

Aristotle and Aquinas on Cognition

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I

There is little need today to be apologetic about making Aristotle the basis for a philosophical discussion on human cognition. Interest in the Stagirite is in fact on the upsurge: interest in Aristotle not merely as a great thinker who lived in a particular epoch of time, but more pointedly as a philosopher who has much to offer for the promotion of serious thinking in our own day. In this regard I might merely refer to some straws that are indicative of the direction in which the winds are blowing. One was a series of four lectures given by Richard Sorabji in the spring of 1990 at the University of Toronto, in which the relevance of Aristotle for understanding current philosophical problems became strikingly apparent to those who listened to or took part in the discussions. Another was the conference held at the University of Alberta the same year on Aristotle and his medieval commentators. A third is the reprinting of John Herman Randall's book *Aristotle*, which is scheduled to appear shortly in the collection entitled *The Easton Press Library of Great Lives*.

In 1960 Randall gave his reading public a thoroughly American Aristotle, geared to the pragmatic and progressivist philosophy of Randall's own milieu. If Aristotle had been writing now, Randall claimed, he would have directed all his philosophy to action and

progress, instead of to contemplative thought.¹ You may retort that a more perverse misunderstanding of the general bearing in Aristotle's philosophy would be hard to imagine, especially if your ears are ringing with the almost oracular proclamation of Aristotle himself against people who thought that way: "Those who suppose, as the Pythagoreans and Speusippus do, that supreme beauty and goodness are not present in the beginning, because the beginnings of both plants and animals are *causes*, but beauty and completeness are in the *effects* of these, are wrong in their opinion. For ... the first thing is not seed but the complete being."² For Aristotle, perfection was already in the world from the start. To each of us and to every active being belonged the task of working out individual perfection by striving towards the perfection of the world's supreme final cause. From Randall's viewpoint, on the contrary, continued progress towards ever increasing perfection — perfection as yet nowhere found — was the norm of human endeavor. In this spirit of the then prevalent process philosophy, Randall maintained that if Aristotle were writing for modern Americans "he would not elevate knowing above practical action" (248).

Yet in spite of this bias of epoch and culture, Randall was able to find in Aristotle's thought a philosophy able to serve the needs of any age or culture whatever. Perhaps one might even say that *because* of this discrepancy between his own outlook and the quite apparent temper of the Aristotelian treatises, Randall was spurred on to envisage a depth in the *Stagirite's* thinking that lay below both modern and ancient Greek mentalities, a depth into which both those cultures sink their roots, thereby drawing rich life-giving nourishment into their bloodstreams. In regard to Aristotle's practical philosophy, Randall made that point explicit. He wrote glowingly of how Aristotle's thought "can be applied to *any* social and cultural materials ... to Soviet Russia, to medieval Christendom, to India, to New York City"

1 John Herman Randall, Jr., *Aristotle* (New York: Columbia University Press 1960), 300

2 Aristotle [4], *Metaphysics*, XII.7.1072b30-1073a1

(248). This was written long before *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* had been thought of. At the time, the iron curtain had already been erected. It appeared too deeply divisive for most people to allow any common ground for the two respective ways of thinking. But today the outlooks have changed, so much so that Randall's point can be applied to the whole of Aristotle's thought as well as to his ethics. The *Stagirite's* principles can in fact be brought to bear upon any culture and any age. They can be the means for deeper understanding of the thought and the reality of any epoch, not at all excluding our own.

In a word, the indications just mentioned suggest that present interest in Aristotle is located not basically in a revival or a development of his ancient Greek thought, but rather in taking Aristotle's philosophy at its face value and using it as a help for doing our own thinking. There is no question of necrophilia at issue.

It might be objected, however, that this way of viewing the situation does not fit into the currently accepted syndrome of western philosophy's historical development. We are now accustomed to look upon antiquity as having naïvely based philosophical thought upon real things, things known directly in themselves and taken uncritically as such. Next came the medieval period with corresponding uncritical acquiescence in real things existent in themselves, plus acceptance of other tenets of religious faith, as in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian circles. Then followed the Renaissance, with its backwards look to ancient culture, succeeded by the Enlightenment or modern period with its refined philosophical basis in human ideas. Finally, we are now in the postmodern period with its starting points in language and with the hermeneutical requirement of indefinitely recessive signifiers in any philosophical interpretation.

Into that syndrome, one has to admit immediately, the present interest in Aristotle does not fit at all. This interest is far from a further development along the lines indicated by postmodern thinking, and it is not appealed to by current hermeneutics for substantial help. But neither is it a backward plunge into the culture of a former epoch, like the activity of the Renaissance. It does not seek to make Aristotle's world live again in our own epoch. On the other hand, it does not look for new starting points in thought or language, as did the later philosophical trends. No, it leaves Aristotle's thought intact in the

original setting. The thought it looks to for help remains that of the *Stagirite*. That thought is not adopted holus bolus as our own. But it does provide us with much appreciated assistance for our own thinking, and for understanding the thought of other philosophers both of past ages and of our own day. In this perspective one may probe the bearing and the value of Randall's conclusion incisively expressed at the end of his book: "Clearly, Aristotle did not say everything; though without what he first said, all words would be meaningless, and when it is forgotten they usually are" (300). At first hearing, this assertion may seem intolerably wide in its sweep, and irresponsible in its boldness. But it rings as a challenge to probe its import, and it is provocative enough to prompt and sustain the patience that is required to examine its meaning in depth.

II

In the contemporary philosophical forum, of course, a hearing may be asked for Aristotle in virtue of today's genial pluralism, just as it may be asked for any other philosophy. But something much more serious seems to be indicated by the reflections that have just been made. Those reflections tend to regard Aristotle's thought not merely as one philosophy alongside the others, but more importantly as a means for deeper understanding of those others and for working towards fresh and independent conclusions. In this way Aristotle's thought is envisaged not as a system fixed and closed in itself, but rather as a key that opens the doors for a more profound grasp of today's philosophical situation.

Against this background the first question that arises is about the way pluralistic thinking appears when it is assessed in the light of Aristotle's epistemological doctrines. In the *Peri hermeneias*, Aristotle described human thought as meant to represent things, while words and language express what is thought about those things.³ Further,

3 Aristotle [1], *De interpretatione*, 1.16a3-8

in the *De anima* he showed that the human mind is entirely blank before it becomes sensible things in the actuality of cognition.⁴ In cognition it is those things.⁵ Of itself the human mind has no original content other than sensible things. The original content, then, will be the same in all three orders: namely reality, thought, and speech. The knowable content is what is present in the things, represented in thought, and conveyed in speech. With thought and language bearing on things, the content in all three orders is the same. There is no immediate reason why philosophies of things, philosophies of ideas, and philosophies of language should not be able to understand each other, to enter into dialogue with each other, and to profit each in its own realm by the insights of the others. Honest and appreciative acknowledgement of philosophical pluralism should be that simple an approach from the Aristotelian standpoint.

In this setting, moreover, things and thought and language are in themselves objects of immediate awareness. Accordingly, all three allow themselves, rightly or wrongly, to be used as starting points for philosophical thinking. The way is thereby open for understanding the pluralism that is so courteously accepted in present-day philosophical circles. But if this is actually the case, how could any trouble ever occur in the philosophical world? How is it that philosophers have been able to disagree so bitterly in the past, and to argue so acrimoniously against one another? Even today everyone seems to cling tenaciously to her or his own views, albeit under a polite smile of tolerance or even of pity when conversing with people of radically different opinions. And sometimes, tempers are still lost in animated philosophical discussion. How could this be possible if the philosophical situation is to be viewed from the Aristotelian perspective?

In the light of the history of western philosophy, the genesis of the discords becomes sharply apparent. For Aristotle himself, human thought conformed to external sensible things. In the ordinary course of nature it originated from no other object. Speech in its turn ex-

4 Aristotle [3], *De anima*, III.4.429a21-4

5 Ibid., III.2.425b25-426a19; 5.430a19-20; 7.431a1-2; 8.431b20-3

pressed thought about things. Language had no other content. Yet despite one's immediate awareness on each level, there was with Aristotle a definite epistemological order of each level to the others. Epistemologically, external things were basic. Thought was correct when it conformed to things. Speech was true when it conformed to what was correctly thought about things. Epistemologically, things just in themselves remained absolutely fundamental and regulative in this setting.

The attitude of grounding philosophy on things external to human thought remained unchallenged throughout antiquity and the middle ages, in spite of wide variations in the way those things were held to confront human knowledge. The Platonic Ideas, as Aristotle saw them, were reached from sensible things with the added note of eternal duration. For Plato himself they existed in natural reality and not just in human thought. Neo-Platonic commentators on Aristotle did distinguish intellectual knowledge as coming from within, in contrast to sensation, that came from without. But within the Plotinian framework the intelligibles as objects were prior to intellection. With Augustine, things themselves, spread before the mind in their primordial existence in the divine Word, were what confronted human intellection.⁶ In one way or another, then, things external to human cognition were the basis upon which western philosophy was built throughout the centuries prior to Descartes.

With Descartes, however, the change in the epistemological viewpoint was drastic. Philosophy before his time, Descartes claimed, had been a victim of the childish propensity to think in terms of sensible objects, instead of through clear and distinct ideas in the manner of mature mathematicians. A severe intellectual asceticism — comparable to the spiritual asceticism that Descartes knew from Lafleche as the means of training for religious life — was required to rid the mind of its childhood tendencies and accustom it to think in terms of ideas only. Malebranche spelled this out graphically in saying that for acquaintance with the sun and the stars you do not go for a walk

around the heavens. Rather, you look at the ideas you have about them in your own mind. It is these ideas that you first know, and you base the rest of your philosophical thinking upon them. Subsequent philosophers, such as Locke, Hume, and Condillac, made sensations function in this epistemological role of starting points for human cognition. But with them the cleavage from the Aristotelian stand remained just as drastic. For Aristotle, external sensible *things* were epistemologically the basic starting point. For the empiricists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the starting points were located in internal *sensations*, not in external things. Locke's stand that all our knowledge comes from sensations is just as radically distinct from Aristotle as is Descartes's, for the Aristotelian tenet is that sensible things, not internal sensations, are the starting points for all naturally acquired knowledge.

But Aristotle's overall view, diverse as it is from that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, provides the means for seeing how this new way of starting philosophy could attain acceptance with these later thinkers. We are in fact immediately aware of our cognition. With a bit of Cartesian asceticism — the kind still practised on first year philosophy students to make them doubt the beliefs they bring with them — one can easily come to disregard the problem of the order that the sensation or the thought has to the thing. Sensations or ideas are then used as absolute starting points. The obvious consideration that what is sensed or known is something other than the sensation or the thought, is easily neglected. Refusal to probe in the starting points themselves the order of cognition to things, entailed the consequences brought out in the repeated failures of the Cartesians to demonstrate the real existence of things outside cognition, or of the American Neo-Realists and Critical Realists to account for errors in the perception of external things.

A parallel situation holds likewise in regard to philosophies based on language. We are immediately aware of what we say, and accordingly can take speech as a starting point for philosophizing. But again, the order of speech to thought and things, as noted by Aristotle, is neglected. And again, the consequences have to be faced. Instead of bearing on the great realities of life, as western philosophy has traditionally claimed to be doing, the object of philosophy becomes

⁶ Augustine [2], *De magistro*, 12.40; 48.23-49.5

restricted to the intricacies of language, leaving reality to the natural sciences and other disciplines, and leaving itself open to Bertrand Russell's biting sarcasm that linguistic analysis becomes silly talk about silly statements.⁷ Where historicity is made basic, as in post-modern hermeneutics, the thrust is to weave a web of words that will catch as best it can the "quivering elements of reality itself."⁸ The starting point is still language, involving an endless chain of signifiers. The origins of philosophical statements are traced to the historical and linguistic conditions that make them possible. These origins in their turn require corresponding explanation in terms of their own historical and linguistic conditions, and so on in infinite regress. The pursuit has been very interesting, but hardly satisfactory.

In regard to contemporary pluralism, however, the issue here is obvious enough. By reason of their radically diverse starting points, philosophies that spring ultimately from thought or language are immune from attack by philosophies based upon external things. Other philosophies cannot be *refuted* on Aristotelian grounds. On the basis of their own chosen starting points they reject, either offhand or with reasoning cogently grounded on those accepted starting points, the very notion of things in themselves as an immediate object of human cognition. Reasoning based on external things in themselves, consequently, does not make contact with them. They are not open to argument based ultimately upon what is existent in itself and in that way outside human cognition. Hence one cannot use Aristotle to refute Enlightenment or postmodern philosophies. The stand that something outside cognition can be functioning as the basis of all philosophical demonstration is in fact given short shrift. If the thing is outside cognition, it is thereby unknown just in itself. At best it can be reasoned to or inferred from something already inside cognition. From this perspective the starting point for philosophical reasoning cannot be

external to cognition itself. The Aristotelian way of thinking is historically outmoded for people who take their starting points from thought or language. It does not have the conventionally accepted weapons for engaging in Enlightenment or postmodern controversy.

For the same reason, modern and postmodern philosophies do not have the means for coming to grips with Aristotelian arguments. There is no question of refuting Aristotelian positions on the strength of their own radically different starting points. But the task of the philosopher is to understand. His objective does not consist in refuting, as may sometimes be the case with a theologian. In this respect Aristotle's tenets do show us how to understand today's pluralistic situation in philosophy. They explain how other philosophies are able to develop their divergent views. We are immediately aware of external sensible things, and immediately aware of our own perception and knowledge of them, though with epistemological priority for the sensible things. What is expressed in language is our thought about the things, and we are immediately aware of our words and sentences. Things, thought, and language offer innumerable different starting points, starting points immediately known and able to be chosen deliberately as the principles of a distinct philosophy. In this way philosophical pluralism is given a rational explanation. One is able to acknowledge sincerely and appreciatively the insights and worth of philosophies with which one radically disagrees, and draw genuine profit from the wide range of thought displayed in the panorama of western reasoning. The innate pluralism of philosophical thought, in the innumerable varieties that confront us today, is thereby understood in depth and made use of in one's own thinking.

Finally, one sees how the same person can at various stages in a career change her or his philosophy. Starting points in any of the three orders — reality, thought, and language — are immediately known and can be used at any time to start a new and different way of thinking. A change of starting points means in this way a different philosophy. A person who becomes dissatisfied with her or his present philosophy, or comes to reject the consequences to which it leads, is free to start all over again on different immediately evident principles. Aristotle's tenets make this all very clear. They enable us to *understand* our present-day philosophical pluralism.

7 Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1959), 230

8 Gary Brent Madison, 'Hermeneutics and (the) Tradition,' *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 62 (1988), 169

III

By the same token, however, a philosophy based on things in themselves cannot look for support from philosophies grounded on thought or language, when it seeks to vindicate its own starting points. It itself has to substantiate its own procedure, and answer on its own grounds the objections brought by others against it. When, for instance, it is accused of naïvely assuming that known things exist in themselves outside human thought, it can only ask that the accusers take a closer look at their own thought and see if the situation is actually as simple as they have presumed. In this perspective Aristotle's philosophy is able to offer a thoroughgoing defense of its own procedure. It can be elaborately apologetic (in the ancient sense of 'apology' as a rational defense of one's own tenets), but not at all in today's use of the term. Anyone who reads carefully Aristotle's *De Anima* can hardly be tempted to regard its elaborate account of human cognition as at all naïve. One may disagree with it because of one's own philosophical starting points, but one can hardly accuse it of superficiality in its procedure.

In confronting the problem of cognition, the Aristotelian account calls attention to the fact that every thought and every sensation is of something other than itself.⁹ What you see or know directly is the desk or the table, and not the act of seeing or of knowing it. You are, of course, concomitantly aware of your own cognitive acts, but only in the course of attaining something else. What you see is something else, and not directly the act of seeing. What you know directly is likewise something other than the act of knowing, even though awareness of the act itself is always concomitant. This tenet, however, is not a conclusion that can be reached from the nature or idea of cognition itself. As far as the notion of cognition goes, cognition can be either directly of itself, as in the case of the Aristotelian separate substances, or of something else, as in human cognition. Aristotle faced this question in justifying his conclusion that a separate sub-

stance is the knowing of itself, even though in all cognition of which we are immediately aware the knowledge is of something other than the concomitantly known act. Aristotle's stand on this question, therefore, is based not on the essence or nature or idea of cognition, but on the fact of what is directly known in sensation or in any other act of human cognition. The object is in fact something other than the act itself, and in the case of sensation, cognition bears directly on something extended and sensibly qualified: for instance, on a table or a chair. It does not bear directly on the cognition. You can only reflect closely on your own awareness and see if this is not the case.

But, the objector will urge, all this goes on within the awareness itself. The notion of something other than the cognition arises within the cognition only. It does not take you outside the cognition. It is something that springs up within your own cognitive activity. You are merely assuming that there is something outside that corresponds to it.

This is the standard objection that has had to be faced from the time of Descartes on. The objection is based upon the dogmatic assumption that what we are aware of is our own cognition, instead of something other than the cognition. Aristotle's stand, in facing the aporia to which I have just referred, is that in the ordinary way of knowing with which we are immediately acquainted, the cognition is always of something other than itself. Aristotle has to argue very elaborately for a different situation in the case of separate substances. He means accordingly that what we first know directly is a thing in itself, a thing other than the cognitive act and cognitive agent.

There is no attempt to argue from the thought or perception to the thing. External things have epistemological priority. One's thought and oneself are known only through concomitance to this basic object.

What does this mean? How can what is acknowledged to be originally outside cognition get within cognition? With the basis of reasoning located firmly in the thing that is other than the cognitive act, Aristotle is able to offer his explanation of what knowing or perceiving a thing means. It means that the percipient or knower becomes and is that thing in the actuality of the cognition. This is not a case of having a thing in a material way. In material possession the possessor remains distinct from the thing he has, in the way you possess a house

⁹ Aristotle [4], *Metaphysics*, XII.9.1074b35-6

or a car. On the other hand, cognition means thoroughgoing identity with the thing insofar as it is perceived or known. Aristotle repeats this assertion of identity of knower and known too often to leave any doubt about its important role. To know a thing is to *be* it in a distinctive way of being. Obviously, on account of this thoroughgoing identity of knower and things known, the one cannot be cognitively grasped without concomitant awareness of the other, for they are the same in the actuality of the cognition. In this way the concomitant awareness of the cognition is present in every cognitive act that bears directly on something else. You cannot be aware of the thing perceived or known without thereby being aware of yourself as knower, and vice versa.

On this account cognition is something very different from photography or recording. Cognition is not like *having* a picture or sounds. The camera does not *see* the landscape. The recording machine does not *hear* the sounds. They have the impressions, but they are not aware of them. As something essentially different, the cognitive activity has to be explained in terms of being rather than of having. You *have* the sensations and the concepts, quite as the machines have the impressions, but you *are* the things perceived or known. Knower and thing known do not produce a third thing in the cognitive activity, as is the case in material production. Rather, the two become one and the same in the actuality of the cognition.

From the strictly epistemological standpoint, this thoroughgoing identity of knower and thing known is the most important and most fundamental tenet in the Aristotelian conception of knowledge. Yet it is the tenet that evokes the hardest sales resistance in students, and is the last Aristotelian dictum to which they come to assent. They instinctively revolt against the prospect of *being* the things they know. They do not like the idea of being a brown cow or a big bad wolf just because they are seeing those animals or thinking about them. They can be shown that the tenet is explicit in Aristotle, but they recoil at accepting it for themselves. All one can say to them is to continue to think it over. It is a profound insight that has to be absorbed very gradually. It can be approached in various ways, but ultimately it itself is what has to provide the basis for the legitimacy of the approaches themselves.

The overall difficulty here lies in a failure to grasp the full import of Aristotle's frequently repeated norm that being is meant in various ways. A thing can be in a material or an immaterial way, a substantial or an accidental way, a physical or a cognitional way. To be a brown cow cognitively does not at all mean to be a brown cow physically. Likewise, you are a brown cow only accidentally in your contingent act of cognition, while you remain your own self substantially. Further, you are not changed into a cow in a material way when you receive its form in cognition. All-pervasive for Aristotle is the metaphysical insight that form is the cause of being. Form makes a thing be, be what it is, and be a unit. In any physical change, the form is received materially, insofar as physical matter takes on a new form in generation or in perishing or in alteration. Physical matter receives a new form in procreation, and loses that form in death or in alteration. In every case of physical change a matter loses one form and takes on another, under the influx of an efficient cause, as when wood is reduced to ashes by fire. But when a form is received in immaterial fashion, there is no loss of form in either the knower or the thing known. The immaterially received form becomes in cognition the form of the recipient in the actuality of the awareness. It makes both be one and the same thing in the cognitive order. It makes them be cognitively a unit, though in physical being each retains its own distinctive result of the causality.

That is what cognition means for Aristotle. His explanation shows in its own terms how something external to cognition can be epistemologically prior to the cognitive act, and how all our cognition originates in sensible things rather than directly in the sensations themselves. It shows how there can be no question of a sensible replica leaving a distant thing and traveling through the media to the sense organ. It lets us understand how an astronomer can literally *see* today a cosmic event that took place millions of years ago in physical being. It allows no ground for the objection that as we do not know what happens to the sensible stimulus in its journey along the nerves from sense organ to cortex, we have no guarantee that the external thing may not have changed or may have vanished completely in that infinitesimally short time. In these and similar cases there is no insuperable difficulty in explaining how the form is impressed physi-

cally and cognitively by its efficient causes through the appropriate media upon a distant thing. The form is thereby able to make the knower be the things or events as they are at the time the efficient causality originates.

As an illustration, a form may be worked into marble by a sculptor, or into lines and colors on a canvas by a painter. The artistic form originates in the mind of the sculptor or painter. There is no question of a facsimile or image of it traveling down through the nerves and muscles of the artist, and then through the chisel or brush to the surface of the marble or canvas. No, the image or form exists only in the mind of the artist and in the finished product. It does not exist in the media. The late Marshall McLuhan's dictum that the medium is the message holds only in a causal sense, though with very important bearing. The medium, rather, is the means by which the efficient cause acts upon a subject. Through nerves and hands and tools the artist is exerting her or his efficient causality upon the subject that is spatially distant from the agent, and is thereby bringing about the form in the new instance. The form is existent as such only in the efficient cause and in the ultimate effect. In the image on the television screen the color and pattern are present solely in the real game being played in the Skydome, and on the television screens throughout the country. In the miles of transmitting media there is neither color nor image, but simply the electronic signals that cause the television set to reproduce the images on the screen.

The case of television is of course material reception. The television set itself does not see or hear or know what is going on in the Skydome. The apparatus is not cognitive. But there is neither more nor less difficulty here in understanding how the colors and pattern of a distant object are transmitted in immaterial as well as material fashion to the retina without coloring the air. It is the same overall problem of how an efficient cause can transmit form through media without affecting the media in the same way it affects the ultimate subject upon which it is working.

In sensation, then, the external thing impresses through the media its own form in immaterial fashion upon the percipient, and thereby makes the percipient be one with the thing itself in the actuality of the cognition. In this way Aristotle's philosophy is within its own proce-

sure fully capable of justifying its basis in external things themselves, rather than in sensations concerning them. It is not acquiescing to the existence of external things naïvely. It is offering an elaborate and penetrating explanation of how it can regard all human thought as based epistemologically upon things external to the thought. Their real existence in themselves is known in epistemological priority to our sensations and thought about them. Aristotle's explanation shows how real things, existent in themselves, speak to us immediately in our thought, since they are identical with us in complete fashion in our cognition. It is reality itself that is talking to us. There is no room here for the caricature of a 'hot line' to the external world. The real external things come first in our cognition. Ourselves and our cognition are known only by reason of our concomitant identity with them in the actuality of the awareness. If the notion of a 'hot line' could at all be introduced into the problem, it would be rather from the external things to our sensations and thoughts.

In that way the Aristotelian explanation allows each individual thing to stand in its own right absolutely, as an independent starting point for philosophical thinking. It is there, in itself, and is known as such. It does not have to be explained hermeneutically by something preceding it, in infinite regress. Aristotle allows eternal succession of cosmic changes, and the recurrent rise and fall of civilizations, but he does not make truth and certainty the victim of our inability to encompass in our knowledge this infinite regression of causes. Each existent thing is an absolute on which one can base philosophic reasoning.

But all this is within Aristotle's own philosophical territory. If others — and they are legion — wish to say 'No, we cannot see our way clear to basing our philosophy on external sensible things as absolute starting points,' Aristotle has no philosophical means to refute them. He has to let them go their own way, but with the understanding that they have to accept the consequences of their own thinking. He gives us the means to see in his own context what they are doing, and thereby leaves us fully at home in today's pluralistic world, a philosophic democracy that permits each citizen to think in her or his chosen way.

IV

Aristotle, then, enables us to understand in depth the widely pluralistic thinking that the western world has produced in the course of its long and varied history. His philosophy also offers leads and means for pursuing one's personal thought in new directions and to new heights. Here fresh inspiration comes from other sources, and may in turn throw new light on the original Aristotelian conclusions. This will not result exactly in a further development of Aristotle. Rather, it will give rise to authentically new philosophy within the Aristotelian tradition. The point may be aptly illustrated by an instance from the philosophical thought of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century of our era, on the topic of existence.

For Aristotle, quiddity and existence were melded together. One might distinguish the two logically, in one's mind or in definition. But for practical purposes it was better not to do even that.¹⁰ However, Aquinas, like other theologians of the middle ages, was approaching the theme against the Biblical background of creation. The things that come under our experience did not have their being from themselves but from an omnipotent creator. Created things were decidedly not their own being. In that setting it was imperative to concentrate more intensely on the things immediately known, and look in them for some kind of distinction between themselves and the existence they had acquired through creation. Various kinds of distinction were seen by different thinkers. The impulse for this could not come from Aristotle, or be looked upon as a development of his thought. It was new philosophy, and had to be established on new and further grounds, even though it still worked on real things in themselves, as had been the case with the *Stagirite*.

Aquinas, working in this new perspective, saw that the nature of things was known in intellectual abstraction while their existence was grasped through judgment. From that philosophically new starting point he demonstrated that every created thing was really distinct

from its existence. The identically same thing could thereby have different ways of existing, while remaining exactly the same thing in nature and individuality. Every finite thing had existence primarily in the divine creative essence, where Augustine, as did Malebranche centuries later with great flourish, made the things the immediate object of human intellection. In that existence, as Aquinas repeated from Anselm, the creature was really identical with the divine creative essence.¹¹ Second, the thing could exist in itself, in the world of perishable objects, and there function as the subsequently notorious 'thing in itself.' Also it could exist in cognition, angelic or human.¹²

This explanation involved three different modes of existence: namely, divine existence, real finite existence, and cognitional existence. It permitted one to see how something could remain identically the same thing under the three different ways of existing. In the epistemological context it allowed a much sharper vision and a much neater way of expression than with Aristotle. It permitted one to see and to say that external things come to *exist* in one's cognition, in addition to the Aristotelian formula that knower and thing known are identical in the actuality of the awareness. Aristotle eschewed the expression that the things themselves are in the mind, on account of his explicitly cited Empedoclean setting in which cognition of like by like would have to mean that earth in reality as an object was known through earth really present in the mind.¹³ But Aquinas in his new approach could say without hesitation that the whole universe can exist in the mind of an individual person.¹⁴ This is definitely not a development of Aristotle. Rather, it goes against Aristotle's way of developing the theme. It is a different philosophy, proceeding from new philosophical principles, but spurred on and guided by the

¹⁰ Ibid., IV.2.1003b22-30

¹¹ Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis*, 1.36.1.3 ad 1m; Thomas Aquinas [2], I, 836

¹² Aquinas, *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, 8.1.1. Resp.; Thomas Aquinas [10], 159-60

¹³ Aristotle [3], *De Anima*, III.8.431b28-432a3; cf. I.5.410a1-12

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas [8], *De veritate*, 2.2.Solut.; Thomas Aquinas [1] vol. XXII, 44.118-33

Aristotelian principles of actuality and potentiality, substance and accident, the four types of causality, and the origin of human cognition in external sensible things. It shows that the nature of a finite thing, though known in abstraction, can be an object of cognition only as existent in one of the three ways just mentioned. Only as an existent, and never as just an Avicennian nature, can a thing be perceived or known. What receives no satisfactory explanation in the Aristotelian text thereby finds an answer in the approach of Aquinas.

The same point could likewise be illustrated by Thomistic contributions on topics such as free-will, the moral order, and the temporal beginning and end of the cosmic processes. On those questions Aristotle goes just so far, and then remains silent. This is what seems to lie behind the Renaissance dictum *sine Thoma mutus esset Aristoteles* — 'without Thomas Aristotle would stay silent.' What other medieval thinkers have to say, for instance in their doctrines on the common nature, may similarly be of help.

V

One may now ask whether this investigation substantiates Randall's irritating claim that even though Aristotle did not say everything, "without what he first said all words would be meaningless, and when it is forgotten they usually are." The assertion that "Aristotle did not say everything" holds even within the strictly philosophical realm, insofar as history shows definitely that Aristotelianism is not the only profitable way in which one may philosophize. The widely varied pluralism in the history of western thought, and the wisdom one may absorb by osmosis by reading types of philosophy other than one's own, are obvious facts. But for a satisfactory explanation of how all this intellectual ferment takes place, the account given by Aristotle is unmatched.

The reason, I would suggest, is that Aristotle is able to let reality itself do the talking. He shows how real things in themselves can be accorded epistemological priority. Things are able to be acknowledged as final arbiter without sacrifice of respectability for a philosopher. Aristotle makes clear how one can honestly and consistently meld one's philosophic life with the real life one is daily living in

common with the non-philosophical public. There seems to be something not right in situations like the Cartesian insistence that the reality of the external world must be demonstrated even though no one could really doubt the fact; or in Locke's refusal to have controversy with any person who questions Locke's real existence outside that person's thought; or in Hume's recourse to a really good dinner and real game of backgammon when philosophical speculating became too dejecting. Aristotle shows how the ultimate recourse to real things is philosophically correct, and is not to be looked upon as a bow to human weakness. In that perspective he enables us to see how the real has philosophically the last word.

Without the backing by reality, words and thoughts do lose their meaning. So applied, Randall's assertion may come to appear as an understatement rather than as an irresponsible exaggeration. Instead of claiming that when in philosophy Aristotle is forgotten, words are *usually* meaningless, one is tempted to say, with appropriate reservations, that they *always* are. But in any case, this conscious and justified and all-pervasive grounding in reality merits in full the niche traditionally accorded to Aristotle as *the philosopher par excellence*, and, in Dante's words, "the teacher of those who know." Yet quite often Aristotle may pursue a line of thought only to a certain limit. He is conscientious in not pushing his conclusions further than his premises allow. In this way he seems to become silent for a listener of a later era. It is here that a radically different notion of existence enabled Aquinas to interpret the Aristotelian texts in a manner well beyond their original implications. In cases of this kind, study of Aquinas may aid us in breaking through the Aristotelian silence, and thereby in enhancing our own work upon the topics at issue.

This conclusion is well illustrated in the difficulties about the nature of human knowledge, difficulties that in the minds of some contemporary writers have borne epistemology to the brink of the grave.¹⁵ Locke had called for examination of our own abilities before

15 For a discussion of this topic, see Susan Haack, 'Recent Obituaries of Epistemology,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1990), 199-212.

approaching other philosophical problems.¹⁶ In the wake of that appeal there has been an almost universal tendency in subsequent epistemology to base the reliability of human knowledge upon the reliability of our cognitive faculties. In the light of Aristotle's explanation of cognition, the circularity of this procedure becomes apparent. One sees why it can lead to frustration in epistemology. Our intellect is pure potentiality in the cognitive order. What we can know about our intellect actually, including its reliability, comes from real sensible objects and our concomitant awareness of them. We know that these things cannot be and not be at the same time in the same respects, that each of them is something that is extended and existent, and that two and two of them are four. We can find on deliberate examination that this knowledge is certain. In that way the reliability of our actual knowledge itself, checked against the epistemologically prior existents, is the basis for reasoning to the reliability of our cognitive powers, and not vice versa.

On the one hand, this Aristotelian epistemology has to face a charge of extreme dogmatism. It makes every particular instance of existence an absolute. Each instance stands epistemologically in its own right, and in itself offers a solid basis for philosophical reasoning. Philosophies that have their starting points in human thought or language, moreover, are from the Aristotelian viewpoint absolutely wrong from start to finish, even though their treatment of details may be of outstanding aid in the philosophical enterprise. These stands can hardly help but have a savor of unacceptable dogmatism when they are assessed in modern or postmodern circles.

On the other hand, a charge of extreme relativism has to be faced by the notion that philosophies are as individually distinctive as are fingerprints. Yet the Aristotelian conception provides a single absolute and mandatory standard by which all philosophies are to be judged. The standard is the one real world in which we all live and think and act. The one standard is the same for all. Human thought

¹⁶ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1.1.4; John Locke [1], 44-5. Cf. *ibid.*, 'Epistle to the Reader,' 7.

and language about that real world can offer innumerable different sets of starting points upon which philosophies may be built. In this respect the Aristotelian conception of human knowledge, with the relation of that knowledge to thought and things, shows how pluralism in philosophy comes about, and why none of the philosophies can be refuted by any other even though in details all may receive inspiration and guidance from others. But in no way do the conceptions of knowledge in Aristotle and Aquinas dispense from a single absolute standard by which all philosophies can be judged. This norm cannot be demonstrated to anyone looking for proof on the basis of modern or postmodern starting points. It itself remains true to the explanation of pluralism in which no philosophy can refute any other. It has to wait till the opponent is no longer able to accept the notion that one's knowing can add anything to the thing itself.¹⁷

¹⁷ Cf. Bertrand Russell: "I could no longer believe that knowing makes any difference to what is known" (*Contemporary British Philosophy* [First Series], J.H. Muirhead, ed. [London: George Allen & Unwin 1924], 360). This was in reaction to the argument previously accepted from Bradley that a thing may be altered in the process of being known: "And you cannot ever get your product standing apart from its process" (Francis Herbert Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, 9th imp. [Oxford: Clarendon 1930], 23).