

Understanding the *Magna Moralia*: Associate Professor George Karamanolis and Dr Solmeng Hirschi

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The *Magna Moralia* is one of the three ethical works attributed to Aristotle in antiquity, next to the *Eudemian Ethics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, the *Magna Moralia* has not been studied as extensively as the other two treatises, with research focusing largely on the question of authorship and much less on the ethical theory. The team at the University of Vienna aims to establish a new critical edition of the *Magna Moralia*, to offer a fresh English translation, and to prepare a philosophical commentary. The project will enable a future re-appreciation of the *Magna Moralia* while contributing to a better understanding of the development of Aristotelian ethics.

What is *Magna Moralia* and Who Wrote It?

The so-called *Magna Moralia* (Ἡθικὰ Μεγὰλα, *MM*), together with the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) and the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), are the three main ethical works transmitted under the name of Aristotle (a fourth one *On Virtues and Vices* has always been considered spurious). The *MM* has received far less scholarly attention than the other two ethical works, mainly because of its disputed authenticity. It is one of the few classical works of ancient Greek philosophy for which we have no reliable edition of the text.

Much is unclear about this work. Firstly, it is unclear what the term 'Magna' (Μεγὰλα), i.e., 'great', signifies in the title of the work. Scholars have suggested that this may describe the size of the individual books of the *MM*, arguing that the work must have occupied two unusually large papyrus rolls. Others have argued instead that this is because the work is a long summary of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Secondly and relatedly, the authorship is unclear. Despite the fact that the entire ancient and medieval tradition perceives the *MM* as genuinely Aristotle's, the authorship has been disputed in modern times – at times leading to a virtual consensus against it.

The problem, in a nutshell, is that the style of the work does not look Aristotelian, while the content is close to Aristotle's ethics, especially the *Eudemian Ethics*. Most scholars accept that a later editor tampered with the work, but they disagree as to whether the ethical doctrine is Aristotle's, and if it is, where the work stands from the point of view of the development of Aristotle's ethics, whether it is the earliest, the latest, or somewhere in the middle. Only a careful scrutiny of the work can help us answer those questions. Our inclination for the time being is that it is a later work written by a Peripatetic student of Aristotle.

Why Is This Treatise on Ethics so Important?

Several aspects of the *MM* make it distinct from the other ethical works of Aristotle. First, the *MM* discusses the question of what we should do in case two virtues dictate opposing actions on a given occasion – a situation which never occurs as such in the *EE* or the *NE*. The question is specified with regard to bravery and justice (*MM* 1199b36–1200a11). The *MM* asks first how it can be the case that one virtue opposes another and then goes on to argue that a perfect virtue is actually informed by practical wisdom, *phronêsis*, which ultimately decides about the right action. We do not find such a position regarding the role of *phronêsis* in the *NE*, although both works describe *phronêsis* in comparable ways (*MM* 1198a10–22, *NE* 1144b28–37).

Another question that does not occur in the other two ethical works of Aristotle is whether the virtues resemble other good things, such as the goods of the body or property (*MM* 1200a12–14). The *MM* claims that virtue is unlike other goods in the sense that the increase of virtue will always make us better, while it implies this is not the case with bodily goods or property. The unconditional goodness of virtue, as opposed to the conditional goodness of other things, is a view we find in Plato (e.g., *Euthydemus* 278–281, *Lysis* 216d), taken later to extremes by the Stoics. In doing so, the *MM* offers a hierarchy of goods not found in the other two ethical works of Aristotle. Because the *MM* takes a view on virtue close to that in the *Euthydemus*, according to which virtue enables us to make the right use of everything else – in other words, only virtue renders other things good. The treatise is thus crucial because it considerably enriches our knowledge of Aristotle's ethics or, at the very least, of the ancient reception of Aristotelian ethics.

What Is Virtue as Discussed in *Magna Moralia*?

The nature of virtue is a central topic in the *MM*, as in all Aristotelian ethics. Yet we can find some interesting differences between the *EE* and the *NE*, as mentioned above. The question, then, is which direction the *MM* inclines to. While in the *EE*, virtues of character are states or dispositions of the non-rational part of the soul, which is shaped and guided by the rational one, in the *NE*, virtues of character are dispositions of the rational part of the soul. They thus mainly affect the way we decide, not the way we act. They are 'prohairetic states', i.e., states of *prohairesis* or choice. In the *MM*, by contrast, virtues are not such states – at all. According to the *MM*, we acquire virtues through training and habituation, as with athletics. What is more, they are said to involve pleasure! At the basis of virtue in the *MM* are thus affections and irrational impulses developed and guided by reason (in this sense, the *MM* is closer to the *EE*). In the *MM*, virtue make someone act correctly; in the *NE*, virtue makes someone decide correctly.

What Stands out in *Magna Moralia* as Particularly Meaningful?

The question can be answered in two ways. The *MM* is traditionally contrasted with the two other treatises of Aristotle's ethical triad (i.e., the *NE* and the *EE*). Hence, one may first want to look for distinctive elements, considering that these are what make the *MM* meaningful by comparison. The function of *phronêsis* in helping one make a decision when two virtues conflict (say, as we saw above, bravery and justice) is particularly striking, and so is the emphasis on the role of luck in happiness. What one may subsequently want to make of such differences is another issue. Suffice it to say here that it brings a further set of questions which have a bearing on what we could call the developmentalist and unitarian readings of Aristotle's writings, in case those differences are taken to be indicative of a lack of authenticity.

However, it is equally interesting to look at the *MM* and analyse its structure, topics, and style in isolation. From this second perspective, the *MM* offers a remarkably pragmatic and interlocutory approach to ethical problems. The second-person is used, practical scenarios are given, and some sentences even seem to suggest a deliberate effort to facilitate memorisation, e.g., with stylised catchphrases such as 'οὐθὲν γὰρ τῶν ὄντων φύσει ἔθει ἄλλως γίνεται' (1.6 1186a4–5) which one could translate as follows: 'None of what is by nature can be changed by custom'.

What Are the Implications of *Magna Moralia* for the Current Day?

The *Magna Moralia* represents the perfect playground to test several hypotheses – or indeed hidden assumptions – concerning ancient authorship in the early Lyceum, knowledge production and dissemination in the Hellenistic age, or authenticity debates up to this day. This can have serious consequences on text critical and editorial decisions. For instance, should we accept a passage favouring an understanding of the *MM* as anti-Stoic and thus relatively 'late', or should we rather take such a passage to be a subsequent gloss added to an earlier, 'authentic' original?

Even trivial questions such as orthographical conventions end up being affected by, and indicative of, such assumptions. To put it differently, precisely because of the problematic tension the *MM* puts on our expectations concerning Aristotle's (or a later Peripatetic's) overall consistency, the quality of the argumentation, and the homogeneity of the style. This treatise makes us confront some of our most fragile and yet momentous assumptions like no other text of the Aristotelian corpus could. Editing the *MM* today amounts to a complete reappraisal of Aristotle's ethics *qua* doctrine, corpus, and edited output.

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✓ Credit: The so-called 'Memento Mori' mosaic from Pompeii, Museo archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, inv.109982, ca.42x47cm



What Should the Study of *Magna Moralia* Now Focus On?

There are three foci that require the immediate attention of the scholarly community interested in the *MM*.

Our first focus must be on the collation of the main witnesses in order to improve on the outdated edition of the Greek text by Franz Susemihl, who knew of about a quarter of all the extant manuscripts and used only a handful of them properly. The point has been highlighted several times since Susemihl, and invaluable preliminary work has already been done. This must now be brought to completion and used to constitute a state-of-the-art text, together with a new translation and commentary.

Our second focus must be on the reassessment of the authenticity of the *MM* rather than, or at least in addition to, their authorship. Having or not an individual author sanctioning the text we have reconstructed, should not take up all the debate. There is actually little left to be gained in this field and it is much more fertile to shift the focus from a putative authorial intention to the relevance of the text through time. Ancient texts, especially before canonisation took place, were more fluid in their use and transmission than we are used to nowadays (not to mention the absence of copyright).

Our third focus is related to the second one. We must also focus on the knowledge and transmission of the *MM* in the Byzantine, Latin, and Arabic world. Their history, or rather histories, are still very sketchy. The reception of the *MM* is complex and not that of a blockbuster. The *MM* has never represented the first port-of-call for Aristotelian ethics, and whenever people felt attracted to that (instead of, say, the *NE*), there were specific reasons for it. Our team will endeavour to trace them back and thus contribute to the intellectual history of the Mediterranean.

MEET THE RESEARCHERS



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Dr George Karamanolis was awarded a doctorate in philosophy (DPhil) from Oxford University (UK) in 2001. Following this, he undertook academic and research roles at various universities, including Princeton University (USA), Humboldt University of Berlin (Germany), the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (Germany), and the University of Crete (Greece). He is now Associate Professor in Ancient Philosophy at the University of Vienna. His overarching interest is ancient philosophy and, in particular, the study of ancient Platonism, ancient ethics, and logic.



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After his undergraduate studies in Berne (CH), Dr Solmeng-Jonas Hirschi was awarded a doctorate in Classics (DPhil) from Oxford University (UK) in 2021. He then moved to Fribourg (Switzerland), where he worked on papyri, and to Rome (Italy) and Berlin (Germany) to work on the Epicurean doctrines concerned with time and astronomy. He is now a postdoctoral research fellow in ancient philosophy at the University of Vienna. In addition to Aristotelian and Epicurean philosophy, he nurtures a keen interest in papyrology, textual criticism, and the role of antiquity in modern and contemporary society.



FURTHER READING

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