

**CHIEF ANCIENT
PHILOSOPHIES: THE
ETHICS OF ARISTOTLE**

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Chief Ancient Philosophies: The Ethics of Aristotle by I. Gregory Smith

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I. GREGORY SMITH

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PHILOSOPHIES: THE
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THE
ETHICS OF ARISTOTLE.

BY

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P R E F A C E.

THIS is an attempt to tabulate from the "Ethics" the opinions of Aristotle on several questions of paramount importance, which are widely discussed at the present time, and to set his opinions side by side with those of some eminent modern philosophers. Perhaps in doing this something may be done towards indicating that "Scientific basis of morality,"¹ which is desired in many quarters. I have tried to be on my watch against the danger, to which commentators are specially exposed, of importing into the mind of their author opinions, which are really their own, not his.

It would be a grave injury to moral philosophy, if Aristotle were left out of consideration by moralists, or displaced in the studies of our Universities.

In a work, which though of small compass, has

¹ "The establishment of rules of right conduct on a scientific basis is a pressing need."—H. SPENCER, "Data of Ethics," p. iii.

occupied many years (so far as other duties permitted), it would not be easy to enumerate all those, to whom I am under obligation. But I would mention particularly the very sensible "Commentary on the 'Ethics'"¹ by the late accomplished Principal of the University of Edinburgh, as more really helpful to the student, than some more ambitious treatises. After all, the old saying is true, "Aristotelem non nisi ex ipso Aristotele intelliges."

The Appendices A, C, G (in part), H, I, J, are from an essay, which I contributed some years ago to a Quarterly Review.

The references to the "Ethics" are to the divisions of chapters in Grant's 3rd edition, 1874.

I have endeavoured to compress what I would say.

I. G. S.

MALVERN, Feb., 1886.

¹ "The Ethics of Aristotle." By Sir Alexander Grant, Bart., &c. &c.

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INTRODUCTION.

It might seem superfluous, when ethical questions are discussed, to call attention to the Ethics of Aristotle, were it not, that he is in some danger of being overlooked now in England. However far behind he may be left by the progress of knowledge in many departments, he may still be worth bearing on questions of morality and conduct. In regard to these the advance made by philosophy is rather in the art, than in the science, in the application of principles rather than in the principles themselves; ethical philosophy, as has been well said, being assimilative rather than progressive. There are indeed some characteristics of the Aristotelian philosophy, which bring it very near to modern thought on these subjects; while the terseness of his style is a relief to those, who are accustomed to modern diffuseness.

Aristotle's method of reasoning is mainly inductive. He has been called the inventor of the syllogism;¹ he may as fairly be said to have anticipated the inductive process of Bacon. With him analysis precedes synthesis; observation furnishes the mate-

¹ Appendix A.

rials for generalising; his major premiss is based on the collation of particular instances. Partly, perhaps, by recoil from the transcendental theorisings of his great rival, partly from natural temperament, Aristotle prefers the comparative certainty, solid, precise, definite, which experience alone can give. He starts from what he knows and rises from the bare fact to the potentiality of the principle which it embodies and exemplifies. In ethics he is content to take what he finds ready to hand, a practical consent, so far as he knows, as to what is praiseworthy and what is not. He will not even say, that there is any necessity to know the reason.¹

His data may be insufficient and, therefore, his summary imperfect and his inference faulty, but, at any rate, the method, which he proposes to himself, is the method, which modern science commends. His method has been discredited by the rigid technicalities and minutely-elaborated deductions of the schoolmen; but in itself it is, essentially, to ascend from what we know to what we know not.²

If the horizon, which Aristotle surveyed, is contracted in comparison with that, which science surveys now, at least he is eminently cautious in his assertions. So far as he knows, he affirms or denies, and no farther. If the major premiss in any of his arguments is invalidated by the inadequacy of the induction, on which it rests, he would be the first to admit, that the conclusion is good, only so far as the pre-

¹ "Ethics," I. vii. 20.

² "Ethics," I. iv. 6.

misses go. His reticence makes what he says all the more valuable. The reservation and the limitation, which continually qualify his assertion, are a safeguard against an overweening gnosticism. A favourite phrase with him, so far as a thing "is what it is,"¹ contains an important limitation of universal applicability for judging rightly. His philosophy abounds in distinctions, not purely dialectical, not mere refinements of language, but thoroughly practical. He insists on the difference for practical purposes between the absolute and the relative, the abstract and the concrete, the objective, as it is termed now, and the subjective.² The very staple of his teaching is, that our knowledge is limited; that things as they are to us, not as they may be in themselves, are what we are concerned with. His is a healthy agnosticism. He writes as one feeling his way from facts to theory.

Thus his use of induction and his tentative manner of using it bring Aristotle into sympathy with European philosophy at the present day. Another point of contact, less easily apprehended but not less important, is, that his teaching implies, if it does not express, the essential unity of the material and the spiritual world. More and more science discovers the ubiquity of law; more and more religion recognises the living presence, the continuous operation

¹ "Ethics," X, vii. 6.

² Ἀπλῶς, πρὸς τι ἄπλῶς, ἐκ τῶν ἰπαρχόντων καθέλου, τὰ καθέλου ἄπλῶς, πρὸς ἡμᾶς κατ' ἀλήθειαν, ἰδέσθω. "Form" and "matter" in Aristotle do not coincide with "subject" and "object" in modern philosophy.