

Review on Craig Martin's
Subverting Aristotle: Religion, History and Philosophy in Early Modern Science
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SUBVERTING ARISTOTLE OR CULTURAL HISTORY OF EUROPE?

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Given the current revived interest in Aristotle and Aristotelianism, any discourse on the topic is welcome, particularly, if it covers several centuries of pertinent polemics, as the new volume does. One may appreciate the effort of constructing a historiographic narrative, rich in the required onomastic panorama, and an attempt of restoring the *zeitgeist* of centuries. The volume does make recourse to numerous authors who dealt with Aristotle in the post-Christian discourse. However, what could have become a much needed tracing of the several hundred years of polemics around Aristotle, relevant to philosophy, modern science or past and present theology, happens to be a very problematic outcome.

Rather than becoming a valuable reference volume, Craig Martin's book is a *discourse desideratum*, revealing a post- post-modern impatience with the facts and following the well-trodden in historiography pathway of a fable, unsubstantiated by, the available by now, historical evidence. It displays the intention of becoming an ambitious reference source, but regrettably fails to do so. It may mislead the unqualified reader on many planes, but it strikes the average scholar with unprofessionalism. One is surprised how one of the most reputable American Press houses could have approved the volume for publication without checking the contents. But even the cover signifies very peculiar contents.

The choices made by the author and blessed by the Press are more than peculiar. For instance, the front cover, displaying Aristotle's portrait in the striking (!!!) upside down position appears to be more suitable for a student satirical paper rather than a scholarly monograph. It does signify the **satirical intentions**, but it is a clear subversion of the scholarly discourse. The author's desire is clearly to mock and misinterpret for the sake of entertaining the reader whether it is with laughter or hearsay. It diminishes the narrative, constructed allegedly upon the work in the reputable Italian archives. The author promises to prove that Aristotle was "an impious figure of dubious morality," one wonders why? This intriguing but very surprising promise is substantiated by anecdotal references to the sources which the author did not bother to check, i.e. Diogenes Laertius (pp.36; 106; 154). Moreover, it is quite clear to the academic reader that the author plans to subvert a towering icon in world cultural history discourse, whose works he is hardly familiar with, i.e. Aristotle himself. Prof. C Martin has not proven that he has read enough of Aristotle in English, Latin, French, Greek or Arabic, and without such a proof one cannot take

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his statements seriously. One may subvert something which one knows intimately. Nor has he apparently read Cicero, either in English or Latin, his statements about his alleged non-relationship to Aristotle are anecdotal (p.34).

The author is also, regrettably, completely misinformed regarding the actual transmission of Aristotle in Europe and the role of the Arab commentaries and translations which he exaggerates unduly. Hence, his undue attention to Averroes whose works are more familiar to him. The mythology around the role of the Arabic scholars in connection with Aristotle evolved concurrently with the myth of the alleged Islamic impact on the West, and spread of Islam in the world, but it has been already debunked by the Western European scholars in this century (see *Aristoteles Arabus*) and historians of Spain, who have already revised and corrected the flawed narrative. According to Renan, the Spanish born Averroes (1126–1198) knew neither Greek, nor Syriac, and simply gave “a Latin version of a Hebrew commentary, written on Arabic version of the Greek” (Stocks, 1933:126). Most educated Moslems and Jews of Spain by the 12th century knew neither Arabic, nor Hebrew, and were assimilated into the Spanish culture. They had opportunity to read Aristotle because the Roman Emperors, centuries prior, had made sure that the libraries of all their provinces had the Greek and Latin versions of the philosophical texts.

Had the author bothered to familiarize himself with the elementary sources in Greek, Roman, Byzantine and European history, he would have understood the real pathway of transmission of knowledge from Greece to Rome and the rest of Europe. Had he compared it with the Arabic history, he would not have made the sweeping statements in his para-scholarly attempt. The myth of the alleged Arabic role in returning Aristotle to Europeans coincides with the anxiety of the younger civilization and the myth of Al Andalus, particularly useful in the current climate of Islamo-Christian debates, Islamic radicalization and politics of post-modernity. Contrary to Prof. Martin’s mythology, Aristotle survived not due to Arabic commentaries but to the strong ties between Athens and Rome, Alexandria and Byzantium, and Roman educational policy in the pre-Christian era. The author treats hundreds of years of European intellectual history around Aristotle with enormous carelessness. Obviously, not possessing solid background in European cultural history, the author contributes to the historiographic mythology, mystifying the subject even more. He neither convinces the readers in the alleged “dubious morality” of the Hellenic sage, nor did he enlighten about the process of cultural evolution. The narrative shifts the focus of the polemics in the direction of the Islamic impact on Europe. It may appeal to the Islamic scholars and contribute to another currently popular mythology.

Consistent with the **satirical format** of the book, it has nine conclusions (!!!), after each chapter plus final, having devoted 27 pages out of 177 total to conclusive remarks. Dedicated to the Latin translator of the citations, the book does not have a dedication page. The table of contents does not reveal the actual contents; there are subsections within each chapter not mentioned. The introduction fails to introduce the topic properly. It lacks the, required for the genre, proper indexing, depriving the reader of the much needed mini-biographies for the most unknown or forgotten historical figures. Usually, books of such genre have two indexes – one name and

one subject. Citations from the sources are reduced to half sentences and do not help to prove the arguments. In general, the volume contributes to the historiographic mythology rather than debunks it. It is surprising that Johns Hopkins Press, one of the most prestigious USA publishers, rushed to publish this work without proper preparation and evaluation. The volume seems to have been hastily compiled out of the several papers or essays to produce another “book”, the skill which many post moderns do not have, despite the ambition.

References

John Leofric Stocks. *Aristotelianism*. New York: Longman Green & Co., 1933
Peters, F.F. *Aristoteles Arabus*. Leiden: Brill, 1968.