

Martin Heidegger

Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy.

Trans. Robert D. Metcalf and Mark B. Tanzer.

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This set of lectures from 1924 offers a refreshing and productive picture of Aristotle. He is no abstract categorizer of nature according to this consideration of his basic concepts. For Heidegger, we must concern ourselves with Aristotle's account of concept formation in the concrete context common to all human beings as the mode of their being-there. In their preface, the translators explain their decision to translate *Dasein* as 'being-there' rather than following the convention in Heidegger translation of leaving it untranslated (xii). They argue for the need to focus attention on the 'there' (Da) when exploring Aristotelian concepts and their role in Heidegger's reading. This proves to be a worthwhile move because it allows us to take a fresh look at a Heideggerian concept without presupposing its established role in his thought. It also allows us to examine Aristotle's role in Heidegger's thought. These lectures play an important part in Heidegger's formulation of the key concepts of *Being and Time*, published three years later.

Heidegger's readings in the history of philosophy are both controversial and extremely rich, providing unexpected opportunities for developing our understanding of the problems of philosophy. They can be seen to subsume diverse philosophies into a 'history of being' which traces the role of being in the genesis of many philosophies. Aristotle scholar Jonathan Barnes has argued that we should not get carried away by Aristotle's references to 'being *qua* being' despite its 'pleasantly esoteric ring' (*Aristotle*, Oxford University Press 1982, 25). This refers, Barnes argues, not to some genetic and unifying element, but to beings, or what Heidegger would term the 'ontic'. In what sense can Aristotle be said to contribute to a thinking of 'being *qua* being' which accounts for the emergence of abstract concepts of beings and thus provides their being? At the beginning of *Being and Time* Heidegger writes: 'Our aim in the following treatise is to work out the question of the meaning of *Being* and to do so concretely' (1). In the *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* it is the concrete being-there of human beings which is at stake. This leads Heidegger to explore the different ways or modes of being involved in the world for which Aristotle seeks to account. He explores Aristotle's accounts of animal, social, political, ethical and linguistic modes of being. These wide ranging engagements with Aristotle's corpus are unified by the account of concept-formation he claims to find across them all. He argues that Aristotle takes us beyond the abstract notion of definition found in traditional logic, to conceptuality itself (11). The concrete genesis of concepts is to be found in the concrete contexts of their formation where the

basic structure of human being-there is at work. Each of these contexts embodies the basic determinations and structures of concept formation as such. For Heidegger this is what Aristotle puts us in touch with.

Heidegger is concerned with the way of thinking being that Aristotle provides, the characteristic grasp of reality found in his thought. Heidegger refers to ‘the *basic experience* in which I make the *concrete character* accessible to myself’ (12). This must lead us to the being-structure of the being-there of human beings for Aristotle (32). One of the most productive parts of these lectures is their exploration of Aristotle’s impact on modern philosophy. If the being-structure of the being-there of human beings is to be grasped through the concrete, certain abstractions are challenged. Heidegger claims that the concepts of subject and object do not appear in Greek philosophy (40). Rather than the apprehension of the world, he claims, it is being-in-the-world which was their concern. For Aristotle it is the character of the world as it is encountered by human beings that will set them apart from animals, but both humans and animals are already in the world. This puts human being close to the concrete, since our difference from animals must emerge in this concrete context rather than being set out in advance. This problematizes the certain abstract pretensions of philosophy by bringing concepts back to the concrete context of their formation.

We may also note Heidegger’s extensive engagement with Aristotle’s account of human beings as social and political beings, and as users of language. Heidegger claims that ‘the Greeks existed in discourse’ (74). This gives the orator genuine power over human being-there, showing discourse to be genuinely concrete, because the Greeks lived in discourse as a mode of being rather than a tool. Language forms part of the concrete being-in-the-world that Heidegger finds in Aristotle. This suggests that there is in Aristotle a presentation of Greek living, of the ways of living of the Greek world. Heidegger argues that, for Aristotle, language is rooted in discourse and rhetoric. Rhetoric is understood as the self-interpretation of being-there, a means of interpreting concrete being-there (75). It is oriented to everyday concerns involved in being-with-one-another that have to do with important or prestigious events or arenas (84).

Also of note is the doctrine of affects that Heidegger claims to uncover in Aristotle. These are not states of the soul or attached to bodily symptoms, but ‘dispositions of living things in the world’ (83). They have to do with ways of being in a concrete world. This doctrine has the effect of unifying acts of the mind and the body (134). Heidegger here addresses his own times and calls upon his contemporaries to take this thought further. They need to find the concrete context which includes those things separated in our abstract concepts. The affective becomes part of a concrete account of concept formation. The concrete context in which these concepts were formed allows us to locate the unity of the situations in which we find ourselves.

The value of this reading of Aristotle is similar to the value found in Heidegger’s

readings of other philosophers. Heidegger provides a unified reading, an ‘idea of the whole’, which suggests a way of locating the genesis of these philosophies. Such an approach reveals possibilities in these philosophies which are of value, even if we do not follow Heidegger in the specific genesis he locates. They open up the prospect of pursuing a unifying reading of philosophies rather than breaking up their elements and considering them in isolation. This can be considered a lesson in how to read a philosophy, how to pull together its elements in order to appreciate it as a whole. The publication of this set of lectures in English also opens the prospect of renewed debate on Aristotle’s role in the genesis of Heidegger’s thought and of *Being and Time* in particular. Here we can see the formation of concepts central to his philosophy in the context of Aristotle’s concrete account of the most abstract things. Aristotle’s philosophy of engagement with the concrete also has implications for philosophical problems that merit further exploration. Heidegger opens up possibilities in these lectures for reading philosophy and for putting our thought in touch with the concrete.

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