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ARISTOTLE'S THEOLOGY.

BY W. W. EVERTS, M. A.

Aristotle, called by Plato the mind of the school and by Dante the master of those who know, may be said to have made "science his forte and omniscience his foible." His father, Nicomachus, physician at the Macedonian Court, and his pupil, Alexander the Great, supplied him with means to collect books and specimens of every kind. Raphael, in his famous fresco of the school of Athens, represents him as the investigator looking down upon the earth while Plato is represented as the dreamer, looking up into Heaven. Plato called him the reader, and said that he needed the check as much as others needed the spur.

Aristotle followed the scientific and historical method in his researches. Beginning with a statement of his theme he then gave a historical review of the treatment of the subject by others, afterwards stated the difficulties, doubts and contradictions suggested by the subject, then sifted, discussed and explained them, and finally gave his own solution of the problem, much as Dorner does in his "Glaubenslehre." In this manner he studied the cosmos, man and God. It is unnecessary to name the sciences whose foundations he laid, as he invented the nomenclature and outlined the scheme of nearly all of them. The philosopher's tools were forged for him in Aristotle's work-shop. Suidas calls him "the secretary of the universe." Hegel says "he penetrated the whole universe of things." Sir William Hamilton found the seal of the peripatetic philosopher on all the gates of knowledge. St. Hilaire reckons all before the Stagirite only his precursors, and all after him only his disciples. Cuvier was astonished at his knowledge of the animal kingdom; Lessing started with his æsthetics, and

Kant with his categories. Hegel found logic where Aristotle had left it. He was as familiar with the habits of ants as with the social life of man. He wrote more than four hundred treatises. He studied the constitutions of 158 Greek cities in preparing his *Politics*, a book that Thomas Arnold knew by heart.

It is safe to say that Aristotle had the gift of analysis in perfection; he has been well called an "anatomical, critical, descriptive and classificatory genius." In contrasting Aristotle with his great teacher, Goethe likens the younger man to an architect who draws an immense circle for the base of his building, collects materials from all sides, arranges them, piles them up in layers and so rises in regular form like a pyramid to the sky, while Plato seeks the heavens like an obelisk, or better, like a pointed flame.

It need not occasion surprise, if with so many subsidiary sciences to elaborate Aristotle did not take the time needed to study all religions and thus to discover the best. His works on "the Good" and on "the Ideas" are lost, and we are compelled to depend on incidental references to theological questions scattered through his works. Theology had a place in his encyclopædia, but it was not treated by him as fully as the other sciences were. He may have neglected it intentionally, for to judge from what we know of his character, he was not a devout person. No statue of him is extant. The bust in Palazzo Spada in Rome represents Aristippus, and, if it were his, it would convey no information concerning his character, as the head is gone. But, if we may trust contemporary epigrams, the philosopher was a thorough-going man of the world. He was called a gourmand. His stature was small, his legs were thin, his head was bald, his lips curled in a mocking way, his beard was short; he was always well-dressed, his fingers were covered with rings and he lisped. Such a person might be expected to treat religion, if at all, in a condescending fashion, as it was afterwards by Montaigne, Voltaire and

Gibbon. However, Aristotle was not lacking in the nobler traits of character. He refers in his will to his mother and his wife, long since deceased, in most affectionate terms. While he denied the chief tenet of Plato, the existence of ideas, he nevertheless always venerated his teacher and declared that it would be profane for a bad man even to praise him.

In my search for references to deity in the writing of Aristotle I have found his metaphysics and his Nicomachean ethics most helpful. Naturally metaphysics and ethics come nearer to theology; however, I have found in various other books occasional allusions to my theme. I have arranged the quotations under the following heads: Omnipotence and eternity, omniscience, design and first cause, benevolence, blessedness, unchangeableness and the divine image.

I give first what the philosopher has written on the omnipotence and eternity of deity.

It may seem that there is no eternal essence separate and subsisting by itself. This, however, is absurd, for it appears to the most elegant minds that there is such an essence. But how can an eternal essence be the principle of things both eternal and not eternal? The existence of God is eternal and perfect, a life everlasting. We say that God is a living being eternal and the most excellent so that life and duration, continuance and eternity are present with God, for God is this. We should separate from mythology the point that the first and deepest grounds of existence are gods. The world did not spring out of Chaos. There is an eternal and immutable existence, an actuality prior to all potentiality, a source of motion itself unmoved. How could matter be moved if there were no power to move it? The matter of a house does not move itself. God's action is immortal and this is perpetual life; there is perpetual motion in God. Since there is that which is moved, that which moves and that which subsists as a medium between these, there is something which moves without being moved, which is eternal

essence and energy. The first mover attracts that which is attracted and through that which is moved it moves other things, hence he is a necessary being. The first of all is the mover of all, the first mover is God. If movement is eternal, there must be something eternal, too. Movement being continuous this something, which is one, must be eternal. The quintessence is the eternal cosmos beyond earth, water, air and fire. We are accustomed to give to the extreme and highest place the name of heaven, which we call the seat of all which is divine. The sky is a kind of divine body; the stars are far more divine than man; the souls of the stars are God's.

“Imagine men who have always dwelt beneath the earth in good and well illuminated habitations, habitations adorned with statues and paintings and well furnished with everything which is usually at the command of those who are deemed fortunate. Suppose these men never to have come up to the earth, but to have learned from an obscure legend that a deity and divine powers exist. If the earth were once to be opened for these men so that they could ascend out of their concealed abode to the regions inhabited by us and if they were to step forth and suddenly see before them the earth and the sea and skies and perceive the masses of clouds and the violence of the winds; and if then they were to look up at the sun and become aware of its magnitude and also of its workings, that it is the author of day in that it sheds its light over the entire heavens; and if afterwards when night had overshadowed the earth they were to see the whole sky beset and adorned with stars and should contemplate the changing by night of the moon as it waxed and waned, the rising and setting of all these heavenly bodies and their course to all eternity inviolable and unalterable; truly they would then believe that gods really exist, and that these mighty works originated with them.”

Here follow some passages that treat of the first cause, the design and the omniscience of the great spirit.

Whoever thinks there is need of a God has to think that there are gods. God seems to be a sort of beginning of *causes* and God possesses the knowledge of causes. All kinds of knowledge are more needful than this but none is better. The principle of things eternal must be always true for they are not *sometimes* true, nor is anything the cause of their being, but they are the causes of being to other things. Essences should be without matter, for it is necessary that they should be eternal if there is anything eternal. Essence cannot possess any magnitude but it is indivisible. It is divinely said that the first essences were God's. The first intelligent substance to all eternity itself possesses intelligence of itself.

He understands himself if he is the best of all things and if intellect is the intellect of intellect. God's blessedness consists in thinking on thought. He who bids the law to be supreme makes God supreme. Law is intellect free from appetite. Anaxagoras says that man is the wisest animal because he possesses hands. It would be more reasonable to say that he possesses hands, because he is the wisest animal, for it is more reasonable to give a flute to a flute player than to confer on a man who has some flutes the art of playing them. To the creature fitted to acquire the largest number of arts, nature assigns the hand, the instrument useful to the largest number of purposes. "The universe is like an army. The good of the army consists in order and in its commander who is the good of the army in a still greater degree; the commander is not on account of the order, but the order on account of the commander. The same immovable uncreated nature always chooses the best in all cases and being is better than non-being. God and nature make nothing superfluous. God has completed the whole by rendering generation continual. Perpetual production is as near *being* as possible. As the eyes of bats to the light of day, so is the intellect of our soul to such things as are naturally the most splendid of all. It is unworthy not to seek that knowledge which is appropriate to God. Science may be

godlike in two ways, godlike because it is that thing which God hath above all others, or because it is itself, the knowledge of the divine. Some have thought that besides other manifold goods upon earth, there is some absolute good, which is the cause to all these of their being good. But we may dismiss the idea at present for if there is any good universal and generic or transcendental and absolute it can neither be realized nor possessed by man, whereas something of this latter kind is what we are inquiring after. The cobbler, the carpenter, the physician and the general all pursue their vocations without respect to absolute good."

The next group of passages centers around the benevolence of God.

The good is the good of all production and motion.

If the gods take any care for men, as they are thought to do, it is reasonable to suppose that they delight in that which is best in man and most akin to themselves and that they regard those that show greatest regard and reverence as caring for that which is dear to themselves and as doing rightly and nobly. It is plain that all these things are found most of all in the wise man. The wise man therefore is the most beloved of heaven and therefore we may conclude the happiest. Homer very properly calls Jupiter father of gods and men, as he is king of all.

When there comes to be a great distance between persons in virtue, vice or wealth, or in any other respect, they no longer are or expect to be friends. It is most plainly seen in the case of the gods, for they have the greatest superiority in all good things. Given a being very far removed as God, and there can be no friendship. It is always supposed that the gods are of all beings the most blessed and happy, but what kind of action must we ascribe to them? It is ridiculous to conceive of the gods engaged in trade, can we conceive of them as facing danger? To whom are they to give? It would be an insult to praise them for having no evil desires. In short if we were to go through the whole list, we should find that all

action is petty and unworthy of the gods, and yet it is universally supposed that they live, and therefore that they exert their powers, for we cannot suppose that they all sleep like Endymion. Now if a being lives and if actions cannot be ascribed to him, still less production, what remains but contemplation? It follows then that the divine life which surpasses all others in blessedness is contemplation.

Many passages deal with the adorable blessedness of God.

“That which intellect appears to possess as divine belongs more eminently to the first intellect than to ours, and his contemplation is the most delightful and the best. If God always possesses that excellent condition of being which we sometimes possess, it is admirable, but if he possesses it in a still higher degree it is still more admirable. In this manner however he subsists. Life also is energy, essential energy is his most excellent and eternal life.”

The unchangeableness of God is set forth unmistakably. “He is without passion and unchangeable. The heavens that are moved are simple, without beginning or end and immutable. That by which they are moved is still less subject to change for it is first of first, simple of simple, indissoluble of indissoluble and ungenerated of ungenerated. If that which has a body is changeless, much less can that which has no body be changed. The parts may be regarded as changeable, but the whole cannot change, it is increate and indestructible.”

Aristotle seems to have drawn from man’s intellectual grandeur the inference that he must be made in the image or of the nature of God.

“Man’s life is happy as far as it resembles the divine state of mind. The life of God is of a kind with those higher moods, which with us last but a brief space, it being impossible that they should be permanent, whereas with him they are permanent, since his ever present consciousness is pleasure itself. A life which always follows

the reason is something more than human, for it would be the expression not of man's nature, but of some divine element in that nature. If then reason is divine, the life which consists in the exercise of reason will also be divine."

"The intellect seems to have something divine. If the mind were capable of perfect energy we should be as God. The soul is not a body neither is it without a body. The soul may be the realization or perfection of the body as the sailor of the boat. The highest function of the soul is not inherent in the body, and has no special organ with which it is connected like the other functions. It is an emanation from the celestial sphere and is the only part of the soul which survives the death of the body. Death destroys those potentialities that result in happiness. Whether forms remain after separation must now be considered. Is soul a thing of this kind? Not indeed every soul, but intellect, for perhaps it is impossible that this should be the case with every soul. Can Solon have meant that a man is happy when he has died? This would be an absurdity since we consider happiness to be energy. No one desires to remain in all respects the same when he grows older. With God this may be, for God is already in complete possession of the good. As the stories tell us, superlative excellence raises men to be gods."

What conclusions as to the theology of Aristotle can be drawn from these quotations? In the first place it seems he was a deist. He believed in an absentee deity, one who planned the machinery of the world, set it going, and then left it to itself, a being who was good in the philosophical sense, who had a good mind, but gave no thought to anything but himself, an inactive, a self-contemplative being, a being to be admired, worshipped and imitated, and yet without affection for men, a being who is the quintessence of order and beauty, who stamps his law on the constitution of everything in nature, but never bows down his ear to hear the cry of his creatures, who never utters a word of comfort, never extends a hand to help; a being in the

abstract; a principle without a name; a cause without an effect; a force not prior to matter; an unrelated idea; a first form; pure, immaterial actuality, moving, not by creation, for he remains ever unmoved in his own eternity, but by attraction as just ideas and beautiful objects always awaken desire in those beholding them. God is an actual principle, the eternal principle of development, not its product. The formative principle in him is not confronted as in man by an alien matter which can be overcome only after a long and painful struggle. He is the clear dry light of abstract existence. He is the God of animated nature, of Hylozoism rather than of Pantheism. He is an egoist of the transcendent kind, the personification of theoretical reason.

Aristotle's view has been stated in the figure of a sorites thus: There is no extension without time; there is no time without motion; there is no motion without unrealized desire; there is no desire without an ideal; there is no ideal but thought thinking of itself, thought that cannot interest itself in the affairs of men. The God of Aristotle is like the picture of the clock-maker on the wall facing the great clock of the Cathedral of Strasburg; rather he is like a spectator looking forever at himself in a mirror. He is pure intellect separate from feeling and will; the God of logic rather than of philosophy; an interrogation point, a question that, like Plato, Aristotle was always postponing and then answering yea and nay. He confesses that man is blind as a bat before the most splendid things. Now he agrees with the most elegant minds that there is a separate eternal essence. Then he dismisses the conception of a universal general, transcendent and absolute good, because such good cannot be realized or possessed by man. He denies that there can be any friendship between men and gods because men are so inferior to them. But he teaches that it is by the immediate apprehension of the highest truth, by beholding the highest truth, that man gains a participation in that pure thought in which the essence of the deity con-

sists. This beholding, this wishless absorption in the perception of the highest truth, is the most blessed experience of life. This theoretic life is the immortalizing of man. This life according to the divine in man renders him like the divine.

Again we may say that Aristotle believed in final causes. He established the cosmological proof of the existence of God. As illustrations of this argument, you may recall the comparisons which he draws between the world and a house or an army, showing that one needs an architect or a general as well as the other. Then he lays down the broad generalization that nature makes nothing superfluous, but always chooses the best. There is something admirable in all the handiwork of nature. The world is not disconnected like a poor tragedy. It is as beautiful and good as it can be. Matter is under the sway of reason. Throughout his writings he identifies God with law, order, beauty and intelligence. Reason is the ruling and guiding principle within us through which we form our conceptions of what is noble and divine. Whether this be intrinsically divine or only the divine in us, its appropriate activity must be perfect happiness. Such a life is more than human and man can only partake of it through the divine principle within him. He traces the human mind to the divine and considers the original superior to the copy. In the fragment portraying the heavens, a fragment preserved to us by Cicero, he anticipates the apostle's declaration that "the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and godhead."

In reply to the query, Was Aristotle a monotheist? we may say with Grant the translator of the *Ethics*: "It may be doubted whether in his own mind Aristotle ever succeeded in arriving at entirely definite results. It was to a first cause that Aristotle did homage. When we use personal language to describe the deity of Aristotle we feel that it is improper and unsuitable even if he resorts

to it himself. To be sure he quotes Homer approvingly, where he says that 'the domination of the many is not good' and then he applies the poet's words to theocracy and affirms that 'one must be supreme,' but we cannot attribute to that one anything more personal than Parmenides had discovered in absolute being, or Anaxagoras in absolute mind, or Plato in the idea of the good. Personality connotes more than being, mind, and the idea of the good. It embraces feeling and will, qualities which Aristotle explicitly excludes from his notion of deity." Prof. Blaikie thus sums up the limitations of the mind of this great philosopher. "His intellect was complete in all the categories of scientific cognition and strongly marked with all the sagacity which belongs to the man of business. His mind was radically different from Plato's. It was curious, while Plato's was inclined to lofty speculation. He was devoted to the analysis of things small and great, while his teacher thought out grand and beautiful harmonies. He had cultivated acuteness at the expense of wonder. The analytical work of mere understanding is an inadequate method of reaching the highest forms of vital reality. Intellectual culture can never produce a complete and healthy manhood; some flowers are without fragrance; some souls are without piety. Devotion is of the finest aroma of the emotional life. The omnivorous lust of knowledge stunted the growth of the most delicate emotions. In the Ethics the god or rather the gods are alluded to in several places, but merely in the form of a passing remark, as a pedestrian may pick up a primrose and throw it away. This is the great defect of his ethics." St. George Mivart reminds us that in the accumulation of natural knowledge, men's minds have been deadened to spiritual truth. "At the end of abstractions," Dr. Goetz observes, "nothing remains but a mechanical principle of motion. Of God, the one, personal God, author and creator of the visible universe, nothing was heard in the Lyceum." "The Ethics fail," Bishop Hampden says, "in elevating the heart

and the mind to objects which it needed divine wisdom to reveal and a divine example to realize to the life." Revelation is necessary, Milton shows, if governments are to stand the shocks of time. Herein to our prophets far beneath,

“As men divinely taught and better teaching
The solid rules of civil government,
In their majestic unaffected style,
Than all the orators of Greece and Rome.
In them is plainest language and easiest learnt
What makes a nation happy and keeps it so,
What ruins kingdoms and lays cities flat.
These only with our law best form a king.”

Practically Aristotle was a polytheist, although he speaks of a first principle and a first cause, he sees no incongruity in believing in gods many and lords many. He favors the worship of idols for the sake of the people. To his mind attention to the service of the gods is more important for a city's welfare than food, arts, arms and revenue. Myths were invented by the law-givers, he says, so as to please the masses. He knew the self-contradiction contained in idolatry, for he said “If you deem the sea goddess Leucothea a mortal you should not offer sacrifice to her; if you deem her divine you should not lament for her.”

Nevertheless, he adopts immemorial custom and declares that our ancestors were right when they regarded the stars as gods. He located the gods in the farthest circle of the heavens and he argued to himself, the stars, being so much nearer the gods than we are, must be more divine.

He assigned divine souls to the stars because he could not otherwise account for the force that moved them in their various orbits around the central earth. Like his master he cleared the character of the gods of the charge of immorality, but he did not reduce their number. He had an idea that the gods stood originally for the powers

of nature, but he believed in doing honor to the powers of nature.

When the gospel came it swept away Aristotle's idols but it yielded to his philosophy. When Luther arose he found Christendom following the Stagirite rather than the Nazarene. Galileo was imprisoned for disputing the twice holy philosopher. The books of *the* philosopher, as he was reverently called, were treated as infallible. It is a wonder that he was not canonized. The Franciscans and Dominicans were fierce rivals under Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas but both followed the metaphysics of Aristotle. The whole world, Mohammedan as well as Christian, bowed to his sceptre. In recent years the pope has re-established Aquinas as the standard in theology, and Aquinas' teacher, Albert Magnus, was nicknamed the ape of Aristotle. Calvin inherited from the schoolmen as the schoolmen from Aristotle the thought of God as a being without love. Luther cried out: "God has afflicted us on account of our sins with this cursed, haughty, rascally heathen." But he cried in vain. Melancthon perpetuated his rule in German theology where a second era of scholasticism prevailed until the days of Schleiermacher. The idea so long prevalent that God is outside, not inside the world, is traceable to Aristotle. The first of the 39 Articles that describes God as without parts or passions comes from the same source. Descartes' famous argument for the existence of God which runs in this way "A perfect being must exist because we can conceive it, existence being involved in the idea of perfection," this argument is suggested by the words already quoted: "whoever thinks there is need of a God has to think that there are gods." Kant uses the same argument when he drops the rational proofs of the existence of God and appeals to the needs of the soul. Ritschl with his value judgments, holding that the idea of God is a valuable idea and we must hold to it for that reason, is the last one to use Aristotle's dictum. When Spinoza declared that extension is the other side

of thought, he put in different phrase Aristotle's announcement that the world is the body of God. When Locke planted the empirical philosophy with its offshoots in the scepticism of Hume and the atheism of Diderot, he selected as a seed from the granary on the Lycus, the saying, the mind is like a tablet, on which nothing has been written. When Paley gave his well known story of the watch as an illustration of design in nature, he might have found a better one in the hand which Aristotle had selected for the same purpose. When Richard Rothe magnified the absolute, he got the word as well as the idea from Aristotle, and finally Mrs. Eddy with her denial of the existence of an evil principle in the world can appeal to Aristotle for support. In recapitulation I would say that while Aristotle appears to teach the natural and some of the moral attributes of God, that while he appears to be a deist if not a monotheist he is actually a dualist, accepting the eternity of mind and of matter, and a polytheist assigning powers to various deities in different spheres. While it is impossible to exaggerate the contributions which Aristotle made to the physical and intellectual sciences, it is difficult to define what benefit if any he conferred on theology. We might wish that he had sailed to Egypt, as his teacher had before him, for then he would have found in Alexandria a colony of thousands of Jews, any one of whom could have taught him what he had been seeking so long. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long suffering and abundant in goodness and truth keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin."

But it was not so to be. God seems to have kept this wise man as an example of the feebleness and nothingness of the most exalted intellect in the search for God, to prove as Aristotle himself admitted that man is as blind as a bat before the most splendid things, to prove that man by wisdom cannot find God.