**Plutarch on Aristotle as the First Peripatetic**

by

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**Abstract**

This contribution focuses on the question of what place Aristotle occupies in the history of Greek philosophy according to Plutarch. Rather than placing Aristotle in the Platonist or Pythagorean-Platonic tradition, Plutarch regards the Stagirite as the founder of the Peripatetic tradition. Although this philosophical tradition clearly differs from the Platonic one, it remains fairly close to Platonism, so that it can often function as Plutarch’s privileged ally in his attacks against other schools.

**Key-words:** Plutarch, Aristotle Platonicus, Aristotle Pythagoricus, Aristotle Peripateticus

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1. *Aristotle in Plutarch, or how to find a way out of the labyrinth*

Plutarch’s position towards Aristotle has often been examined. Both in the *Lives* and in the *Moralia*, the famous philosopher from Stageira is frequently introduced as a respected and authoritative source in many different domains. Aristotle is not only referred to in the context of technical philosophical discussions but also quoted for ordinary anecdotes. His view on time, for instance, as measure or number of motion according to antecedent and subsequent (*Quaest. Plat.* 1007A) is rejected, whereas his story that Timon’s grandmother every year used to hibernate

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1 This is a more elaborate version of a paper that was presented at the conference of the Réseau Plutarque in Málaga, November 28-29, 2008. I would like to thank Jeroen Lauwers for his valuable suggestions, and Ivo Jossart for his competent and much appreciated technical support.

2 Good recent discussions (with further bibliography) can be found in D. Babut, 1996; A. Pérez Jiménez & J. García López & R.M. Aguilar, 1999; and G.E. Karamanolis, 2006.

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for two months (Quaest. conv. 733C = fr. 43 Rose) is quoted with approval.

Unfortunately, Plutarch’s ample use of Aristotle is not free from ambiguities and problems. Usually, his references to, and evaluations of Aristotle’s position are fairly brief and directly related to a specific context, and nowhere, he provides a detailed and lengthy discussion of the Stagirite’s philosophy. As far as we know, Plutarch never wrote Quaestiones Aristotelicae, and it is extremely doubtful whether he devoted any book length studies to (aspects of) Aristotle’s works. Several passages might prima facie suggest a good knowledge of the Corpus Aristotelicum, but on closer inspection, there is only little cogent evidence that points to such thorough familiarity on Plutarch’s part. Often, he is rather critical of Aristotle’s views. He disagrees, for instance, with the latter’s doctrine of νόησις νοήσεως and with his theory of aether. On the other hand, he sometimes endorses and appropriates important aspects of the Aristotelian position. The classic example is to be found in De virtute moralis, the Aristotelian flavour of which has often been underlined.

In dealing with such problems, the commentator risks to get lost in an enormous and dark labyrinth, where different paths seem to lead in opposite directions, only to come to a dead end or – what is worse – to open out onto the monster of unfounded hypotheses. In this contribution, I would like to seek my own way out of this labyrinth, by focusing on a specific but important question, that is, to what philosophical tradition Aristotle belongs according to Plutarch. An answer to this crucial question may throw a new light on Plutarch’s general attitude towards, and use of, the Stagirite. First of

3 The Lamprias catalogue mentions studies on Aristotle’s Topics (n. 56), on the Ten Categories (n. 192), and on the Fifth Substance (n. 44). See, however, F.H. Sandbach, 1982, pp. 212 and 216-217; a less sceptical view can be found in D. Babut, 1996, pp. 8-9 and G.E. Karamanolis, 2006, p. 89 (with n. 15) and p. 338.

4 E.g. Alex. 7.5 (on Aristotle’s Metaphysics); De virt. mor. 442BC (with G. Verbeke, 1960); Quaest. conv. 616D; Adv. Colot. 1115A-C.

5 In general, I side with the view of F.H. Sandbach, 1982, esp. p. 230: “Plutarch or his sources knew of Topica, Metaphysics, Nicomachean Ethics, Historia Animalium, Rhetoric III, and probably of De Caelo and De Anima. Direct acquaintance with the contents is certain only for Historia Animalium and Rhetoric III, both books for the use of which before his time there is some evidence”; cf. also P. Donini, 1974, pp. 66-80.

6 De def. or. 426D; see F. Ferrari, 1999.


8 Cf., e.g., O. Greard, 1885, p. 58: “C’est la pure doctrine d’Aristote; on ne saurait plus formellement se détacher de Platon”; more references can be found in D. Babut, 1996, p. 2, n. 2.