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# Aristotle

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# One

## Aristotle: Life and Works

### **1.1 ARISTOTLE IN THE ANCIENT BIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION**

Depending upon the ancient sources we prefer, Aristotle emerges to the modern era as a man with one or the other of two remarkably dissimilar profiles.<sup>1</sup> According to one tradition, presumably inaugurated and flamed primarily by his enemies, Aristotle was, if intellectually capable, a ghastly sort of man: obnoxious and disagreeable, conceited and overbearing. According to an equally well-attested and completely opposing tradition, Aristotle was, on the contrary, not only a genius beyond all measure, but a considerate soul, fervently devoted to his friends and passionately interested in the enhancement of human knowledge in all its forms. Armed with either one or the other of these assessments, it is possible to find corroborating evidence when combing through Aristotle's extant writings.<sup>2</sup> Although neither approach is likely to yield an accurate portrait of Aristotle, there is a methodological moral in surveying the excesses of each.

According to the first, scurrilous tradition – which does come down to us with an ancient pedigree – Aristotle arrived on the intellectual scene of Athens displaying the haughty character of genius: self-smitten, he was ever jealous of his reputation for intellectual pre-eminence and given to preening self-promotion.<sup>3</sup> Also an ingrate, he was, as an ancient biographer tells us, the 'foal who kicked his mother'.<sup>4</sup> The mother in question was Aristotle's teacher, Plato.

The derogatory approach paints an unflattering picture of Aristotle's relationship to Plato. Having been taken as a young

man into the bosom of Plato's Academy, once educated and acculturated, Aristotle turned upon his master and mocked him in the manner of a cocksure schoolboy too vain to appreciate that his very ability to ridicule had been gifted him by the teachers he now disdained. At his caustic worst, Aristotle ridicules and dismisses the towering achievement of Plato's philosophy, his theory of Forms: 'Farewell to the Forms: they are but ding-a-lings and even if they do exist they are wholly irrelevant' (*APo.* 83a32–34). Ever arch, Aristotle denigrates the thinkers who came before him as crude and intellectually infantile, even though he regularly fails, or refuses, to represent their views fairly and adequately. He credits them in a patronizing way only when he thinks he can see them groping inadequately towards his own theories and convictions. Otherwise, his predecessors come in for harsh treatment: 'Even the more recent among the older thinkers found themselves befuddled lest it turn out that according to them that the same thing should be at the same time both one and many' (*Phys.* 185b25–27). These thinkers, implies Aristotle, fell into a dither about parts and wholes, 'as if it were not possible for the same thing to be one and many' (*Phys.* 186a1–2). Here Aristotle contends that those who came before him somehow could not see that a single confection might be one cake and eight slices of cake, each ready to be eaten individually. How could they be so obtuse?

They could be so obtuse, our first tradition tells us, only because Aristotle used them sorely in an effort to prop up his own self-image by comparing travesties of their views disadvantageously to his own, the virtues of whose innovations he was keen to trumpet with immodest self-aggrandizement. Aristotle was ever alive to his own intellectual advances, and where he understood himself to have succeeded, he expected the credit he thought his due. Thus, for example, at the end of his work he had written on styles of argumentation, Aristotle proclaims:

Once you have surveyed our work, if it seems to you that our system has developed adequately in comparison with other treatments arising from the tradition to date – bearing in mind how things were at the beginning of our inquiry – it falls to you, our

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students, to be indulgent with respect to any omissions in our system, and to feel a great debt of gratitude for the discoveries it contains.

(*Soph. Ref.* 184b2–8)

What he had accomplished in this work, Aristotle's critics contend, was little more than a fragment of elementary logic, as might be taught today in the first weeks of an introductory course, followed by a series of recommendations for gaining the upper hand in contests of eristic.

In fact, still according to our first ancient tradition, when we think of Aristotle's self-conception, it is difficult not to suppose that he understands himself to be an instance of the sort of figure he idolizes as 'great-souled' (*megalapsuchos*) in his discussion of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1123a34–1125a35). The virtue of being great-souled, if it is a virtue, requires having the sort of character trait Aristotle admires in the *megalapsuchos* – sometimes translated into English via its Latinate counterpart as the *magnanimous* man. This is at best a misleading translation, since the *megalapsuchos* is someone manifesting not greatness of soul, conceived in altruistic or other-regarding terms. The *megalapsuchos* has rather the conceit to understand himself as possessing a soul greater than all others, someone whose own superiority leads him to condescend to those he regards as inferior, even to the point of despising them when they endeavour to honour him:

The great-souled man will be concerned most of all with honours and dishonours; and he will be moderately pleased with great honours given by good men, because he will think that he is being given his due – or perhaps less than his due, since there can be no honour worthy of perfect excellence. Nonetheless, he will accept them since they have nothing greater to bestow upon him; but he will be completely contemptuous of honour offered by just anyone or given on trifling grounds.

(*EN* 1124a4–11)

This man, who comes equipped with a suitably deep baritone voice and who affects a measured gait, is Aristotle's very ideal (*EN*



1125a12). The crowing trait manifested by this great-souled man, claims Aristotle, is a 'sort of gilding of the virtues' (EN 1124a1–2). Already perfectly virtuous in all other respects, Aristotle's ideal man does not refrain from making his superior self-conception known. The man of pre-eminent human virtue, according to Aristotle, is evidently jealous of his social standing and haughty to the point of contemptuousness.

Who could tolerate such a man, let alone esteem him so openly and unapologetically as Aristotle? As the greatest Aristotelian of the twentieth century, Sir David Ross, observed, the arrogance on display in this passage 'betrays somewhat nakedly the self-absorption which is the bad side of Aristotle's ethics'.<sup>5</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that Aristotle's ancient biographers are replete with stories capturing his self-aggrandizing tendencies of character.<sup>6</sup>

Before we close the book on Aristotle, however, we should give a fair hearing to an equally well-attested and yet completely opposing biographical tradition. According to this second tradition – which again comes down to us with an ancient pedigree – Aristotle was, uncommonly for an indisputable genius, a fine and generous man, who despite his prodigious intellect evinced a natural humility and generous devotion to his friends. Although it is true that he could be critical of his teacher where he differed with him, Aristotle regarded Plato warmly and with deep and grateful affection. He characterized Plato as 'a man whom the wicked have no place to praise: he alone, unsurpassed among mortals, has shown clearly by his own life and by the pursuits of his writings that a man becomes happy and good simultaneously'.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle saw something fine in Plato, whom he honours not only for his intellectual ability, but also, and more tellingly, for his unmatched concord of mind and life. Plato is a paragon and a model to us all, contends Aristotle, because he demonstrates, in a way never surpassed if ever equalled, that human happiness resides in the attainment of high intellectual achievement.

This is why, when he comes to differ with him – as every truly great teacher hopes his best students will do, when it is warranted – Aristotle exhibits an affectionate restraint and a touching hesitance. For instance, when he expresses his difference with Plato

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about the nature of goodness, as he does in an important chapter of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says:

We had perhaps better consider the universal good and run through the puzzles concerning what is meant by it – even though this sort of investigation is unwelcome to us, because those who introduced the Forms are friends of ours. Yet presumably it would be the better course to destroy even what is close to us, as something necessary for preserving the truth – and all the more so, given that we are philosophers. For though we love them both, piety bids us to honour the truth before our friends.

(*EN* 1096a11–16)

The philosophical difference between these two towering thinkers is both central and structural: Plato thinks that goodness is univocal – that all good things are ultimately good in precisely the same way, by instantiating the single Form Goodness – whereas Aristotle doubts that this is so. On the contrary, he assails Plato's univocity assumption, because he thinks that different things are good in irreducibly different ways: the goodness of Kathleen Ferrier's singing *Ombra ma fu* is not at all the same thing as the goodness of a crisp Cox's Orange Pippin apple in the autumn.

It is noteworthy that despite this deep philosophical disagreement, Aristotle does not ridicule Plato's opposing view. Instead, he pays Plato the respect which is his due by arguing carefully against him, and proceeds, as he intimates, only against his natural disinclination and because piety bids that we place our service to the truth before the feelings of even our dearest friends. Here, according to the champions of this second approach, we observe the true Aristotle: intellectually honest, yet affectionate, grateful, and pious as well.

We can further appreciate, according to the positive biographical tradition, how Aristotle's respect for Plato is equally reflected in his warm, almost reverential attitude towards friendship in general. It is plain that Aristotle values friendship exceedingly, even to the point where he is prepared to regard a friend as a 'second self' (*allos* or *heteros autos*; *EN* 1166a32; *EE* 1245a3). Your

true friend, maintains Aristotle, is someone whose well-being matters to you no less than your own. In a revealing passage of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle observes:

It is said that one ought to love most the friend who is most a friend; and he is most a friend who most of all wishes good things for a friend for his own sake, even if no-one will know about it. Yet these are attitudes which belong most of all to someone in reference to himself, as indeed do the remaining defining features by which a friend is defined. For we have said that features of friendship extend *from* oneself and *to* all others. Indeed, all the proverbs agree, in mentioning, for example, 'a single soul', or 'what is common to friends', or 'friendship as equality', or 'the knee is closer than the shin'. For all these are things which one bears in the first instance to oneself, since one is in the first instance a friend to oneself.

(EN 1168b1–10; cf. EE 1240b3–31)

This remark occurs in a passage in which Aristotle is combating the view that all forms of self-love are base, in effect that all self-regard is ultimately rank selfishness. He disagrees, differentiating appropriate forms of self-regard from those which are venal or puerile. It is striking how readily he pairs the appropriate forms with the heightened love one has towards the dearest of friends. He even cites as a then popular saying with approbation: a friend is someone with whom one shares a single soul.

These are not the sentiments of a self-involved egoist. Rather, the Aristotle who emerges from this passage, and many others like it, is a man who values friendship as indispensable to human flourishing (see, e.g., EN 1169b17–19; Pol. 1262b12–14). In such contexts, he expresses a fine and noble sentiment, unashamedly proclaiming that it is necessary to value our friends in the way that we appropriately value ourselves. So much is neither haughty nor excessively self-occupied. On the contrary, Aristotle's remarks reflect the commitments of a man who loves and cherishes his own friends, and advises others to do the same, because he well understands the inestimable value of intimate association for human flourishing.<sup>8</sup>

One finds this same fine and gentle character coming to the fore in Aristotle's will, the only genuinely personal document from his pen that we possess. In this will, we find Aristotle freeing his slaves, an unnecessary and generous gesture for a man of his time, and also providing for the well-being of his children and his estate (Diogenes Laertius v 11–16). This, though, is what we might come to expect from a man whose primary preoccupation was the advancement of human learning and not self-promotion.

Indeed, if we read Aristotle closely, we find revealed in his writings not a genius who disparages the worth of others, but rather a biologically inclined investigator who saw beauty in life forms no matter how lowly. For example, Aristotle expressly rebuffs those who ridicule research into lower animals on the grounds that we should care little about vermin when we can turn our minds to the lofty:

Having assayed the celestial world by saying how things in that domain appear to us, it remains for us to speak about animals and their nature, omitting nothing, whether or lowly not. For if the study of the lowly has nothing to charm the senses, that nature which fashioned them provides an irresistible pleasure in their study to all those able to detect the causes of things, those who are by nature disposed to philosophy. Indeed, it would be irrational and perverse if we were to delight in seeing representations of such things, because we discern at the same time the craft of painter or sculptor, but did not love still more a view of the originals as constituted by nature – again, at least as regards those able to observe their causes. We therefore must not recoil childishly from the examination of the baser animals: for in all strata of nature there is something marvelous. And as is reported regarding Heracleitus – that when some strangers hoping to visit with him found him warming himself by the kitchen stove hesitated and refrained from entering, he encouraged them to take heart and enter, on the grounds that even there in the kitchen the gods were present – so too should we embark on the study of every kind of animal without disdain, since in each of them there is something natural and beautiful. For in all the works of nature

we find not happenstance but end-directedness to the highest degree, and the end for which those entities were put together and produced surely embrace the province of the beautifuls.

(*PA* 645a5–36)

This passage, written in an elevated and flowing prose incongruous with what surrounds it in the biological work in which it occurs, the *Parts of Animals*, provides a window into Aristotle's emotively charged intellectual character: he loves study not least because he loves what he studies. Reading this sort of sentiment, it is hard to credit the cavils of Aristotle's ancient detractors. Probably we should simply admit what is plain: the negative remarks in the ancient biographical tradition surrounding Aristotle are mainly the views of his enemies, men driven by petty jealousy and competitive zeal rather than by a sober interest in neutral assessment.

## I.2 ARISTOTLE'S CHARACTER

These two portraits, the first captious and the second fawning, reflect two genuine traditions surrounding Aristotle's life and character. Neither is likely to be fully apt, since each is decidedly exaggerated. Each has its ancient and modern champions; and neither will ever be fully credited, though each may safely be at least partially discredited.

Although the two traditions which have come down to us are doubtless overblown in their different directions, they do tend to intersect in a noteworthy manner at one common point: Aristotle was, on each account, a self-assured man of formidable intellectual powers. He was, undeniably and on all accounts, rapaciously engaged in all areas of human learning, indefatigably determined to expand and ennoble the power of the human intellect through research into what would now be an impossible variety of fields – and what was then, as a matter of comparison, a bewildering number of distinct enterprises. He prized intellectual endeavour, at times to the point of reverence, going so far as to characterize our mental life as the divine element within us (*EN* 1177b33–1178a32,

1179a18–30). If we permit this sort of remark to offer us a fleeting glimpse into his character, then we come to appreciate one facet of him about which all should agree: he loved learning.

Aristotle thought of human learning as natural, as good, and as precious. Indeed, he thought it part of the essence of humanity. He opens his great work, the *Metaphysics*, with the simple observation that ‘All humans, by nature, desire to know’ (*Meta.* i 1, 980a1). He thinks, then, controversially, first that humans have a single and unalterable nature, and surprisingly even for an essentialist, that this nature has a rather startling character: we are, at base, according to Aristotle, *knowledge seekers*. He does not say or think, as other theorists of human nature have thought and said, that it is the nature of human beings to be selfish, or dominating, or somehow narrowly self-interested. On the contrary, he thinks that all humans are so constituted that their dominant activity is knowledge acquisition.<sup>9</sup> Plainly, Aristotle understands his general view to apply to himself; the inference thus lies near that his general judgment rests partly in his own self-acquaintance. Aristotle was, in fact, enthusiastically, even zealously devoted to excellence in intellectual attainment.

Perhaps, then, accepting at face value the tenor of his extant work, we should avoid the ancient tradition whose primary goal has always been to disparage Aristotle. At the same time, we have no reason to indulge in Aristotelian hagiography. As dispassionate philosophical investigators, what we really want to know are not the facets of his character, which are in any case largely unrecoverable to us, but rather the value of his thought. What we wish to know, primarily, is this: what in his surviving writings is true and valuable; what has been superseded, by what and how; and what if anything remains instructive in such errors as he may have committed? If we approach his works armed with preconceptions about his character and personality, we will likely only find our partialities reflected there. We may read him believing that he is a great man, worthy of veneration, or that, on the contrary, he is an overrated idol with an overblown reputation sorely in need of deflation. Or we may rather simply read and evaluate his works for ourselves. We may, that is, do our best to approach Aristotle’s

writings with fresh eyes, not expecting them to be true or false, magnificent or modest, relevant for our times or surpassed by the centuries.

We shall follow this last policy in this work and encourage others to follow suit.

### I.3 THE FACTS OF ARISTOTLE'S LIFE

Although we have little independent basis for an assessment of Aristotle's character,<sup>10</sup> we do know some things about the course of his life. Even here, however, we cannot assume that our speculations are more than broadly accurate.

Aristotle was born in Stagira, in the northeast of what is now Greek Macedonia in 384 BC – hence the moniker applied to him through the ages, even down to the present day, The Stagirite. It will prove significant for Aristotle throughout the course of his life that he could not be known as The Athenian. (Of course, Aristotle would have had stiff competition for that nickname had he been born in Athens; indeed, notably, no-one is called *The Athenian*.) Because he was only an alien resident of Athens, Aristotle was compelled to contend with the consequences of his non-citizen status for most of his adult life, even to the point, it seems, of having his life endangered in a time of civic duress at the close of his last period in that city.

This, though, brings us too quickly to the end of his life. Details of his early life are sketchy, though reasonably well attested. His father, a physician named Nicomachus, died while Aristotle was still a boy. Evidently raised by an uncle named Proxenus, Aristotle was sent, or went, to Athens in 367, when he was seventeen. (Another, less credible account has him migrating to Athens a little over a decade later, in his early thirties.)<sup>11</sup> Apparently, he went to Athens for the express purpose of joining Plato's Academy, which was at the time widely regarded amongst Greeks as the pre-eminent centre of learning in the entire civilized world – in that is, all of Greece. Aristotle remained in the Academy for two decades, until Plato's death in 347, at which time he left Athens for Assos, on the coast of Asia Minor, in

present-day Turkey, a city then positioned somewhat insecurely in the outer reaches of the Greek world. Aristotle went to Assos in response to an invitation from Hermeias, a friend and former associate in the Academy, who though once a slave and also a eunuch had been freed and ascended to become ruler of that city.<sup>12</sup>

Speculations concerning the motives for Aristotle's departure from Athens range from the benign to the spiteful. When Plato died, his nephew Speusippus assumed the headship of the Academy. This cannot be explained by blatant nepotism, since Speusippus was a philosopher and mathematician of considerable talent. Perhaps, though, Aristotle was displeased by this turn of events, and, some suppose, because he was venal, he left when he was passed over for the headship. More probably he simply did not care for the increasingly mathematical direction the Academy was set to take under Speusippus. Independent of such possible internal considerations, there was also at the time a mild resurgence of an always-simmering anti-Macedonian sentiment in Athens. This too may have contributed to Aristotle's departure, if, as seems likely, he was a prudent man. No less likely, however, is the suggestion that Aristotle was not pushed but pulled: the Aegean Coast of Asia Minor would have proven an ideal setting for his burgeoning interests in marine biology. We cannot access his actual motives.

Whatever his motives for leaving Athens, Aristotle went to Assos and remained there for only three years. During that time, he married the niece or adopted daughter (or both) of Hermeias. She was named Pythias,<sup>13</sup> and with Aristotle she had a daughter, also named Pythias. After his three years there, probably because of the deposition of the tyrant Hermeias, Aristotle moved to the nearby island of Lesbos, to the town of Mytilene. While the move was perhaps in some ways significant, it was geographically inconsequential: Lesbos is sufficiently close to Assos that it can be seen from its acropolis. Once he arrived there, Aristotle carried on his researches with another refugee from the Academy, Theophrastus, who was a native of Mytilene. The two men forged a close working relationship, which lasted, at least intermittently, until Aristotle's death almost two decades later. It is likely that during his two or so years on Lesbos, Aristotle gave over a great



deal of his energy to marine biological investigation.

His activity on Lesbos was brought to an end when Aristotle was summoned home in 343 by Philip of Macedon to serve as a tutor to his son Alexander, soon to be the Great. Although it has proven irresistible to historians of all stripes to speculate about the interactions of this world historical pair, in fact we have no credible evidence regarding their contact with one another. It is, however, hard to lay too much praise or blame at Aristotle's feet for the subsequent course of Hellenistic history under Alexander. Whatever influence Aristotle may have had was confined to just two or three years, beginning when Alexander was thirteen and ending when he was fifteen, at which age he was appointed a Regent before embarking on his Asiatic campaigns. The next five years, after Alexander's departure, are mainly a blank period in our account of Aristotle's life. He evidently remained in Macedon, still at the court of Philip or perhaps back in Stagira. The Roman encyclopaedist Pliny contends that Aristotle at this time benefited scientifically from his association with Alexander. His account has it that Alexander made available to Aristotle the services of all of his hunters, fishermen, and all those engaged in animal husbandry of any kind.<sup>14</sup> The astonishing breadth and extent of Aristotle's empirical description in his biological works lends at least some credence to this story. In the *History of Animals*, for example, Aristotle describes in minute detail, to take but a few examples, the habits, habitats, and patterns of reproduction and maturation of nine varieties of bees (HA viii 40, 623b5–627b23); the hunting techniques of a great variety of marine creatures, explaining, for instance, how the cuttlefish is the most cunning of the cephalopods, by dint of its ability to discharge its pigment for concealment (HA ix 37, 621b10–622a2); and the joint structures of the legs of such diverse animals as elephants, crocodiles, lizards, and seals (HA ii 1, 498a1–b3). The grain of the description tends to be at this level of exactness or higher:

The seal is a kind of imperfect quadruped, for its front feet are placed just behind the shoulder-blade, resembling hands, like the front paws of the bear; for they are furnished with five toes, and

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each of the toes has three flexions and a nail of inconsiderable size. The hind feet are also furnished with five toes, and in their flexions and nails they resemble the front feet; but in shape they resemble a fish's tail.

(HA 498a32–b3)

Or to take another example, also from the realm of marine biology:

The fishing-frog hunts little fish with a set of filaments that project in front of its eyes; they are long and hair-like, being rounded at their tips; they lie on either side and are used as bait. The animal stirs up a place full of sand and mud and having concealed itself, it raises the filaments, and when the little fish strike against them, it draws them in underneath into its mouth

(HA 620b13–19)

Aristotle evidently compiled his massive descriptions of animal life and activity from close empirical observation augmented by the precise descriptions of those involved in animal husbandry made available to him.<sup>15</sup>

In any event, we know next that Aristotle returned to Athens more or less concurrent with the death of Philip in 335. Upon his return, Aristotle set up his own school in an area dedicated to the god Apollo Lykeios, whence the name the Lyceum.<sup>16</sup> Those in Aristotle's school were also called the Peripatetics, a name derived from Aristotle's reported habit of walking about during his lectures and discussions (*peripateô* = to walk around in Greek), or, more likely, from the existence of an ambulatory (*peritpatos*) on the grounds of his school. In the thirteen years spent there before leaving Athens for his last time, Aristotle and his associates conducted research at a feverish pace. It is likely, though the matter is disputed, that most of the philosophical works of Aristotle which survive today derive from this period. The school's research portfolio was, however, hardly confined to what is today regarded as philosophical investigation. Aristotle and his colleagues, who included Theophrastus, Eudemus, and Aristoxenus, pursued research programmes *inter alia* into botany, biological taxonomy, music, mathematics, astronomy,

medicine, cosmology, physics, the history of philosophy, the arts, psychology, ethics, rhetoric, and government and political theory. In all these areas, the Lyceum sought to collect manuscripts, assembling, according to Strabo,<sup>17</sup> the first great library in antiquity. We know, for example, that in politics alone the Lyceum undertook the task of collecting the constitutions of some 158 cities,<sup>18</sup> evidently in an effort to arrive at a comprehensive description of political arrangement, with the further goal of determining what the ideal constitution might be, but then also, more practically, which sorts of governments would be best suited to which forms of material and social circumstances. One finds traces of research into all these areas in Aristotle's surviving writings.<sup>19</sup>

Evidently the brisk pace of research in the Lyceum continued unabated for over a decade. During that time, Aristotle's wife Pythias passed away and he developed a new relationship, whether into formal marriage or not remains unclear, with Herpyllis, who was also a native of Stagira. Together they had a child, Nicomachus, named for Aristotle's father, for whom his *Nicomachean Ethics* is named, either because it had been dedicated to him or, less likely, because the son edited the work after Aristotle's death.

After thirteen years in Athens, Aristotle again found cause to retire from the city. It seems reasonable to conclude that prudence once more played its part. His second and final departure from Athens was probably hurried along by a resurgence of anti-Macedonian sentiment. After Alexander succumbed to disease in 323 in Babylon, Athens had greater latitude to vent its long-simmering anti-Macedonian sentiment.<sup>20</sup> In its wake, Aristotle was evidently charged with impiety, just as Socrates before him had been. In Aristotle's case, the pretext offered was a Paeon, or Hymn, praising the character of Hermeias, the tyrant who had welcomed him in Assos upon his departure from Athens after Plato's death. Aristotle had also erected a statue in his honour at Delphi, set atop an inscription extolling the tyrant's virtue. The hymn, which survives,<sup>21</sup> compares Hermeias, a eunuch and one-time slave, in glory to various Greek heroes, a coupling perhaps likely to offend common Greek sentiment though hardly impious. Finding no special reason to defend himself against such transparently trumped-up charges,

Aristotle withdrew directly to Chalcis, on the large island of Euboea, remarking, as an ancient legend has it, that he was compelled to go lest Athens be permitted to sin twice against philosophy.<sup>22</sup> He died of natural causes in Chalcis the following year, in 322.

#### **1.4 READING ARISTOTLE**

Aristotle left his library, including his own writings, to his friend and immediate successor of the Lyceum, Theophrastus. Stories abound as to their subsequent disposition. A once well-received story, that his writings were for the most part neglected until recovered in a damp chest by Andronicus of Rhodes in the second century AD, is difficult to credit, since it relies on sources which are otherwise mainly unreliable.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the path of their transmission, however, Aristotle's surviving writings provide a number of challenges to his modern readers. Scholars wrangle about their relative datings, in some cases about their authenticity, and in many, many instances, about the appropriate constitution of the texts themselves. That is, the translations we read today are provided from texts which have only recently – within the last century or two – been put into anything like authoritative versions. All modern translations derive in one way or another from the monumental 1831 Prussian Academy edition of Immanuel Bekker, whose pages and columns provide the standard reference numbers for all modern texts and translations, including those employed in the current volume.<sup>24</sup> Still, since the time of Bekker, many advances have been made in the art of paleography, new manuscripts have been uncovered, and new readings have been adopted. The process is ongoing.

Scholars are hindered in their attempt to establish canonical texts by the character of Aristotle's prose. As will be evident to anyone reading Aristotle for the first time, whether in the original Greek or in translation, his writing can be extraordinarily difficult to understand. Most students encounter Aristotle after having been introduced to the supple, engaging, and highly literary dialogues of Plato. Where in Plato a novice reader will find humour, vivid characterization, and striking deployment of imagery, all often advanced in nimble banter and draped in lilting prose, in Aristotle

the same reader confronts terse, crabbed, and gritty prose, much of it ungainly in syntax, often littered with unexplained technical jargon, and sometimes veering into the impenetrable. At a first pass, even a generous reader is bound to be perplexed by such arid observations as:

For if **A** belongs to no **B** but to every **C**, e.g. animal to no stone but to every horse, then if the propositions are stated contrariwise and it is assumed that **A** belongs to every **B** but to no **C**, then a true conclusion will emerge though the propositions are wholly false. The case is the same if **A** belongs to every **B** but to no **C**; for we shall have the same deduction.

(*APr.* 55b10–16)

Though what Aristotle says here is perfectly true,<sup>25</sup> his manner of presentation is not likely to engage an unschooled reader. It is therefore striking, given how far removed Aristotle's writings are from Plato's in tone and temperament, that Cicero, himself one of the greatest stylists of antiquity and a justifiably assured judge of the prose of others, ranked Plato very highly, but then added that if Plato's prose was silver, Aristotle's was a flowing river of gold.<sup>26</sup>

As will be plain to even the casual reader of Plato and Aristotle, Cicero cannot be speaking of Aristotle's writings as we have them. The current Aristotelian corpus comprises some thirty-one works, with occasional overlap of closely parallel passages.<sup>27</sup> It seems likely that the works we possess were not prepared by Aristotle for public consumption, but were rather in-house working drafts, more akin to a professor's evolving lecture notes than to her published treatises. Aristotle mentions some 'exoteric' writings, presumably of his own composition, which were intended for a popular audience (*Pol.* 1278b30 and *EE* 1217b22, 1218b34). Unfortunately, we do not possess these works, although fragments of a few dialogues written by Aristotle survive and in them we do encounter some arrestingly lovely prose. It is also occasionally possible to get a glimpse of the style which so impressed Cicero in the main surviving works, but only very rarely. For the most part, what we read is syntactically kinked and simply not pretty.

The question thus arises as to how best a novice reader might persevere through a first encounter with Aristotle. Key to making progress with his texts is understanding some features of his method. First, and most importantly, it is crucial to bear in mind Aristotle's adage that 'For those who wish to solve problems, it is helpful to state the problems well' (*Meta.* 995a27). When confronted with a philosophical problem, Aristotle characteristically begins by stating it as crisply as possible. To take just one illustration, we may be confronted with a problem as to whether human beings can be akratic, or weak-willed (*EN* vii 3). Why? We take it as an obvious datum of our lives that we sometimes decide to pursue a course of action, perhaps to better ourselves by initiating an exercise programme, but then fail to implement our plans, only later to engage in regret and self-recrimination. We thus take it as obvious that *akrasia* is possible, because we recognize it with lamentable frequency in our own conduct.

Then, however, we learn that Socrates has given a surprisingly compelling reason for doubting that such *akrasia* is possible. As he suggests, if people always pursue their own perceived interests and forever try to maximize their own well-being, then a failure to implement an exercise programme when planned must reveal not weakness, but an unvoiced belief to the effect that such activity is not really the best course of action, all things considered. It must be the case, as Socrates seems to suggest, that if we know that exercise really is good for us, and we in fact want what is good for us, as we say we do, then our failure to exercise must stem not from weakness but from a cognitive error of some sort. In general, if some course of action *a* is good for us, and we in fact want what is good for us, but yet do not pursue *a*, then we must not have grasped the relevant fact, namely that *a* is what is good for us.<sup>28</sup> So, we have a problem: the Socratic contention, which is motivated by widely shared convictions, conflicts with what most of us accept as an all too common phenomenon, that we are sometimes lazy and weak-willed.

Here we find ourselves confronted with a puzzle, an *aporia* in Aristotle's terms, because we have good reason to accept some proposition, but then again some good reason to reject it – and

we know that we cannot do both. When Aristotle approaches this sort of puzzle, he begins by pausing to reflect upon the character of the puzzle he means to address. Do we want to prove that *akrasia* is after all possible? Or are we assuming that *akrasia* is actual and so possible, and hence really only interested in explaining what must be true about our access to our own psychological states when we act in self-undermining ways? Or is it our goal rather to explain how *akrasia* might seem possible when we know, on the basis of a proof, that it really is anything but? We will make progress, contends Aristotle, in this as in other philosophical puzzles, only if we first set out the problem to be tackled in clear-headed terms.

The allusion to Socrates in the formulation of the problem of *akrasia* points to another useful guideline for reading Aristotle's works. When first working through a problem, Aristotle begins by sorting through what he calls the *endoxa*, variously translated as 'reputable opinions' or 'entrenched opinions' or 'credible beliefs' or simply 'common beliefs'. (In ordinary Greek, a man who is *endoxos* is someone of high repute or an honoured citizen.) This range of translations is unsurprising and unobjectionable, since Aristotle lists the sources of *endoxa* in these terms: 'Endoxa are those opinions accepted by everyone, or by the majority, or by the wise – and among the wise, by all or most of them, or by those who are the most notable and having the highest reputation' (Top. 100b21–23).

Aristotle thinks it salutary to collect *endoxa* for two distinct, though continuous reasons. First, there is the obvious point that it is a waste of time to re-invent the wheel; where progress has already been made, it is otiose to begin afresh, ignoring the advances made by predecessors. This, it should be stressed, is not for Aristotle merely a form of pietistic rhetoric. He thinks that we have something to learn from our predecessors, as often by their mistakes as by their accomplishments, and so we should not waste our own intellectual resources by ignoring them. Second, as often as not, our predecessors had good reason to formulate problems in the manner they did. We can accordingly learn something about the texture of the problems that confront us by paying attention to the terms in which our predecessors have cast them.

Thus, for instance, if we run into an intellectual impediment or puzzle, an *aporia*, this is as likely as not due to the fact that we have unwittingly made a false assumption along the way. To revert to our earlier example: once we reflect upon the assumptions about human psychology which generate Socrates' worry, we may uncover more nuance than he was willing or able to see. When we do, we will find ourselves able to draw distinctions which deprive Socrates' argument of much of its force. In this way, philosophical progress is possible.

More generally, Aristotle thinks that we begin in philosophy precisely where we are: *we begin with how things appear to us* – we begin, that is, by stating the appearances, the *phainomena*, of which the *endoxa* form a subclass (EN 1154b3–8). (They form a subclass when they serve as the starting points of dialectic, the form of argument appropriate to non-scientific frameworks (APr 46a17–27; PA 639b5–10; EN 1145b2–30).)<sup>29</sup> In general, Aristotle suggests, when we find ourselves confronted by a puzzle in some area, whether natural philosophy, or philosophy of mind, or ethics, or metaphysics, it is best to begin by reflecting upon the way the world appears to us in our untutored apprehension of it. It appears, for example, that we are sometimes weak-willed. It also appears, in a different domain, that every physical event has a cause, for example that a billiard ball does not move unless something causes it to move. Of course, such appearances may be deceiving; or they may be accurate. Scholars divide on the question of the degree to which Aristotle maintains that appearances should constrain us in our philosophizing. Often enough, Aristotle suggests that we should do what we can to preserve appearances, where possible; yet he stands ready to abandon them whenever science or philosophy demands (Meta. 1073b36, 1074b6; PA 644b5; EN 1145b2–30). Thus, for example, if it appears to us that the universe is geocentric, then we will be foolish to insist that appearance and reality match if it is subsequently shown that the heavens do not rotate around the earth as their midpoint.

Still, it is difficult to state in abstract and exceptionless terms when appearances should be respected and when they may be abandoned. Perhaps this is a general worry in philosophy, but it



has a special focus in Aristotle, because he has a methodological precept of beginning a discussion by collecting the phenomena and surveying the *endoxa*. For the novice reader, it merits mentioning only that Aristotle will often begin a discussion by collecting the appearances and the credible beliefs only to test them in order to determine their worth. In practical terms, this means that one very regularly finds Aristotle introducing a topic with ‘it seems’ (*dokei*) that such and such, or suggesting that something ‘appears’ (*phainetai*) to be the case, without thereby taking a stand on whether what seems to be the case merely seems to be so or really is so, or whether what appears to be so ultimately coheres with reality. In Aristotle’s Greek, these phrases have roughly the range of meaning we find in their English counterparts. We range in English, for instance, from, ‘He seems fierce, but he’s actually a pussycat’ to ‘Did you forget to buy the milk?’ ‘Yes, it seems that I did.’ Or, similarly, we say both that ‘Appearances can be deceiving’ and that ‘The Prime Minister made an unannounced appearance.’ So too Aristotle sometimes means to suggest that what appears to be so is so; other times, he means that what appears to be so is not really so; very often, however, he intends to be neutral, suggesting that we need to determine whether what appears to be so is really so or not. Generally, when dealing with Aristotle, we must proceed as we do in English, by gleaning his meaning from context. Most importantly, though, we should not prejudge whether he intends to endorse or discard a reputable opinion (*endoxon*) or appearance (*phainomenon*) upon its first mention in the setting out of a problem (*aporia*). Mainly, though, this is a somewhat unstable generalization, Aristotle tends to be neutral at the moment of introducing a credible belief or appearance, and while he respects the phenomena and the *endoxa*, he does not regard himself as beholden to them. Appearances and reputable opinions may crumble in the face of sustained scrutiny. Still, he does often enough begin with the presumption that credible beliefs are credible for a reason and that appearances often track the truth – if not the surface truth presented by the appearance, then a discoverable truth whose relation to our initial appearance becomes clear upon investigation and analysis.

Further, a novice reader needs to be alert to the fact that terms such as *endoxon* and *phainomenon* are regularly appropriated by Aristotle and given quasi-technical status. In fact, these are but two examples among many, central, to be sure, but none too exceptional. Perhaps because primarily intended for an in-house audience, Aristotle's extant writings are replete with technical terms, neologisms, compressed and ungainly syntax, unexplained abbreviations, jargon, and non-standard idiom. This is one central reason why his works tend to be forbidding and sometimes off-putting to those first encountering them.<sup>30</sup> If it is at first discouraging, it bears reflecting that serious thinkers usually find it worth the effort required to move beyond the initially challenging characteristics of Aristotle's prose.

In general, even with the aid of a study guide, a novice reader can become bewildered when first approaching Aristotle. He is capable of moving quickly from a relatively clear and transparent statement of a puzzle to a discussion so tangled and dense that scholars quarrel even about its primary terms, and thence to disagreements about Aristotle's preferred resolution; these interpretations occasion still further discussion and debate and the conversation continues through the generations. To be sure, many of the exegetical difficulties we encounter with Aristotle result from the troubled state of his surviving writings. In part, however, such debate is also a natural and welcome consequence of the kinds of topics Aristotle tackles. As Peter Strawson has aptly noted, work in philosophy may be introductory but never elementary: "There is no shallow end to the philosophical pool."<sup>31</sup> While certainly apt as a general characterization of philosophy as a discipline, Strawson's observation has a special resonance in the study of Aristotle. If there is any recompense for the difficulties inherent in working through Aristotle's texts, it can only be the philosophical buoyancy they afford.

### **I.5 ARISTOTLE'S CORPUS AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE ARISTOTELIAN SCIENCES**

Whatever their provenance and intended audience, the corpus of writings having come down to us under Aristotle's name contains

some spurious works, some works whose authenticity remain a matter of scholarly debate, and many more rightly accepted as genuine. A reasonable estimate would be that we now possess thirty-one works by Aristotle, not including the many fragments preserved primarily in the form of quotations and paraphrases from later authors.<sup>32</sup>

Because we do not have secure information concerning the dates of composition for Aristotle's works, scholars, assuming that such knowledge would help us understand his developing philosophy, rely on a series of mutually reinforcing considerations to determine their relative order. These include stylometric data, involving diction and the features of his syntax; doctrinal matters, including some permanently thorny issues regarding the effect of his relationship to Plato on his independent intellectual development; the use of place names, which tend to indicate that the biological works, unsurprisingly, were written in his period away from Athens; intertextual references; and historical allusions of one form or another.

Taken individually, each of these techniques is fairly unreliable. For instance, as regards intertextual reference, we cannot assume that one work is later than another simply because the one refers to the other. We must always allow for the possibility that Aristotle or a later editor added a given reference later than the referring work's original date of composition. Similarly, doctrinal determinants invariably become mired in philosophical controversy. Thus, while it is often tempting to regard Aristotle's more sophisticated and technical work as late productions and his simpler work as early, the possibility always remains that the apparently simpler works are intended to summarize or supersede the more complex pieces, as Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* stands in relation to his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, or Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* to his *Critique of Pure Reason*. In the case of these later authors we have reliably accurate information regarding their intentions and very accurate information regarding their dates of publication. For Aristotle, we are in the dark in both regards – and we are not even able to speak non-anachronistically in terms of 'publication' at all.

These considerations are consequential in many interrelated ways for our understanding of Aristotle's philosophy. To take one central example, we can consider a work often taken to be early in virtue of its simplicity and relative ease of doctrine, the *Categories*. In this work, Aristotle adumbrates a theory of substance which seems to be overturned by the much more complicated treatment of the same topic in the *Metaphysics*, which thus seems to be the later work. In many respects, the works seem to contain theories of substance which are positively incompatible. Even so, some scholars deny that they are incompatible, recommending instead that the *Metaphysics* be regarded as elaboration of the *Categories* rather than its rejection. To complicate matters further, if we look beyond the doctrinal matters, we discover that various other criteria for dating do not always line up. Thus the supposedly youthful *Categories* contains a reference to the Lyceum (Cat. 2a2), suggesting a date not earlier than Aristotle's second stay in Athens, when he set up his own school.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, a companion piece to the *Categories*, *De Interpretatione*, contains an evident reference to *De Anima* (De Interp. 16a8), thought by most scholars to be very late on doctrinal grounds.

Even so, taken corporately, these criteria do provide a plausible – though certainly disputable – picture of Aristotle's development. Some works, including the *Categories* and related efforts, in all likelihood come from an earlier period, when Aristotle was still a member of the Academy (367–347). Many of the biological works appear to originate from the period when Aristotle was away from Athens (347–335), and many of the most demanding philosophical works in the corpus, including the *Metaphysics* and *De Anima*, seem to have been composed during his last period in Athens (335–323). Although it would be desirable to have secure knowledge in this area, scholars must accept most relative dating schemes as tentative.

We can, however, be a bit more confident about the character of Aristotle's works, both because they form natural groupings and, more importantly, because Aristotle himself offers a division of the sciences (Top. 145a15–16; Phys. 192b8–12; DC 298a27–32, DA 403a27–b2; Meta. 1025b25, 1026a18–19, 1064a16–19, b1–3;

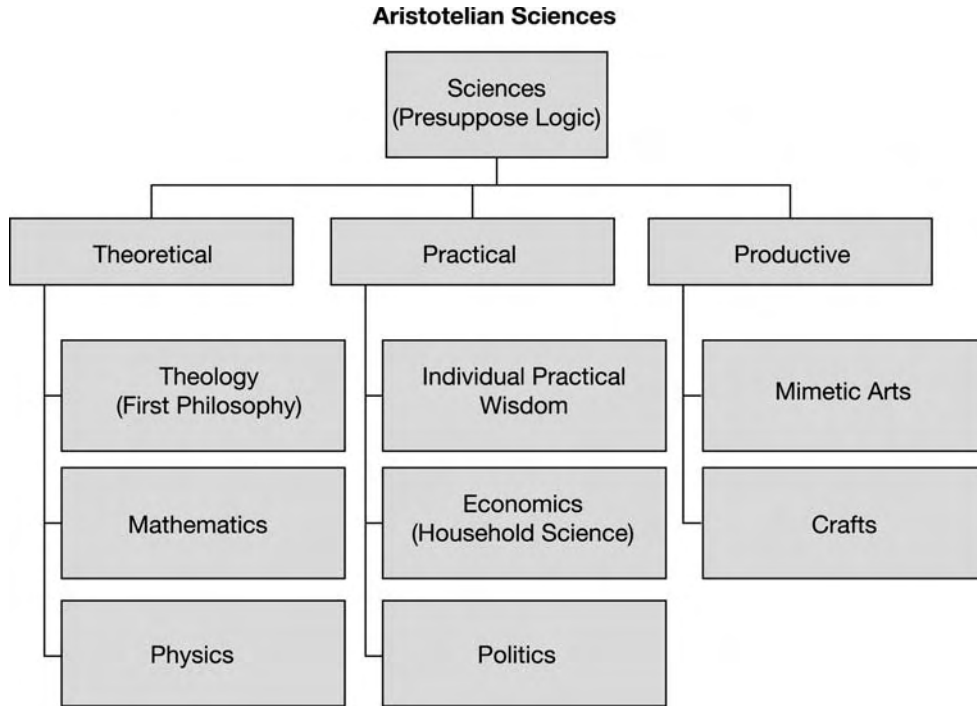


Figure 1.1

EN 1139a26–28, 1141b29–32). Although the fine-grained details are difficult, it is clear that he accepts the general division as shown in Figure 1.1.

The general differentiation at the highest level turns on the orientation of the sciences: theoretical sciences seek knowledge; practical sciences concern conduct and goodness in action; and productive sciences aim at beautiful or useful objects. Among the theoretical sciences are first philosophy, or metaphysics as we now call it;<sup>34</sup> mathematics; and physics, or natural philosophy.<sup>35</sup> The sub-division of physics comprises topics in natural philosophy generally, but also special sciences such as biology and astronomy. Practical sciences all concern themselves with conduct, and not with the creation of products external to sciences themselves, whereas the productive sciences are crafts, aiming at the production of artefacts or external productions more broadly. The productive sciences include ship-building, agriculture, and medicine, and also the arts, which produce music, theatre, and dance.

Note that this hierarchy makes no mention of logic. Although the word ‘logic’ in our sense was unknown to him, Aristotle did develop the first detailed system of logic and inference. In

Aristotle's terms, logic belongs not to science, but to that branch of learning which subserves all the sciences in common. This branch investigates the nature of correct argumentation, as well as the forms of argumentation appropriate to various occasions.<sup>36</sup> One does not, for example, expect the same rigour and precision in the context of the courtroom that one demands in the presentation of the most exact sciences. The group of Aristotle's works constituting this area of investigation has come down to us under the general title of *Organon* (*organon* = tool in Greek). Although not so characterized by Aristotle, the name is an apt one. The works falling under this heading deal with category theory, the doctrine of propositions and terms, logic and argumentation, the structure of scientific theory, and to some extent the basic principles of epistemology.

Slotting Aristotle's surviving works into this scheme of division, we end up with the following basic divisions:

- *Organon*
  - *Categories* (Cat.)
  - *De Interp.* (DI)
  - *Prior Analytics* (APr)
  - *Posterior Analytics* (APo)
  - *Topics* (Top.)
  
- *Theoretical Sciences*
  - *Metaphysics, or First Philosophy* (Meta.)
  - *Physics* (Phys.)
  - *De Anima* (DA)
  - *Generation and Corruption* (GC)
  - *De Caelo* (DC)
  - *Parva Naturalia* (PN)
  - *Parts of Animals* (PA)
  - *Movement of Animals* (MA)
  - *Meteorologica* (Metr.)
  - *Progression of Animals* (IA)
  - *Generation of Animals* (GA)

- Practical Science
  - *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN)
  - *Eudemian Ethics* (EE)
  - *Magna Moralia* (MM)
  - *Politics* (Pol.)
  
- Productive Science
  - *Rhetoric* (Rhet.)
  - *Poetics* (Poet.)

Although Aristotle nowhere provides just this list, the groupings as given conform to his general divisions of the sciences when taken together with his scattered remarks characterizing the goals of the works listed.

This list is intended to help Aristotle's readers situate themselves in his large corpus. (*The Revised Oxford Translation*, which includes spurious works and some fragments, runs to 2465 pages.) It also provides much of the structure for the chapters to follow. We begin in Chapter Two with Aristotle's general explanatory framework, the doctrine of the four causes, since this framework informs virtually all of his philosophy outside of the *Organon*; this chapter is, consequently, presupposed for all of the subsequent chapters beyond Three and Four.<sup>37</sup> Chapters Three and Four take up facets of the *Organon*, focusing especially on Aristotle's category theory, his development of logic, and his theory of dialectic. From there, thus prepared, we move in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, to Aristotle's core theoretical science: natural philosophy, where he considers the nature of change, time, and the infinite; metaphysics, where he investigates especially the theory of substance; and psychology, where he focuses primarily on the soul and its capacities of perception and thought. Although his present-day readers do not always appreciate this, Aristotle's practical philosophy and political theory, as considered in Chapters Eight and Nine, presuppose the metaphysical and psychological theories developed in the theoretical sciences. A full understanding of Aristotle's ethics and politics thus requires a basic grounding in his more

technically theoretical investigations. The same holds true, perhaps to an even greater extent, for Aristotle's treatment of the productive sciences of rhetoric and poetry, treated jointly in Chapter Ten. In these areas, there has been a tendency to read Aristotle's views as if they were free-standing, lacking the theoretical and practical underpinnings he provides for them. This practice has resulted in both misunderstanding and unnecessary controversy. Consequently, Chapter Ten assumes familiarity with this background and seeks to highlight the ways in which any constructive understanding of rhetoric and tragedy requires a prior familiarity with the larger explanatory framework of Aristotle's philosophy, upon which they depend in large and small ways.

## **1.6 CONCLUSIONS**

We know the basic outlines of Aristotle's life, although we do not have any secure biographical data about his character or personality traits. While it is tempting to speculate on the basis of the scanty and unreliable reports that have come down to us, our doing so is mainly counter-productive. In any event, neither the unremittingly harsh nor the unswervingly laudatory portrait of Aristotle in the ancient doxographical tradition does justice to the corpus of his writings as we have them.

When we turn to Aristotle's works with fresh eyes, unprejudiced by an antecedent decision to find in them a man who is magnificent or base, or theories which are brilliant or abysmally outmoded, we discover a corpus of writings which is intellectually intricate, in many places obscure, often challenging, occasionally alien, and yet consistently arresting in its nuanced philosophical insight and its penetrating intellectual acumen. Aristotle's works, even in their current unhappy state, present both prospect and promise for sustained intellectual engagement. While there is no call to be fawning, especially at this early stage of our inquiry, we should appreciate that it is surely no accident that Aristotle's works have survived to enjoy the long-lasting influence they have earned. That acknowledged, we should surely direct to Aristotle an adapted version of the adage he had himself aimed at Plato, and



recall that however admiring or disparaging our ultimate view of him may prove to be, our primary duty lies not to the man but to the truth. This is, after all, precisely what he requests.

**FURTHER READING (\* = ESPECIALLY SUITED TO BEGINNERS, IN TERMS OF CLARITY OR ACCESSIBILITY)**

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