

SEEKING BALANCE AND HARMONY AMIDST POST-MODERN CONFUSION

Review of Joel Kaye's *A history of balance, 1250–1375*,
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 519 pp.

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Any search for balance, in our unbalanced, confused, post-modern unpredictably irrational reality, is highly commendable. Particularly the one accomplished by Joel Kaye, after twelve years of his laborious research in numerous world archives, such as American Academy in Rome, Liguria Study Centre in Bogliasco, Biblioteca Vaticana, in Italy, and Princeton University, USA, among other repositories of rare historical data. The outcome is impressive, although not without some disappointing conclusions. First, though let us dwell on the positive – due to its interdisciplinary orientation, the book will definitely interest historians of culture, philosophy, medicine, Aristotle scholars, semioticians, sociologists, economists and historians of civilization. The author treats balance as a sign of strong polyvalence without naming the method as semiotically related, and this is the main attraction to the potential readership.

It is remarkable that the book makes substantial recourse to the Aristotelian corpus of works in an unusual manner. The author expands the canonical semantics and meaning of the concept of balance, moving from Nature to Culture, i.e. from biology, medicine, anatomy, physiology to economics, urban planning, sociology, art, architecture, market place and role of money. This wide universe of application is most interesting. J.Kaye does so by applying Aristotle's arguments, articulated in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* and starting with the mention of Aristotle's notion of equalizing or Medium in the very Introduction to the book. Then the author continues to evoke Aristotle throughout the lengthy (perhaps, overly so for the modern reader) treatise. The mention of Aristotle in the context of Galen, Galenists of the Middle Ages, such thinkers as Marsilius of Padua, Nicole Aresme, Taddeo Alderotti, Pietro d'Abano and Gentile da Fologno et als is by itself indicative of the current overall post-modern Aristotelian renaissance – surprising rebirth of his legacy and return to his analytical vision and paradigm of his thought. If previously Platonic thought dominated history and philosophy, the current trend in general and the work by J.Kaye in particular signal a remarkable shift in thinking and governing paradigm. In this sense, J.Kaye's study is fully au courant because its main contribution to scholarship lies in its revisiting Aristotle and an attempt to find applicability of his thought to modernity.

Nonetheless, the book reveals some regrettable conceptual confusion, occasional lack of logic and clarity. J.Kaye erroneously assumes on p. 2 of his book that

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“Balance is balance; we all know what we mean by it” and does not feel obliged to define the key term. Regarding this principal failure of the discourse, it may have been useful to recall Aristotle’s statement made in his *Prior Analytics*, B.I, “first we must state the subject of enquiry and what it is about [1984, B.I:39]. This particular key text by Aristotle is not obviously a part of J.Kaye’s bibliography, otherwise, he would not have treated his own key term in such a cavalier fashion. J.Kaye ends his treatise on Balance in no less paradoxical manner when he writes on p. 463, “The history of balance is not the history of an idea. Ideas are verbalized, communicated directly, problematized, debated and considered subjects by themselves. None of this was true of balance.” The author spent twelve years on history of a concept that cannot be verbalized, nor does it exist, bringing the author into the universe of the absurd. The post-modern strife for originality and custom of playfulness ends rather tragically in nonsense. One is puzzled why the editor could not notice this regrettable lapsus prior to putting the manuscript into print? The author insists that the Aristotelian concept of balance, equalizing or medium had been transformed into “a new balance” in the period between 1250 – 1375. It is perplexing how something “inconceivable” could be transformed into another form during the same period? J.Kaye is apparently unaware of the full impact and meaning of European Renaissance as a cultural phenomenon and the qualitative ontological shift brought on by the recourse to the re-processed antiquity. Balance, understood, debated, described and tested in antiquity, was transplanted onto the new human reality and history during the early Middle Ages, marked by its construction of a new habitat, sophisticated urbanity, new market place, new class relations, new aesthetics though rooted in the canons of the ancient inimitable past. Art of the Renaissance that brought on a new dimension into life of society and created existential Balance is neglected by the Columbia University Professor.

Neither is the author aware of the actual trajectory and logic behind the concept of Balance – rooted first in Nature and then transmitted onto Culture. Hence, the misplaced order of the narrative. Given the logic, the chapters (3 and 4) devoted to Galen, should have been placed at the start, making a logical commencement by discussing the natural processes in the human body and cosmos first, and then proceeding to present the Body Politic, as secondary in origins or recreation of nature in culture. The balance in the human body or medicine as a starting point of human pursuits or cultural construction should have been the opening of the study. In fact, the best pages in this volume are dedicated to Galen and Galenists, as followers of Aristotle and Hippocrates. Regrettably, it is only in the conclusion of the book that the author reveals Galen’s vision of the functioning human body as a metaphoric inspiration for understanding of the Body Politic! Only on p.470, J.Kaye writes, “Galen likens the esophagus to the main thoroughfare through the city; the stomach to a “central storehouse” for the city.” Galen who provided a new meaning to Balance in the Roman times as a guiding principle in architecture and ancient urbanity via metaphoric pathway – from Human Body to Social Body, the Human habitat, the city – is the most remarkable personage in J.Kaye’s historical account of Balance.

The comparative analysis of Galen’s and Aristotle’s conceptualizations of

Balance is also very interesting, although some may not agree with the conclusion. Driven by the idea of newness and the desire to apply it to Balance, the author adjusts the observations and analysis accordingly. Joel Kaye claims that Galen had expanded the Aristotelian notion of Balance by introducing the so-called “intermediate” between sickness and health or “neutrum.” He correctly claims that the totality of the Galenic system and his vision had been processed and filtered through the lens of Aristotle’s logic and natural philosophy [p.129]. Galen of Pergamum (129–216 AD) revisited during the early Renaissance, as demonstrated in the book, embodies continuity of Aristotelianism and celebrates the permanent undying significance of Greek natural philosophy in general and Aristotle’s contribution in particular, as well as the transmission of ideas from Greek Asia minor, Alexandria to Latin Rome and Medieval Europe. Trained both in philosophy and medicine, much like Aristotle, Galen successfully combined the two disciplines. A Court physician of Emperor Marcus Aurelius and at the School of gladiators, Galen had ample opportunity to observe what constitutes physical balance in the human body or makes it healthy. He also was able to conduct analogies between the health of the human body and social body, believing that philosophical thinking was indispensable for a thinking physician. His synthesis of medicine and philosophy was remarkably akin to that of Aristotle made centuries prior. However, the so-called “neither state”, i.e. neither health or sickness, but the third, “neutrum” was allegedly Galen’s improvement of Aristotle’s systematic approach and an addendum to his theory. J.Kaye argues that Galen’s tripartite division was a valuable improvement to Aristotle’s image of health.

Galen’s idea of optimum living health was based on the premise of required balance or “temperamentia”, the contrast between “sanum corpus” and “egrum corpus.” Galen adds proportionality and equality to the concept of balance. Thus, Galen, an obvious Aristotelian, is the best guide in the Universe of Balance which Joel Kaye eventually labels “inconceivable” but actually unpacks the meaning of the sign Balance, defining the role of the physician whose function and “primary task to restore balance to the body” [p.157]. On p.160, J.Kaye makes a very interesting observation that “the idea of proportional relation carries with it both mathematical and aesthetic connotation”. Balance in Nature or order in Cosmos, exhibiting symmetry, proportionality, harmony and stable processes observed by Aristotle found continuity in Galen who defined the body as “medium perfect between all excesses” (ibid). Galen actually followed Aristotle when he argued that “everything that is ill-proportioned was contrary to nature”. After all, it was Aristotle who repeatedly that “Nature made nothing in vain”.

It is gratifying to see, in the recovered during the Middle Ages Galen’s writings, the Aristotelian proto-base acknowledged in the volume, “Following Aristotle, Galen situates all qualitative alteration and change in the dynamism of opposing contraries” [J.Kaye, p.167]. Yet, the author wishes to endow Galen with “going beyond Aristotle” while it is convincing, but this is of lesser significance. What is gratifying is that Aristotle’s natural philosophy is visibly present in Galen, recovered in the early Renaissance.

The author provides a novel interpretation to the term Balance as justitia,

equality, making it applicable to sociology, economics, law and market place. Here, he relies on Aristotle's Book V of *Nicomachean Ethics*. Healthy society, in J.Kaye's view, should exhibit some equilibrium, balance and harmony through money as an alleged "instrument of balance." In this regard, the author fails to acknowledge that money does traditionally just the opposite, i.e. creates inequality and imbalance. Contrary to the proposed arguments, the new occupations which appeared in the Middle Ages did just that – produced imbalance, and thus undermined J.Kaye's theory. Although the metaphor or sign Justice is treated as a model of desired Balance, embodied in Aristotle's proportional equalization, J.Kaye proves to be not a very attentive reader of his works.

The section on the revival of Galen as a neo-Aristotelian in the Middle Ages is most interesting and valuable. It coincides with a wide range of commentaries on both thinkers. The passages on Taddeo Algarotti (1210-95), Professor of Medicine at the University of Bologna, are very useful for the understanding of the transmission of Aristotle. It confirms that around 1270-80 the study of Aristotle had moved to the centre of the University curriculum, also informing that Taddeo Algarotti had provided a vernacular translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

The book enriches the post-modern scholarship with the section on the theory of "pharmacological balancing" by Arnau de Villanova (1238–1312) who constructed a new system of measurements, rooted in proportionality, balance and located at the intersection of Medicine and Philosophy. One has to mention the sections on Pietro Torregano de Torregiani, known as Turisanus (died in 1320) who had a "mastery of the Aristotelian corpus" and advocated the integration of scholastic medicine and philosophy [p.229].

Delving into the markers of social health and balance, J.Kaye introduces the city as a site of possible equilibrium and a "self-ordering system" that strikingly evokes the capitalist ideology of the market place, presumably capable of organizing and balancing itself on its own. The historically proven colonies of imbalance are erroneously presented as universes of balance or new balance. Yet, with all the semantic, logical, historical and narratological infelicities and misinterpretation, the volume presents greatest interest as a marker of vitality, relevance and endurance of the Aristotelian thought. It places Aristotle into a proper locus in European cultural history and evens out the pathway of his legacy, according more significance than previously given to the exaggerated Platonism. The Aristotle motif in the volume signifies a new cycle in contemporary philosophy – the post-modern Aristotelian Renaissance or rebirth of his analytical paradigm.