

## Aristotelianism

The philosophical system developed by Aristotle (Stagire 384/383 B.C. – Chalcis 322B.C.) and the tradition that comes out of it, via disciples and commentators who received and elaborated the ideas, is one of the foundations of Western philosophy as a whole, and it remains alive and a major source of stimulus up to our own times. Nor should one omit to mention the role of Aristotelianism within the Islamic intellectual tradition, through medieval translators and commentators like Avicenna and Averroes, and in the Jews tradition through Moses Maimonides. Formed intellectually within the Academy of Plato (367-347 B.C.) up until the death of the Master (347 B.C.), Aristotle came to make a formal break with Platonism, and, with other dissident disciples, he established with Theophrastos, one of his most important disciples (344-343 B.C.) his first school at Assos (347-345 B.C.); this was soon moved to Mytilene, on the island of Lesbos. In 343/342 he became the tutor of Alexander the Great of Macedon, and in 334 he returned to Athens where he founded a school, the Lyceum (Peripatetic school). On the death of Alexander strong currents of hostility towards him came into the open, such as to induce him to hand over the direction of the school to Theophrastus and to move to Chalcis in Euboea, where he died in 322 B.C. A fundamental aspect of Aristotle's approach, which distinguishes it from that of Plato, so that they are in some ways even in opposition to each other, lies in his interest in the natural sciences, which is of a piece with the specifically speculative dimension of his thought: both are in tune with the central assumption of the Aristotelian system, namely the immanence of universals through the inseparable *synolon*, (a concept typical of Aristotle's discourse) binding matter and form together; this is what real being consists in, according to the principle of *entelechy*, the logic which is intrinsic to every being and which determines the transition from potential to actualisation. The key task of science is to investigate the 'causes' of this process, these being the formal cause [similar to 'structure'] the material cause, the efficient cause [close to 'cause' in everyday English] and the final cause [similar to 'function']. The last of these is the crucial one, in that it reveals ends or intentionality of nature and takes us to the underlying reality of being. Aristotle in fact defines the notion of 'substance' as 'that which is in itself and through itself', beyond accidental attributes. Knowledge - possible through the correspondence between the intellect and reality, which is grasped through the senses, and through the human mind's intrinsic capacity to reach truth ("Men are sufficiently endowed for truth and mostly attain to truth": Rhetoric, I, 1. 1355 a) - comes about through a dialectical movement governed by logic which, based on the principle of identity and non-contradiction, formalised in terms of syllogistic logic, enables one to classify natural reality according to groups and categories. The philosopher overcame moreover the problem of the individuality of being by formulating the principle of the 'knowledge of causes' which go beyond nature, and which are therefore *metà physin*, that is to say 'after' and 'above' nature. It is from this that the notion of 'Metaphysics' derives, hence the title – given to it incidentally by a disciple (Eudemos of Rhodes? Andronicus?) – of one of the Master's most important and famous works. The intellectual faculty which makes it possible to attain to this 'knowledge of causes' is the deduction of the universal from the particular and 'intuition', through which one is led up to an 'uncaused cause, namely one which has in itself the reason for its own substance. This Aristotle calls

the ‘unmoved mover’, identifies with God and which he implies is the object of ‘love’ (*eros*) on the part of all beings. A page of the *Metaphysics* (XII b 1-30) can give the measure of this Aristotelian notion: to illustrate it, Aristotle proposes a comparison with human intelligence. ‘Thus it [the first mover] produces motion by being loved, and it moves the other moving things.... The first mover, then, of necessity exists, and insofar as it is necessary, it is good, and in this sense a first principle....(p. 1694)... And thought in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thought in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense. And thought thinks itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same. For that which is *capable* of receiving the object of thought, i.e. the substance, is thought. And it is *active* when it *possesses* this object. Therefore the latter rather than the former is the divine element which thought seems to contain, and the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best. If, then, God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better this compels it still more. And God *is* in a better state. And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God’s essential actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this *is* God.’ [Barnes edition, ii, pp. 1693-1694]. Alongside the field of natural sciences (astronomy, biology, meteorology, etc.), the theory of knowledge – based on logic and dialectic, ontology, and metaphysics, is Ethics, another important area of Aristotle’s thought. He stresses man’s need to act in such a way as to fulfil his own being, in the pursuit of happiness. While the fulfilment of the potentiality inherent in the vegetative soul is achieved through the satisfaction of natural needs and the attainment of pleasure and health, and that of the sensitive soul in the harmonization of the drives of the passions, through the exercise of the moral virtues which come under the heading of ‘justice’, the rational soul should achieve its specific end through the exercise of the so called intellectual virtues, which are subdivided into the deliberative virtues (craft knowledge and prudence) and the theoretical or scientific virtues (scientific knowledge [*sophia*, not just natural science] and intelligence (*phronesis*). It is not possible to survey the vast body of Aristotelian writings (cf. Diogenes Laertius V, 221 ff), but it would be remiss not to note the fundamental distinction between those destined for a wide public (the esoteric works) and those intended only for his disciples. Most of the first category are lost. Only a few more or less substantial fragments and references to them survive, while for the collection and organisation of the works in the second category we are indebted to a late disciple, Andronicus of Rhodes (1st century A.D.). The Aristotelian tradition was at first kept alive and developed by writers like Theophrastus, Eudemus of Rhodes, Aristoxenus of Tarentum, and Dicaearchus of Messana, and in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. by scholars like the medical scientist Galen and the astronomer Ptolemy and the philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias, but from the Hellenistic period and in the first centuries of the Roman empire the tradition was combined in various ways and degrees with the other main Greek philosophical traditions, above all Stoicism and Platonism, with influences in all directions. The lost treatise ‘Protreptikos or On Philosophy’ exercised a decisive influence in the shaping of the vast stream of

ideological and religious material typical of this period, characterised by a ‘cosmic religion’ which attained certainty that a supreme divinity existed on the basis of contemplation of the beauty of the cosmos (cf. Cicero, *De natura deorum* II, 37, 95). Arguments of this type were also often employed by Christian authors. Though the Fathers tended to prefer the Platonic system, with its clear distinction between levels accessible to the intellect and to the senses, as being better adapted to the elucidation and organisation of the contents of the faith, they did not in fact exclude the Aristotelian system, especially where logic and dialectic were concerned. In Clement of Alexandria in particular one may observe a sympathy for the characteristic Aristotelian idea of first principles which cannot be demonstrated but which are none the less true and worthy of belief, while the Aristotelian theorem of the capacity of the human intelligence to investigate the truth was a comfortable fit with the Christian conviction, expressed in various registers and permeating theological reflection, that there was no contradiction between faith and reason and that they gave support to each other. A writer like Boethius (480-525 A.D.), whose philosophical programme involved the translation of Aristotelian works which had a powerful influence on its intellectual structure, reinforced this situation [the symbiosis of faith and reason, transl.] This is not the place to give further examples of the profound influence of Aristotelianism on the Christian tradition, but before concluding one must at least mention the most important example of the potential of this combination of faith and reason, namely the astounding theological edifice built up by Thomas Aquinas. A passage of the *Summa contra gentes*, in the context of his demonstration of the existence of God, can stand for the profound affinity which Aquinas had recognized that he shared with the classical Greek philosopher, an affinity going beyond the utilisation of Aristotle’s premisses and transcending the distance, and sometimes the disagreements, that the fundamental Christian originality of Aquinas’s thought necessitated: ‘Since not every way of making the truth manifest is the same, but “it is in the character of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject permits”, as it was very well said by Aristotle, quoted by Boethius, it is first of all necessary to show what method is possible to make manifest the truth proposed.... Our intellect is ... led from what we perceive with our senses to the knowledge of God insofar as we know that he does exist and know other things of this kind which should be attributed to the first principle. So therefore there are certain intelligible things relating to divinity which are accessible to human reason, but certain things which are altogether beyond the powers of human reason.’ (Summa Contra Gentiles I, III)

**Bibliography:** W. JAEGER, *Aristotle* (Oxford, 1948); D.J. ALLAN, *The Philosophy of Aristotle*, Oxford 1970 [trad.it. con aggiunte Milano, 1973]; R. SORABJI, *Aristotle Transformed. The Ancient Commentators and their Influence*, New York, 1990; G. REALE, *Introduzione a Aristotele*, Roma-Bari, 1991.  
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