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ARISTOTLE AND THE POSTMODERN WORLD

Since the eighties Aristotle's biological works have been the focus of intense intellectual activity. New editions and translations as well as detailed and creative studies have been published in English and several other languages. A major and extensive part of Aristotle's Works is becoming available, perhaps for the first time since they were written, to a large number of scholars, not only to specialists in the subject, and they are arousing great intellectual curiosity.

This interest in the biological works has affected our interpretation of the rest of the Aristotelian Corpus and has paved the way to a new understanding of Aristotelian thought as a whole. Paradoxical though it may seem, today, twenty-three centuries on, we may now be in the most advantageous position for understanding the Stagirite's philosophy and applying it to contemporary philosophical problems.

This is the task I have undertaken. I propose an understanding of the Aristotelian Corpus inspired by the biological works, and with the support of recent scholarship. This understanding is bound up with other current philosophical discussions.

Indeed, the modern world was in part born as a reaction against Aristotelianism. We are now in a position to say that the image of Aris-

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totle's thought to which modern philosophers and scientists reacted was partial, to say the least. Many contemporary neo-Aristotelian philosophers are of the opinion that the new perspective offered by the recuperation of his biological works reinstates his thought for post-modern philosophy.¹ Aristotle's work is also being recuperated in the field of science, and by way of example, I would mention two especially important cases, taken from widely differing sciences. In biology, Conrad H. Waddington has recovered the Aristotelian idea of *epigenesis*, which is guiding a new and flourishing line of biological research under the Evo-Devo label.² And in economics, the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen recognises his inspiration from Aristotle to develop his capabilities approach and the Human Development Index.³

If in such diverse fields as biology and economics, Aristotle's work has once more found its capacity to inspire, then much more rightly will it prove again useful in the post-modern philosophical debate. My intention is to contribute to the forming of an idea of post-modern reason inspired by a constellation of Aristotelian concepts, such as prudence (*phronesis*), practical truth (*aletheia praktie*), science in act (*episteme en energeiai*), metaphor (*metaphora*) and the imitation-creation pair (*mimesis-poiesis*). They all form an interconnected network, and together they make up an idea of reason that may prove suitable for the present.

Some of my interpretations will very probably go beyond Aristotle's original intention. Nonetheless, my goal is not to revive the original meaning—whatever that may be—but to extract from his

¹ I reserve the term 'post-modern' and derivatives, hyphenated, simply to refer to the time coming after the modern period. I shall use the term 'postmodern' in reference to a given style of philosophy with a tendency to so-called weak thought and relativism. This type of thought is *post-modern* chronologically, but typically modern in content, for it is a reaction like so many others that have been a counterpoint to the progress of the Enlightenment rationalist project (nominalist, relativist and romantic, nihilist, existentialist, vitalist and irrationalist currents, etc.).

² Conrad H. Waddington, *Toward a Theoretical Biology* (4 vols., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968-72).

³ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

work, always alive and so prolific, any insight relevant to contemporary philosophy. In this regard, I propose to deal with the Aristotelian Corpus as if it were a living being and, instead of focusing on linguistic and historical analysis, I have gone one step further to apply the Aristotelian scholarship available to us to the philosophical thought of today.

In short, I have found that Aristotle's works may again be a source of inspiration for dealing with strictly contemporary problems as long as we take the *Poetics*, the *Rhetoric* and the ethical writings as a theory of knowledge, a theory of rationality and as a methodology of science; providing we interpret the texts of the *Organon* as a rhetoric and axiology of science, and carry out a metaphysical reading of his biology and a biological reading of his metaphysics.

Let me briefly sketch six points⁴ where we could probably find inspirations for today's philosophical problems: biology, rationality, realism, the knowledge of an individual, metaphor, and poetics.

Biology

I believe that we should begin by an invitation to a philosophical reading of Aristotle's biological works. In this way we will be in a position to catch the possible implications of the biological works for the Aristotelian Corpus as a whole. Why should we start off with an invitation, instead of a neutral introduction to Aristotelian biology? The reason is this: the Aristotelian biological works are not too often read, so it would seem advisable to persuade others of their great importance. It is crucial to consider the enormous weight that biology carries in Aristotle's thought as a whole. To begin with, there are more texts on biological issues than on any other topic. Moreover, biological study was a frequent practice and a driving force throughout Aristotle's life. Our understanding of his metaphysics or ethics would be poor without an accompanying reading of his biology. We must not forget that for Aristotle, beings *par excellence* were indeed living beings.

⁴ Alfredo Marcos, *Postmodern Aristotle* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

Let me then briefly recall two pioneering studies of Aristotle's biology. Pierre Pellegrin looked on Aristotelian biology as primarily concerned with a better understanding of animal life, rather than with a mere classification of animals. After Pellegrin's valuable contribution, it is hard to go on seeing Aristotle as a thinker obsessed by taxonomies. What is even more important is that Pellegrin's proposal, in demoting Aristotle's taxonomic intentions, makes it possible to bridge the gap between metaphysics and biology through the key notions of form (*eidōs*) and kind (*genos*) once they are stripped of their supposedly classificatory function. On the basis of Pellegrin's work, we may consider the meaning of these two terms to be the same, in both the biological works and in the rest of the Corpus.⁵

A second step along this path of interpretation is that taken by David Balme, another pioneer of Aristotelian biology. Just as Pellegrin argued against the taxonomic ideal, Balme also rejects the idea that definitional purposes are the main goal of Aristotle's biological studies, arguing for an interpretation of form (*eidōs*) as an individuating principle, and of kind (*genos*) as matter. Naturally, this inversion of the most traditional interpretation of Aristotle has been fraught with controversy. My aim here, however, rather than question his correct exegesis, is to find something in Balme's interpretation for the philosophy of today. And in this regard, as we shall see, it must be recognised as being extremely fruitful.⁶

For all these reasons, my personal approach to the Aristotelian Corpus begins with the biological works. From that starting point, I address the rest of his works. Aristotle very probably looked on himself as a passionate advocate of living beings, something which we should always bear in mind in our understanding of his works.

⁵ Pierre Pellegrin, *La classification des animaux chez Aristote* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1982).

⁶ David Balme, "Aristotle's Biology was not essentialist," in A. Gotthelf and J. Lennox (eds.), *Philosophical Issues in Aristotle's Biology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 291-312.

Rationality

From this departing point, we can now address the search for an updated model of rationality. Apparently, Aristotle was not looking for classification or definition as direct aims of his biological works. He did not study nature principally from the point of view of logos (*logikos*), and his caricature as Nature's Secretary is quite definitely ill-founded, or at least partial. This being the case, in Aristotle's works themselves we may find some guidelines for forming another, more flexible and less logicist vision of rationality. So let me make the following claim: far from the ideal of rigid scientific rationality sought by Modernity and from the irrationality proposed by Postmodernity, we may find a more moderate halfway point for reason: a prudential rationality. Both scientism and irrationalism have become widely developed and established. Prudential rationality is still work in progress.

Certainly, the notion of a prudential rationality is rooted in the Aristotelian idea of *phronesis*. It could even be said that two ideas of rationality coexist in Aristotle, one more logicist, and one more prudential and flexible. As in all great thinkers, in the Stagirite we find mutually opposing tendencies, but what is important for my argument is that one of those lines, the one pointing to prudential rationality, is of great interest for the ongoing debate on rationality. In my opinion, such a concept has interesting affinities with the fallibilism proposed by such contemporary thinkers as Charles S. Peirce, Karl Popper, Hans Jonas and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Exploring and presenting these similarities reveals the relevance of the Aristotelian view of *phronesis* to present discussions.

Realism

Prudential action seeks, according to Aristotle, the truth of practical reason. In consequence, we should also explore the Aristotelian concept of practical truth, as a middle path between naïve objectivism and radical subjectivism. Kant's legacy tells us that our knowledge is not a passive representation of objects or an arbitrary construction on the part of the subject of knowledge. Our contemporary epistemology

needs the reconciliation of the subject's underpinnings with the objective constraints. Obviously, this is not a simple task, and numerous studies in contemporary epistemology are working on its elucidation. The Aristotelian notion of practical truth as construed as creative discovery, could be, I believe, the most promising bet for this end.

The Knowledge of an individual

Could we use a realist approach to the problem of universals, while simultaneously examining the possibility of a scientific knowledge of the individual and the particular? I think this would be possible by taking the Aristotelian distinction between science in potency and science in act. A common contemporary complaint against science is that it disregards concrete individual substances to focus on theoretical abstractions that tell us little or nothing about the world around us of singular beings and events. In Aristotle we find indicators of the possibility of a science of the individual and, consequently, a science relevant and reverent to the concreteness of reality. Such a science of the individual, we believe, is also subjected to truth, but to practical truth.

Metaphor

As I have suggested, the concept of prudence (*phronesis*) leads us to that of practical truth, which in turn takes us on to that of science in act, or science of the individual. But a science of the individual surely needs creative and linguistic resources capable of bringing us closer to the individual, different from those of mere conceptual language, supposedly literal and univocal. Aristotle suggests that it is metaphor that possesses these creative and expressive capacities. The cognitive value of metaphor is also a recurrent topic in current debates. In recent years, we have become aware of a previously overlooked fact: there is an all-pervasive presence of metaphors in scientific language. They cannot be replaced by a so-called "literal language," and are not mere aesthetic, didactic or heuristic devices. Their epistemic role is irreplaceable. This fact compels us to reconsider scientific language in relation to ordinary language, in its historical dimension and within the very status of sci-

entific realism. If we accept that scientific language is largely metaphorical, can we still take a realistic approach to science? Aristotle presents these questions as well as some valuable answers. According to Aristotle, metaphor is not just an ornament for language but a way of looking into the individual concreteness of reality and a useful way of expressing it. A good metaphor, according to what Aristotle suggests, is a genuine creative discovery of similarity that takes us back to the former notion of practical truth.

Poetics

Finally I will propose an epistemic reading of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Our construction of the concepts of metaphor and practical truth allow us to interpret the *Poetics* as a theory of knowledge. We find a tension between the notions of *mimesis* and *poiesis*, for the former concerns the representation of reality by means of imitation, while the correspondence between that imitation and what is imitated takes priority in the *mimesis*. The truth of the imitation consists in its likeness to the original. On the other hand, the concept of *poiesis* is a sign of creativity, of presenting before our eyes a reality constructed by art. Its value rests more on its originality and vividness than on any correspondence with the original model. The tension in question is resolved through the concept of practical truth or creative discovery, which helps us to integrate at once the mimetic and poetic features present in both art and science.

Conclusion

To sum up, the journey through these six points begins with biology, goes on via ethics and metaphysics to finish with rhetoric and poetics. The message we get is that Aristotle's works could be actively used across post-modern debates: in short, they tell us that there is a third way, a better middle path for many of the dilemmas that threaten our philosophical discussions. For example, between identity and difference, the Aristotelian texts propose a midpoint for understanding reality: similarity. In the midst of the dilemma between ab-

stract universals and concrete individuals, between science and life, Aristotle presents us with the possibility of scientific knowledge of individuality, while simultaneously accepting a real foundation for universals. Halfway between a sentimental anthropology of romantic tailoring and a rational anthropology, according to the philosophy of the Enlightenment, Aristotle presents an integrated anthropology. On methodological issues, between the algorithm and anarchism, prudence flourishes.

Bridging the gap between realists and non-realists, Aristotle proposes an open view of reality that contemplates as real not only what is actual but also what is possible. Between knowledge understood as a mere subjective construction and knowledge as representation, as the mirror of nature, we can borrow from Aristotle the notion of practical truth, that is, an understanding of knowledge as a creative discovery, a notion in which the activity of the subject and the reality of the object meet.

Aristotle provides a dynamic, analogical view of language with his theory of metaphor; a view that avoids both the equivocity of linguistic relativism and the semantic rigidity and alleged univocity of a so-called ideal language. From a cultural point of view, the Aristotelian proposal is halfway between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, between extreme optimism and pessimism, far from drama and supported by common sense and by a sound, balanced attitude.

On the way, this shift facilitates the relationship among science, arts and ethics, the three parts of the sphere of culture that Modernity had separated. It also facilitates the integration of the sphere of culture itself with the world of life (*lebenswelt*). Aristotle offers the most promising ontological, epistemological and anthropological basis for undertaking a series of urgent reconciliations: of facts and values, of theoretical and practical reason, of understanding and sensation, and of intelligence and emotion. Aristotle's notions could help solve many dualisms of modern times, in their Platonic or materialist varieties.

I do not, however, wish to present the Aristotelian texts as containing all the answers to contemporary debates. From Aristotle's texts we

learn an intellectual modesty that is incompatible with such pretensions. Yet, at the same time, my considered opinion is that to ignore Aristotle's work would amount to mindlessly wasting a source of wisdom of great value for us today.

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SUMMARY

With the support of recent scholarship the author proposes an understanding of the Aristotelian Corpus inspired by the biological works. He points out that this understanding is bound up with other current philosophical discussions, especially on biology, rationality, realism, the knowledge of an individual, metaphor, and poetics. The author concludes that Aristotle offers the most promising ontological, epistemological and anthropological basis not only for undertaking a series of urgent reconciliations (of facts and values, of theoretical and practical reason, of understanding and sensation, and of intelligence and emotion), but also for solving many dualisms of modern times, in their Platonic or materialist varieties.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle, postmodernism.