

Aristotle's Open Society* "Everything You Wanted to Ask Aristotle but Which You Knew Anyway?"

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Another book on Aristotle?

Prof. Akrill is the General Editor with Lindsay Judson of the Clarendon Aristotle Series which to date have published a total of ten (10) volumes. This opus is not one of the ten. More than a recognized expert on the man and the text he articulates, his pen in *Aristotle The Philosopher* (1991) breathes, etches, and enfleshes life and detail. Rather an unusual task to perform on such material such as *the* Aristotle, Akrill does *perform* in a style and substance seldom read in Aristoteliana.

Quite curiously, *The Philosopher* here is no longer the Aristotle we were told many times in the past, he was. Indeed, we were convinced by third parties of his being intentionally brilliant, partly by word of mouth, and partly by watered down commentaries. But all that is beside the point and may soon come to pass. Philosophers are more than mere cultic objects. A writer like Akrill is bound to deconstruct some myths aside from recreating impressions on readers of Aristotle specially those who denied themselves the passion of his arguments, a classic case of substantive omission. But as it does often happen in deciphering a text, it is presumed that the written word is never able, and not enough to contain a mind which is always more expansive than print, regardless of brilliance or the lack of it.

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The Aristotle of Argument

His secretaries left to themselves took matters at hand to collate his notes and in the process of arranging their master's manuscripts (which were far from being camera ready!) were starkly unfortunate. They could not fully fathom, neither the mind which scripted, nor the scriptures left behind. And these, added to the writer's continuous revisions, glosses, comments, etc., should make the reader wary of a 'treatise' that promises fine editing and smooth lectures. Definitely not. The corpus we have now was definitely intended for oral delivery — for discussions, argumentations, etc. The reading of the present text being essential nonetheless, the modern reader will surely find him challenging if not exasperating (Hussey, 1993 : X et ff).

The texts are therefore not without their moments of vacillation, of confusion, of inconsistencies, of cryptic nuances which can only be unwinded in another locus, of layered texts, of a mind probably too fast, or too much (his style of putting things densely in a nutshell) for readers like us, of eons of distance in culture, language and time. Such apparent permutations are not to be expected of the Philosopher, but such is the fact of experience (Graham, 1990 : 14). So much have been written about what Aristotle has composed. And we predict more will come. But if immersion in his text does not breed familiarity beyond the orbit of his 'doctrines', we have succeeded dismembering The Philosopher not surprisingly canned and sterile. The worst part of it is we may have excluded and denied ourselves the better part of his mind. Indeed, there is a big difference between talking *about* Aristotle and talking *of* Aristotle. The former writes what others say Aristotle said, the latter conjures what he read Aristotle wrote. The former talks about Aristotle's milestones, the latter communes Aristotle's lighthouses.

Argument Over Conclusion

Akrill composes a guide-book of sorts. His aim is for us to sort out objectively the space that Aristotle had left open in his texts and for its readers to purposively oscillate in that space to configure what the texts really meant. What The Philosopher does not "doctrinize," we should not be hasty in doing so; what he apparently leaves open, we should explore. The point here is that we are grossly mistaken and

we are in fact misreading in taking him as a hard core doctrinaire par excellence, who has a bottomless pit of conclusions ready for distribution for whatever intellectual malady imaginable. The fact that he appears intent on a system and discusses his 'treatises' with confident style of a headmaster with character, does not justify us at all to transpose our mental cadences to frame and measure his arguments and conclusions.

To present Aristotle in an "Everything You Wanted To Ask Aristotle But You Knew The Answer Anyway?" sort of book of beliefs is a misrepresentation of The Philosopher pure and simple. A large portion of Aristotle of the text remains fertile, untilled, uncharted or unresolved. On the lighter side (which I think is very vital in philosophy), the reader should not miss the spectacle and the excitement of 'conversing' with or listening to a genius spin his arguments rather than read the text like attending an auction sale of antiques for some collectors items!

Akrill takes the cudgels for Aristotle's developmental gift and the revisions he made in his thought, the variety of tools he used, the substitutionality of arguments he employed, the turbulence his arguments caused whether these arguments were found in systematic logic or in correctable disjunctives, in a manner which highlights Aristotle's deftness of mind a tasteless reader will no doubt easily miss. This is bound to happen if the reader takes for granted the chance of arguing with his text and does not go beyond simply understanding him as a treasured Arcadian artifact. If Aristotle is still central in the frontlines of contemporary philosophical discourse, it is no less for the reason that he has anticipated a lot of the tools for argument we are using today. Aristotle was a lecturer at heart whose lectures were fruits of his continuous research and ruminations and his notes were said to record copious afterthoughts. His system exuded rigor but it was never meant to enclose or to enchant, and package the truth. Neither do we think it right to say that he considered his findings the end of the arguments. If later thinkers found his text applicable in their times, this could only mean at least two things, that his arguments were valid and these same arguments transcend, leading to other conclusions.

It appears quite fundamental at this point to reconfigure our mind sets in terms of confronting the texts of Aristotle : he *continues* to write his texts as his printed word continues to pursue his mind.

Weakness or Wickedness?

Readers of Aristotle notice a specific style and a decisive character of the writer. It is quite evident that such character chose to confront philosophical problems philosophically, doing away with their respective historical components. This situation does not at all make him a poor historian as some commentators are wont to exult. He simply does not make considerable use of it if at all and focuses on the horns of the issue anachronistically. He puts philosophical scenario under his full control, with his own language and terminologies, and with his own reformulation of the fundamental interrogative. Akrill with his pedagogic instincts rewinds and translates Aristotle's interrogative with a series of more simple questions using common situations familiar to the reader today.

Akrill does more than create his signature commentary on Aristotle as it has been with a host of Aristophilics. Aristotle is made to speak in the person of his texts which are quoted in full, saving the reader the salutary exercise of having the text beside. Interrogatives emerge very striking and almost relevant, e.g., What is the difference between weakness and wickedness of character? What is the best life for man? These questions on *akrasia* and *eudaimonia* samples the NE and such issues continue to interest contemporary man.

The import Aristotle gives to 'common beliefs' is very revealing both for the immense value given to current opinions and the agency philosophy is to play as social vehicle and enterprise. It is increasingly understandable why Aristotle truly merits the title *The Philosopher*. In the process of trying to develop clearer thinking, he creates a methodology of distinguishing, a skill which he develops into a monumental art. It appears that while theory is the object to behold in his mind, such mind never forgot the fact that it is a mind here on earth.

The Knowledge of One

We are rather acquainted with Aristotle's paradigmatic exercise of the (non)twinkling planets. The fact on the local distance of the planets as a correct inference is well taken. But the premises do not explain for they do not provide the 'causes' of the conclusion. We have succeeded establishing a 'that', not a 'why.' Quite evidently, the

reverse is true. The planets are near and they do not twinkle. Aristotle for one, insists that demonstrated truths are necessarily true since they follow necessarily from true premises. But it is altogether another thing to say that true premises themselves as starting points are necessarily true. The rigidity which he has set for premises of a demonstration appear rather faulty, to say the least. It is obvious that a set of necessary truths for all what they represent, will never be adequate to provide explanation for particular events and instances. This is the case of a scientific law which obviously cannot include the various conditions that affect various phenomena. There is no scientific knowledge of a case of one, he insists.

There is no doubt that a philosophy of science based on Aristotle is better consigned to history. His theory of demonstration is perhaps tenable given as an outline of a finished product, the nature of the economy which a theory must be characterized, and the fertility of deducing from the same theory. Given this perspective of what is now known as a canonical product in science, Aristotle insinuates a context of justification.

As an account of the process, as an *Antehoc* of the scientific enterprise, we have to move elsewhere.

Where lies the flaw? The science of nature is decidedly empirical. Being empirical connotes conditions, the conditions of variables. Logic and mathematics may admit of the necessary, but never in an empirical science. We have in the latter, facts which are conditioned, and we get conditional statements. Aristotle's *nous* was deemed too powerful as to be able to see, understand or grasp 'the necessity of certain basic truths.'

To Underlie is not To Remain

What is the difference between 'x comes to be y' from 'y comes to be from x'? It is presumed that items *x* and *y* may be simple items such as man, musical, etc., or a compound item such as a musical man or an unmusical man. In his analysis of change, in the case of a musical man for example, an underlying thing is something which is coming-to-be with reference to that which does not remain. The man remains in the shift between being unmusical and becoming musical, while the latter shifts constitute the 'underlying things.' However, a different

application operates on the 'thing that remains' between the statements 'a statue comes to be from bronze' and 'bronze comes to be a statue.' In the former example, man is the thing that remains and being musical does not come to be from a man while the statue in the latter example comes to be from bronze.

The nature of substance becomes both the alpha and the omega of the aforementioned discussions for, strictly speaking, only substances are said simply to come to be from matter (*Physics* 1.7.190a31). This is known as the substantial change, the coming to be of a new being. In cases other than a substance change, e.g., and accidental change, it is effected in virtue of a substance because these accidents such quality and quantity simply inhere in a substance. In both cases, in explaining coming to be a new thing, an underlying thing is a necessary postulate and such thing postulates no other than a substance (*Physics* 1.7.190b1). Any talk of change whether such change involves a thing or a material evidently involves a material with properties, a complete being so to say.

The controversy on the 'existence' of prime matter is not pursued, with "This is a matter of dispute", and "(This issue) remains to be discussed." Akrill is being prudent in not pursuing such controversy in a type of an opus such this, which cannot provide justice to the problem.

Methodic Mind

Indeed it is the methodology that makes the thinker. What is the philosophical method of Aristotle? The question of method consequently brings us to the question of beginnings, the *archai*. The question evolves more clearly into "How are starting points attained?" Since there are no innate ideas in us but innate capacities, man learns the idea of these starting points from perceptions, common sense intuitions, opinions, processed to experience. The formation of general ideas is discussed. What is seemingly lacking is the matter to fill the gap and the distance between the concepts and its corresponding precise and defined terms required of scientific knowledge. It is evident that The Philosopher does provide a psychology of mental processes and but this is not a method we can try in planned research to discover such fundamental truths. If science is essentially data or sense based, science is essentially finite and completable.

If indeed Aristotle does not fall into the kind of historian our current classification qualifies, he was a rabid practitioner of the necessity of taking the opinions of the past and of his times seriously. Akrill notes "Aristotle holds that what is generally believed is likely to have some truth in it, and the views of the wise are also not likely to be entirely wrong." "Everyone has something to contribute" (p. 112). Akrill depicts the thinker as an early witness of what is now current among a good number of hermeneuticists as the principle of charity. Positive thinking may sound too pedestrian, but if there is a thinking lifestyle Aristotle have more than excelled in, it is the taking of 'pedestrian' matters quite seriously. This is shown by the assumptions and the philosophical commitments he starts with in his critical endeavors.

Far from a philosophy that is suspect of being 'home-grown', Aristotle imbibed the cardinal merits of dialogue and dialectics of his teacher, Plato. Conflict is the crucible of truth and it is possible that suitable interpreted, two opposing views may later possess the crown of truth. This is easier seen certainly if the reader proceeds to the task of reading his texts in their context. This means that 'reading' approximates the structure of the Greek language and thought. Akrill realizes and admits the importance of language, culture, and the subjectivity of experience that goes into a text, and the burden of unwinding that an interpreter has to perform on these factors, if he has to be honest in his hermeneutics.

He Who Listens ... Thinks

The Philosopher never presumed that philosophy was 'an exercise of some private and privileged insight.' A philosopher improves his task by sharpening his art of listening and exorcising his appetites for the temptation of 'hometown-decisions.' Akrill does not find any basis from his reading of The Philosopher's text that the writer assumed that some final decision would be attained after he has gone through a philosophic survey. If some of Aristotle's successors nurtured such 'certainty', it has to be made clear that such baseless imagination was never a concoction of The Philosopher.

It is to be noted in fact that with Aristotle, dialectics assume a more preponderant role covering a wider range. *Endoxa* now involve both the opinions of the ordinary minds and the experts. Ordinary

facts such as language, beliefs, or physicals, are vital as starting materials but these materials are the very sources of distillations of scientific investigations and discoveries. A sharp distinction does not exist between these two areas in Aristotle. A missing link is not missing at all since an interplay between the two is left unsaid. The connection fits into the matrix like it was there from the beginning. It is therefore an understatement to say that philosophy as conceived by Aristotle precludes science. A developed science and its consequent philosophy of science will find its place in Aristotle.

Nurturing the *Nous*

Becoming a philosopher encompasses not only the idea of an articulate and skilled 'doing' philosopher. It does not only mean the science of having learned the responses to the interrogative "What is." By and large, it is a developing art of a mental attitude, or a working lifestyle towards the makings of genuine scholarship. One has the right to comment because one has investigated. One is a better investigator because one has gathered a wealth of evidence. He alludes to the necessity of experience and fieldwork in *De Gen et Cor.* I.2.316a5. Steeped in facts, one achieves a wider repertoire within which to analyze the issue. Aristotle was never an overnight thinker who struck his eureka. Truth is to be worked out and this is never achieved immediately, or even after a long time. He talks about experience and about 'being at home' with the facts. 'Being at home' with the fact does not end with the facts. This should sharpen the 'nous' which grasps the indemonstrable starting points of demonstration.

Becoming a philosopher is never easy. Aristotle speaks from experience with both pride and modesty. In *Sophistici Elenchi* 183b34, he reminisces the difficulties one has to undergo the first steps and how the achievements of the present owe its beginnings to past achievements. The text connotes an epilogue to the logical works but could very well be attributed to his whole corpus. Teaching is not achieved if it does not impart a skill in the learner. One has not really learned if one cannot function and operate the expected skill. One does not teach the manner of Gorgias' method by making the learner memorize pieces which were defective on all counts: methodology and content (even the choice of the pieces to be memorized were atrocious!). Aristotle recounts the ordeal of not having any at all to start with, and

the agony of working things out for 'over a long time by trial and error.' Yet, he ends this particular text with 'if, therefore, when you look at it, this discipline appears to you in pretty good shape (considering the original conditions), when compared with other subjects which have grown up over the generations, then the only thing left for all of you who have followed the lectures is to pardon any omissions — and be heartily grateful for what has been discovered.'

Not Just Another Book

Akrill proves the myth wrong that every book about Aristotle are all the same. Akrill proves too that not all commentators of Aristotle are happily not created equally. This opus of 155 pages succeeds proving that this is not just another book on Aristotle. Akrill needs fewer words to effect more insights and create his radical turn.

The opus is not only handy in its paperback size (a big plus for students) and excellent design, but also quite handy for demything *The Philosopher* many mentors through the years thought they knew. Such interesting if not an exciting piece as *Aristotle The Philosopher* can only come from a mentor as Akrill who has honed himself both a master and a scholar, with a fluid pen to prove it, amidst a very exacting readership of peers. Akrill proves the myth wrong that *The Philosopher* was invulnerable. It was in decoded vulnerabilities that *The Philosopher* bleeds his bits of philosophy which otherwise were assumed or strangely contended.

He composes his book like he were handling an actual class - dialectical, dialogic, illustrative, exclamatory, anecdotal, in a language that can be homely, conversational and indeed confident. He therefore succeeds where others failed who offered readers of Aristotle packaged canons with some salestalk of invulnerability.

Akrill moves fast backwards, the way Aristotle treated his predecessors — if they were found wrong, we should know why. Conclusions bear no meaning at all if they were not explained why. After all, the exercise of reason is found in the premises. Akrill explains why — with his gift of choice of cases, with his instinct for seeing through an argument, and with his wit which is manifest even in print. Akrill proves the myth wrong that philosophy has to be boring if it has to be real.

Akrill proves wrong the other myth that one can never be a master of the whole corpus and one could be very well a specialist of a particular field. It takes a mind of a General Editor of the Clarendon Aristotle Series to detect the strengths and weaknesses, the gaps and loose ends, the problems and the problematic in the various texts of Aristotle. This is particularly manifest in his study on Logic for example, which has developed so rapidly since. Notwithstanding, Aristotle could never be so intelligibly enthralling via Akrill's pen! One gets to use this book in a 'laboratory class' having Aristotle's texts as specimen with the big difference that this time with Akrill, the exercise is not an autopsy but a hands-on, a live interview with Aristotle.

Akrill's Aristotle does not say he has argued the final truths, he simply says there are limits to eternal errors.

Selected Readings

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