Aristotle and Menander on the Ethics of Understanding

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Signature:

Valeria Cinaglia
This doctoral thesis explores a subject falling in the interface between ancient Greek philosophy and literature. Specifically, I am concerned with common ground between the New Comedy of Menander and aspects of Aristotle’s philosophy. The thesis does not argue that the resemblance identified between the two writers shows the direct influence of Aristotle on Menander but rather that they share a common thought-world. The thesis is structured around a series of parallel readings of Menander and Aristotle; key relevant texts are Menander’s *Epitrepontes*, *Samia*, *Aspis*, *Perikeiromene* and *Dyscolos* and Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*, *De Anima* and *Poetics*. My claim is that Menander’s construction of characters and plots and Aristotle’s philosophical analyses express analogous approaches on the subject of the relationship between knowledge and ethics.

Central for my argument is the consideration that in Aristotle’s writings on ethics, logic, and psychology, we can identify a specific set of ideas about the interconnection between knowledge-formation and character or emotion, which shows, for instance, how ethical failings typically depend on a combination of cognitive mistakes and emotional lapses. A few years later than the composition of Aristotle’s school-texts, Menander’s comedies, as expressed in the extant texts, present to a wider audience a type of drama which, as I argue, reflects an analogously complex and sophisticated understanding of the interplay between cognitive or rational understanding and character or emotion.

More broadly, Aristotle and Menander offer analogous views of the way that perceptions and emotional responses to situations are linked with the presence or absence of ethical and cognitive understanding, or the state of ethical character-development in any given person. Thus, I suggest, the interpersonal crises and the progress towards recognition of the identity of the crucial figures in Menandrian comedies embody a pattern of thinking about perception, knowledge and the role of emotion that shows substantial linkage with Aristotle’s thinking on comparable topics.
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