

AN INTRODUCTION  
TO  
PHILOSOPHY

THE PERENNIAL PRINCIPLES  
OF THE CLASSICAL REALIST TRADITION

*By*

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Rockford, Illinois 61105

## CONCLUSION

Plato, by way of Socrates, has brought us back to the old dilemma of Heraclitus and Parmenides. We still have the problem of reconciling permanence and change. Plato says that through our senses we are exposed to the world of bodies, the world of change or becoming. There is just enough reflection of stability and reality in this world to turn our minds to another realm, the realm of unchanging, immaterial being. This doesn't really solve the problem, however, for the separation between the two realms is still there, a chasm Plato never succeeded in bridging.

Plato has made, nevertheless, enormous contributions to the advance of knowledge. In raising the question, Why do we give the same name to different things, he has brought up the question of meaning: What do we mean by meaning? To answer this question, we must find out what we mean by thinking, and what a thought or an idea is. And these problems in turn are related to the problems of what man is and what kind of a world it is in which he lives.

Plato and Socrates, therefore, have not only raised some of the questions that are most important for philosophy but they also have taken us a long way down the road to answering them.

*Dear to me is Plato, but dearer still the truth.*  
ARISTOTLE.

## CHAPTER 7

## ARISTOTLE

## LIFE AND WORKS

ARISTOTLE (384 B.C.—322 B.C.), the son of a renowned physician from Thrace, became a pupil at Plato's Academy at the age of seventeen, and remained there until Plato's death some twenty years later. In the year 343 B.C., Aristotle was called to the court of Philip of Macedon, where he was appointed tutor to Philip's son, the future Alexander the Great. During the reign of Alexander, Aristotle established a school in Athens called the Lyceum,<sup>1</sup> where he taught for the next twelve years. The name Peripatetic, "Walker," which is sometimes given to the philosophy or to the followers of Aristotle, came from Aristotle's habit of walking up and down while lecturing.

After the death of Alexander, Aristotle was forced by his political enemies to flee to Chalcis, in northern Greece. Referring to the death of Socrates, he refused, he said, to give Athens the chance to sin a second time against philosophy. In less than a year his exile ended with his death.

Many of the philosophical writings of Aristotle have been lost. Like Plato, he wrote his philosophy in the form of dialogues which were meant for reading by the general public. These are known as the exoteric, or popular, works. All except a few fragments have been lost.

The prose treatises that have survived are known as esoteric works, written, that is, for initiates. Their understanding presup-

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's school was set up next to a temple dedicated to Apollo, one of whose names was Lycaeus.

poses a thorough philosophical preparation, and they are apparently the notes based on Aristotle's lectures within the Lyceum. They have come down to us in somewhat mutilated form, and the wonder is that they survived at all, because for a century and a half the only complete edition lay buried and lost in a well where it had been hidden to avoid seizure during a time of war.

We probably possess most of the important prose works of Aristotle. These include a series of treatises on logic known collectively as the *Organon* — the tool or instrument of knowledge; treatises on the natural sciences, such as the *Meteorology* and the *History of Animals*, along with the *Physics*, a study of the philosophy of nature; the *Metaphysics*, or *First Philosophy*; and the ethical treatises including the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, to which can be added the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*.<sup>2</sup>

#### ARISTOTLE'S RELATION TO PLATO

Aristotle was a devoted pupil of Plato and assuredly his most brilliant. Probably no one has ever known better the philosophy of Plato. Aristotle did not philosophize in opposition to his master, as is sometimes said, but rather brought the already rich and profound philosophy of his teacher to its magnificent fulfillment. On the key issue of the universals, Aristotle accepted the discoveries of Plato. Nevertheless, on one of the most fundamental points of his philosophy, the doctrine of the two worlds, the disciple parted company with the master: for Aristotle there is only one world, the world made apparent to us through our senses.

Aristotle agreed with Plato that there is only one Whiteness, one Treeness, one Triangularity, one Justice. They are not, however, in a world by themselves. Whiteness is in all white things, Treeness in all trees, Justice in all just actions. Instead of calling them Ideas Aristotle gave them the name Forms.

<sup>2</sup> References to Aristotle's works are based on the pages, numbers, and lines of the standard Greek text of Bekker, 5 vols., Berlin, 1831-1870. Nearly all modern editions repeat these numbers. The pages are divided into two columns, a and b. Thus the reference *Meta.*, 965 a 15 (often referred to as "the Berlin number") means that the reference is to the *Metaphysics*, p. 965 of the Berlin edition, column 1, line 15.

#### THE DOCTRINE OF FORM AND MATTER

All the things in the world around us, he said, are made up of two principles. First, there is the *form* — that which makes them what they are, gives them their basic way of being: Manness, Treeness, and so on. Manness does not exist by itself, however; only individual men — Socrates, Plato, John, James, Peter — exist. Treeness does not exist by itself but only individual trees: this maple tree, that oak tree, and so on. Form alone, then, is not enough to explain the actually existing individual men, trees, and so on. There must be something else in things, something which limits them, which ties them down to this particular way of being, and not any other, to this particular time and place, to this quantity. There must, in short, be a second basic principle in things, a principle of limitation, a principle which limits *form*, restricts it, so to speak, which makes it individual, quantified, existing in a definite time and place. To this principle Aristotle gave the name *matter*.<sup>3</sup>

With this doctrine of the two basic principles at the heart of things, Aristotle is able to go a long way toward the reconciliation of some of the paradoxes of reality which perplexed earlier philosophers. He is able to account, for example, for the stability and permanence of things through the principle of form. Once given what a triangle is, you have something that holds good forever, and the intellect is able to know triangularity as separated from the conditions of change and imperfection — in other words, as something eternal, perfect, unchanging. Outside the intellect, however, forms exist only partially, imperfectly realized, coming to a relative completion only, through the successions of change, for form is never found separated from a second principle, the principle of matter. This second principle, which like form is never found existing by itself, is the principle which accounts for change, individuality, imperfection.

<sup>3</sup> It is important not to confuse Aristotle's matter with our modern notion of "stuff." The notion of matter is one which is arrived at as the result of a rational analysis; it is something we are led to as the result of an act of reasoning, and which cannot in any way be grasped by the senses. Similarly, the philosophic term "form" is not equivalent to the word form as it is used in everyday speech. The notion of form is also an intelligible principle, not reducible to anything that can be seen, touched, or imagined.

## ACT AND POTENCY

Aristotle extended the notions by which he explained the composition of bodies to cover the whole range of reality — incorporeal as well as corporeal. In this wider usage he divided being into “the potential and the completely real.”<sup>4</sup> Complete reality refers to the fullness of being, the actual existence of a thing as against its merely possible existence. “Actuality,” Aristotle says, “means the existence of the thing not in the way which we express by potentially”; and he goes on to illustrate: “We say that potentially, for instance, a statue of Hermes is in the block of wood and the half-line is in the whole, because it might be separated out, and we call even the man who is not studying a man of science, if he is capable of actually studying a particular problem.”<sup>5</sup>

The act of a being, then, is what is absolutely primary to it — the basic way of being itself. Aristotle calls this the “first act” of a thing; its operations beyond the bare fact of existence are called “second act.” When referred to bodies, “first act” can also be called “form.”<sup>6</sup>

The ways of being that are possible to a thing beyond what it is being at a given moment are its potentialities — or “matter,” as referred to bodies.

The full reality of any being is what it actually is plus its potential ways of being. This is the truth which Parmenides missed, and the reason why he had to argue away the fact of change. For granted that a thing such as a possible statue is not *being* in the sense that an actual statue is *being*, nevertheless we cannot say that it is nothing. It is part of the reality of a block of stone that it can be carved into a statue; even though a builder is not building, he is capable of it, and that makes him something more than the man

<sup>4</sup> *Metaphysics*, XI, 9; 1065 b 16. (All quotations from the *Metaphysics* are taken from the translation of W. D. Ross [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1928].)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, 6; 1048 a 30.

<sup>6</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas would later on distinguish between “form” and “act,” pointing out that the form itself is in potency to existence, “the supreme act of all that is.” Cf. E. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949), Chap. V.

who is not able to build; even if I close my eyes, I am still capable of seeing, and that makes me different from the man who is blind.

If we are going to use the term *being* to stand for whatever is not nothing, then it will cover potentialities as well as actualities, and therefore we can say that all being is divided into act and potency. If a being has no possibilities in its make-up, then we say it is pure act; that is, it exhausts the full actuality of being. If it is not pure act, then it is composed of act and potency. Pure potency does not exist except as an abstraction, for a real possibility is always a possibility of something — has meaning, in other words, only in relation to some act.

## THE EXPLANATION OF CHANGE

Aristotle’s profound insight that the whole of reality included possible ways of being as well as actual beings came to him as the result of his effort to explain the mystery of change. Any existing thing is already all that it can be. (If it could be more, there is no reason why it should not be.) Therefore the explanation of change will not be found in what the thing actually is. Neither will the explanation be found in terms of what the thing will change into, for the goal of change does not yet exist, and what does not exist cannot be a positive factor in the explanation of anything. The explanation must be found then in the line of potency, in terms of what the thing is able to be under the influence of the appropriate external causes. Aristotle defines change, therefore, as “the actuality [or actualization] of the potential as such.”<sup>7</sup>

Change is neither the potency of things nor their act, but something in between — an incomplete act, Aristotle says. It is incomplete because the reality toward which the change is moving is not yet fully realized, and the being undergoing change cannot be said to be changed until that new way of being is achieved. The intermediate stage between the starting point and the goal of change is, then, “actuality and not actuality”<sup>8</sup> — actuality in so far as it is on its way to realizing the new perfection, not actuality to

<sup>7</sup> *Metaphysics*, XI, 9; 1065 b 17. For a further discussion of this definition, and of change in general, see below, Chap. 27. <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1066 a 26.

the extent that it is short of the goal; "which is hard to detect," Aristotle says, "but capable of existing."<sup>9</sup>

#### THE EXPLANATION OF KNOWING

Not only do the concepts of matter and form enable Aristotle to explain the constitution of bodies and their changes without explaining away the world in which we find ourselves, but they also give him the key to the explanation of knowing. Although the things around us are constantly changing, nevertheless a true knowledge of the world of bodies is possible because the nature of things and the laws of change itself are unchanging. Man has two ways of knowing — through his senses and through his intellect, and their co-working is needed for complete knowledge of the world. Our senses carry to us the changing aspects of things, while the power of reason is required to put us in touch with their stable, unchanging elements.

Although whiteness, sweetness, triangularity, circularity, oneness, threeness, and all other ideas exist as universals only in the intellect (where they are known as eternally immutable and one) they nevertheless are drawn out of material things, where they exist as the formal element. Even though our world is a limited and changing one, therefore, it is real and knowable, not the insubstantial shadow world of Plato.

#### THE LEVELS OF KNOWING

Aristotle goes on to explain how the light of the intellect is able to penetrate behind the panorama of change to deeper and deeper layers of reality, starting with the superficial aspects of things, their "surface" qualities, such as whiteness, sweetness, hardness, and so on, and penetrating to the deeper aspects of quantity, whereby we know things as having figure and able to be numbered.

The deepest thrust of all of which our intellect is capable is to the very heart of things — their being itself. Before a thing can be anything else it has simply to be, and this awareness of being, the awareness of what it means to exist, which the least of things can give to us, is the deepest knowledge of which the intellect is capable.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1066 a 27.

This deepest and most universal of all the things that can be known is the most basic study for the philosopher — a study which leads the intellect all the way from the contemplation of the unchanging aspects of changing bodies to their ultimate explanation in the Unchanging Being Itself. Aristotle gave the name First Philosophy, or Theology, to this branch of knowledge.

#### ARISTOTLE'S DOCTRINE OF MAN

Explaining knowledge as he did, Aristotle had to give a picture of man different from that of Plato. For Plato, the real man is the soul, and the body is a prison house which darkens and deadens the soul. But Aristotle, holding that all knowledge has its origin in the senses, had to hold that the body was just as much a part of man as the soul. Just as in all other bodies, there is in man a union of two principles, of form and matter. The soul of man is his form and that form exists limited, individuated. The mark or manifestation of that limitation is the body of man, and man would not be man if he did not exist as circumscribed, so to speak, as having this body and existing in this time and this place.

Plato held the doctrine of the pre-existence of souls and held, therefore, for the soul's immortality. Aristotle rejected the doctrine of the pre-existence of souls and, wary perhaps of the Platonic tendency to reject the world of bodies for some other world, practically ignored the problem of the soul's immortality. The few passages in his works which deal with this problem are ambiguous and inconclusive.

#### ARISTOTLE'S COMPLETION OF SOCRATES AND PLATO

Probably the most important single advance of Aristotle over Plato was his restoration of reality to the world we live in. Plato had held that the shadowy, changing world given to us by our senses could never be an object of real knowledge because it was always becoming something else even as we were in the act of being aware of it. By recognizing beneath the flux of sensation the unchangeable, enduring character of the forms of bodily things, Aristotle saw that real knowledge of bodies was possible and laid the foundation of the sciences of the external world.

In the fields of ethics and politics we find, again, that Aristotle brought to substantial completion the work so well started by Socrates and Plato. The most important contribution of Aristotle here is his distinction between the theoretical or speculative order and the practical order, the order of contemplation as against the order of action. Socrates had made knowledge the equivalent of virtue. Aristotle, however, emphasizes the fact that to know is not the same as to do. In the realm of acting the fact of free will makes it possible for us to choose in contradiction to what we know is right. He stressed, therefore, the importance of developing the virtues in man for the strengthening of the will and for the control of the animal appetites.

Along with some of the physical sciences, such as zoology, the science of logic received much of its content and its first formulation from the hands of Aristotle. Aesthetics, too, as a branch of philosophy, received its first systematic treatment from Aristotle.

The philosophy of Aristotle, in short, represents the glorious fruition of the work started by Socrates and carried on by Plato. In the words of Stace, the eminent historian of Greek philosophy, "It is the highest point reached in the philosophy of Greece. The flower of all previous thought, the essence and pure distillation of the Greek philosophic spirit, the gathering up of all that is good in his predecessors and the rejection of all that is faulty and worthless — such is the philosophy of Aristotle."<sup>10</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The great significance of Aristotle for philosophy is that he brought it to completion; not in the sense that he finished it, but in the sense that he formulated it in its broad outlines, laying the secure foundation on which many future generations of philosophers could build. The philosophy of Plato incorporated the deeply profound and penetrating insights of a great philosophic genius, but his work is nevertheless incomplete. Where Plato threw intermittent flashes of light into the darkness of the unknown, Aristotle dissipated the darkness itself with a clear and enduring light whose rays stretched to the very horizons of man's ken. While the soaring

<sup>10</sup> W. T. Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1920), p. 332. (Reprinted with permission of The Macmillan Company.)

genius of Plato raised philosophy to unequalled heights, winning priceless treasures of truth, Aristotle anchored philosophy to reality itself, insuring for it the stability, universality, and inexhaustibility which makes it the truly "perennial" philosophy.

"Plato's relation to the world," says Goethe<sup>11</sup> "is that of a superior spirit, whose good pleasure it is to dwell in it for a time. It is not so much his concern to become acquainted with it — for the world and its nature are things which he presupposes — as kindly to communicate to it that which he brings with him, and of which it stands in so great need. He penetrates into its depths, more that he may replenish them from the fullness of his own nature, than that he may fathom their mysteries. He scales its heights as one yearning after renewed participation in the source of his being. All that he utters has reference to something eternally complete, good, true, beautiful, whose furtherance he strives to promote in every bosom. Whatever of earthly knowledge he appropriates here and there, evaporates in his method and in his discourse. . . ."

"Aristotle stands to the world in the relation preeminently of a great architect. Here he is and here he must work and create. He informs himself about the surface of the earth, but only so far as is necessary to find a foundation for his structure, and from the surface to the centre all besides is to him indifferent. He draws an immense circle from the base of his building, collect materials from all sides, arranges them, piles them up in layers, and so rises in regular form, like a pyramid, toward the sky, while Plato seeks the heavens like an obelisk, or better, like a pointed flame."

#### CONCLUSION TO PART I

With the full flowering of Greek philosophy in the work of Aristotle we bring our historical study to a close. The principles elaborated, refined, and organized by Aristotle were destined to become the foundations of what is called the perennial philosophy, the enduring philosophy, the one philosophy which, renewing itself over and over again through all the vicissitudes of time and history, offers to each new generation the unchanging key to the mysteries of reality. Our historical survey makes no pretense to completeness. Its purpose has been twofold: to introduce the reader to the problems of philosophy in what seems to us the easiest and

<sup>11</sup> He is commenting on the famous painting of Raphael called "The School of Athens," where Plato is portrayed as pointing upward, whereas Aristotle is gazing earthward. This passage and the following paragraph are quoted by Ueberweg, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Scribner's, 1872), pp. 103 and 139.

most interesting way, and to elaborate certain basic concepts which we can now use as tools or instruments in a more direct probing of the mysteries of reality. In the chapters which follow we shall endeavor to expose in broad perspective the truths about man and the universe in which he finds himself, as they have been elaborated by the co-operative efforts of countless thinkers following down through the centuries in the footsteps and in the spirit of Aristotle.

## PART II *The Meaning of Man*