

Incontro con Aristotele. Quindici lezioni. By Mario Vegetti and Francesco Ademollo. Turin: Einaudi, 2016. Pp. xi + 287. € 22.00 (paperback). ISBN 9788806200374.

Roberto Granieri

In 2003 Mario Vegetti published an excellent little book entitled *Quindici lezioni su Platone* (Turin: Einaudi). This is a lucid and concise introduction to Plato, to whose philosophy Vegetti devoted several years of research, having worked in particular with a team of scholars on a monumental commentary on the *Republic* in 7 volumes (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1998-2007). After 13 years, readers of Italian will certainly welcome a new book akin to the *Quindici lezioni su Platone*, regarding Aristotle's thought. This time Vegetti decided to co-author the volume with another well-known Italian scholar, Francesco Ademollo, who wrote one third of the work.

Incontro con Aristotele comprises 15 chapters and 2 Appendices (as well as a *Premise* and an *Index of Aristotle's Passages Quoted*). There is no final comprehensive bibliography, as each chapter has a valuable short *Bibliographical Note*, reporting the most relevant works on each topic treated. The authors aim not to write just a book-by-book exposition of Aristotle's works, but rather to offer also an introductory critical account of his style of reasoning, his background, his assumptions and arguments, by engaging with many interpretative issues and by pointing out even the difficulties of some Aristotle's own solutions. Their goal is to understand Aristotle beyond the 'unreflected Aristotelianism', i.e., beyond the semantic and conceptual sedimentations of Western philosophical culture (and also of our common sense), which have been largely structured by Aristotle's philosophy itself.

In the first chapter Vegetti goes through the several testimonies on Aristotle's biography (collected by I. Düring in 1957), and provides a coherent account of them. He points out some of their puzzling elements—e.g., how was a non-aristocratic provincial admitted to the prestigious Academy of Plato?—and focuses on Aristotle's relationship with Plato and Alexander the Great, as well as the creation of his own new school and the new figure of philosopher he creates, entirely devoted to research and teaching.

The old vexed question of 'Plato vs Aristotle' is tackled by Vegetti in the second chapter *Dimenticare il maestro*. Vegetti's synthetic survey of the various critical points of continuity and difference between Plato and Aristotle is a paradigm of clarity and it is centred on two basic (anti-Jaegerian) claims: (1) Aristotle was never a faithful Platonist; (2) Aristotle has always been, in certain aspects, a Platonic philosopher. Vegetti claims that Aristotle attempted to eman-

cipate himself from his Platonic heritage, but preserved some relevant aspects thereof. He carried out a ‘deconstruction of Platonism’, i.e., he tried to build a brand new system of knowledge, although he made use of several Platonic notions, which he rearticulated and reconfigured against Plato’s tendencies toward both separation and unification (epistemological, ontological, ethical, and so on). The conclusion is bold and sound, even though I think that Vegetti could have developed it more in-depth and could have explained, at least in part, some of its numerous potential implications: Platonic elements in Aristotle’s thought are not vestigial remnants or accidental lapses, but constitutive parts of its brand new theoretical architecture, even when they sometimes create conceptual tensions that Aristotle did not perfectly conciliate or control.

It is Aristotle’s own achievement, as we know, to have created an articulated and impressively extended project for an encyclopaedia of knowledge. He planned to explore the entire human and natural domains and to draw a sort of map of the world. This project and its theoretical grounds are explained in ch. 3. Vegetti highlights two of Aristotle’s innovations in particular: his articulation of autonomous disciplinary fields of research and his choice of the treatise for the production and communication of knowledge, both essential presuppositions for the encyclopaedic organization of knowledge.

Ch. 4 is devoted to Aristotle’s methodology and has the revealing title *Vedere e ascoltare il mondo: il fenomeno e il linguaggio*. On the basis of Owen’s and Wieland’s research, Vegetti argues that Aristotle takes φαινόμενα as the starting points of scientific knowledge, φαινόμενα being not only information coming from sense perception, but also from linguistic data, acquired through the analysis of the structures of ordinary language and through the reputable opinions (ἔνδοξα).

In chs. 5 to 7, Ademollo provides a rigorous presentation of Aristotle’s logic, epistemology, dialectic, and (part of his) metaphysics. He has a masterful knowledge of all the works of the *Organon* as well as of the secondary literature and makes a conscientious and meticulous exposition of most doctrines and the arguments that Aristotle elaborates, presenting them also in formal symbolic language. Here, I shall focus just on three chief points. (1) Ademollo seriously takes into account recent scholarship on the doctrine of categories (especially after Frede’s famous 1981 paper) and is able to offer a coherent presentation thereof, without simply ignoring uncomfortable passages. More in detail, his account of *Top.* i 9 is excellent and I entirely agree with its conclusions. (2) The exposition of the content of the *Topics* is concluded by useful observations about the purposes of dialectic and its relationship with philosophical sciences. Ademollo’s conclusions are convincing even in this case: dialectic is certainly useful for philosophy but it should be kept distinguished from it, insofar as dialectic depends upon the ἔνδοξα, without putting them into question, which is something that philosophy, instead, must do. (3) Ademollo tackles the notorious question of the nature of substance at the end of ch. 7. He makes a very thorough and precise *status quaestionis* and endorses the convincing—albeit still problematic—solution

claiming the ‘numerical distinction’ and the ‘qualitative identity’ of forms.

Aristotle’s philosophy of nature, which Vegetti has been concerned with for several years, is the subject of chs. 8 to 10. The illustration of the content and theoretical assumptions of the *Physics*, *De caelo*, and *De anima*, and of the various biological and zoological treatises, is notable and exhaustive. Vegetti sheds light on the historical background of Aristotle’s physical science in order better to appreciate its own contribution, particularly the attempt to make *physis* an autonomous ontological domain with its own principles and laws, and the development of an articulated theory of causation. Unsurprisingly, the discussion of Aristotle’s investigations on the living beings is remarkable and very detailed as well, especially the survey of Aristotle’s biological works. In four dense pages (165-168), Vegetti provides an updated and perspicuous report of the vexed question of the nature of the intellect in *DA* iii 5, presenting the main contemporary interpretations, which he tracks back to the ancient and medieval commentators. I wish Vegetti’s own opinion on the topic were more apparent. While he does not explicitly take a position, it looks as though he has a slight preference for Kahn’s and Berti’s readings, according to which the agent intellect is the patrimony of knowledge and truths collected from human beings.

Aristotle’s practical philosophy too has notoriously been a topic of major interest for Vegetti, at least since the publication of *L’etica degli antichi* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1989) and here it is the topic of chs. 11 and 12. Vegetti’s explanation of the famous definition of the human being as a political animal by nature is masterful and one must say the same about Vegetti’s illustration of all the great ideas developed in Aristotle’s ethical treatises, from ἐξίς to ἦθος, from πράξις to φρόνησις, from ἀκρασία to ἐφ’ ἡμῖν and the all the other chief notions of the two *Ethics* and the *Politics*. Even the discussion of the controversial chs. 7-9 of *NE* x is excellent, though Vegetti does not provide a careful discussion of the main interpretative options as he does for the agent intellect or the unmoved mover.

Ademollo is concerned with the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* in ch. 13. He makes a good selection of the main doctrinal elements of these treatises and explains them with remarkable accurateness. Concerning the *Poetics*, he underlines the anthropological and cultural importance of the notion of imitation and endorses Donini’s interpretation of κάθαρσις as purification of pity and fear, in that the pain is transformed into pleasure. Concerning the *Rhetoric*, the analysis of the enthymeme and of the *loci* is admirable in its care and precision. Perhaps too little space is left for book 2 and the very deep examination of human passions that Aristotle provides there. But, as I said, the chapter is, and must be, selective.

«La scienza indagata»: *il primato della filosofia* is the title of the penultimate *lezione*. Vegetti and Ademollo have made a bold decision in this book, with which I find myself in agreement. In *Incontro con Aristotele* there is not a single chapter devoted to explaining the content of the *Metaphysics* as a whole. Since after Jaeger we are almost certain of the fact that the *Metaphysics* lacks a strong compositional unity, and is rather a collection of several (maybe originally independent) treatises, the manifold themes tackled in this work are discussed in dif-

ferent chapters: e.g. books 1, 13, and 14 in ch. 2, books 7-9 in ch. 7. However, this does not lead the authors to take the *Metaphysics* as a rhapsodic or heterogeneous work. Thus, ch. 14 is devoted to those passages, especially from books 1, 4, 6, and 12, which thematize a ‘metaphilosophical inquiry’ (239) and investigate the epistemological status of first philosophy, giving a unity to the philosophical enterprise carried out in the 14 books of the *Metaphysics*. Ranging from book 4 to 6, Vegetti first tackles the famous question of the relationship between theology and ontology. After providing a penetrating criticism of Frede’s interpretation, he claims (246) that first philosophy arises in different ways in various fields, which are all areas of specific competence for the philosopher: it is *metaphysica generalis*, but also meta-physics and cosmo-theology, these fields not being reducible to a systematic unity. Vegetti finally addresses the question of the causation of the first mover. He discusses in particular the interpretations shared by Broadie and Berti (unmoved mover as an efficient cause), which he seems to prefer to the traditional view (unmoved mover as a final cause), even though he finds some difficulties in this interpretation as well.

In ch. 15. Ademollo recalls the notorious stories told by Strabon and Plutarch about the transmission of Aristotle’s works, and takes them as a starting point to conduct an interesting, brief survey of the commentary tradition from Andronicus to Philoponus. He rightly notes the peculiar role of the *Categories* in the first century BCE, and of Plotinus and Porphyry for the integration of Aristotelian philosophy in the Platonic tradition. He also spends a few pages explaining Ammonius’ and Proclus’ relationship with Aristotle, which is not so common and, indeed, highly appreciated. Ademollo should have perhaps emphasized more the importance of Boethus of Sidon (just mentioned once at p. 260), which is now hardly disputable (especially thanks to Chiaradonna’s and Rashed’s studies). Furthermore, one might ask the authors why they have chosen to focus only on the commentary tradition and to exclude the history of the early Peripatos. After all, even the *Quindici lezioni su Platone* included a brief useful sketch of the Platonic tradition from the Old Academy onwards.

Two useful *Appendices* conclude the volume, on the exoteric works and on the chronology of Aristotle’s treatises (again following Düring’s). To sum up, the *Incontro con Aristotele* is an accurate and fair-minded monograph that perfectly achieves its goals. Both the authors show an admirable skill, which is one of the most remarkable virtues of the book: they know how to say the most with the fewest words. The result is a sober, rigorous and updated presentation of Aristotelian philosophy, from which beyond doubt, every student of Aristotle’s thought, both the beginners and the initiated, will greatly profit. Highly recommended.

Department of Philosophy
University of Toronto
Toronto ON Canada M5R 2M8