
Aristotle: His Life and School by Carlo Natali, edited by D. S. Hutchinson

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Aristotle betrayed his home town of Stagira to the Macedonians and was later King Philip's informer. This was discovered in intercepted letters from Aristotle—according to Demochares (died *ca* 275), the nephew of Demosthenes. We learn about this in the seventh book of Aristocles' *On Philosophy* (second century AD), which survives only in the form of a lengthy excerpt in Eusebius' *Preparation for the Gospel* (fourth century AD).

The problem should be clear. Any attempt at a biography of Aristotle or a history of his school must not simply gather together any passages about Aristotle and the Peripatos and put them together in roughly chronological order. One must first of all scrupulously assess the sources of these *testimonia* and, to the extent possible, determine their reliability. This is extremely difficult and there is no guarantee that, when the dust settles, such scholarly rigor will have yielded a relatively full and accurate account of the life of Aristotle and the nature of his school.

The best attempt at this—containing texts, translations, and commentary—is the still indispensable (however dated) Düring 1957. But an excellent and much more readable presentation of this material, both accessible to a wide audience and useful to scholars, is Carlo Natali's *BIOS THEORETIKOS. La vita di Aristotele e l'organizzazione della sua scuola* [1991], now available in an updated version translated into English by D. Hutchinson.¹

¹ As is clear from his preface [vii–xix], Hutchinson was the prime mover in seeing this English translation through to publication. Moreover, he translated all of the ancient texts from scratch (in consultation with Natali), taking into account the most recent critical editions.

Putting aside front and end matter (Hutchinson's preface, Natali's original introduction and a new postscript as well as endnotes and indices),² the book has, as I see it, three parts: the life of Aristotle (chapter 1), the school of Aristotle (chh. 2–3), and modern scholarship on the life of Aristotle (ch. 4).

The first chapter, as one might expect, is the most important (and interesting) part of the book. But it has a misleading title: 'The Biography of Aristotle' (with the subtitle 'Facts, Hypotheses, Conjectures'). I say this because this chapter is not really a biography. One might be tempted to call it a prolegomenon to any future biography of Aristotle; but, aside from being pretentious, that would suggest that an actual biography of Aristotle is possible. Given the existing evidence, however, it is not. And I suspect Natali would agree with this assessment, for he opens this chapter with:

On the biography of Aristotle we have few certain facts, and there has been much conjecture. We lack information on the most important issues, whereas there is much information about matters that are ultimately of marginal significance. [5]

Instead, what Natali gives us is an excellent presentation of the ancient evidence concerning the life of Aristotle that follows the chronology of Aristotle's life, as far as that can be established, with his own running commentary and evaluation of sources. (Translations of sources are presented in boldface.) The chapter is divided into 10 parts:

1. Many Facts, Not All of Equal Interest
2. Stagira
3. A Family of Notables
4. A Provincial Pupil
5. A Sudden Interruption
6. At the Court of Princes and Kings
 - 6.1. Atarneus
 - 6.2. Macedonia
7. The Adventure of Callisthenes
8. Athens Revisited
9. Trial and Flight
10. From Traditional Customs, a New Model.

² This volume includes a bibliographical index [196–210], i.e., a bibliography, with each item followed by the relevant page numbers from the body of the book. I like this feature.

The reader is straightaway confronted with a wide variety of sources (some of which may well be unfamiliar) that have been used in the attempt to construct a life of Aristotle. For example, in the second section, on Aristotle's early life, the passages quoted come from the following sources:

- Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*,
- the *Vita Aristotelis Marciana*, an anonymous *Life of Aristotle* preserved in a single Greek manuscript in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice which is thought to derive from a biography written by someone named Ptolemy, whom the Arabs called *al-Gharib* (the Unknown),
- Aristocles' *On Philosophy*, excerpted in Eusebius (the passage with which I began this review),
- Aristotle's will, which is included in Diogenes Laertius,
- Diogenes Laertius again, and
- Theophrastus' *On the Causes of Plants*.

Again, in the fifth section which addresses the events of 348–347 in Macedonia³ and the death of Plato in 347 as well as Aristotle's subsequent (or consequent?) departure from Athens, there are three sources (the relevant quotations from which take up half a page):

- Philochorus (from a papyrus fragment of Philodemus' *Index of Academic Philosophers*),
- Diogenes Laertius, and
- Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *First Letter to Ammaeus*.

Natali points out that how these events are connected, that is, 'whether Aristotle's departure from Athens was caused by events within the school or by external political events' [31], is a matter of debate among modern scholars (since Zeller) for which there is little help from these sources. He presents a brief and useful summary of the debate but reserves judgment:

It is not possible to establish anything on this point, because neither of these two hypotheses has yet found any unimpeachable arguments in the texts. [32]

Although Natali does include his assessment of the sources and the debates about them as he proceeds, I nevertheless recommend that readers begin at

³ 'In the year 348 BC, Philip of Macedon conquered Olynthus and in 347 the anti-Macedonian party of Demosthenes took power in Athens' [31].

the end, so to speak, with the first section of chapter 4: ‘Sources of Aristotle’s Biography’. For those who work in ancient philosophy and science but do not specialize in the ancient biographical tradition, this is an extremely useful resource. And reading it before the ‘biography’ of Aristotle (in chapter 1) and the account of his school (in chapters 2–3) should allay some of the worries (or satisfy the curiosity) that a reader might have in encountering such sources as Diogenes Laertius, Aristotle’s will, the *Vita Marciana*, Dionysus of Halicarnassus, and so on.

This fifth section of chapter 1 is further divided into four subsections:⁴

1. Texts of Aristotle
 - 1.A. Fragments of the Lost Works and Texts of the Surviving Works
 - 1.B. Aristotle’s Last Will and Testament
 - 1.C. The Poems of Aristotle
 - 1.D. The Letters of Aristotle
2. Official Documents⁵
3. Ancient Biographies of Aristotle
4. The *Testimonia* of Ancient Authors.

For each section and subsection, Natali provides the reader with a concise account of the surviving evidence, the main scholarship on it, and his own assessment. For instance, regarding Aristotle’s own works, he says:

From these texts it is not possible to gather much biographical material. Aristotle, it would appear, adhered to the Ionic scientific tradition of saying little about himself in his works.⁶ [120].

Concerning the (supposed) letters of Aristotle [Rose 1886, frs. 651–670] and, most significantly, those to Alexander, some scholars defend their authen-

⁴ In its opening paragraph, Natali acknowledges his debt to Düring:

A large part of this section derives from Düring (1957); I have updated the information provided by this magisterial work on the basis of later studies up to 1990, and I have revised its interpretations on a few marginal points. [120]

He discusses more recent scholarly developments in his new postscript.

⁵ That is, three inscriptions, one each at Delphi, Ephesus, and Athens.

⁶ Would that Aristotle were more like Galen, whose remarks about himself could be used to construct a biography. In fact, see Mattern 2013.

ticity and others reject it, whereas Natali comes across as agnostic.⁷ In the case of one of the most important sources, Diogenes Laertius, Natali agrees with Moraux [1986] that in this work ‘the best is right next to the worst’ [127]. Aristotle’s will would count as the best: ‘Today’, Natali claims, ‘there are no longer any doubts concerning [its] authenticity’ [121]; the worst is comprised of ‘the fanciful details of which the work is full’ [127]. Concerning the bulk of material that fits the description ‘*testimonia* of ancient authors’, Natali prudently advises that ‘Even in the case of very ancient reports...it is necessary to weigh their reliability carefully’ [130]; and he warns that ‘In the Hellenistic period, numerous legends were fabricated about Aristotle’ [133]. Examples of how Natali himself follows this advice and heeds this warning are found throughout his account of Aristotle’s life and school.

I turn now to Aristotle’s school, to which Natali devotes two chapters. As I am somewhat critical here, it is worthwhile to start by presenting the contents of these chapters:

Chapter 2. Institutional Aspects of the School of Aristotle

- 2.1 The Three Conditions of the Theoretical Life in Aristotle
- 2.2 The Organization of *Theōria*: The Nature and Organization of the Philosophical Schools
- 2.3 The Organization of *Theōria*: Philosophical Schools and Permanent Institutions
- 2.4 Subsequent Events

Chapter 3: Internal Organization of the School of Aristotle

- 3.1 The Collection of Books
- 3.2 Methods of Gathering and Interpreting Information
- 3.3 Teaching Supports and Instruments of Research
- 3.4 Teaching while Strolling

⁷ A few pages later, however, in the section on the *testimonia* of ancient authors, he writes:

In my opinion, the collections of letters between Aristotle and Alexander, as well as the collections of letters between Philip of Macedon and Aristotle, are to be reckoned among these [*scil.* post-Hellenistic] literary fictions. [134]

It was unclear (to me, at least) whether these were among the letters discussed earlier in chapter 4.

I was a bit baffled both by the division of this subject matter over two chapters and by their organization. It is in fact one subject and these chapters together consist of fewer pages than the first chapter, so it would have made sense to combine them. Further, some of the material spread over these chapters naturally goes together (e.g., the collection of books and the organization of the school). Finally, I see no reason not to present it in roughly chronological order; but as it is, 2.3–4 deal mostly with Theophrastus (and after), whereas the vast majority of texts quoted in 3.1–3 come from the works of Aristotle. These are relatively minor objections, however, and they do not detract much from the value of these chapters. I found especially useful Natali's account of Theophrastus' will and what it can tell us about Aristotle's school [86–90], his account of the much-discussed story from Strabo and Plutarch about the fate of Aristotle's library after the death of Theophrastus [102–104],⁸ and the presentation of passages in the *Corpus Aristotelicum* including or referring to tables, lists, diagrams, and so forth [113–117].

Natali avoids making imprudent connections between Aristotle's life and philosophical convictions. Certainly, there is nothing like the sort of thing that one often encounters, e.g., that Aristotle was more empirical in his approach to philosophy because his father was a physician.⁹ But it is in chapters 2–3 where one sees most clearly some of Natali's own views about Aristotle's *philosophy*. Most notable is section 2.1, in which he briefly presents his interpretation of Aristotle's claim that the best life is one of contemplation. This section [72–77] glides rapidly (however intelligently) over some highly controversial texts in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10 (which some scholars have claimed contradict, or appear to contradict, the rest of that work). Natali holds that these texts are crucial for understanding Aristotle's life

⁸ In his postscript [148–150], Natali briefly discusses two more recent works on this topic: Barnes 1997 and Primavesi 2007.

⁹ It is surprising to learn how little evidence there is about Aristotle's father, Nicomachus. Natali writes, 'All we know about Aristotle's father is his name,' though there is some evidence that he was a physician [8–9]. Epicurus, according to Diogenes Laertius, reported a different kind of connection between Aristotle and medicine: 'after devouring his father's fortune [Aristotle] took to soldiering and selling drugs' [9].

and especially the organization of the school (recall the Italian title: ‘BIOS THEORETIKOS’). I’m not so sure.¹⁰

More objectionable, in my view, is Natali’s attempt to bring Plato and Aristotle closer together than I think they are, an attempt which stems at least in part from his interpretation of Aristotle’s conception of the βίος θεωρητικός. This attempt is especially objectionable in connection with Aristotle’s biology.¹¹ In fact, I regard his treatment of Aristotle’s biological works as the book’s one fundamental flaw.

In section 3.2, Natali writes:

Plato also admitted the importance of investigating the presence of rationality in the world of becoming (*Timaeus* 29a–c), and from this point of view his position is not very far from the one expressed by Aristotle in *Parts of Animals* 1.5. [105]

Without denying that there are connections between the two works, I think that to anyone who goes on to read (and consider the details of) *Parts of Animals* 2–4 they are in the end worlds apart.¹² A couple of pages later, Natali writes that ‘Theophrastus...is considered much more of an actual

¹⁰ I do not deny that knowing something about Aristotle’s ethical philosophy contributes to what we might conclude about the sort of person he was and the life he led. My point is that you could say that about any number of passages in his literary corpus: e.g., *Parts of Animals* 1.5 on the importance of the study of biology or the passages in *Poetics* 25 and *Metaphysics* Λ.8 which make fairly certain that Aristotle regarded the Olympian gods as mythological.

¹¹ I do not know enough about ancient astronomy to say how close together or far apart Plato and Aristotle are on that subject, though I assume (whatever Aristotle’s actual practice) that he objected to the Platonic conception of astronomy as unconcerned with “visible things” and that those studying astronomy “should leave the things in the heavens alone” [*Resp.* 528e–530c].

¹² David Balme [see Gotthelf and Lennox 1987, ch. 1] writes:

PA II–IV recalls Plato’s *Timaeus*, both in the dual causation by the good and the necessary, and in its view of the *scala naturae* with its associated value judgments. [17]

But in another essay in the same volume [ch. 10], he describes how differently these characteristics in fact operate in the two works [276–279]. See also Lennox 2001, chh. 6 and 13.

scientist than Aristotle'. 'By whom?', one wonders.¹³ Moreover, as evidence for this astonishing remark, Natali quotes the opening of the Peripatetic *On Weather Signs*, which reports that 'we have recorded signs of rains, winds, storms...'—presumably from the author's (or authors') own observations—and taken 'some from others who are not untrustworthy' [107].¹⁴ That one could regard this compilation as more scientific than, say, the *History of Animals* or *Parts of Animals*, is mind boggling, especially for those who know the scholarship on Aristotle's biology.¹⁵ And that's the problem: Natali, who has done brilliant work on other aspects of Aristotle's writings (and especially his ethics), does not seem to know the biology (or at any rate much of the excellent scholarship on it that has appeared over the past few decades). For instance, earlier in the book, he writes that in his *History of Animals* 'Aristotle worked primarily from written sources, including Homer,¹⁶ the poets, and Xenophon, and not from personal observation' [41–42]. No scholar of Aristotle's biology (whom I am aware of) would agree with this claim today.¹⁷

The final section of the body of the book [ch. 4.2] is entitled 'Images of Aristotle from the Nineteenth Century to the Present' [135–44]. It contains

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- ¹³ For an excellent comparison between Aristotle's *History of Animals* and Theophrastus' *History of Plants*, see Gotthelf 2012, ch. 14. He does not conclude that Theophrastus was a better botanist than Aristotle was a zoologist.
- ¹⁴ In a note to this passage, Natali states that the manuscripts attribute the work to Aristotle but that no modern scholar accepts this attribution, adding that it cannot be attributed to Theophrastus either, though 'its content is Theophrastean' [175n7]. In fact, of the two most authoritative manuscripts, the oldest (Marcianus IV 58) names no author, while the other (Vaticanus gr. 2231) names Aristotle. The 13th-century Latin translation by Bartholomew of Messina, which comes from an independent tradition and is important for establishing the text, also attributes the work to Aristotle. It is ascribed to Theophrastus only in Vaticanus Reg. gr. 123, a 16th-century manuscript copy of the Aldine edition (1497), which itself names no author.
- ¹⁵ None of this implies a lack of respect for or interest in Theophrastus on my part. On the contrary, he is a fascinating figure and currently occupies a great deal of my time, as I am preparing a critical edition (with translation and commentary) of his *On Winds*. But I do think that he is no Aristotle.
- ¹⁶ On the nature of the Homeric passages in Aristotle's biology, see Mayhew 2015.
- ¹⁷ See the essays in Gotthelf and Lennox 1987, Lennox 2001, and Gotthelf 2012. Note especially Gotthelf's coda to this last item: 'Aristotle as Scientist: A Proper Verdict' [371–398].

a brief but superb survey of the history of Aristotle-biography from Zeller to the present, with Zeller, Wilamowitz, Jaeger, and Düring quite rightly receiving the most attention, though many other figures are treated as well.¹⁸ Natali ends where the survey begins, defending a Zeller-like position in favor of an intellectual over a political interpretation of the life of Aristotle:

The pages of *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6–8 on the *bios theôretikos* [sic],¹⁹ in which Aristotle describes it as a perfect state of being, take on an exactly autobiographical flavor. The position of Zeller, from which we began, emerges again at the end of this review as one of the most reliable interpretations. [144]

A reader, having finished this book, may well bemoan how little, in the end, we can say with certainty about Aristotle's life and school. But there is, in an important (if not entirely satisfying) sense, a fair amount about which we can be confident. Having read this book, I now have a much better grasp of the issues involved in ancient biography as it applies to Aristotle and other Peripatetics, and of what we know and what we do not know (and knowing what we do not know is a kind of knowledge).

My objections to the treatment of Aristotle's biology aside, I agree with Hutchinson's claim in his preface, that this book will (and the implication is, should) 'serve as the new modern standard biography of Aristotle' [vii].

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¹⁸ Natali's postscript updates his account.

¹⁹ Rather, 'theoretikos' (as in the Italian title) or preferably 'theôrêtikos' («θεωρητικός»). Perhaps this is the appropriate place to mention that this book is relatively free of typographical errors. I noted one other: 'Döring' on page 131 should be 'Düring'.

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