

Interview: Susan D. Collins, University of Houston

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Aristotle's Greek is notoriously arduous and any translator of Aristotle faces difficult interpretive work as well as navigating through various controversies about the meanings of his most basic, fundamental terms. The University of Chicago Press has just published a new translation of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins which documents this struggle in their notes and critical apparatus while still providing a faithful and readable rendering of the text. In October 2011 I spoke with Susan D. Collins, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Houston, about the intricacies of her translation and the larger questions that emerge about Aristotle and our reading of him. Below is a transcript of that conversation.

Spiro: Why do a new translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*?

Collins: I think there's at least eleven [in print]. You can check our bibliography – we did list them. We looked very carefully over the terrain before we decided to do this, and we talked about what we were trying to do with a new translation. There have been recent translations as well. The Sachs¹ was the closest to ours in its aims, its literalness. I reviewed several translations a few years before and I liked Sachs but it wasn't as consistent or as literal as it claimed to be and was also quite awkward in places because it seemed to be influenced by a Heideggerian and Kantian perspective rolled into one. There were some choices, like *energeia* as “being-at-work,” that drew our attention to the meaning of the Greek, trying to get away from the overly-laden, Latinate words. This isn't a bad idea, but it made for difficulty in reading, so one couldn't be consistent; Sachs will use both “being-at-work” and “activity” for *energeia*. We decided to go with “activity” for *energeia*. We wanted a translation with the closest access possible for non-Greek readers. We were as literal and as consistent [as possible] with the terms while still being readable.

Aristotle's Greek is very terse. Over the number of years we translated, I felt my English was getting worse! I would have the Greek before me and I worked on being literal before trying to be readable. Those were our aims: fidelity, literalness, consistency, and readability.

We also felt we had a lot to offer. We had both worked on the *Ethics*. We thought our background helped with interpretive matters. We didn't expect people to agree with us, but we thought we could help beginning students and scholars with the apparatus we could provide.

One of the things I like about our translation is our notes where we show readers that there are disputed passages. We used the commentaries for that, other works to supplement the readers' understanding with controversial passages.

We knew that [The University of] Chicago [Press] had a translation of the *Politics*² but not the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and would be sympathetic to a translation faithful to the Greek. We thought that would be a nice home for it. Chicago was great with helping the project along. They just came out with a Kindle version. We insisted that the Kindle version have the Becker numbers, though I haven't checked yet about that. Kindle versions don't have page numbers or Becker numbers, and that's necessary. The paperback will be out in April.

You mentioned that you read it in a reading group.

Spiro: Yes, some of my colleagues and friends met weekly this past summer to discuss it, covering about a book a week. I saw that your translation had come out and I realized I hadn't read the *Ethics* start-to-finish in a long time, since I usually just teach parts of it. We liked the translation very much, particularly how your notes teach the reader a bit about the Greek. It shows that you can't just translate his important terms – the meanings of his words can't be conveyed directly in English. In particular I liked your translation of *enkratia* as “self-restraint,” while many other translators use “continence,” a cumbersome, dated word. Though, as you say in your notes, “self-restraint” doesn't fully render *enkratia*, and it's somewhat telling that there is no real English word for it.

Collins: *Enkratia* – we went back and forth on that term. “Continence” doesn't capture it as well as “inner mastery” or “inner strength,” and the lack thereof, and we went with “self-restraint,” but *autos*, “self,” isn't there in the Greek. It's not exactly literal.

I've noticed with my students, that they become more attentive readers, seeing that these words are carefully chosen, there are nuances in the terms. They slow down and think about the terms, which then leads them to think about the arguments and the ideas. I've had a couple of students who have, on the basis of reading not just ours but other translations, started to learn Greek. That's great in itself.

Spiro: What are the unique challenges to translating and understanding the *Nicomachean Ethics*?

Collins: Some of the things I've mentioned already. It's such a complex text that I still don't have confidence in my understanding of it, even though I've published on it. I approach it with trepidation because I'm not on solid ground in my understanding of the text. I have a more mature understanding now than ten years ago or ten years before that, but I hope I will still be kicking and can have an even greater understanding in ten years. To translate it is a big presumption. As a translator I'm an interpretive screen for other readers, but somebody has to do it. The perfect is enemy of the good in this case. It's such a well-known text, especially among scholars of ancient thought, so you're on well-trod ground and you're always seeing challenges

with your translation and interpretation and the apparatus where we make interpretive moves. It's a familiar text and I've worked with it for many years, but then I have to be careful to keep it fresh, not slide over things I think I know.

It's a text that speaks to so many different audiences. You have to keep in mind its complexity in that regard. That's hard to capture in translation. You work in Greek and for me the Greek texts I know well, I enter them like they're a house and they have many rooms. It's hard to capture all of that. So it's a great book! There's a kind of presumption in translating it! But I think even readers who disagree with our "Interpretive Essay" can still like our translation.

We also wanted to speak to young readers. The "Introduction" is meant for beginning students, to try to say to them that some of the assumptions of our days – the prevailing relativism of our time – are just assumptions – that they need to approach the *Ethics* with the expectation that it speaks to the most serious question, the highest good for a human being. We wanted to bring that out.

What's your experience with teaching the *Ethics*? I have courses where it goes extremely well and others where it can be difficult.

Spiro: I mostly teach Books 8 and 9 (on friendship), though I have also taught Book 5 (on justice). I find that students respond to Aristotle's ideas about the various kinds of friends. It gets good conversations going, especially since now they have hundreds of "Facebook friends." The parts about virtue and justice and courage are harder to teach, though I find that ROTC students are often very receptive to Aristotle.

Collins: I have found the friendship books to be the most accessible. They have friends, and they've had friends who betray them, so they know how important a good friendship is in our lives. I have ROTC students as well, but I haven't noticed that ... I too see that military students have more open minds on some questions, such as honor.

Spiro: What was your process of translation?

Collins: [Robert Bartlett and I] divided the books up at the beginning. We each did a rough draft of the five we were assigned. But by the end of the process, the two of us had worked on every single book, because we switched them. We live in different cities so we did it long-distance. We went over the other person's work and made our changes. Then we had debates and disagreements we had to resolve about terms – how to translate them. Then we got together when we could to read through each book again, reading a line, one person looking at the Greek, one person reading the English. The person who had done the original translation would read the translation while the other was looking at the Greek, but then we stopped that because we both had worked on it so much. We did that over a period of years. The final go-throughs were for readability. Each of us had a grad student who would read it out loud to us, and we would note if somebody stumbled while reading. And we would read it to each other out loud. But it was most

effective having a student read it. We also used it in classes and got feedback from students and other faculty. And we just kept going over and over it, a very slow and painstaking process.

Spiro: How did you write the “Interpretive Essay”?

Collins: As for the “Essay,” we both had written on parts in previous work, which we revised and then we had to write new pieces – as on friendship – and fill in gaps. And it was the same process, passing it back and forth. I hope it’s relatively seamless. In the “Essay” we thought it would be important to give a sense of the main themes and questions that inform the text without resolving them. In the sections on friendship, we raise the questions at stake in the books, how they fit in with the rest of the book as a whole. But there’s a lot of room to move in that “Essay.” Its intent is to give readers some guidance, and even something against which they can argue.

All of the other apparatus and notes we worked on while translating, and we used the commentaries while we were reading and translating. The glossary was something we worked on in parts, assigning words to each other.

At a point near the end we sent the translation to people we knew who were teaching the *Ethics* or who offered to read it for us.

Now that I’m talking about it, I’m getting tired! How much work it involved!

Spiro: How long did it take?

Collins: It was on our radar screen, working on it, about seven years. But a lot of work we had done before that, on our own. We had material from before, and we had both published on the *Ethics*, so that’s another five-to-ten years of work.

In some ways I think of translations as benefiting the good of others, because there’s so much tedious work that goes into it. But it got us close to the text and there were things I hadn’t seen before. So it benefited my own inquiry.

At first I said I didn’t want to do it, because I approach the text with such trepidation still. I knew how much work it would be to even be satisfied. You’re never fully satisfied with a translation. You always get complaints ... invariably when I’m talking to people, they say, “Why didn’t you translate this term this way? It would be better,” and I’ll say, “I remember we discussed that, but I don’t remember what we said!” For example, there’s a number of terms [Aristotle] uses for “vice” or “wickedness” or “baseness,” and you pick one and you think it looks good in one context but it doesn’t work in another. So you’re always struggling with these things.

In that regard it’s not entirely satisfying work. On the other hand, I think it turned out pretty well. If it’s of use then it does what we want it to do. It’s also, interestingly enough, brought attention to the *Ethics*. A review in the *New York Times*³ helped. But even locally it drew attention. I’ve

been asked to give talks at places, like at the local Unitarian congregation, so it's brought attention to a seminal work.

Spiro: What force or appeal do Aristotle's *Ethics* have now?

Collins: Start with our students. They begin to see how important this question of "the good" or "the human good" or "the best life" or "the good life for human beings" is, and they're at a point in their lives where they're open to thinking through that question, and they *need* to. It's a rare time in their lives when they have openness and leisure, insofar as anyone has leisure nowadays. (A lot of our students work, and I'm always trying to find money for them.) I tell them "You can stay up nights!" It's wonderful to bring that inquiry to them in a careful and nuanced – I don't want to say systematic – but a precise way.

But also in the community. I used to work for Liberty Fund and we set up conferences, largely on a particular text or question, and we did these mostly for academics but we ran them also for professionals. I was heartened to hear often that these professionals – doctors and lawyers and businesspeople – have reading groups. These kinds of conversations are going on. Many were reading classic texts. The *Ethics* would invariably fall into the set of possible texts; they had read it as undergrads, or heard about it, and they decided to read it with others. Former students had emailed to say they have started groups to read these texts. That's the way it should be. Four years is artificial – it's not like you get all the Aristotle you need in four years of college and you don't need to study him anymore. As you age, your thoughts evolve, and every time you come to a new stage of your life, you realize that you understand life more fully as you have more experiences. In this regard, the *Ethics* is good for the mature reader who brings experience to it. I think it's a text that works very well in the world, speaking to readers across age groups.

So I gave a talk at a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and I focused on friendship in the good life, and I sketched Aristotle's view, and it really sparked conversation among these older people, made them think again about their friends, why they pick them, how they're important to them. That's another reason this book is so important, why it stayed alive.

It's remarkable that these texts from classic times still speak to us – who knew? A possession for time everlasting! These civilizations rise and fall and texts are lost, but human beings through the ages have found these works so valuable that they've done all they can to protect them and transmit them. That's the staying power of these works and their worth to us as human beings. And students, too, respect that, seeing that the *Ethics* isn't just a book on the university curriculum. They realize this book has survived centuries, and people have spent years of their lives translating it yet again.

Spiro: How is Aristotle misunderstood?

Collins: I have a certain understanding of Aristotle. I hope it's an understanding which issues from a careful reading. I have also, I hope, humility about my understanding since there's a

distinct possibility that I'm wrong. A way Aristotle has been kept alive through the ages is in the Catholic church and the reading of Thomas, the schools of Thomism. I respect that tradition and I have learned from Thomas and my friends who are Thomists, and his re-translation of Aristotle for the Christian world, but some of the positions I take are a friendly argument with Thomist readings.

And there's the Aristotle of the virtue-ethics world, the theorizing in departments of philosophy. People, scholars like [Alasdair] MacIntyre, going back to [G. E. M] Anscombe and that school of thought – [Philippa] Foot, [Rosalind] Hursthouse – and there are differences among them. They take inspiration from Aristotle and the centrality of virtue, of character in moral action, and this is an important revival of Aristotle. But part of my difficulty is, How does one institutionalize such an understanding in political terms? What are the political implications of virtue-ethics, especially in our liberal democratic world that emphasizes individual freedom?

The libertarian Aristotle emphasizes reason and choice, and says you can incorporate a form of Aristotelianism into a libertarian framework. You can choose a way of life, a good, but this claim involves a whole other set of considerations that I find problematic though I'm interested in them. Is this view a way to incorporate Aristotle into a liberal-democratic framework?

Each school of thought or way of approaching Aristotle is understandable as an effort to respond to the kinds of questions we have today in our modern circumstances. We see there's an openness to Aristotle because of the critiques of the modern project which, it is argued, leaves people, leaves individuals without the foundation to even ask the question, "What is my good as a human being?" You can just ask, "What do I want? What's in my interest?" But you should also ask, "Is there ground for my understanding, for what it is to live a good life as a human being?" Aristotelianism today attempts to answer that question in a context where the possibility of asking that question is at least partially cut off.

Spiro: As you note, Aristotle's *Ethics* were brought into the Judeo-Christian tradition by Thomas and others. But you also begin your "Interpretive Essay" with the concern that this book is not Judeo-Christian as such. Would you call Aristotle's *Ethics* "secular"? Or perhaps "Greek" or "Classical"?

Collins: I'd call Aristotle's *Ethics* "rational." Most of this is a huge matter once you begin to think it through: Aristotle's thought is not grounded in revelation. This is a problem for Thomas, trying to bring Aristotle into the Christian world. This is a problem with making Aristotle consistent with the revealed word of God, so some virtues get jettisoned. For me, this is still a big question: How to understand Aristotle in light of revelation. So that's the main thing that we meant, and therefore, other things following from this – for example, we don't see piety in his list of virtues. We see the centrality of magnanimity or greatness of soul, which is more easily identified in the Christian tradition with a kind of *pride* that doesn't fit with humility. There's this great question in terms of the relationship of the virtues in Aristotle's *Ethics* grounded as

they are in reason – I think that’s how they’re presented – and the Biblical understanding of revelation. Not that you couldn’t, as with the example of Thomas, or other writers and thinkers in the Judeo-Christian or even Islamic tradition, not that you can’t incorporate an understanding of Aristotle’s view into another tradition, but it’s necessarily transformed when you do that.

This is a large question for some of our students. Many of my students come from the evangelical world, and they’re great students because they want to think about this matter, so they become serious interlocutors when reading the *Ethics*. It’s a challenge and they’re intrigued by it. The potential independence the book can give you when thinking through the question of the good. It’s problematic but not a challenge they’re afraid of.

Spiro: You suggest in the “Interpretive Essay” that God may not be necessary for the virtuous person, or perhaps the virtuous person should ask questions about God. Does that mean religion is unnecessary, or that established religion does not settle religious questions?

Collins: I would say this is a tough one. As far as I can see, the questions you raise are not entirely settled by the end of the *Ethics*. At least – I think there’s more than one way they remain questions. The first is that the life of moral virtue for the reasons that we lay down, or the interpretation we give, requires, it seems, to be supplemented by – “Providence” is too strong a term, the fullness of that term is understood in the biblical tradition – by the care that God would give to a human being, and the assurance of happiness for that human being. One of the reasons we think this is connected with the discussion of self-sufficiency – and I was asked this years ago at a talk at St. John’s [College]. The aim of happiness is bound up with self-sufficiency, yet for a human being, perfect self-sufficiency is not possible, not only because we’re mortal but also we’re vulnerable to chance. Part of what constitutes our happiness – our children, for example – may come to harm. But also we’re mortal, and bad things can happen to us. So part of what we do is show that self-sufficiency as an aim so much informs what we call our “hopes” for happiness that we have to come to terms with it in its connection with the life of moral virtue. We have a kind of dependence on the divine if we want to make the equation of “moral virtue = happiness.”

The same thing is said of the contemplative life. It’s superior because it’s more self-sufficient, the most self-sufficient life, and so the contemplative life also must include a reflection on this problem, a thinking-through of the theological claims, the place of the divine and our hopes for happiness. Those who are philosophic in nature seek to live the contemplative life also for the sake of happiness. I think that’s part of the way that the question is left open at the end. We begin to reflect anew from the point of view of the question which informs the *Ethics*: “What is the best life?” So in certain respects, we leave the question of God’s care or providence open as a question for readers. We try to also give the passages so people could have an interpretive route, but it wouldn’t surprise me if people gave alternative interpretations to these passages and come to a different conclusion.

Spiro: Aristotle's ethics are grounded in community, not in the individual or even in the family. Is this a challenge for us?

Collins: It is a challenge. It's a challenge just to entertain sympathetically the view that the *polis*, the political community rightly-ordered, is best since it isn't the political organization we currently live in! As the world has become more mobile and globalized, this view is even further from us. When I grew up you had strong neighborhoods or church communities which can give you a sense of what Aristotle had in mind. These things are further from our experience of the world [now]. So that's a challenge. But Aristotle presented a challenge even in his own day. His was a world of flux, the rise and fall of empires, but he made a choice, and he thought of the "city" as the unit of political life.

Why does Aristotle end with the *polis* as the political community *par excellence* in the *Politics*? If he's right about this matter, then we confront a problem! The community in which we live does not support the best life for a human being, insofar as that life is bound up with political communities. But it's the same problem as the end of Book 9 of the *Republic*. Nonetheless you have to make your way through obstacles and your perspective is going to be affected by what you come to understand. But this is what Aristotle wants us to do and what he wanted from his own students; even in the midst of the obstacles presented by actual political life, we can nonetheless think through the question of the human good and what the political community would look like if you properly ordered it, and remember even his best regime is one you would pray for! But this regime can inform our life, so we can understand what it is to act well. It's difficult but important, even more so, a challenge to us, not taking for granted the authoritativeness of our own time.

We can still see now, in churches, community organizations, and the like, how human beings seek the good together. I've sat through enough civic meetings in my own life to see how hard it is for a community to work through the problems of what is best for us and our neighbors. But this is how people come to know one another, know their neighbors, help the old, help the young.

Spiro: To what extent is the *Nicomachean Ethics* an argument with Socrates (or Plato)?

Collins: Ronna Burger's book is all about this, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates*.⁴ There are seven explicit mentions of Socrates in the work, and she collates them in the back. I certainly think that she makes a powerful case in her book that reading the *Ethics* as a kind of conversation is very fruitful exercise. I'm in agreement with her that you can read the work in that framework. I even wrote a review of her book that was glowing.⁵ But I haven't spent as much time as she has with that framework at the forefront. So when I read the *Ethics* I pay attention when Socrates comes up, especially in the book on Prudence, where he figures prominently at the end. Aristotle concedes the Socratic position in a way without wholly acknowledging what might be the implications of this concession. I think the *Ethics* as an inquiry into the question of the human

good approaches it in a manner different from, say, the Platonic dialogues or Plato's portrayal of Socrates, the Socratic confrontation with prevailing opinions, the confrontation that got him killed. Aristotle is more careful, sober, respectful of the phenomena; he wants to describe rather than disturb the phenomena. But he still makes us aware of the difficulties of certain claims.

Spiro: In our reading group on the *Ethics*, we had difficulty thinking of "great-souled" men or women. Can you think of examples, historical or fictional, of such people?

Collins: [Harry] Jaffa mentioned Churchill in his review.⁶ I often think of Lincoln, but I can't tell my friends in the South that! The description Aristotle gives is a bit of a caricature, a fiction, intended to help us think about this peak of virtue. What would this human being be like? Churchill, Lincoln, Washington ... so possessed of the virtues, and then they recognize that fact in themselves and act appropriately. These are rare types. Most of us stumble through life, hoping we say and do the right things. When I teach the *Peloponnesian War*, and we reach the Battle of Salamis, I ask, What would happen if Themistocles hadn't been there? Someone so capable and able to act on that capability ... It boggles the mind, that history is so contingent, and that individuals can be that way. Something unforeseen happens to me, I'm confused about what to do, and it takes a while to settle down and think about it, compared to other people who are so capable and in control of themselves that they are able to act in accord with the virtue that they possess. When I think of someone like this, it's a Churchill or a George Washington or an Abraham Lincoln. I think someone like General George Marshall is another example of such a person, though I need to read more about him. I don't know who else.

Spiro: We thought of Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. But what about real people?

Collins: A fictional character! There are people I've encountered in my life, people raised with a certain set of virtues, who had a sense of honor as human beings; they knew what it meant to be decent and they understood themselves to be that and they acted accordingly. They were graceful in that way; they didn't make mistakes. Aristotle says certain things about great-souled people that we can still see and admire today, how they act towards their friends and their enemies, they don't abide gossip or personal conversation, they don't act in haughty ways toward those who are inferior. I can think of people in my life who are like that.

Spiro: So there are more homely examples than historical examples.

Collins: Right, even if greatness of soul is a caricature or fiction, you go out in the world and you notice people who have these qualities in some fashion. This aspect of it we're not unacquainted with in our age: these people have to *know* themselves to be virtuous. I thought as a kid that a man of honor worried too much about what other people think of him, but now I think that a man of honor thinks of the reputation he must have in terms of the good. It's contingent on your own prizing of what's good and what's virtuous. And that's hard.

If you think of other examples, email me!

Notes

1. Aristotle. 2008. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Joe Sachs. Newburyport, MA: Focus.
2. Aristotle. 1985. *Politics*. Trans. Carnes Lord. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
3. Jaffa, Harry V. 2011. "Aristotle and the Higher Good," review of *Nicomachean Ethics*, by Aristotle. *New York Times*, 1 July, Sunday Book Review. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/03/books/review/book-review-aristotles-nicomachean-ethics.html>.
4. Burger, Ronna. 2009. *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
5. Collins, Susan D. 2009. "The Beautiful and the Good," review of *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*, by Ronna Burger. *Claremont Review of Books* 9.3. http://www.claremont.org/publications/crb/id.1635/article_detail.asp.
6. Jaffa 2011.