

INTRODUCTION (1990)

This outline of the life of Aristotle is not the work of a professional historian of the ancient world, only the fruit of the reflections of a scholar of the history of ancient philosophy; and it was born out of the need felt by the author to get his ideas clear when he was faced with a quantity of biographical reports, affirmations, and anecdotes often repeated but not always reliable. Historians with expertise in this period will not find much to learn from these pages, but my fellow “philosophers” or, better, “historians of philosophy,” may perhaps find it useful to have in hand a brief sketch and a general interpretation of the available historical data about Aristotle. This reconstruction, like any other, is burdened by personal prejudices, historical conditioning, and limitations of every sort. But perhaps it is good that readers have an overall picture in front of them to discuss, and perhaps refute, rather than a series of dubious data and conflicting reports.

At a general level, perhaps, one might wonder whether a reconstruction of this sort does, after all is said and done, serve any useful purpose, or whether it is instead a futile exercise. There are some who have urged this doubt; for example, George Steiner, in the course of reviewing a biography of Wittgenstein (*London Review of Books*, 23 June 1988), wondered why in the world people feel the need to write biographies of philosophers. Husserl, he recalls, “believed that a philosophical argument was worth considering only if it aspired to the universality, to the truth-conditions of the anonymous.” And Jonathan Barnes maintained, in his preface to *The Presocratic Philosophers* (1979), that “philosophy lives a supracelestial life, beyond the confines of space and time; and if philosophers are, perforce, small spatio-temporal creatures, a minute attention to their small spatio-temporal concerns will more often obfuscate than illumine their philosophies.” To an Italian reader such as myself, these statements appear rather paradoxical, even if their caution is per-

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haps justified by certain excessively daring historical reconstructions of the lives of ancient philosophers. Located at the other end, both cultural and geographical, are the ideas of those who think it impossible to explain and expound correctly the life of an ancient philosopher such as Aristotle without taking into account the entirety of his life and the dramatic events that make it up (for a Russian example, see Losev and Takho-Godi 1982, p. 11).

Perhaps it is banal to say so, but very probably the truth lies in the middle. A truly serious biography, Steiner maintains, should seek to make the biographical data correspond with the work of the philosopher, and to draw from this attempt the grounds of its legitimation; and yet completing a project of this sort, with a vision of the connections between life and theory that is both analytic and intuitive, would “require something like genius” and “demand formidable authority.” Linking the biographical events of a philosopher with the special characteristics of his thought is therefore an undertaking as difficult as it is fascinating.

Where Aristotle is concerned, one illustrious example of an ambitious attempt to produce a biography that connects life and theory is that of Werner Jaeger, in his *Aristoteles* (1923). Jaeger combined an account of Aristotle's life with a description of the evolution of his thought, from time to time halting the narrative of historical events and personal stories in order to provide a panoramic overview of Aristotle's thought in each particular phase of his life and spiritual evolution. The very remarkable allure and the impressive compactness of Jaeger's book, which remains a classic in the field even though many of its hypotheses are no longer accepted, derive from its original structure and from the application to Aristotle's works of the concept of “spiritual evolution,” more than from any actual discovery of a strictly historical-biographical nature. But in the case of Jaeger the whole appears to be much more significant than the sum of its parts, and his work, together with that of Düring (which I will discuss later), remains a model to keep in mind.

In general, however, reconstructions of the life of Aristotle do not set themselves such ambitious goals. Speaking in very broad terms, one could say that academic historians are disposed, in general, to believe many of the anecdotal accounts offered us by ancient authors, and their

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writings tend to accept what is found in sources from Hellenistic and Roman times, such as Plutarch and Aulus Gellius; on the other hand, the studies of philologists and of historians of philosophy, who are more critical and diffident, cast doubt on the greater part of the data and traditional reports. The pictures that result are very different. Moreover, certain aspects of Aristotle's life, such as his relations with Alexander the Great or his link with Hermias, are at times treated by the same author in a contradictory manner, and it sometimes happens that we see attributed to the same historical figure the most contrasting positions.

While I do not set myself the objective of successfully resolving all these problems and these impasses in research, I have sought to make a summary of the situation, get to the bottom of certain doubts, and correct a few misunderstandings. My reconstruction starts off with ambitions far more modest than the requirements set out by Steiner, although it has no intention to be limited to a series of anecdotes and curious stories about the life and the personality of an ancient philosopher.

In my view, the interest to be taken in an investigation into the biography of Aristotle, as with the biography of Plato or of other figures of the ancient world, lies principally in the paradigmatic value of their intellectual experience. With Aristotle, in my view, a new cultural type was born, a model of the wise man different from that of his predecessors, and especially different from the sages who have been called the "Presocratics"; and a new style of philosophical reflection was worked out, the impact of which on European culture in all the centuries that followed would be very difficult to overestimate. What I am interested in doing here is to reconstruct as well as possible the historical features of this new intellectual figure, and to determine its specific characteristics.

In the reconstruction of these historical events I shall not concern myself directly with the content of Aristotle's thought; its birth and its development will be understood in a more global context, by means of a comparison with the philosophical discussions of the school of Plato and the influences of other cultural currents of his time. In this sense my research is lacking and insufficient, but it is impossible to proceed otherwise, given the enormous difficulty and the great complexity of this material. A major contribution to the delineation of the intellectual

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figure of Aristotle was made by Berti (1989), whose conclusions should be kept in mind, particularly when reading section 10 of chapter 1 of this book.

In working out this endeavor, the results of the work of Ingemar Düring (in particular Düring 1957) have been of precious guidance to me, as he analyzes the general trends, the prejudices, and the assumptions tacitly underlying the various biographical information on Aristotle; today the fruits of his investigations are an essential point of departure, even though, as we shall see, the logic of our endeavor has led me at times to an approach that is rather more constructive.

In the first three chapters of the present work I have started off by going back to the ancient sources, rather than the scholarly *status quaestionis*; and I have instead devoted the whole of chapter 4 of the present study to a delineation of the panorama of biographic research on Aristotle from the time of Zeller to the present. In the first three chapters I have not failed to keep in mind the results of the critical debate, at least of most of it, but I have undertaken first and foremost to re-read the texts, and have attempted to reconstruct a coherent picture of the life and of the intellectual personality of the philosopher by making use of the most reliable facts or, if not those, of the least uncertain ones. In order to give my readers some tools with which to check up on what I am going to be saying, I thought it a good idea to provide for them, in my own Italian translation, most of the data and most of the texts upon which I base my reconstruction.

CARLO NATALI
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