

Marcos, A., *Postmodern Aristotle*, with a Forward by Sir G. Lloyd, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, 154 pp.

Review

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The innovative and challenging issues of “Postmodern Aristotle” excellently illustrate the perennial significance of the Aristotelian corpus as conceptual basis of our current representation of reality. Moreover, by its general layout rather than by its arguments, the book invites to an in-depth discussion on postmodern endeavors to interpret, update and, ultimately, instrumentalize the classics from the view point of postmodern philosophical agenda. The author clearly states that his objective is not to search for a correct interpretation of the Aristotelian corpus, but to answer the question “Are any of the existing interpretations useful for the current philosophical debate?” (p. 6). Naturally there is at least one, Balme’s,<sup>2</sup> which, although the author admits is highly controversial, it suits his purpose and therefore adopts it without further inquiry. This is a straightforward position. It is take it or leave it. One may raise objections to Balme’s line of interpretation, but here it is used as a working hypothesis. Aristotelian theories are further updated and completed by philosophers such as Popper, Peirce or Jonas in order to provide an adequate ontological framework to modern philosophy of science by creating a continuum of science with life and common experience. After all, the researcher is a human being, therefore, subject to the same code of moral behavior as everybody else. In sum, the Aristotelian philosophy of substances creates the conditions for a science of the concrete individual. In order to realize such an ambitious project, the author is at the lookout for hints of a possible alternative reading of the Aristotelian texts. By such maneuvers, “Postmodern Aristotle” indirectly raises the question of the reliability of available Aristotelian translations for a scholar or student with no or scarce mastery of ancient Greek.

Let’s take point by point our discussion. Aristotelian theories updated and completed by modern philosophies serve as an ontological framework to a postmodern science of the concrete, which, furthermore, is not isolated from common experience or beyond predominant values and objectives of modern Euro-Americans. The reconciliation of such heterogeneous intellectual clusters is made possible by a sort of vague universalization of current preoccupations either in the field of scientific inquiry or in that of values and pursuits. The discussion of the Aristotelian theory of *phronesis* (prudence, also translated as practical truth) may give us some

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<sup>2</sup> “In Balme’s opinion, the notions of species and form must be distinguished... Form is individual, actual, with physical reality and causal capacity” (p.20). Balme further states that the word *eidos* covers both form and species. In his view, our concept of species corresponds to Aristotle’s universal (*Ibid.*).

interesting clues as to Marcos' meaning and purpose of updating. *Phronesis* is presented as the umbrella of all methods in scientific research as well as in environmental preoccupations. In its postmodern version, it presents the scientist with the rule of responsible research, with the possibility of making a science of the concrete, and the environmentalist with the conditions of preserving, caring and fostering humanity's indefinite continuation as advocated by Jonas. *Phronesis* is presented as a methodological attitude to draw up rational rules (translation of *logos*) and as the standard of their correct application (*p. 36, sq*). In the proposed reading, the scientist, the environmentalist or any person concerned may persevere in her own proclivities insofar as she acts according to the rules of *phronesis*. By its independence from the original context, the discussion of methodological *phronesis* raises questions as to its pertinence. It overlooks or underestimates an important, in my view, dimension of recasting, namely the limits imposed by the Aristotelian moral context. The version of methodological *phronesis* leaves far behind the gist, I may say, of Aristotelian moral tenets. If the formation of character, the interconnectedness with the other virtues, particularly justice, and the active participation in the political reality are barred from the debate, we may well ask whether Aristotelian ethics are needed for advancing a responsible scientific attitude or methodological ethos. If the context may be ignored or altered according to the author's objectives, then we witness a degree of arbitrariness which impacts on the validity of the advanced positions. In sum, a preliminary discussion is needed on what and how may be convincingly updated.

In the bottom line, Marcos admits that his main focus in exploring Aristotelian theories is ontology. In his view, Aristotle may well provide the ontological framework of postmodernism. Plural substances, of humans, animals and plants, in their concrete individuated existence constitute the ultimate ontic reality (*p. 44*).

My second point concerns the interpretative line of "Postmodern Aristotle." The author takes as starting point the so-called biological writings, the latest in date and considered until now as the less philosophically interesting texts of the Aristotelian corpus. Marcos proposes to discover in their pages the authentic Aristotelian conception of science. Indeed, such texts may illustrate what Aristotle thought of science in the concrete inasmuch as they constitute scientific writings. Adopting such a starting point entails two significant consequences. First, the object of Aristotelian science is the concrete individual –our focus in the next paragraph- and second, the final cause gets a restrained biological meaning. In respect to the second point, a significant shift is operated from the human to the animal and ultimately to the biological perspective. We are transferred to a biocentric, i.e. nature-centered, in opposition to the more conventional anthropocentric, Aristotelian reading. In line with current trends, the living being is considered as a biological atom. The Aristotelian concepts of genus and species are relegated to matter, potency and the universal (*p. 21*). The author systematically downplays their epistemological necessity in the formation of a science of the concrete. Then, teleology almost "naturally" is left out of the discussion. Therefore, living beings can be examined as biological monads exhibiting plurality, variety and individuality. Marcos observes

living beings in their process of differentiation from “something undifferentiated, generic, material” to their last differentiation as individuals. The process reminds the differentiation of cells during the formation of the embryo (*p. 103*). Inasmuch as differentiation actualizes the potential of matter, it corresponds to one aspect of Aristotle’s conception of finality. It is equally certain that it is not the only one. As the *On the Soul* (415b2,3) explains finality is of two kinds, namely the end and that by which the end is achieved. For instance, whereas all beings partake of divinity and eternity, they don’t do so individually or as numeric entities, but collectively as species. Reproduction is the means to achieve this kind of eternity (415b3-8). It is obvious that goals and pursuits vary according to the nature of the soul, nutritive, sensitive or rational. Purpose in its various degrees, grading from vegetal tropism to human *proairesis* is perhaps the most salient feature of living beings. Marcos’ biocentric perspective and the silence surrounding the final cause, his heavy reliance on the biological writings alongside a selective reading of the Aristotelian corpus creates a kind of vacuum around the ideas he uses in his various purposes. For instance, the discussion about humans being “desiderative intelligence or intelligent desire” (*p. 38*) does not go further than meeting late twentieth century conceptualizations. It is to be regretted that Marcos has slightly altered the Aristotelian definition, which reads as follows: “*Intention (proairesis) is either appetizing intellect or intellectual appetite and this principle (defines) man*” (*Nicomacheian Ethics, 1139b5-7*, translation of the reviewer). Within its proper context, “desiderative intelligence or intelligent desire” speaks of finality as the condition or principle of humankind and further defines its nature. The Aristotelian text lets us think that whereas all beings move more or less instinctively towards something, humans deliberately propose and pursue targets. In their case, finality is the convergence of a complex affective, psychological, cognitive and ultimately moral process. The last aspect of teleology, banned from contemporary literature, concerns the viewpoint of nature. As intelligence works for a purpose, likewise works nature (*On the Soul, 415b17-19*). A complete silence surrounds natural teleology, although it plays a central role in ancient philosophy and specifically in the Aristotelian context.

My third point concerns the “science in act” which constitutes without doubt the pivotal chapter of the book. A discussion of the epistemological and ontological aspects of the Aristotelian concept of science prepares the ground for the ‘science of the individual’ (*pp. 68-75*). The author defends the thesis that in at least one passage, Aristotle leaves room for a science of the concrete individual (*p. 67*). The passage in question is *Metaphysics M 10* (1087a14-31). There, Aristotle sums up his criticism of Plato’s theory of ideas and concludes by a brief reminder of his own position and the distinction between science in potency and science in act. Marcos reads Aristotle’s position as meaning two separate kinds of *episteme*, one of concepts, equivalent to the universal and potent, and one of the individual corresponding to science in act. Having established such a distinction, he goes on to explore the conditions of an updated science of the individual. Questions are raised first by the way the passage is presented. Aristotle gives a concrete example conveniently cut out and replaced by

dots. I feel the need to reconstitute it as I find it in conformity with other relevant texts usually accepted as representing Aristotle's concept of science. It reads as follows:

*But per accidens sight sees universal colour, because this [individual] colour which it sees is colour; and this [individual] a which the grammarian investigates is an a.*<sup>3</sup>

The example sheds light on what Aristotle means – at least in this passage- by science in act and science in potency. He explains two aspects of the same process. From the point of view of epistemology, when I see this color (act), I see color (potency) in this individual concrete object of my sight. From a logical point of view, at the sentence “I see this,” I predicate color as object (accidents (*symvevekota*) are predicated on substance). Marcos accepts this interpretation (p. 69), although he tries to establish a different interpretative line based on the concept of similarity as the real basis of concepts (pp. 69, 84). A science of the concrete individual construed with the aid of metaphors and similes and free from the constraints of concepts finds corroboration in passages of various texts, such as the *Rhetoric* or the *Poetics*. According to Aristotelian standards, it admittedly constitutes a type of knowledge distinct from science. In this case, we may well conceive of a science based on images, photos, videos, etc. There are plenty of citations to defend any thesis. My point is that such ideas need to be both verified and validated within their referential context. Current scientific practice cannot provide the ultimate authority. In fact, all writings written by scientists do not constitute science in the proper meaning of the term. There is popular science, where metaphor is the main instrument of explaining ideas, there are documentaries written by or in consultation with scientists, etc. I think that a science of the concrete aiming at a figurative understanding of its content may find its proper and most welcome place in a discussion about the different genres of scientific literature.

My last point concerns the reliability of available translations particularly for a scholar or student with rudimentary mastery of ancient Greek. Excessive reliance on the letter of a translated text may lead to misinterpretation. The most striking example in “Postmodern Aristotle” is the polarized treatment reserved to the pair universal-individual. These terms translate the key-expressions, *to kath'holou* and *to kath'hekaston* respectively. Significantly, by their structure, such expressions communicate a strong sense of imbedding things in a specific context: from the point of view of the whole (*to holon*) and from the point of view of each one (thing) (*hekaston*). A fresh Aristotelian reading of the terms is certainly welcome. One last remark concerns the confusion between individual and concrete thing in Aristotelian vocabulary. Each one (*hekastos*) does not mean the individual in the modern sense. It refers to one of a class, series or kind, i.e. an instance. By many aspects, it is opposed

<sup>3</sup> *Metaphysics M 1087a 24-26* translated by W. D. Ross, *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1908-1952. I cite on purpose the translation of Ross in order to keep in line with Marcos. The brackets are my own as their content does not figure in the original. Throughout the passage, Ross translates “ousia” by “substance.”

to the individual as a unique, separate entity. On the other hand, the concrete is *to the ti*, this something which is the object of our perception but beyond *episteme*. This *ti* may also mean “what” and thus it asks a question inviting us to get to know what is. We can think “this what” as so specifically concrete that it cannot become object of knowledge unless it is referred to the whole. Marcos defends the position that the extreme differentiated individual may be the object of the new science of the concrete mediated primarily by metaphors. He may well find hints in various Aristotelian writings; the truth remains that Aristotle has articulated a theory of science which has come down to us and relies on the idea of potency and concept. It may well be, and this is only a suggestion, that in line with the general tendency of Greek philosophers, he considered “this what” as belonging to the realm of pure experience, to pure seeing, hearing, etc. which remains beyond our rational knowledge. In this perspective, pure experience covers the field of immediate reality, the thing itself. Then comes perception, the seeing of color or the observation of a letter. This level contextualizes the unknown into a whole-concept and apprehends it as one of its kind.

In conclusion, I think that “Postmodern Aristotle” demonstrates without doubt the actuality of Aristotelian theories. The corpus is so rich, that it can inspire, guide and corroborate the most diverse and innovative issues of our age. It may well be that philosophy – and not only – needs an urgent cure of Aristotle. However, I also think that we need to listen to what Aristotle says. Involved with our current philosophical preoccupations we tend to read our thoughts in the ancient texts. Perhaps Aristotle has more to offer than an ontological background.