Aristotle: the desire to understand

This is a philosophical introduction to Aristotle, and Professor Lear starts where Aristotle himself starts. The first sentence of the *Metaphysics* states that all human beings by their nature desire to know. But what is it for us to be animated by this desire in this world? What is it for a creature to have a nature? What is our, human, nature? What must the world be like to be intelligible, and what must we be like to understand it systematically? Through a consideration of these questions Professor Lear introduces us to the essence of Aristotle's philosophy and guides us through the central Aristotelian texts – selected from the *Physics, Metaphysics, Ethics*, and *Politics* and from the biological and logical works.

The book is written in a direct, lucid style which engages the reader with the themes in an active, participatory manner. It will prove a stimulating introduction for all students of Greek philosophy and for a wide range of others interested in Aristotle as a giant figure in Western intellectual history.
Aristotle: the desire to understand

Jonathan Lear
Professor of Philosophy
Yale University
For Cynthia Farrar

tί σον κωλύει λέγειν ευδαίμονα τὸν κατ’ ἀρετήν
teleίαν ἐνεργοῦντα καὶ τοῖς ἑκτὸς ἄγαθοίς

ικανῶς κεχορηγημένον μή τὸν τυχόντα χρόνον

άλλα τέλειον βίον;
Contents

Preface

The desire to understand

1 Nature
  1 Nature as an inner principle of change
  2 Understanding and 'the why'
  3 Four fashions
  4 The hearts of animals

2 Change
  1 The Parmenidean challenge
  2 The analysis of change
  3 The media of change I: the infinite
  4 The media of change II: the infinity of time
  5 A paradox of change: Zeno’s arrow

3 Man’s nature
  1 Soul
  2 Perception
  3 Mind
  4 Active mind
  5 Mind in action

4 Ethics and the organization of desire
  1 The point of the Nicomachean Ethics
  2 Happiness and man’s nature
  3 Virtue
  4 Incontinence
  5 Freedom and virtue
  6 The master–slave dialectic
## Contents

6 Understanding the broad structure of reality 209
   1 Aristotle’s logic 209
   2 Aristotle’s philosophy of mathematics 231
   3 Metaphysics: the inquiry into being as being 247
   4 The most certain principle of being 249
   5 What is substance? 265
   6 A tourist’s guide to *Metaphysics* vii 273
   7 Mind’s place outside of nature 293
   8 Man’s place outside of nature 309

*Select bibliography* 321

*Index* 327
Preface

I wrote this book as a way of saying goodbye. I first went to Cambridge on a Mellon Fellowship when I graduated from Yale in 1970, and with occasional excursions back to the United States I ended up staying there for almost twelve of the next fifteen years. Cambridge is in many ways my intellectual and emotional home: I had never seen before such a warm, supportive, yet challenging intellectual environment. Perhaps that is why I stayed so long. When I decided to return to the U.S. in 1985, I wanted somehow to mark, intellectually if not emotionally, the time I had spent in Cambridge. Most of my research on Aristotle was done while I was first a student and later a Fellow at Clare College, so I decided to write an introduction to his philosophy. I liked the idea of an introduction, first, because I thought it would force me to work on a broad canvas: to elucidate the thoughts of years rather than detail a single argument. Second, I wanted to write a book that was accessible to my friends who are not Aristotelian scholars—friends who would ask me in countless casual conversations, ‘What do you think Aristotle would have thought about this?’ I am not going to mention my many Cambridge friends by name: if you are one of them and are reading this, suffice it to say that you are very much in my heart and mind. I would, however, like to mention those who helped me in my study of Aristotle. First, I would like to thank that part of my Cambridge life which accompanied me back to America: my wife, Cynthia Farrar. I won’t indulge in the usual cliché, ‘...without whose support...', in part because it is a cliché, in part because I am not sure it is true: even if Cynthia had not been supportive I think I still would have written this book. I mention her here solely because she helped me to understand what is involved in Aristotle’s claim that man is by nature a political animal. It was in attending her lectures on Thucydides in Cambridge and watching her live her life that I learned how theorizing about politics and actively living the life of a citizen in a polis might
Preface

form a coherent whole. Let me also thank the ancient philosophy
mania of which I was once part. It is from countless seminars,
classes, individual discussions with Myles Burnyeat, Geoffrey
Lloyd, M. M. Mackenzie, David Sedley, Malcolm Schofield and
(for two years) Gregory Vlastos, that I learned how to read ancient
philosophical texts. Indeed, virtually every week I spent in Cam-
bridge had a day in it which was spent with one or the other of
them translating and interpreting an Aristotelian text. Finally, I
would like to mention Timothy Smiley and Bernard Williams, two
friends from whom I have learned most about how to do philos-
ophy. However, I have no interest in bidding them a fond farewell.
In saying goodbye to a way of life, I do not intend to be saying
goodbye to the people who helped to constitute it.

There is one person I do want to say goodbye to, but I can’t.
Charles Parkin, the soul of Clare College, died suddenly of a heart
attack in the fall of 1986. He was one of those modest men who
knew everything and published nothing. He loved the people he
knew and remained a bachelor living in College rooms. The world
did not know him, and the students and Fellows of Clare loved
him. He was an historian of political thought, but his interests
spanned the world. When I first arrived in Cambridge, we would
spend evenings looking at bacteria under his microscope, photo-
grahping craters on the moon through his telescope, sitting quietly
and listening to recordings of trains pulling out of various Euro-
pean stations. And we would discuss Aristotle. Just after World
War II, Charles contracted tuberculosis and spent two years in a
sanatorium outside of Cambridge. It was in this period that he had
an epiphany in which he felt he really understood the identity of
subject and object. He once told me that he thought that the rest
of his life was an attempt to recapture that moment. I think he would
have liked this book.

I should like to thank: the National Endowment for the Hu-
manities (U.S.) for a Fellowship for Independent Research in which
some of the research and writing of this book were accomplished;
the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for administering the Fellow-
ship which first sent me to Cambridge; the Masters and Fellows of
Clare College, Cambridge, for providing the ideal atmosphere in
which to carry out my studies; the Whitney Humanities Center at
Yale for providing a second hide-away office in which I could
Preface

write this book undisturbed by the usual demands of the semester.

An earlier draft of this book was read by Alan Code, Geoffrey Lloyd, Jeremy Mynott, Malcolm Schofield, Timothy Smiley, Bernard Williams and Michael Woods. They all offered extensive and valuable comments. Although Code and I talked about Aristotle so often and so long on the transatlantic telephone that I suspect we supported the launching of a communications satellite, I would especially like to thank him for his suggestion of Kermit as a candidate for the non-human individual I needed to make the point I was trying to make about levels of potentiality and actuality. Christopher Dustin, who was a teaching assistant in a lecture course I gave at Yale, wrote copious comments on my lectures which greatly helped me to unify the material I have presented in this book.

Above all, I would like to thank the undergraduate students at Cambridge and Yale to whom I have lectured about Aristotle. They persuaded me that material at this level of difficulty is interesting to them and that a book of this sort would be a help to them.