the works of Aristotle were based on his lecture notes, which were not classified and organized in his times. All his works that we read today were first classified and organized by Andronicus around 1st century B.C., and then went through many translations across countries and centuries. In this process some non-Aristotelian (or forged) works that are still disputed could have been included. Perhaps these facts are the most perplexing challenge for researchers on Aristotle, and could be the cause of the ambiguities we find in his thought. Although Winthrop considers such ambiguity to be Aristotle's intention, we should consider the contrary possibility that in fact it is not what Aristotle meant. Knowing the limitations of the works we are reading will surely more often broaden our thinking than not.

Second, all languages are subject to change in meaning over time. Herein lies the need for translation and interpretation, and hence why we must give consideration to the history of ideas. We ought to acknowledge the great difficulty in understanding works written about 2,300 years ago as their authors intended, for indeed all or at least some parts even of works written in the 17th century, for example *Leviathan* of Hobbes, must be translated into modern English to be understood. In short, we should admit that we can easily fall into the trap of modern reading when we translate and interpret ancient Greek works and should try always to be open to the possibility of other translations and interpretations.

Winthrop seems clearly aware of these difficulties. It would be the consequence of such awareness that she added "A Note on the Translation" and "Translation of Aristotle's *Politics*, Book III" (Appendix Two). Her translation in Appendix Two is succinct while her interpretation in the main text is a bit long-winded, but both are demanding. Hence, some readers who are not familiar with Aristotle's works might need to read the whole of the *Politics* and other translations or interpretations of it first. Nevertheless, it is clear that both serve as an education and a test of the reader's interpretive capacity. Further, it is clear that both serve to enlarge and diversify the thinking of the readers. Whether this will happen can only be known by reading this book.

Biographical Note

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