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0521235731 - A History of Greek Philosophy, Volume VI - Aristotle: An Encounter

W. K. C. Guthrie

Excerpt

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## I

## DISCOVERING ARISTOTLE

I will tell you, if you are willing, of my own  
experiences in the matter.

Socrates in the *Phaedo* (95e)

(1) *Two encounters*

I still remember my first serious introduction to Aristotle. Plato I had met in my schooldays. I read the *Phaedo* at the impressionable age of seventeen (probably the age at which Aristotle first read it), and could not (as I scarcely can now) repeat the final sentences of either that or the *Apology* without a catch in the voice. This, I felt, was what philosophy should be: grounded in tough argument but borne up on the wings of Reason itself to the realm of pure Being, where the mind 'itself by itself', freed from reliance on the untrustworthy mediation of the senses, enjoys direct communion with the eternal, unchangeable realities. The culmination of searching dialectic in the symbolic truths of poetry and myth, the dramatic skill and the beauty of the language, together made an irresistible appeal.

In comparison with this, Aristotle represented the unknown and, one suspected, the hostile and unsympathetic, 'the foal that kicks its mother', as Plato is reported (improbably) to have called him.<sup>1</sup> The scholastic tradition still cast its spell on anything I had read about him. Aristotle was simply the unchallengeable, scarcely human, authority, Dante's 'Master of those that know'. The Arabs called their greatest philosopher 'The Second Master'. It did not need to be said that the first was Aristotle. For Christian and Moslem alike Aristotelianism was a fixed and rigid scheme of ideas, a closed system, worlds away from the

<sup>1</sup> D.L. 5.2. Alternatively he nicknamed him 'Horse' because he was like a horse that *bites* its own *father*. (See Düring, *AABT*, 320 t. 37b.) One can take one's choice. On the unfavourable traditions about A.'s relations with P., see Düring, *AABT*, 256f., de Vogel, *Philos.* 1, 301-3.

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tentative probing of the Socratic method; and from this there had grown up a corresponding idea of the mind of Aristotle himself as coldly self-consistent, aloof and uncompromising towards all others, teaching moreover a metaphysics and cosmology that had little or no interest for the world of today.

Two things served to banish this distasteful impression. First, a reading of Aristotle's own works. As an undergraduate I started with the first book of the *Metaphysics*, and read on with increasing excitement. Part of the attraction of earlier Greek thought had lain, it must be admitted, in a certain remoteness and mystery. Reading the remains of the Presocratics, and in part the works of Plato himself, one enjoyed the attempt to penetrate their strange ways of thinking, but strange in many respects their mentalities remained. There was a temptation to regard this as something typically Greek, for after all it was natural enough that a kind of curtain should divide us from a people who lived more than two thousand years ago and thought in a different language with a structure sufficiently alien to affect that of the concepts which it expressed. Yet here was Aristotle, an Ionian Greek like the Milesians and Democritus and not far removed from them in time, a pupil and friend of Plato's, puzzled by their strange expressions in much the same way as we are ourselves. If there was a curtain between us and them, he was definitely on our side of it. 'When the Pythagoreans construct physical bodies out of number – things which have lightness and weight out of what has neither – they appear to be talking about a different universe and other bodies, not those which we perceive.' With Empedocles, 'one must get away from his primitive expression to the thought that lies behind it'. Similarly with Anaxagoras: 'If one were to follow him out by analysing what he had to say . . .'; 'he speaks neither rightly nor clearly, but what he means is something like what his successors say and corresponds more nearly to phenomena as we now see them.' These early thinkers were 'like untrained boxers, who may get in some shrewd blows, but there is no science behind them'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Met.* 1090a 32, 985a 4, 989b 4 and 19, 985a 13. He has been much blamed for remarks like this, on the assumption that under the pretence of discovering his predecessors' 'real meaning' he is in fact distorting what they said to fit it into his own philosophical framework. We cannot go into this here, but see my article 'A. as a Historian of Philosophy' in *JHS* 1957.

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Here at last was a Greek who reflected my own thoughts in plain and comprehensible terms, a mind that worked on the same lines and bridged the gap of millennia between us, though it might be truer to say that it is we who have learned to think in Aristotle's way. After all, he laid down the rules of logical thinking that guided European thought till the nineteenth century, and if professional logicians have in the last hundred years gone beyond him, the thinking of the ordinary man, whether he realizes it or not, is still conducted mainly within an Aristotelian framework. In any case the personal discovery of this affinity was a stimulating and enlightening experience. In spite of my admiration for Sir Karl Popper, I hope I shall succeed in proving him wrong when he accuses Aristotle of making Platonism dull, and acquiesces in Zeller's judgement that 'he cannot inspire us . . . at all in the same way as Plato does. His work is drier, more professional . . . than Plato's has been' (*O.S.* II, 271 note). Poor Aristotle – and with all his dialogues lost too!

The second aid towards my discovery of Aristotle was Werner Jaeger's epoch-making book, 'Aristotle: towards a History of his Development'.<sup>1</sup> The subtitle of the English editions, 'Fundamentals of the History of his Development', is a little misleading, suggesting as it does a kind of textbook exposition of the accepted groundwork of a subject ('Fundamentals of Physics' or whatever), whereas Jaeger's more modest aim was to lay foundations (as Case translated it in *Mind* 1925) on which others could build. The new title tends to obscure the most attractive features of the work: its freshness of approach and pioneer character,<sup>2</sup> and the tentativeness of its conclusions. If the

<sup>1</sup> *Aristoteles: Grundlegung einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung*, Berlin 1923; English trans. by R. Robinson, 2nd ed., Oxford 1948.

<sup>2</sup> If, as some scholars like to remind us (e.g. A. Mansion in *Rev. Néoscol. de Phil.* 1927, German trans. in *A. in der neu. Forsch.* 1968, where see p. 9 on Zeller), development-theory has its roots in the last century, its first flowering must be credited to Jaeger's *Aristoteles* and its predecessor of 1912, his *Entstehungsgesch. d. Metaph. des A.*, though patriotic Britons remember also the account of Thomas Case in the comparative obscurity of his article on Aristotle in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1910. (See Ross's much-reprinted lecture from *Proc. Brit. Ac.* 1957, 63f., and Case's own *apologia* in *Mind* 1925, 80–6.) Compare too Grant's *Ethics* I, 71 n. 35, on the chronological sequence of some of the extant writings, an order based on 'comparison of the thought in different books and the various degrees of maturity exhibited by the same conception occurring in different books', also pp. 272–7 of the same volume. E. Berti's *La filosofia del primo Aristotele* is a mine of information on the history of the development problem, both before and after Jaeger.

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following half-century has seen a steady stream of criticism as well as appreciation, in the course of which some of Jaeger's conclusions have been considerably modified, this is what he expected and intended to happen. His achievement was to infuse new life into Aristotelian studies and set them off on a new track. Whether in agreement with him or not, their dominant theme in the post-Jaeger period has been the extent to which his philosophy did or did not change and develop during his working life. Returning now to Jaeger after many years, having in the meantime read many of his critics, I feel no doubt that the *Grundlegung*, the foundations, remain.

(2) *The genetic approach*<sup>1</sup>

For all this reaction towards the standpoint of common sense and empirical fact, Aristotle could never cease to be a Platonist. His thought, no less than Plato's, is governed by the idea of aspiration, inherited by his master from Socrates – the idea that the true cause or explanation of things is to be sought, not in the beginning, but in the end.

F. M. Cornford

Now for a statement of policy. The details of development-theory are sometimes obscure, and some important, even fundamental points are still a matter of doubt and controversy. In view of this, and of the evidence that from the time when he abandoned belief in the transcendent Forms of Plato, Aristotle's philosophy underwent no revolutionary changes, it will not be advisable to allow arguments about development to predominate in a general survey like the present. Here and there, no doubt, they will throw light on a particular question, but to make the whole approach a genetic one might involve us in a welter of controversial detail and be the reverse of helpful towards an under-

<sup>1</sup> It seems superficial to play down the achievements of development theory on the *a priori* ground that they are simply a manifestation of the *Zeitgeist* of the 19th and early 20th centuries, influenced in particular by the evolutionary biology of men like Darwin and Wallace but traceable further back to Herder, Goethe and the Romantic movement. So Dirlmeier in *A. in der neu. Forsch.*, 144. Cf. rather Tarán on a book by Oehler (*Gnomon* 1974, 538): 'It is not clear, moreover, why O. connects Jaeger's work on Aristotle with all this, for though J. was undoubtedly influenced by such notions, current at the time, as the evolution of personality and thought, his interpretation is independent of them in as much as he attempts to support his views by an analysis of texts.'

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standing of the main lines of Aristotle's thought. Yet in another way the genetic outlook (that is, the awareness of Aristotle's philosophy not as something static, a single self-consistent system, but as a dynamic process of continual growth from its Platonic roots) cannot but permeate the work of any writer on Aristotle today. Whatever one may think of the correctness of its results, it has taught that there is a better way of looking at him than that hitherto traditional. It is better not only as representing a sounder method of scholarship but also because this method, by demanding a critical study of the historical background of the philosopher, his life (especially his long-standing membership of Plato's Academy), the idiosyncracies of his mind and personality<sup>1</sup> and the variety of his writings, has brought a new vigour and attractiveness into Aristotelian studies. As a German scholar wrote in the first flush of enthusiasm, less than a year after Jaeger's book was published, 'Jaeger resuscitated the living Aristotle in the flesh'.<sup>2</sup>

For these reasons I shall make some general remarks at the outset about development-theory, so that they may be in a reader's mind when we turn to a more systematic consideration of the various branches of Aristotelian philosophy. It rests on the belief that from the evidence at our disposal, both in the surviving works of Aristotle and elsewhere, we can trace a process of development in something deeper than the mere expression and formulation of his thought. This is an idea with which we are all familiar in the study of Plato. In fact most of us are now, especially since the achievements of stylometry, so used to regarding many of the most important dialogues in a certain order, corresponding to the development of the author's thought, that we are apt to forget how recent are the researches which allow us to place them so confidently. No one would deny that they have led to a better understanding of Plato, and it was natural that scholars should at least wonder whether a similar service might be rendered to our understanding of Aristotle. On the other hand he presented a very

<sup>1</sup> Dirlmeier's warning of the difficulties of reconstructing the personality of an ancient Greek (*A. in der neu. Forsch.*, 148f.) is perhaps salutary; but his argument that the attempt itself is anachronistic seems to rest on the curious fallacy that because the Greeks did not consciously possess and make use of the concept of personality, therefore they had no personalities, and to suggest that they had is to project a modern thought-category back into antiquity.

<sup>2</sup> E. Hoffmann in 1924, quoted by de Vogel, *Philos.* 1, 296.

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different problem, and any new theories were bound to be hampered by the clinging weight of the scholastic tradition already mentioned. Nor must one ignore the possibility that although it is psychologically unlikely that Aristotle's philosophy underwent no change or development from his teens to his sixties, yet so far as we can learn it from the surviving documents the traditional picture might be the true one – if, that is, they were all written after his mature system had taken shape. In fact it is for the seeker after development to think twice and produce good reasons before proceeding with his researches. If we wish to share the thoughts of a great philosopher, and his writings as they stand offer a coherent and intelligible account, there are more profitable ways of spending our lives than by picking them to pieces in a search for traces of change and development in his thought. The attempt at dissection may be positively harmful by casting unnecessary obscurity over what, if read in a straightforward and receptive way, is lucid, comprehensible and philosophically interesting. The genetic approach is only justified if there is a chance that its results may clear up some real and fundamental difficulty which other methods of study have so far failed to remove.

In Aristotle's case there is such a difficulty. To see what it is one need only make two simple statements which no one can deny, though some might think it superfluous to repeat once more what everybody knows. First, it is generally agreed that Platonism and Aristotelianism are not the same, that they stand for two different ways of looking at the world, that the Platonist is of a different intellectual character from the Aristotelian. Secondly, we have a well-attested historical fact, namely that Aristotle received his early philosophical training at Plato's feet, and remained for twenty years a member of the school of which Plato was founder and head. In this general form, the statement can incur no suspicion of unfairness or distortion by any remarks which we may make later on, of the nature of the Academy and Aristotle's attitude towards it during the period, so far as they can be recovered or at least conjectured with reasonable probability.

We set out, then, from the admission that there is a difficulty in reconciling the commonly received opinion about Aristotle's philosophy, stated in its most general terms, with a known fact about the

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foundations of his thought. This leaves a wide selection of more or less likely hypotheses from which to approach the evidence. First, there are the two extremes. I should not like to spend much time considering the possibility that Aristotle remained till his death devoted to the letter of Platonism. It would demand at least the sophistic agility of the author of *On Nature, or What is Not*. If on the other hand he was an active anti-Platonist from his earliest years, one's first reaction would be one of amazement that he was allowed, or indeed that he wished, to remain within the Academy. Here one must face the fact that perhaps the most distinguished of living Aristotelian scholars, Professor Ingemar Düring, insists emphatically and repeatedly that Aristotle took up a position opposed to Plato *from the beginning*.<sup>1</sup> It would be unrewarding to criticize Düring's view in detail. I shall simply make one comment now, and in the following pages treat the question when Aristotle diverged from Plato as still open to discussion.

The comment is this. Aristotle, son of a successful doctor in the far north of Greece, came to Athens for the first time at the age of seventeen to enrol as a pupil in Plato's Academy. I do not see how anyone can believe that this provincial boy *began* by setting up theories in opposition to the head of the school who was forty years his senior. Yet if one does not take 'from the beginning' in this impossibly literal way, the highly interesting question remains to be asked: *When* did he begin to diverge? Where in the surviving records does his independence of Plato begin to show, and to what period of life can it be assigned? It could be that there is not the evidence to decide, or that none of the writings known to us belongs to his Platonic period. That,

<sup>1</sup> 'Von Anfang an' and 'anfangs' are favourite expressions of Düring in this connexion. Both occur on p. 46 of his *Aristoteles*, and 'von Anfang an' again on pp. 64, 94, 202, 290, 457. Cf. also his *RE* article (*Suppl.* xi, col. 329): 'A. stellte sich anfangs stark in Gegensatz zu Platon.' As allies in refuting Jaeger, D. refers only to E. Frank ('The Fundamental Opposition of Plato and A.', *AJP* 1940) and Cherniss (*ACPA*, App. 2, 488-94). Both these scholars, however, deal only with the passages in the *Met.* quoted by Jaeger as supporting his case. Neither mentions the exoteric works at all. Moreover Frank's articles are sometimes obscure in expression and contain several misleading statements. (He speaks for instance of Plato's 'conception of God as the transcendent good'.) D.'s idea takes us back to Bernays in 1863. See his *Dialogue*, 23, 25, 26 (on the *Eudemos*).

Among many places where information about J.'s critics can be found one may mention (besides Berti, *Primo A.*), de Vogel, *Philos.* 1, 296-9 (a historical survey first published in 1965), Lesky, *HGL*, 575f. (Eng. tr. from 2nd ed. 1963) and Lynch, *A.'s School*, 77 n.14.

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however, must be settled by an examination of the evidence: it cannot be closed *ab initio* by any talk of ‘from the very beginning’.<sup>1</sup>

Between the extremes we have the choice of several more moderate opinions. We might admit that we know less of Plato’s thought in his latest years, agree that this was when Aristotle knew him best, and conclude that what he did was simply to draw out the implications of his master’s philosophy as it was developing just before his death – much as one might argue that Plato did with his own master Socrates. In modification of this we might maintain that Aristotle remained always devoted to Platonism, and without sticking to the letter of Plato’s writings, has preserved the real kernel of the system and dropped nothing but inessentials. There was in fact a powerful school of Neoplatonic interpreters who did their best to maintain that in all essentials the message of the two philosophers was the same, though its claims have found little response in more recent times. In this connexion we shall clearly have to decide more precisely what we are going to mean by the vague word ‘Platonism’. Perhaps, as E. Berti more than once suggests, scholars are mistaken in thinking of the abandonment of transcendent Forms as synonymous with the abandonment of Platonism. After a long review of scholarship Berti writes:

While appreciating the seriousness of all these analyses, one cannot but remark that they all stem from Jaeger’s assumption that Platonism is simply identical with the doctrine of Ideas, and their abandonment means turning one’s back on it.

Again:

After this elucidation there is no difficulty about admitting the Platonism of fr. 8 of *De philosophia*, provided only that by Platonism is not meant simply the antithesis of Aristotelianism and in particular adhesion to the doctrine of separate Ideas.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps, however, after starting as a good and loyal Platonist, he later, whether gradually or suddenly, turned round to criticize Plato’s

<sup>1</sup> Düring is not alone in his extreme view. Cf. Flashar (*Articles on A.2*, 12 n. 18): ‘There is no clear evidence that Aristotle at any time gave allegiance to the Platonic Ideas.’ I hope to produce some reasonably cogent evidence as we proceed, particularly with reference to the *Eudemus* and *Protrepticus*.

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 323 and 328 of Berti’s most useful book already mentioned, *La filosofia del primo A.* In the last volume I ventured to call A. a Platonist without the transcendent Forms (p. 414).



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philosophy at its most vital point, and set up a system in opposition to it. One more possibility. Knowing that Aristotle was of a very different mental disposition from Plato, have we the right to say that he never understood his master in essentials, and in the end was led to criticisms which, because based on misunderstandings, are simply irrelevant and do not affect Plato at all?

In this century most points of view have found supporters, especially in Germany, where the problem of the relations between the two philosophers aroused particular interest. In 1919 the great Wilamowitz delivered his opinion thus:

The way in which [Aristotle] transformed the doctrine of Ideas . . . robbed it of the value it still possessed for Plato, and in the pre-existence of the soul he lost one of the chief tenets of his creed. So there drew on with tragic inevitability an estrangement between the master and his great pupil.

The same writer dealt summarily with the possibility that Aristotle might have found himself more in sympathy with Plato in his old age, when he knew him so much better than we do: 'Then came Pythagorizing, playing with numbers, superstitious demonology . . . The Plato who wrote the *Republic* would have come to an understanding with the Aristotelian conception of form; the old man simply avoided the subject.' Others have thought differently. Julius Stenzel in 1924 declared his aim as being 'to show Aristotle as him who preserves the spiritual centre of Plato in a new form, a form not based on the combination of poet and thinker, in the last resort incomprehensible, which was realized in Plato for the first and last time.' Jaeger himself wrote:

After initial attempts at naive imitation and continuation of the Platonic system, there follows a period in which he has learned to distinguish between the lasting essence of the Platonic heritage and whatever in its formulation was either inimitable or out of date. The latter he now seeks to be rid of, while he is at pains to preserve the essentials intact.<sup>1</sup>

The charge of misunderstanding goes back to antiquity. The Platonist Atticus (2nd cent. A.D.) castigated Aristotle because he 'made himself the measure and judge of things which went over his head. He

<sup>1</sup> Wilamowitz, *Pl.* 1, 728; Stenzel, last words of *Zahl u. Gestalt*; Jaeger, *Aristoteles* 1923, 11 (trans. W.K.C.G.).

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rejected those peculiar existents which Plato had recognized and dared to describe the supreme realities as nonsensical, a meaningless jingle of words.' So in our own day Burnet: 'In the first place it is certain that he never understood the teaching of the head of the Academy.'

There was then (and many more examples could be quoted) plenty of room for differences of opinion up to the time when a more scientific criticism was brought to bear on the relations between the two philosophies. What perhaps needs explanation is how the traditional view of Aristotle managed to hold its ground for so long. It was not that Aristotle's early<sup>2</sup> attachment to Plato and the Academy was either unknown or deliberately ignored; but it was commonly considered that a sharp line could be drawn between that period and the years of the 'real' or philosophically mature Aristotle. Moreover the lecture-papers and notebooks which we possess, and which were considered the only basis on which his philosophy could be judged, belonged without exception to this later period, in fact to the days of the Lyceum, the last ten years of his life, when Plato had long been dead and Aristotle was the head of an independent school of his own foundation. His early writings were in the first place lost, but in the second place not greatly to be mourned, since they could only have shown us an Aristotle still fettered by a system which he was soon to cast aside like an empty pupa-case, setting free for coming flights the wings of a purely native genius.

The attempt, then, to look for traces of change in Aristotle's philosophy as he grew older, if it has any hopes of success, is justifiable, since it offers the prospect of a solution to one of the most interesting problems raised by his remains, the problem of his relation to Plato. It remains to mention the means available, and the methods employed, for the attainment of that end.

Modern development-theories base their hopes on two things:

(1) That from references and quotations in other authors, considerable information on the content of Aristotle's lost works can be recovered, significant for the development of his philosophy; (2) that

<sup>1</sup> Atticus *ap. Eus. Pr. Ev.* 15.4, text on p. 327 of *AABT*; Burnet, *Platonism*, 56. Aristotle did in fact call the Forms *τεπερισμματα* (*An. Post.* 83 a 33).

<sup>2</sup> Yet not so very early; it lasted at least until he was 37.