

INTRODUCTION

Why Aristotle?

Why for everybody?

And why is an exposition of Aristotle for everybody an introduction to common sense?

I can answer these three questions better after I have answered one other. Why philosophy? Why should everyone learn how to think philosophically—how to ask the kind of searching questions that children and philosophers ask and that philosophers sometimes answer?

I have long been of the opinion that philosophy is everybody's business—but not in order to get more information about the world, our society, and ourselves. For that purpose, it would be better to turn to the natural and the social sciences and to history. It is in another way that philosophy is useful—to help us to understand things we already know, understand them better than we now understand them. That is why I think everyone should learn how to think philosophically.

For that purpose, there is no better teacher than Aristotle. I do not hesitate to recommend him as the teacher to begin with. The only other teacher that I might have chosen is Plato, but in my judgment he is second best. Plato raised almost all the questions that everyone should face; Aristotle raised them too and, in addition, gave us clearer answers to them. Plato taught Aristotle how to think philosophically, but Aristotle learned the lesson so well that he is the better teacher for all of us.

Since we are concerned with learning how to think the way Aristotle did, what Aristotle thought is more important than who he was or when and how he lived. The centuries and the changes that separate him from us may make the conditions of his life and the society in which he lived appear strange to us; but, as I will try to explain, they do not make either the style or the content of his thinking strange to us.

Aristotle was born in 384 B.C. in the Macedonian town of Stagira on the north coast of the Aegean Sea. His father was a physician in the court of the King of Macedonia. The King's grandson became Alexander the Great, to whom Aristotle later became both tutor and friend.

At the age of eighteen, Aristotle took up residence in Athens and enrolled in Plato's Academy as a student of philosophy. It was not long before Plato found Aristotle a troublesome student who questioned what he taught and openly disagreed with him. When Plato died, and Alexander became the ruler of Greece, Aristotle opened his own school, the Lyceum. That was in 335 B.C.

The Lyceum had a fine library, an extensive collection of maps, and a zoo in which Aristotle collected specimens of animal life. It has been said that some of these were sent to him by Alexander from the countries he conquered. When Alexander died in 323 B.C., Aristotle exiled himself from Athens to one

of the Aegean islands. He died there a year later at the age of 63.

Aristotle lived in a society in which the citizens had free time to enjoy the pursuits of leisure because they had slaves to take care of their estates and to do menial work. It was also a society in which women occupied an inferior position. Plato, in projecting the institutions of an ideal state, proposed that all political offices, except that of military leader, should be open to women, because he regarded men and women as essentially equal; but Aristotle accepted the more conventional view of his day concerning the inferiority of women.

I shall have more to say in a later chapter about Aristotle's views with regard to slavery and to women. Here I want to say at once that my use of the words "man," "men," and "mankind" in their generic sense to stand for human beings of both genders, and not just for the male portion of the population, is in no way an indication that I share Aristotle's view about women. On the contrary, with regard to this point, I am a Platonist.

There may be some persons who regard Aristotle's antiquity as a disadvantage. They may feel that it would be much better to select as a teacher someone alive today—someone acquainted with the world in which we live, someone who knows what modern science has discovered about that world. I do not agree with them.

Though Aristotle was a Greek who lived twenty-five centuries ago, he was sufficiently acquainted with the main outlines of the world in which we live to talk about it as if he were alive today. As an aid to our being able to think philosophically, Aristotle would not be a better teacher even if he were acquainted with everything that modern scientists know.

In an effort to understand nature, society, and man, Aristotle began where everyone should begin—with what he already knew in the light of his ordinary, commonplace experience.

Beginning there, his thinking used notions that all of us possess, not because we were taught them in school, but because they are the common stock of human thought about anything and everything.

We sometimes refer to these notions as our common sense about things. They are notions that we have formed as a result of the common experience we have in the course of our daily lives—experiences we have without any effort of inquiry on our part, experiences we all have simply because we are awake and conscious. In addition, these common notions are notions we are able to express in the common words we employ in everyday speech.

Forgive me for repeating the word “common” so many times. I cannot avoid doing so, and I have to lay stress on that word because what it means lies at the heart of my argument. Not everything is common. There are many things we call our own, but there are other things that we recognize as not exclusively ours. We share them with others, such as a book that our friends have read or a motion picture some of us have enjoyed, or a house that all the members of the family share when they live in it together.

The things we share are common. There are many things that different groups of people share. There are fewer things that we all share and are common to all of us, simply because we are all human. It is in this last, all-embracing sense of the word “common” that I refer to common experiences and common notions, or common sense, as common.

Our common-sense notions are expressed by such words as “thing,” “body,” “mind,” “change,” “cause,” “part,” “whole,” “one,” “many,” and so on. Most of us have been using these words and notions for a long time—since we were quite young. We started to use them in order to talk about experiences that

all of us have had—of things moving or remaining at rest, of plants growing, of animals being born and dying, of sitting down and getting up, of aches and pains, of going to sleep, dreaming, and waking up, of feeding and exercising our bodies, and of making up our minds.

I could enlarge this list of our common experiences, just as I could enlarge the list of the common words we use and the common notions we have. But even without the additions that could be made, it should be clear that the words, experiences, and notions I have mentioned are all common—not exclusively yours, or mine, or anyone else's.

In contrast, the things that scientists observe in their laboratories or that explorers observe on their expeditions are very special experiences. We may learn about them from their reports, but, as a rule, we do not experience them ourselves.

Human beings have learned a great deal since Aristotle's day, mainly through the discoveries of modern science. Applied science has created a world and a way of life very different from his world and his way of life. He did not have an automobile, could not talk on the telephone, never saw what can be seen through a microscope or a telescope, did not have a close view of the surface of the moon, and never heard a description of its surface by men walking on it. But Aristotle had the same common experiences in his day that we have in ours. The kind of thinking he did about them enabled him to understand them better than most of us do.

That and that alone is the reason he can help us to understand these common experiences better and help us to understand ourselves and our lives, as well as the world and the society in which we live, even though our way of life, our world, and our society are different from his.

Aristotle's thinking *began* with common sense, but it did not

end there. It went much further. It added to and surrounded common sense with insights and understandings that are not common at all. His understanding of things goes deeper than ours and sometimes soars higher. It is, in a word, *uncommon* common sense.

That is his great contribution to all of us. What I am going to try to do in this book is to make his *uncommon* common sense easier to understand. If it becomes easier to understand, it might even become less uncommon.