

**Review of Allan Gotthelf's  
"Teleology, First Principles, and Scientific Method  
in Aristotle's Biology"**

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**A PREAMBLE  
TO THE POST POST-MODERN NEO-ARISTOTELIANISM**

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*Many animals have memory and are capable of instruction,  
but no other creature except man can recall the past at will.*

Aristotle, History of Animals

The *onomastic iconicity* of the publishing house and the theme of the volume call for attention of a reviewer. After all, since the 19th century, the Oxford University Press has been wearing and still does carry the 'royal crown' of the authoritative promoter of knowledge in classical antiquities in general, and in Aristotle in particular. The 20<sup>th</sup>-century rise of English as the global *lingua franca* elevated the status of the Press even more due to the wider dissemination of the knowledge of classical antiquities in the parts of the world, less familiar with the subject, i.e. beyond Europe. But the resulting wider area of the global knowledge has also heightened the responsibility of the publishers in English who had to face the challenge of the most unfortunate cultural circumstances.

To common regret, the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have also earned the reputation of the most culturally and ethically bankrupt times – the post- Google and post space -exploration generation has regrettably produced **neither new Homers, Virgils, Ciceroes, Da Vincis, Borominis, Dantes, Shakespeares, nor new Aristotles**. The crisis of the Mind and imagination is self-evident – characterized by the largely absent wisdom in all areas of life, declined aesthetics and noble creativity, the global humanity is left confused, unhappy and angry. The intellectually impotent, inadequately educated, linguistically impaired, albeit technologically and media savvy, the "techno cynical" children of modernity still strive to assert themselves in cultural history, despite their anger at the "cultural parents" of antiquity. And Aristotle became the greatest challenge to this new generation.

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Over millennia, none of the thinkers, theologians, scientists and educators could ignore Aristotle – they all approached his works in one way or the other, contributing to the accumulation of a great variety *aristotelianisms*. Aristotle, by universal, often reluctant, admissions, is indisputably the “Father” of modern **secular science**, logic, secular ethics, literary criticism, political science, medicine, biology, genetics, semiotics, etc. It would not be an overstatement to say that there is no area of collective human knowledge to which Aristotle did not contribute to a certain extent. “**No man before him had contributed so much to learning. No man after him could hope to rival his achievements,**” wrote, in 1982, Jonathan Barnes, one of the recent most attentive translators and astute commentators of Aristotle, who had both the expertise and the courage to undertake the revision of the available English translations from Greek, including those, previously published by the Oxford University Press.

Given the status of Aristotle in the overall human cultural history and the significance of his works for the collective advancement of knowledge and human civilization, it is quite commendable to dedicate oneself to Aristotle studies. As we learn from the authorial preface to the new Oxford volume, Allan Gotthelf has been doing just that for over the last 35 years. Albeit not a monograph, the volume, a collection of previously published materials – parts of the doctoral dissertation going back to the seventies, essays, papers and re-worked lectures – sums up a serious academic activity of a post-modern American scholar.

His interest in Aristotle was apparently triggered by meeting with Ayn Rand, a Russian emigre, the graduate of then Soviet Petrograd University, who herself benefitted from the well-established Aristotle studies, both in the pre and post-1917 Russia. The context of Gotthelf’s academic career does not end there – his interest in Aristotle had also been prompted by the grand shift in the system of American education. All Anglo-American Universities, particularly those in the USA, historically generally were “often purged from philosophy courses” and Aristotle, in particular, as Charles Schmitt correctly diagnosed the situation (1973:125). But the late sixties and seventies of the 20th century also mark the era of the monumental Soviet space exploration, which awakened American politicians and scholars to the fact of a superior scientific knowledge in the “evil Empire” and the sad state of educational affairs and teaching of sciences in their own land of goodness and plenty. Sputnik, Laika and Gagarin forced the USA to radically change the American curriculum, shifting the focus of studies, and the financial support of the scientific projects. This is the context in which Allan Gotthelf’s scholarly career had begun, having predetermined his interest in natural biology and Aristotle as a scientist.

The present volume, compiled in 2012, presents a collection of his early work, largely unchanged, bearing the unfortunate traces of the old styles of presentation and the effects of the so-called “graduate-student syndrome” and “writing in the presence” of the senior colleagues, who still somehow intimidate the mature scholar. Allan Gotthelf, regrettably, exhibits his limited analytical freedom. In fact, Balme, rather than Aristotle, still “teaches” him (p.217), and Balme’s analysis is to him quite

“masterly” (p.24), while Aristotle himself, the “great scientist”, does not evoke the same reverence. In general, the Aristotelian discourse appears jammed by what appears as the less significant quotations from post-modern scholars, undertaking the semi-Biblical exegesis of the Greek sage, but still unable compete with him, but whose ego the polite author feels obliged to stoke by mentioning them far too frequently.

The most interesting part of the volume is the last 15th Chapter, entitled “Aristotle as Theoretical Biologist,” representing a more independent analysis, previously unpublished, and having some interesting insights into Aristotle. Gotthelf, finally, reveals Aristotle’s anticipation of some significant modern scientific discoveries – the distant future DNA program in the simple logical discourse on *directiveness*, as well as some symmetry between the Darwinian theory of selection and the Aristotelian hypothesis about the evolution of the animal world. The volume ends with the remark, “Aristotle was a great scientist, and among the greatest. For, if Aristotle’s practice in his biological works is not great science, then I don’t know what could be” (p. 398). The author should have started with this point, since proving the eternal relevance of Aristotle to human science and civilization is the fundamental premise. The volume leaves one very disappointed both with the text and the reputable Press.

The editorial team of the Oxford University Press could have done a lot to improve the volume. The following should have been suggested and enforced:

1) the preliminary **Introduction**, containing some overview of key commentators and most important students of Aristotle, as well as translators from Greek, and explanation of terms the author intended to use in the text;

2) a **glossary of terms**, placed either after the introduction, or at the back, before indexes;

3) Greek terms be consistently expressed in Greek and not in English transliteration throughout the entire text, not only after p.93;

4) Greek text be *italicized and* placed either next to the English quote or in the brackets below, not in the illegible footnotes; the best way would have been to place it in the Appendix;

5) Aristotle’s voice be made graphically more visible on the page;

6) footnotes be reduced by 50%, had the author purged them from unnecessary commentaries and Greek quotations, which belong to the body of the page;

7) but certain footnotes be added, e.g. dates of birth and death of such important individuals as Theodorus of Gaza, Sepeusipus or Michael Scot(ius);

8) references be limited **only to the works cited** and not those read for background – for instance, hardly possible for Gotthelf to have read all the 20 volumes of *Le Opere di Galileo*, never mind referring to all of them for the needs of his discourse;

9) Darwin’s letters presented as intriguing archival evidence are copied from Burkhardt’s volumes, and this fact should have been acknowledged on all the

relevant pages (No.347;348;349;393;394;395;396;397); this way they are presented and perceived as Gotthelf's personal archival findings;

10) **all Greek proto-editions** of Aristotle used (Bekker, H.J. Drossart Lalof, etc) and English translations should have been acknowledged at the beginning of the volume, as all Aristotle scholars do; they are more important than the sources in Greek Grammar or Particles which Gotthelf mentions, forgetting to name the more important ones;

11) **translators** had to be acknowledged separately from commentators (J.Barnes is both a translator and commentator, so references should reflect his separate roles as well as those of others, such Ross, Balme etc.);

12) the attempts to correct the Greek or English of other translators make the author digress from his main goal which is not in the area of the textological studies;

13) the Arabic transmission of Aristotle, a theme, rather historically problematic (a theme of another book in itself) and politicized at present due to the rise of militant Islam, be omitted from the volume.

All in all, the presentation and layout of this Oxford item in these Aristotle Series significantly breaks the conventions, but not "*for the sake of*" better knowledge. It is rather due to the underlying cause – the cultural circumstances of post post-modernity. Nonetheless, Aristotle is still capable of teaching us how to be clear, concise, honest, logical and insightful. From the distant antiquity, he was able to make the most intelligent guess about the dominant gene, having thus anticipated modern genetics, and one could have learnt this, had one attentively read his early *History of Animals* or *Generation of Animals*.

The Anglo-American scholarship would have significantly benefitted from the awareness about the Russian pre-revolutionary and Soviet Aristotelianism, if not for the ideological prejudices and lack of the desire to familiarize themselves with the Russian studies of the last three hundred years. Prof. Gotthelf would have written different essays about Aristotle, had he known the thematic scope of his Russian colleagues, his contemporaries. For instance, the work by Konstantin Sergeev and Yaroslav Slinin, *Aristotle's Cosmos and Science of Modernity*, published in 1987 by Leningrad University Press, ably deals with the continuity of Aristotle's legacy in the theories of Newton and Galileo, as well as the little known complimentary **Aristotle's Laws**. Alexey Losev (1893–1988), the Russian most authoritative voice on Aristotle, who had a perfect command of Greek and several European languages and one of the Russian scholars, who was familiar with the pre-Christian Greek/Roman transmission of Aristotle is totally unknown in the West (A. Losev, 1971, vol.1:14).

Produced in the relative analytical vacuum for variety of reasons, this volume teaches little about Aristotle, but what it does is that it dictates the strongly revised approach to Aristotle scholarship, which should be more inclusive geographically. The Centres of Aristotelianism have long ago moved from Venice, Padua, Naples, Ferrara, Milan, Leipzig, Frankfurt, Berlin, Vienna, Oxford, New York, and Princeton to Krakow, Belgrade, Prague, Tallinn, Budapest, Helsinki, Oslo, Uppsala, Moscow,

St. Petersburg, Odessa, Novosibirsk, Tokyo, Kyoto, Beijing, or Hong Kong. The Oxford Aristotle series have to expand the geographic scope of scholarship, taking into consideration that English, the **modern lingua franca** no longer permits to continue it as an exclusive club of Anglo-Americans, with the false posture of **the** authorities on Aristotle. Aristotle wrote for humanity, and the English language of the present globe makes his legacy **a shared cultural property of the world.**

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