

## WORLD CONGRESS “ARISTOTLE 2400 YEARS”

WELCOME NOTE THESSALONIKI 23 MAY 2016

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Dear friends of Aristotle,

As President of the *Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie* (FISP, International Federation of Philosophical Societies), on behalf of FISP, and in my personal capacity as an academic philosopher, I am deeply honored to be invited to write these words of welcome to you, the participants in this historic event in Thessaloniki, at the renowned Aristotle University to commemorate the 2400 anniversary of the birth of Aristotle (384 to 322 BCE). On your behalf, I want to thank most sincerely Professor Emerita Demetra Sfendoni-Mentzou, President of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Aristotle Studies, and her colleagues at the Aristotle University, for making this international congress a reality in these difficult and challenging times. I want to thank especially Professor Perikles A. Mitkas, the Rector of the Aristotle University, and Professor Evangelos Moutsopoulos of the Academy of Athens.

It is simply impossible to imagine what the world would have been like if there never had been an Aristotle. He was a true polymath of the kind that appears only rarely on the stage of world history. So great was his authority in the Middle Ages that he was known simply as ‘the Philosopher’. For Dante, he was the ‘master of men who know’ (*Inferno*). We owe to him the word ‘*lyceum*’ (French: ‘*lycée*’) that has come to signify – along with the term ‘academy’-- the very title for an institution of scholarly learning.

Notoriously, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger is reported to have begun his Aristotle lectures with this short biography: “He was born, he lived, he died.” What mattered, for Heidegger, were Aristotle’s works. And Aristotle left us a huge volume of works. Indeed Aristotle reputedly wrote more than 200 treatises — Diogenes Laertius thinks the number was closer to 400. Yet he died at the reasonably young age--even for antiquity--of sixty-two. Consider that Socrates was at least seventy, for instance; and Plato around eighty when they died.

Aristotle’s life *is* also fascinating in itself and has been well documented recently by Carlo Natali.<sup>1</sup> He lived in turbulent times and had to leave Athens on at least two occasions, probably because his life was threatened because of his political allegiances. Although there are no significant traces of the events of Aristotle’s private life in his own writings, remarkably, his last will and testament survives and is

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<sup>1</sup> Carlo Natali, *Aristotle: His Life and School*, ed. D. S. Hutchinson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

reproduced by Diogenes Laertius. In this will, Aristotle makes provision for his son Nicomachus and his daughter and also for his slaves, who are to be freed:

Nicanor shall see that the slave Myrmex shall be returned to his family in a manner worthy of me with the property that we got from him. Ambracis also is to be freed, and when my daughter marries, she shall be given 500 drachmas and the female slave she has at present. Thale shall receive in addition to the female slave she now has and has bought 2000 drachmas and a female slave. (15) And for Simo, aside from the money previously given him for another slave, either a slave shall be bought or money given [for the purchase]. When my daughter is married, Tacho shall be freed, and also Philo, and Olympios, and his son. The executors are not to sell any of the slaves who looked after me, but to employ them. When they reach the appropriate age, they should set them free as they deserve.

This indicates a careful and thoughtful person, and also, within the standards of the time, kind and caring. He at least recognized that slaves were to be provided for properly and eventually freed.

According to Diogenes Laertius, Aristotle was not a charismatic personality like Empedocles, who dressed in purple and wore a golden crown (Diogenes Laertius 8.73), but he did, Laertius records, have his own peculiarities:

He [Aristotle] had a lisping voice, as is asserted by Timotheus the Athenian, in his work on *Lives*. He had also very thin legs, they say, and small eyes; but he used to indulge in very conspicuous dress, and rings, and used to dress his hair carefully.

Overall, Aristotle comes across as a serious, intense, brilliant, combative and somewhat difficult man. He was also generally dismissive of his predecessors in philosophy and could be sharp in his criticisms of rivals. Ancient commentators sometimes characterized him as the disloyal son, based on his acerbic criticism of his teacher Plato, for his doctrine of the Forms. There is even the suggestion—I look forward to hearing this issue clarified here in Thessaloniki!-- that he might have betrayed his native city of Stageira (then allied with Athens) to the Macedonians and acted as their spy in the city.

Aristotle was born in Stageira, then a small town associated with Athens, where his father was a medical physician. One of Aristotle's earliest biographers, Hermippus, upon whom Diogenes Laertius based his own account, claimed that Aristotle's father, Nicomachus, was a descendant of one of the most illustrious branches of the Asclepiads, hence he was a doctor. Nicomachus was a friend of the king of Macedonia, Amyntas. His mother, Phaestis, was also from a prominent family, and, according to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, descended from one of the families from Chalcis that has colonized Stageira. His father died when Aristotle was young and the Neoplatonic *Lives* claims that Proxenus, a citizen of Atarneus, adopted Aristotle on his father's death. It is more than likely that he was originally destined to be a physician, following in his father's footsteps as would have been the norm within professional families. Some ancients (including Epicurus and Timaeus of Tauromenium) say Aristotle led a dissolute youth and even sold drugs!

According to Diogenes Laertius, Aristotle was seventeen when he went to study with Plato at the Academy “during the archonship of Polyzelus” (according to Apollodorus), where he would remain for 20 years (c. 367 to 347), first as student and then as a lecturer. Ancient biographers record that Aristotle’s guardian Proxenus the Atarnean, was a friend of Plato’s, according to Usaibia, the Arabic translator of one of Aristotle’s *Lives*, and probably arranged for the tuition. When Aristotle entered the Academy, Plato was actually away in Syracuse on a political mission and he would have been taught by other members of the Academy.

Aristotle arrived at a time when Plato was getting interested in dialectic and his own early work is in rhetoric. It is claimed he offered courses on rhetoric while still in the Academy and was reputed to have been a rival to Isocrates (as recorded by Cicero and others).

Aristotle would have lived in Athens as a *metic*, an outsider, a legal alien, not an Athenian citizen. Indeed, he could not legally own property there, so it is unclear who actually owned the Lyceum. The evidence suggests that Aristotle did not set up his Lyceum in opposition to Plato himself. A Neoplatonic biography of Aristotle, *Vita Latina*, affirms that “Aristotle did not build the Lyceum in opposition to Plato while he was living ... for he remained faithful to Plato until his death.” Diogenes Laertius, on the other hand, records a famous anecdote about Aristotle: ‘He left Plato while he was living; so they say he remarked that “Aristotle kicked us out, just like colts kick out the mother who gave them birth”’ (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 5.2). He certainly was Plato’s sharpest critic, in relation especially to the teaching concerning the Forms, and in his criticism of the cosmology of Plato’s *Timaeus*. But he also maintains that he is a friend of Plato. Thus, in *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle records that the Forms were introduced by “friends of mine” (Book I.6. 1096a11–13).

On Plato’s death, Aristotle left Athens, possibly for political reasons, as Athens became anti-Macedonian at the time under the rule of Demosthenes, and Aristotle was associated with the Macedonian king. He went to stay for three years with ‘the tyrant Hermias of Atarneus’ (a close friend of the Macedonian King Philip and, reputedly of Aristotle’s step-father Proxenus) at Atarneus, across the Aegean sea. Hermias allowed Aristotle to live in the city of Assos. Aristotle’s wife Pythia, the mother of his two children, daughter Pythias and son, Nicomachus, was a relative of Hermias.

Aristotle conducted a large part of his biological studies at Atarneus and Assos, and later, when he left Hermias, on Lesbos, and then in Macedonia, because many of the observations pertain to species common and in some cases indigenous to those regions.

Back in Macedonia, it is recorded by Plutarch that Aristotle was the tutor for a number of years in ancient Mieza (343-340) to the young Alexander who went on to form one of the greatest empires the world has ever known. Aristotle himself, however, never mentions Alexander. But Aristotle’s guardian Proxenus, had a son, Nicanor, Aristotle’s step-brother, whom Aristotle adopted. It is possible this is same Nicanor who later served as one of Alexander’s generals. The source for Aristotle’s relation with Alexander is Plutarch’s *Life of Alexander*. Plutarch believed Aristotle

taught Alexander his whole system; whereas others believe he taught him only dialectic. Certainly, Aristotle was closely connected to Alexander's father Philip and was a Macedonian first and foremost. Yet the tension between Macedon and Athens did not feature in his works and he comments on the rise of Macedon primarily as a counter to Persia. A famous piece of advice that Aristotle reputedly offered to Alexander, according to Plutarch, is to "treat the Greeks as if he were their leader (ἡγεμονικῶς/*hēgemonikōs*) and towards foreigners as their master (δεσποτικῶς/*despotikōs*), to have regards for the Greeks as for his friends and kindred, but to conduct himself toward other peoples as though they were animals or plants" (*On the Fortune or Virtue of Alexander*, I.6, 329b).

Aristotle returned from Macedonia to Athens in 335 BCE and set up the Lyceum. He taught there for 13 years (335-323), according to Diogenes Laertius. Athens was then undergoing a revival under the rule of Alexander but when Alexander died in 323, Aristotle left Athens again. Almost all ancient authors report that Aristotle left Athens to avoid being condemned to death for impiety (75 years after death of Socrates). He supposedly wrote, "I will not let the Athenians sin a second time against philosophy." He headed to Chalcis, on the island of Euboea, where his mother's family had property, where he lived for a year and perhaps opened a school. In the last months of his life he lamented his isolation.

Aristotle's intellectual contribution is so immense it is impossible to summarize it in a few words. He systematized and formalized logic in a manner that established and stabilized the discipline for the next two thousand years. In the case of logic, he admits he had to make it up from scratch, whereas, in the case of rhetoric, he could draw on a long tradition. He wrote the foundational textbook in psychology, *Περὶ ψυχῆς* (*De Anima*), a discipline that did not make further advanced until Brentano and others in the nineteenth century. His treatise on tragedy is still the defining text for understanding that art form.

Aristotle's writings on animals, on their classification and parts, and reproduction, would set the course for biology and zoology for the next two millennia. He wrote on physics and cosmology, with texts of meteors, on the heavens, as well as on ethics and politics, and the nature of political constitutions. He was deeply interested in the perfect state and the perfect citizen of that state. Democracy, on the other hand, did not impress him. He was the very archetype of the empiricist, collecting 158 constitutions of Greek states, collecting biological samples, collecting examples of bad arguments or fallacies and rhetorical techniques. He observed the phases of the moon and eclipses. In his work *On the Heavens*, Aristotle states that he had personally observed (ἑώρακαμεν/*eōrakamen*) the moon in a half-full phase pass in front of Mars, and Mars, hidden by the moon, then emerge from behind it (*De caelo* II.12, 292a3–6). This event can now be dated precisely.

We know that Aristotle collected books and had a large library (which is referred to in a number of ancient texts). Strabo in his *Geographia* says that Aristotle was the first person to collect books and have a private library. He was a great observer of nature. For him, "all realms of nature are marvelous". In his studies of animals, he frequently references the reports of beekeepers, fishermen, hunters and

herdsmen, all those engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry. His writings are full of references to the sea, to sailing, to boats. Thus he assigns to citizens of his polis particular duties like the duties of different crew on a boat. He was especially renowned as a marine biologist. He observed that the octopus has a penis on one of its tentacles, a fact that, according to Jonathan Barnes, was not confirmed until nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> He was forgivably wrong about the spontaneous generation of flies from mud. But he was careful to observe gradual development of the chicken in the egg (supposedly by removing an egg a day from the hen and documenting the stage of development of the chick inside). His views on the female role in reproduction have been much criticized as well as his view that women's reason is not as authoritative as men's. For Aristotle, based on his understanding ofhylomorphism, the male supplies the form and the female the matter. In this regard, he is endorsing a long Greek tradition that associates the female with the unlimited and with matter. He is also accused of assuming that the male animal is the 'norm', whereas the female is some sort of departure from the male standard. Interestingly, as my colleague Fran O'Rourke reports, an ancient Irish proverb states that there three things Aristotle did not understand: the coming and going of the tide, the working of bees, and the mind of women' (*intinn na mban*)!

Aristotle wrote the classic texts on friendship, virtue (ἄρετα/*arête*), on practical wisdom (φρόνησις/*phronesis*), on the right way to live the good life. He demonstrated decisively that riches and honours are not the highest goods for human beings. Human beings seek to flourish, to live well, to enjoy *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία). But, perhaps, for philosophers, above all we have the books later collected under the title *Metaphysics*. These books on the question of 'being qua being' (ὅν ἢ ὅν) and on the nature of οὐσία remain the most extraordinary and enduring contribution to 'first philosophy' (πρώτη φιλοσοφία/*protē philosophia*).

Aristotle in many ways anticipated monotheism by giving to the Christian West, the conception of the one God as eternal, immutable, living and most good. Christian thinkers united together Aristotle's idea of an intellect that thinks itself (νοῦς ποιητικός/*nous noetikos*, *Nicomachean Ethics*) with his conception of the First Mover who does not itself move (*Metaphysics* 12.6.1072a 9-15, 1073aII-2; *Physics* VIII.9.266a). God is the complete actuality of thought and, as such, is immutable. Aristotle therefore could not accept Plato's account of a creator God in his *Timaeus*. The medieval Christians, of course, could not accept Aristotle's lack of a conception of divine creation and also struggled to interpret his conception of the eternity of the world. But the Christians thought that Aristotle had at least gestured towards the immortality of the soul. Moreover, the Christian monastic tradition owed Aristotle an enormous debt for, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book Ten, defining the nature of the βίος θεωρητικός (*bios theoretikos*), the contemplative life, over the *vita active*, a vision of the contemplative life that inspired the monastic movements of the high Middle Ages.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Barnes, *Aristotle. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

While Aristotle was scathingly critical of early physicist explanations of the cosmos, he was, at the same time, deeply appreciative of myths and stories. He is said to have collected proverbs as part of his interest in commonly held ‘reputable opinions’ (*εὖ δοξα/eudoxa*). Indeed, Rembrandt paints him contemplating the bust of Homer, the greatest of all exponents of myth. Late in life, Aristotle wrote: “The more solitary and isolated I am the more I have come to love myths” (reminding us of Socrates in prison versifying Aesop’s Fables). For Aristotle, the ‘lover of myth’ (*φιλόμυθος/philomythos*) is also a lover of wisdom, since myth is “composed of wonders” (*Metaphysics* I.2.982b).

Aristotle recognized that science culminates in definition and definition fixes the essence of the matter. He was not a great mathematician but was a wonderful defender of the appropriate level of exactness for the particular domain. He set up the very concept of what makes science scientific, of how classification should be carried out. He is famously thought to have had “a place for everything”.

Aristotle influenced everyone and over several millennia. It is not easy to comprehend that his influence went far into Asia, from Uzbekistan, where Avicenna studied him, to Cordoba, Spain, where Maimonides studied him, to Paris and Oxford where Richard Rufus, Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon were inspired by him and taught his Physics. Aristotle’s works were translated into Latin and then entered the curricula of the European universities of Bologna, Paris and Oxford. Indeed, universities advertised that they taught the works of Aristotle that were banned in Paris! Aristotle’s conception of the arts and sciences dominated the High Middle Ages in Spain, Italy, France, Germany and the Low Lands. Aristotle was condemned in the Reformation and belittled by Descartes, but revived in the Neo-Scholasticism of the nineteenth century. His doctrine of final causes was rejected by early modern philosophy, including by Descartes, and later by Darwin but purposiveness continues to be a factor in the biological sciences.

Aristotle is constantly re-discovered and re-invented. The study of Aristotle is now like a thickly-layered archaeological excavation. Aristotle has been interpreted and re-interpreted for 2400 years. Francisco Suarez, for instance, admits that it is difficult to follow the arguments in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, but in his notes he will draw on the explanations of Alexander of Aphrodisias, Averroes, and above all, of St. Thomas. And we will never stop reading Aristotle and trying to understand him and reason with him about the causes of all things.

Here, in Thessaloniki, in Meiza and Stageira, walking in the very places that Aristotle walked as a youth, discussing philosophy in the very location where he taught Alexander, experiencing the location of Aristotle’s school, we shall encounter and celebrate the living Aristotle, *Aristoteles sempiternens*. We are grateful to our Greek hosts for inviting us to this celebration, to this *symposion*. We celebrate the accomplishment of Aristotle and enjoy the best of Greek welcomes. Thanks again to our hosts at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Once again, participants, welcome to the Congress and to Aristotle’s birthplace. Thank you and enjoy.