

INTERPRETING ARISTOTLE

Philosophy in the *Polis*

Much of philosophy over the past 2,000 years has consisted in the interpretation and criticism of Aristotle. The interpretations exhibit four main directions: (a.) **Formalist**, (b.) **Developmental**, (c.) **Aporetic**, and (d.) **Immanent**. The first has been the most pervasive and the others are most readily understandable as modifications or rejections of it. It may be called ‘**Formalist**’ because it takes the ideal of an axiomatized formal system—first stated in A’s *Posterior Analytics*—as the basic framework in which all other parts of A’s corpus are assigned their places. This point of view was established in the Hellenistic age, largely governed by the Stoic conception of ‘systematic’ philosophy, and is implicit in the structure imposed upon the *Corpus Aristotelicum* (*Organon*, *Physica*, *De Caelo*, etc.—titles in Latin because the works we know were first published in Rome) by his first editor, Andronicus of Rhodes (fl. 60–50 BC.), and retained by Bekker (Berlin, 1831ff.) and the Oxford editors. Its best known contemporary exponent is J. Barnes. Despite its appealing simplicity, a Formalist reading is objectionable because it rigidifies A’s philosophy and because A himself did not use the formal logic he invented in the formulation of his theoretical arguments. The chief merit of the (b.) **Developmental** interpretation, especially in Werner Jaeger, is to have loosened the late 19th century stranglehold achieved by the Formalist reading. Its deficiency has been to direct scholarly attention away from A’s philosophy and toward philological questions of ‘earlier’ and ‘later’ books, chapters, or even sentence fragments. After a half century, such work came to appear unprofitable. The most widely accepted interpretation today may be called anti-systematic or (c.) **Aporetic** because it stresses A’s tendency to pose a large number of particular problems or *aporiai* and work out particular solutions to them. This accords well with the predispositions of contemporary Anglo-American ‘analytical’ as well as Continental ‘hermeneutic’ philosophers. But it leaves entirely unsatisfied the desire for that comprehensive insight which A repeatedly stresses as the highest form of human self-realization. It seems that the only thinkers capable of formulating an (d.) **Immanent** interpretation of A are those comparable with him in stature. Such interpretation is called ‘immanent’ because it is like a conversation between equals, with no need to import extraneous (formalistic or developmental) interpretative devices. There is some evidence of an immanent reading of A in Alexander of Aphrodisias, Aquinas, and Leibniz but, so far, the best examples are the discussions of Aristotle in Hegel—most importantly in his *Logic* and *Encyclopedia* and most explicitly in his lectures on the history of philosophy.¹

In Aristotle a science is ‘instrumental’ if it is governed by the use of language. The two principal uses of language are as a means of preserving ‘truth’ as locus of ‘variables’, i.e., ‘logic’, or as a means of achieving persuasion, i.e., ‘rhetoric’. The texts which concern the achievement of these instrumental ends must not be confused with the topics of texts that are theoretical or practical (though this confusion has been the mark of philosophy since the Stoics). The texts in question are: *Categories*, *De Interpretatione*, *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics*, *On Sophistical Refutations*, and *Rhetoric*.

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1st ed., Berlin, 1833), E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simpson, trs., London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1894 [reprinted 1955, 1963 by Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, and Humanities Press, New York], Vol. II, pp.137–231.

Aristotle is universally celebrated as the founder of ‘logic’, which term he did not use. The role of ‘logic’ in his philosophy as a whole is one of the most difficult questions for any interpreter of his thought. A radical statement of the received view is in Jonathan Barnes, *Aristotle*, Oxford: OUP, 1982 [PB]. It has been most effectively challenged in: Eric Weil, “The Place of Logic in Aristotle’s Thought” [originally in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 56 (1951)]. That A invented ‘logic’ by discovering ‘variables’ is brilliantly spelled out by: Jan Łukasiewicz, *Aristotle’s Syllogistic from the Standpoint of Modern Formal Logic*, Oxford: OUP, 1950 [2nd ed., 1957].

Aristotle is justly celebrated as the founder of ‘logic’ (what he called ‘analytics’) because he discovered the linguistic *variable* (e.g., A, B, C,...) and the function of operations that could be performed upon variables *qua* variables. The principal operation he called ‘predication’, whereby the predicate-term place-holder (variable) in an indicative sentence has *eo ipso* a wider extensionality than its counterpart subject-term place-holder (variable). Thus the *transitivity* of syllogistic inference: if A is predicated of B and B is predicated of C, then A is predicated of C, where the force of the argument is dependent upon A, B, and C functioning solely as linguistic *variables* whose sole determinacy derives from the relative-extensionality assigning operation of predication. Having discovered this formal feature of language (or ‘logic’), Aristotle sharply distinguished between the ‘truth’ preserved by formal (logical) operations and the determinate individuality detected in the (theoretical) investigation of things. The conflation of logic and theory has been the mark of the ‘modern’ propensity in western thought. This conflation was inaugurated by the Stoics, whose logic was based upon propositional rather than term variables, and whose logical operations (conjunction, disjunction, and conditionality) were designed to yield mechanical means for the preservation of truth (the ‘truth tables’ of neo-Stoic-Fregean or symbolic logic). Thus logic has come to be regarded as the fundamental structure for all inquiry into all manner of things—metaphysical, physical, biological, etc. This is the clue to our ‘modern’ propensity: we seek the certainty of pure logical inference in our inquiry into individual things and we accordingly conflate the logic of variable operations with the theory of determinate individuals.

As the inventor of ‘logic’ Aristotle was also the keenest critic of the limits of ‘logic’. The shortest commentary one could write on the history of philosophy (and much else) since Aristotle is that these limits have been forgot.