

## AFTERWORD

Are you listlessly glancing at this afterword, since you couldn't find a foothold in Aristotle's text? Because he doesn't "speak to you"? Or with desperation or disappointment, as it all seems to make little sense? Are you bored with your reading assignment? Or have you read from cover to cover, and still wonder "so what?", feeling somewhat perplexed or befuddled? Don't give up on Aristotle just yet. There must be *something* that made you pick up the book in the first place. Hold on to whatever that was.

Aristotle is food for thought. If you haven't a hunger for thought, or at least a certain appetite, you will likely not develop a taste for Aristotle's work. But how does one build up such an appetite? First, unlike a French meal, the sequence of courses (works) to read isn't set in stone for Aristotle. If you hunger for answers to the question of what kind of life you should lead, have *Ethics* I, II and VI as an appetizer. Are you fascinated by the problems of what the soul is, or what life is? Read *Psychology* II. Literature or theatre is your thing? Delve into the *Poetics*. The science of nature has always interested you? Start with the *Physics*. Logical questions are your pastime? Begin with *On Interpretation* and *Metaphysics* IV.4-6. You get the gist. As an appetizer awakens your hunger for the subsequent courses, so reading one part of Aristotle often makes a reader hungry for another.

Don't eat too fast, though. Take small bites. Chew carefully. Pause between sections, paragraphs or even sentences. Aristotle is a complex, highly nutritious diet. Some of the (page 492) taste nuances open themselves up only to the more experienced palate. Some flavors will fully reveal themselves only after repeated ingestion.

There are some basic Aristotelian ingredients that help coat the stomach, thus aiding the digestion of more substantial morsels. If you spend some time studying the ten categories (*Cat.*4), the distinctions between primary and secondary substances (*Cat.*5) and between potentiality and actuality (*Met.*IX.6), and the theory of the four causes

(*Phys.*III.3), this will pay off manifold when you read other parts of Aristotle's oeuvre. For these form the foundation of much of Aristotle's philosophy.

*Still not hungry?* How can you stimulate your appetite? Here's one recommendation. When Aristotle says he wants to investigate, say, what courage is, or literary art – pause right there. Spend a few minutes thinking about what *you* think courage or literary art is. Only then explore what Aristotle offers. Sometimes the differences may surprise, even shock; sometimes the similarities may amaze. Either way, your interest should be piqued.

Often Aristotle deals explicitly with philosophical problems that contemporary philosophers still discuss and to which no generally accepted solution has been found. But what happens when we want to know what Aristotle's view is on a philosophical issue where he himself, in his extant works, does not ask the same questions, but merely provides some material relevant to how he may have answered it? Here we enter an area of ancient philosophy where the prejudices, conceptual structures and beliefs of the reader may unduly impact the interpretation of the text – leading to misconceptions, based on the reader's inability to see a philosophical issue afresh, unadulterated by Post-Aristotelian preconceptions and ideas. We may miss what Aristotle says and replace it with what we want him to say or what we cannot imagine him not saying.

The remainder of this afterword provides an illustration of this pervasive phenomenon. One complex of problems still at the forefront of philosophical debate, without (page 493) a generally accepted solution in sight, is that of freedom and determinism. Aristotle never presents a theory of these problems, or even displays clear awareness of their existence. Still, there are plenty of passages in his philosophical writings -- in fact, some in every chapter of this book -- where Aristotle discusses directly related issues. The following remarks thus also illustrate the many systematic connections between Aristotle's writings. They are structured around a series of common misconceptions regarding Aristotle's position on issues of freedom and determinism.

***Misconception 1:*** Aristotle was a causal indeterminist since he postulated chance events.

A basic distinction in Aristotle's philosophy is between necessary events, like the movement of the stars, and contingent events, which include what happens mostly, what happens as often as not, and what mostly does not happen. Spontaneous and chance events fall in the last category (*Phys.*II.5). They cannot be scientifically explained, like some astronomical and biological facts (*Met.*VI.2, *Phys.*II.5). But they do have efficient causes: efficient causes that are accidental to their effect. If I owe you twenty dollars and you incidentally run into me at the supermarket, then your running into me is the cause of my paying my debt. The payback is a *chance* event, since its cause is accidental, and involves a choice (yours, of going shopping then). If a dagger incidentally falls off your shelf, and injures your friend, then the dagger is the cause of the injury. The injury is a *spontaneous* event, since, although the purpose of the dagger is to injure, it caused *this* injury accidentally. Thus for Aristotle, chance and spontaneous events have accidental efficient causes. From a current scientific viewpoint, too, such events would be considered caused. From either perspective, Aristotle doesn't emerge as a causal indeterminist, i.e. as someone who assumes uncaused events.

Moreover, for Aristotle, necessity and causal determinism (the theory that all events are determined by preceding causes) thus come apart. The fact that an event is causally (page 494) determined doesn't make it necessary in Aristotle's understanding of necessity. By contrast, contemporary theories of determinism usually consider causally determined events to be necessary. That matters for the next misconception.

**Misconception 2:** Aristotle is an indeterminist, since he denies that all events happen by necessity.

This misconception is based on the confusion of necessitarianism (the theory that everything happens by necessity) with causal determinism. Aristotle vehemently rejects necessitarianism, most famously by refuting logical determinism (the theory that all future events are necessitated by the fact that statements about them are already true now) in *Int.*9. He reports this argument for logical determinism: If something is happening now, then it was in the past always true to say that it would happen. But if it was always true to say that it would happen, then – whether or not anybody actually ever said it – it

necessarily had to happen. This holds for all events, past, present or future. Hence all events, including future ones, are necessary.

Aristotle attempts to show what is wrong with this and related arguments. He correctly notes that from the fact that necessarily one of a pair of contradictory statements is true, it doesn't follow that one of the individual statements is necessarily true. What is quite unclear is how this provides a refutation of logical determinism, and literally hundreds of Aristotle scholars have tried to answer this question. The logical determinist's argument seems to run from the truth of past statements about future events to the necessity of the future events. What remains in dispute even today is whether Aristotle argued (i) that the fact that a statement 'this will happen' has always been true doesn't entail that it is now already settled that this will happen, or (ii) that the fact that 'this will happen' has always been true (and it thus will happen, and it is already now settled that it will happen) does not entail that it happens by necessity. (i) is an argument against the predetermination of all events; (ii) an argument against necessitarianism and compatible with the predetermination of all events. As we (page 495) saw in *Misconception 1*, for Aristotle necessity and causal determination come apart. Thus, in Aristotle's own terms, (ii) suffices to refute necessitarianism.

***Misconception 3:*** Aristotle believes that agent causation is necessary for moral responsibility.

For Aristotle, a necessary condition for moral responsibility is that agents are the efficient causes of their action and the action has its beginning in the agent (*Eth.*III.1). *Misconception 3* is the result of misconstruing this condition. Aristotle's statement that the beginning, or principle, of the action is in the agent is wrongly taken to mean not only that the agent is the action's efficient cause, but also that the agent, in turn, is not caused to act by a prior efficient cause. The agent is envisaged as initiating the action, where this initiation itself is causally undetermined. Such causation, where agents are causally undetermined causes of their actions, is called agent causation.

However, for Aristotle, agent causation is not required for moral responsibility. First, when Aristotle elsewhere says that something is the beginning and efficient cause

of something else, he doesn't mean that the first thing did not have an efficient cause that caused it to be the way it is. Thus a father is the origin and efficient cause of a child (coming into being), but has himself a father as origin and efficient cause of him (coming into being).

Second, Aristotle himself explicates what he means by the agent being the beginning of action, and this doesn't involve agent causation. Negatively, he explains it as (i) the absence of external force that makes you "do" what you don't intend to do or prevents you from doing what you intend to do plus (ii) the – non-culpable – absence of ignorance of relevant specific circumstances of the actions (*Eth.*III.1, 5). Positively, he explains that the agent deliberates and chooses an action in accordance with the deliberation, where the deliberation and choice are determined by the agent's character (*Eth.*III.2-3, 5). The character is caused by natural dispose-(page 496)tions together with upbringing, education, other external circumstances, and the agent's prior actions (*Eth.*II; III.5, X.8). Whether the agent's prior actions are in turn caused by the agent's prior character is a question Aristotle doesn't discuss. But even if they aren't, Aristotle's theory does not require agent causation for moral responsibility.

**Misconception 4:** Aristotle believes that freedom-to-do-otherwise is a necessary condition for moral responsibility.

This misconception is the result of misunderstanding Aristotle's statement that if acting is in our power (*eph'hemin*), so is not acting, and *vice versa* (*Eth.*III.5). This is interpreted as meaning that in exactly the same circumstances, and with exactly the same character, the agent could have done otherwise (i.e. has freedom-to-do-otherwise). However, Aristotle's own account of what it means for something to be in our power is quite different. He contrasts the things in our power with things that are impossible or out of our reach (e.g. I cannot square the circle or bicycle on Mars) (*Eth.*III.2, 3); and with things that aren't in our power because we are forcefully prevented from doing them (*Eth.*III.1). Thus with the things in our power Aristotle simply provides the general domain of things on which we focus when deliberating and choosing what to do. Since, in addition, Aristotle never indicates that the same agent, with the same character and in

the same circumstances, could do otherwise than he or she actually does, we have no reason to assume that he regarded freedom-to-do-otherwise as necessary for moral responsibility.

**Misconception 5:** Aristotle claims that humans have freedom of choice.

Freedom of choice is the freedom to choose between alternative options. In Aristotle's terms, this would be to say that it is in our power to choose between performing an action or not performing it; or alternatively to choose between performing one action or another. But Aristotle only ever says that it is in our power to act or not to act; never that it is in our power to choose between doing this or that. His focus is on freedom of action. There is no indication in his *Ethics* that Aristotle is concerned with the question of (page 497) freedom of choice at all. The way he presents our choices (*prohairesis*), they follow upon our deliberation, and are in accordance with the result of our deliberation. Our deliberations, in turn are the result of our ends and desires (which are determined by our state of virtue) and our capacity for practical reasoning (which is determined by the condition of the part of our soul responsible for such reasoning), as well as the circumstances that got them started. If someone's – presumed – choices are not in line with the result of his or her deliberation, in Aristotle's view they may not even qualify as choices. Freedom of choice (*prohairesis*) became a philosophical topic only a few hundred years after Aristotle's death.

**Misconception 6:** Aristotle is a teleological determinist and believes in intelligent design.

*Teleological determinism* is the theory that all events are *predetermined* by an intelligent being, usually a divinity. This kind of determinism is called teleological, because the intelligent being has a *telos*, an end or plan, as to what should happen, and then – somehow – causes it to happen.

*Misconception 6* comes to be as follows: Aristotle distinguishes natural objects (hydrangeas, hamsters, humans) from artifacts or products (houses, hoes, hymns). He says every object, whether natural or artifact, has a final cause or end. For artifacts, the final cause is the “image” of the artifact-to-be in the producer’s mind, which, together with the producer’s desire to realize the object of imagination, causes the producer to bring about the artifact. Thus an intelligent being’s plan, together with their desire to realize it, determine the resulting product.

Now, Aristotle says that if things that happen through art have a purpose, so do things that happen by nature (*Phys.II.8*). The misconceived reasoning expands this analogy, stating that Aristotle thought that the final cause of natural things is the design of an intelligent god. In accordance with this design, acorns become oaks, human embryos fully developed adults, etc. However, this analogy is mistaken. Nowhere in Aristotle’s work appears an intelligent god’s (page 498) design that unfolds, and in accordance with which natural beings are fully developed. Aristotle’s god does not think about contingent things (*Met.XII.9*). Moreover, Aristotle states that the final cause or purpose of natural objects is *in* those objects and that no deliberation is involved in its actualization by its efficient cause (*Eth.VI.4*; *Phys.II.8*). The plan for the oak is *in* the acorn. And the acorn, with this plan in it, doesn’t need to deliberate for an oak to grow from it. Thus comparisons with DNA are more appropriate than with intelligent design.

Aristotle is also aware that nothing guarantees that all acorns become oaks. When the circumstances, e.g. a hungry squirrel, prevent it, no oak comes to be (*Phys.II.8*). If Aristotle was a teleological determinist, he would have to postulate a divine plan for the world as a whole, with acorn-munching squirrels and acorns growing into oaks side-by-side. The Stoics had such a theory; but not Aristotle. Thus, although for Aristotle all natural objects have an end, these ends are not those of an intelligent being, and Aristotle is not a teleological determinist.

***Misconception 7:*** Aristotle has no room for the freedom of artistic creativity, since art is mere imitation of nature.

Aristotle indeed says that art imitates nature (*Poet.*1, 4-6). But this does not prevent artists from creating something new. Artists are producers, as opposed to mere agents. They have an artistic skill (as poets or sculptors) which they use to produce works of art. The starting point of their production resides in the producer, not in the product (*Eth.*VI.4). The artist's skill is the efficient cause of the artistic product (*Phys.*II.3). In the production process, artists have in their mind an image of the product to be, thus employing their faculty of imagination (*Psych.*III.10). This image is the final cause of the artistic product. Hence a work of art is the result of the artists' imagination of the product-to-be, their desire to actualize it, and their skill, which makes the actualization possible.

The *Poetics* elucidate how the artistic process is creative rather than merely imitative. There Aristotle states that (page 499) poets are the *makers* of plots and *invent* situations and names. Dramatists are somewhat restricted by what is stageable. But they can put familiar events together in surprising new ways (*Poet.*9). Novelists can introduce plot elements that are highly improbable, even impossible, as long as they preserve overall plausibility (*Poet.*24). Moreover, in the *Physics*, Aristotle acknowledges that artists can be creative and surpass imitation of nature by perfecting nature (*Phys.*II.8); and in the *Ethics*, Aristotle may hint that chance events can cause artists to adjust their original plans (*Eth.*VI.4), thus leading to unexpected, and pleasing, results.

Hence Aristotle believes that artists can create unique works of art, within the limits of their imagination, skill, the specific physical restrictions of their art, and possible chance events. None of these would be without efficient causes. Does such a theory of art do justice to the aptitude and creativity involved in artistic production? Or does true art require uncaused spontaneity, supernatural genius or divine inspiration? As the presence of none of these is provable, Aristotle seems on safe ground.

**Misconception 8:** The freedom of action of the *Ethics* is the same as the freedom discussed in Aristotle's *Politics*.

Since Aristotle's theory of moral responsibility in *Eth.*III.1-5 is frequently paraphrased in terms of freedom, and Aristotle explicitly discusses freedom in the



*Politics*, this mistake is not uncommon. Often it is based on the more general confusion of the family of notions of freedom related to the determinism debate with those related to discussions of social and political freedom, and of freedom as autonomy. Some later philosophers (e.g. Kant) tried to show that a person's potential for freedom *qua* autonomy is necessary for moral responsibility. But Aristotle never draws a connection between freedom of action (which is essential for moral responsibility) and the freedom of the *Politics*. If he had, he would have stated that freedom of action is necessary for the freedom of the *Politics*, but not *vice versa*. Aristotle never confuses freedom of action with social or political freedom. As is standard at his time, he (page 500) uses the Greek word for freedom (*eleutheria*) solely for the latter two. Its discussion is restricted to the *Politics*.

**Misconception 9:** The theory of freedom Aristotle develops in his *Politics* is a theory of political freedom or of civil liberty.

Aristotle briefly discusses contemporary accounts of political freedom that characterize democracies. However, his own notion of freedom is not one of political freedom. Aristotle defines a free (*eleutheros*) person as “one who exists for their own sake and not for anyone else's” (*Met.I.2*). A person's freedom is manifested in the purpose of their existence. *Pol.I.1-7* provides details about what makes humans free. At the base of Aristotle's theory is the contrast between being free and being enslaved *within a household*. A slave is a person owned by another person. Aristotle defines being free negatively as not being a slave. His positive account of freedom is based on his distinction between being *by nature* free or slave. This distinction doesn't always tally with who is *de facto* slave or free in a given society (*Pol. I.6*). For Aristotle, what makes someone naturally free is having virtuous dispositions that are superior to those of natural slaves (*Pol.I.6*).

Aristotle's natural freedom is related to political theory as follows. A person has to be naturally free to qualify as a citizen (*Pol.I.7*). What makes someone qualify for citizenship is hence superiority in virtue. Aristotelian freedom is then neither political freedom, which may include things like freedom from poverty or oppression; nor civil

liberty, which may include things like freedom of religion or speech. For such freedoms are *not defined* by a person not having the natural dispositions of a slave: there could be laws in a slave society that guarantee slaves freedom of religion or freedom from torture. In Aristotle's *Politics*, freedom is, at its core, a social concept, defined relative to households rather than States. It is a virtue-related disposition that justifies *de facto* freedom, as opposed to enslavement, of humans in a household.

In conclusion, a general remark about reading Aristotle. (page 510) Aristotle never doubts that there are humans who are natural slaves, and for whom it is good and just to be the property of another human being. As justification he invokes the natural inferiority of women to men, which he equally never doubts, thus adding insult to injury. There existed thinkers contemporary with Aristotle who questioned one or both assumptions. Not so Aristotle. His philosophical imagination has deplorable limits. This fact is a useful reminder. Even the greatest thinkers are prone to fall for the prejudices of their times and err on essential issues. How should we respond? For one thing, it is useful to distinguish between an author and his or her work. What you have in your hands is a copy of a selection of Aristotle's surviving philosophical *works*. And whereas with people, we sometimes have to take them or leave them, with a philosopher's theories, we neither have to adopt nor reject them wholesale. We can pick and choose – just as in the case of an elaborate buffet meal. More than that: The fact that there are some obvious (to us!) errors in a thinker's work should remind us to be on our toes with respect to everything he or she says. Aristotle has been studied for over two thousand years, but slavery and the subordination of women were still justified *with reference to Aristotle's works* less than two hundred years ago. The point of reading philosophical works is never to just memorize and believe the theories expounded in them, nor to put their author on a pedestal. Rather, critical study of Aristotle should lead us to form our own reasoned opinions, with truth trumping Aristotle, where there is a discrepancy between the two. Undoubtedly, Aristotle would agree.

– Susanne Bobzien