ARISTOTLE:
THE GROWTH AND
STRUCTURE OF HIS THOUGHT

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To

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PREFACE

This book is intended to help the student to discover and explore Aristotle. Most people would agree that he is not an easy philosopher to approach. His treatises cannot be read for enjoyment purely as literature, as many of Plato’s dialogues can, and the man behind the treatises has the reputation of being a dry, uninspiring, even rather inhuman, person. If in the popular view Plato is as much a poet as a philosopher, Aristotle is still generally thought of first and foremost as a dogmatist and systematiser. This account of him, which is largely the product of a tendency to confuse Aristotle with Aristotelianism, is grossly exaggerated. Like Plato, he conceived the business of philosophy to consist as much in the defining of problems, the examining of alternative views, and the exploring of difficulties, as in the propounding of solutions, and his thought, like Plato’s again, underwent a gradual evolution, even though this is, in his case, much more difficult to reconstruct owing to the nature of our evidence.

But while Aristotle is neither as unimaginative nor as inflexible as he is sometimes represented, no one can deny that his thought is often opaque. The treatises make slow and difficult reading, although their difficulty arises as much from the complexity and subtlety of their ideas as from the obscurity of Aristotle’s expression. Yet however daunting the texts appear, there is no substitute for a close study of Aristotle’s own words to grasp his philosophy. The commentator’s role is merely to mediate between Aristotle and his twentieth-century reader. Certainly
nothing is to be gained from attempting to give him a
spurious air of modernity, or from exaggerating the
extent to which his ideas are relevant to current philo-
sophical issues. To understand Aristotle one must place
his philosophy in the context of the problems and con-
troversies that interested him. But that is not to say that
he is to be treated as a figure of purely antiquarian interest
or that his thought is to be judged without regard to any
philosophical or scientific idea that has been put forward
since the fourth century B.C. On the contrary, to appre-
ciate the originality and importance of his work it is
essential to bear in mind subsequent developments in each
of the fields that he investigated, and these include not
only the various branches of philosophy and natural
science but also what we should call sociology and even
literary criticism.

The aim of the first part of this book is to tell the story
of Aristotle’s intellectual development in so far as it can be
reconstructed, and of the second to present the fundamen-
tals of his thought in the main fields of inquiry in which
he was interested. The book is addressed to the beginner
and the amateur, not to the experienced Aristotelian
scholar. It is intended for the undergraduate who has
reached a stage in his classical or philosophical studies
when he can defer no longer the task of coming to grips
with Aristotle, and for any reader who is interested enough
in some aspect of Aristotle’s work or influence to want to
learn a little more about the philosopher and his thought.
I have dealt only with essentials, but the reader should be
warned that these involve some serious problems which

cannot be ignored or glossed over. Aristotle is a difficult
and profound thinker and his philosophy cannot, without
distortion, be made to seem easy.

In writing this book my debt to scholars, teachers,
friends and colleagues is incalculable. I have not striven
for, nor would I claim, great originality in the account of
Aristotle that I present. I owe much, first of all, to a long
line of distinguished scholars who have written books and
commentaries on Aristotle, and particularly to those who
have worked, in recent years, on the question of his in-
tellectual development. I have not attempted to acknow-
ledge all such debts, since to have done so would have
been to accumulate bibliographical references out of all
proportion to the length and aims of the book. On a hand-
ful of occasions I have included such references in foot-
notes to the text to indicate a few of the most recent
scholarly works in which important new suggestions and
interpretations have been advanced. Then apart from
what I owe to published works of scholarship, I have an
enduring debt to all my teachers and colleagues in Cam-
bridge. The extent to which my ideas on Aristotle and on
Greek philosophy in general have been influenced by for-
mal and informal discussions with them is hard to assess
but is certainly very great indeed. Finally it is a duty and a
pleasure to mention the help I have received from those who
have commented on my work at various stages in its pre-
paration, and particularly from Mr J. E. Raven, Mr J. D. G.
Evans, Mr G. H. W. Rylands and Mr P. G. Burbidge.
They have all devoted much precious time and trouble to
reading and criticising the book in draft. Their coopera-

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Tuition has been a constant encouragement, and their advice has led to innumerable improvements in matters of both style and content. I consider myself particularly fortunate to have had such patient and painstaking critics, and I am happy to record my very special debt of gratitude to them. To Mr Raven, to whom the plan and execution of the work owe most of all, the book is respectfully and gratefully dedicated.

For the 1980 reprint I have brought the ‘Suggestions for further reading’ (pp. 316–17) up to date.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviations for the works of Aristotle and Plato that I have used are those in the Liddell–Scott–Jones Lexicon. Thus the main works of Aristotle appear as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Work Title</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Work Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APo.</td>
<td>Analytica Posteriora</td>
<td>Int.</td>
<td>de Interpretatione</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APR.</td>
<td>Analytica Priora</td>
<td>Metaph.</td>
<td>Metaphysica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cael.</td>
<td>de Caelo</td>
<td>Mete.</td>
<td>Meteorologica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat.</td>
<td>Categories</td>
<td>PA</td>
<td>de Partibus Animalium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>de An.</td>
<td>de Anima</td>
<td>Ph.</td>
<td>Physica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EE</td>
<td>Ethica Eudemia</td>
<td>Po.</td>
<td>Poetica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EN</td>
<td>Ethica Nicomachea</td>
<td>Pol.</td>
<td>Politica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GA</td>
<td>de Generatione Animalium</td>
<td>Resp.</td>
<td>de Respiratioine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GC</td>
<td>de Generatione et Corrupione</td>
<td>Rh.</td>
<td>Rhetorica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HA</td>
<td>Historia Animalium</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Sophistici Elenchi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Top.</td>
<td>Topica</td>
</tr>
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Separate books are referred to by the corresponding Roman numerals in all cases except the Metaphysics, where the books are referred to by their Greek letters: this is to avoid the confusion caused by two different systems of Roman numeration, in one of which book α is treated as a separate book, while in the other it is not.