



## INTERVIEW WITH ENRICO BERTI

*Pietro Angelo Casati*

**INTRODUCTION.** Enrico Berti is professor emeritus at the University of Padua. He has also taught at the Universities of Brussels, Geneva and Perugia. He is a member of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei (Lincean Academy), member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, honorary President of the Institut International de Philosophie and member of the International Academy for Philosophy. Professor Berti has written several essays and papers on Aristotle, mainly in Italian. Among these, it is worth mentioning his paper *Being and Essence in Contemporary Interpretations of Aristotle* (in A. Bottani et al. (eds.), *Individuals, Essence and Identity. Themes of Analytic Metaphysics*, Kluwer, Dordrecht-Boston-London 2002, pp. 79-107) and his book on Aristotle in the Twentieth Century (*Aristotele nel Novecento*, Laterza, Bari 1992).

**In the words of J. Barnes, “although Aristotle has always been the prince of philosophers, we can say without exaggeration that at Oxford, in the twentieth century, he has strengthened his principedom. [...] After the Second World War, the kingdom of Aristotle continued when J.L. Austin has installed in his court as a Grand Vizir”<sup>1</sup>. Some philosophers have even explicitly referred to Aristotle as the authentic “founder” of the ordinary language analysis practiced first in Cambridge, by Moore and Wittgenstein, and thereafter at Oxford, by Austin and Ryle. How and to what extent the Aristotelian thought has been present in the first season of Analytic Philosophy? In what respect you think that “analytic philosophy belongs fully to the great tradition of Western metaphysics”<sup>2</sup>? If by «the first season of Analytic Philosophy» we mean its early times, namely the thought of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, as well as the “first” Wittgenstein (at the time of *Tractatus*) and the Vienna Circle, we can say that Aristotle’s thought was almost absent from it. As far as I know, Frege, Wittgenstein and Carnap have not dealt with him, while Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* (1945) considers Aristotle, disparagingly, as «the philosopher of common sense» (this being an epithet that Georg Edward Moore, conversely, would have liked, being notoriously favourable**

<sup>1</sup>J. Barnes, *Aristotle dans la philosophie anglosaxonne*, «Revue philosophique de Louvain», 75, 1977.

<sup>2</sup>E. Berti, *Ontologia o metafisica? Un punto di vista aristotelico*, in C. Bianchi and A. Bottani (eds.), *Significato e ontologia*, Franco Angeli Edizioni, Milan 2003.

to common sense). The encounter between Analytic Philosophy and Aristotele took place precisely with Moore, when he started paying special attention, unlike Russell, Carnap and Wittgenstein, to analysis of ordinary language, finding that this form of analysis had been started precisely by Aristotle.

The above encounter took place, not surprisingly, in England, the European country that more than any other had resisted the influence of nineteenth century's historicism, widespread in the Continent. Historicism had decreed, with Hegel, that «the most ancient philosophies are the poorest and abstract, even though Hegel himself considered Aristotle the greatest philosopher of all time, dedicating him the main chapters of *Lectures of History of Philosophy*. In England, in 1880, the «Aristotelian Society for the Systematic Study of Philosophy» was founded in order to promote the systematic study of philosophy (not only Aristotelian studies): the society was named after Aristotle, because he was seen as the foremost exponent of this way of doing philosophy. Among the presidents of the «Aristotelian Society» there were Russell and Moore themselves, followed by Whitehead, the great aristotelian William David Ross (responsible for the English translation of all the works of Aristotle, as well as editor and commentator of many of them), and Ryle, Austin, Wisdom, Ayer, Popper, Strawson, and more recent aristotelian scholars like G.E.L. Owen, R. Sorabji, G.E.M. Anscombe, D. Wiggins, M. Burnyeat, S. Broadie.

Furthermore in England, in Moore especially, the influence of Franz Brentano, aristotelian in metaphysics and psychology, was strong. It was through Moore's appeal to Wittgenstein to return to England, after the World War, when he made the turning that led to analysis of common language. Then, from the school of the "second" Wittgenstein, the philosophers of the so called Oxford School arose, developing philosophy as analysis of the ordinary language, following Aristotele. We are now talking of philosophers such as John L. Austin, Gilbert Ryle, G. Elizabeth M. Anscombe, Peter F. Geach and others.

I will answer the last part of question 1, i.e. if Analytic Philosophy rightfully belongs to the great tradition of Western metaphysics, by replying to question 8.

**Is it correct to recognize some form of "essentialism" in the resumption of the fundamental Aristotelian categorical distinctions? If so, would you consider this as a "deleterious" element?** It depends on what we means by «essentialism». If we mean, as proposed by Quine, a philosophy according to which the language refers to object with an essence expressible by a definition, a «formula», which is identical in all possibile worlds (e.g. the chemical formula for water is H<sub>2</sub>O in all possibile worlds, and that which does not have this essence is not water), then «essentialist» analytic philosophers (e.g. S. Kripke, H. Putnam, D.W. Hamlyn) are certainly Aristotelian, since Aristotle, in the famous *Metaphysics Book Z*, ascribed to the substances an essence, the form, expressed by definition. On this issue I recommend the recent *Aristotle's Metaphysics Book Z: The Contemporary Debate*, written by Gabriele Galluzzo and Mauro Mariani (Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2006).

If, on the other hand, as the detractors of «essentialism» do, we mean a philosophy that argues for the existence of eternal immutable essences, that is a philosophy incompatible with the theory of biological evolution and with any other form of evolution, therefore this essentialism has nothing to do with Aristotle. As shown by a great scholar of Aristotle biology, David M. Balme, the form should not be confused with the species, nor it is to be conceived as a Platonic idea, transcendent eternal and immutable. The form is an active cause which works in the development of living things as a program, in the manner of DNA discovered by contemporary genetics; it is susceptible to casual variations, as shown by the difference be-

tween individuals of the same species, detected by Aristotle himself (see D.M. Balme, *Aristotle's Biology was not Essentialist*, «Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie», 62, 1980, pp. 1-12). Balme's survey, preceded by Max Delbrück, Nobel prize for medicine (*Aristotle-totle-totle*, in J. Monod and E. Bore (eds.), *Of Microbes and Life*, New York, Columbia U.P., 1978, pp. 50-55), led Ernst Mayr to change his opinion about Aristotelian essentialism (see E. Mayr, *Toward a New Philosophy of Biology. Observations of an Evolutionist*, Cambridge (MA) 1988, pp. 56-57).

However, the notion of essence, or form, is not the only Aristotelian distinction recovered by Analytic Philosophy, as highlighted by countless work of analytic philosophers and, summarily, by the recent anthology entitled *Aristotelian Contemporary Metaphysics* (ed. by T.E. Tahko, Cambridge U.P. 2013), where authors like Jonathan Lowe, Kit Fine, Peter Simons and others recover the Aristotelian concepts of existence, category, substance, property, power and act, developing them according to the issues of contemporary philosophy.

**The above variability of the essences seems to be scarcely compatible with their desired identity in all possibile worlds. Moreover, the definitions, which should express the essences, would inherit this variability. Is it not desirable that the definitions do not change? How can you avoid this *impasse*?** To avoid the *impasse*, a distinction between non-living substances (e.g. water) and living substances (plants and animals) should be made. The former are completely immutable, therefore Kripke and Putnam are Aristotelian when they affirm that the chemical formula for water is the same in all possible world and, if something has not this formula, then it is not water. Instead, according to Aristotle, the essences of the living substances are constant, but not completely. An individual belonging to a certain species generates another individual of the same species, i.e. with the same form, or essence ("human being generates human being"). However Aristotle himself allows exceptions to this rule, which is valid mainly, but not always (as all physical laws). So it may happen, for instance, that a horse generates a mule. Again, animals belonging to same species can be different because of the location, time and other factors (e.g., the differences between people of different races). This fact introduces in the nature the possibility of variations, usually casual, similar to the random "mutations" in the genetic code allowed by modern genetics to explain evolution.

**The analytic philosophers have often established with the philosophers of the past "a relationship, so to speak, as equals, [...] discussing the arguments from a philosophical point of view and indicating points of agreement and disagreement, valid and not valid arguments"<sup>3</sup>, considering them, in short, as important participants in the current debate. What is the opinion of a historian of philosophy (in the traditional sense) like you about this theoretical approach?** There are two opposite ways, both wrong in my opinion, to approach the philosophers of the past: the way I would call anti-historical and historicism. The former consists in treating the philosophers of the past as equal, discussing with them, but judging them in light of contemporary science, easily detecting their lacks and defects, without reckoning the cultural situation in which they lived. This is a way practiced by some analytic philosophers, e.g. Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy*, where he criticizes Aristotle for his ignorance of the laws of Newtonian mechanics. Obviously, from an historical point of view, this approach leads to a total misunderstanding, not only of philosophy, but of the whole culture of the past. Unfortunately, many

<sup>3</sup>E. Berti, *Aristotele nel Novecento*, Laterza, Bari 1992, p. 177.

analytic philosophers and scientist unaware of the history of philosophy follow this way.

The second way to approach the past, the historicism way, is the polar opposite, as fruitless and useless. Its application leads to relegate the philosophers of the past in their historical situations, excluding them from any possible viewpoint belonging to other ages, therefore from any theoretical discussion. According to this approach, the philosophies of the past belong exclusively to the past and can no longer contribute to contemporary philosophy or culture. From this perspective, every theoretical dialogue necessarily leads to a misinterpretation in bringing up to date what cannot be brought up to date *a priori*. I won't make the names of the historians who practice this approach not to offend them, because it is clear that their way to deal with the past is completely useless and devoid of any philosophical interest. Nevertheless, they exist and are particularly numerous in continental Europe, in Italy especially, probably due to the influence of the never gone historicism of Croce, Gentile, Gramsci, also in philosophers who assume to be immune to it.

Of course, I think the best approach to lie in the "middle path", a synthesis between the two opposite side. This involves first of all a radical historicization of the philosophies of the past, namely a positioning in their historical contexts, understood and retraced in their own authenticity, taking advantage of all possibilities of contemporary philological, sociological and linguistic sciences. Nevertheless, this full historical comprehension should not *a priori* exclude the possibility of a theoretical comparison with the philosopher of the past, from which there can be a lot to learn, not mechanically transposing their solutions to contemporary problem, but rather trying to readapt them, *mutatis mutandis*. Without this operation, the former, i.e. the historicization, completely devoid of philosophical interest, whereas without the former the second operation is completely artificial, because the interlocutor is factitious, unreal, and therefore a genuine discussion is impossible.

**Besides the analytic philosophers who have approached Aristotle with a merely philosophical interest, others in the analytic community have produced a variety of genuine Aristotelian studies, playing an important role in the *Symposia Aristotelica*, and marking a "transition from the traditional way of studying Aristotle, shown by Jaeger and Ross in the first half of the twentieth century, to a new way"<sup>4</sup>. What did this change represent, and what were the outcomes?** The new way of studying Aristotle, introduced by the international *Symposia Aristotelica*, but not only, is the abandonment of historicist method, consisting in a mere reconstruction of the historical evolution of Aristotle's thought, embodied especially in Werner Jaeger which (although deserving) dominated the exegesis of Aristotle in the first middle of Nineteenth Century. The new way corresponds to the approach described above, as a synthesis, the middle path, between opposite propensities. This approach combines historical comprehension and philosophical evaluation, trying firstly to reconstruct and evaluate the arguments used by Aristotele in support of his thesis. This new method was introduced by analytic philosophers, like Elisabeth Anscombe, G.E.L. Owen, Anthony Kenny, Jonathan Barnes, Myles Burnyeat, Sarah Broadie in England, Wolfgang Wieland, Günther Patzig e Michael Frede in Germany, Terence H. Irwin, John Cooper, Martha C. Nussbaum in the USA. However, even philosophers of hermeneutical or existentialist extraction as Pierre Aubenque, or philological as Pierre Pellegrin, André Laks and Michel Crubellier in France, or, in Italy, by a phenomenological philosopher as Leo Lugarini or neo-scholastic ones as Giovanni Reale embraced the

<sup>4</sup>E. Berti, *Aristotele nel Novecento*, Laterza, Bari 1992, p. 128.

same method. Today there are many excellent scholar of Aristotle's thought, who practice this method, in many other countries and continents, for instance in Spain and Portugal and in Latin America (Mexico, Argentine, Chile, Colombia, Brasil), in Canada, in Greece and in Poland, in Russia also. I aspire to be one of those myself and I was often recognised as applying this new method to the study of Aristotle. Most of these studies have made Aristotle one of our contemporary philosophers, being him one of the most studied, discussed and used philosophers.

**Another philosopher that was “made contemporay” thanks to this approach is Thomas Aquinas. What kind of interaction is there between Thomism and Analytic Philosophy?** Between Thomism and Analytic Philosophy there was an interaction that gave rise to the so called “Analytical Thomism” (a term coined in 1997 by John Haldane). This trend has deepened, by using the method of Analytic Philosophy, some of the doctrines of Thomas Aquinas, detecting the convergence with the same Analytic Philosophy. This happened mainly the theory of knowledge, as shown by Anthony Kenny in his book *Aquinas on Mind* (1993). As for the concept of being, Analytical Thomism has interpreted Aquinas' thought in a different direction from existentialist neo-thomist (E. Gilson, C. Fabro), namely has shown that, for Aquinas, *actus essendi* is not the simple act of existing, but it is the act of a certain essence, which, in the case of God, is not *esse ipsum* in general, but “his very being”, that is, the most perfect being that is proper to God (see Peter Geach in *Three Philosophers*, 1963, and also Anthony Kenny in *Aquinas on Being*, 2002).

**An interesting debate within the Analytical Thomism concerns the ontological priority between essence and existence. On the one hand it is possible to argue that all essences are actually instantiated, according to Aquinas. On the other hand, following Avicenna, it can be argued that existence is not a necessary condition to have essential properties. How is this alternative related to Aristotle? What is the relevance for the contemporary debate?**<sup>5</sup> Pursuant to Aristotle, there is no essence without existence, so definitions of non-existent objects (e.g. “hircocervus”) are purely nominal definitions, not definitions of essences. Therefore the distinction between essence and being can not be interpreted in term of power and act, as Aquinas does in *De ente et essentia* to explain the composite nature of immaterial substances (the angels and the intellectual souls), undergoing a strong conditioning by Neo-Platonism and Avicenna. Moreover, according to Aristotle, the existence is not univocal, in other words it is not the simply property of a class, its not being empty, as claimed by Russell, Quine and van Inwagen, but rather existence is constitutive of the essences and it is said also with different meanings, corresponding to different essences, as claimed by John Austin and Gilbert Ryle. This does not mean that all essences exist necessarily, i.e. that are eternal, because some being are essentially generable and corruptible, so they have a limited existence in time.

**In your essay on the presence of Aristotle in contemporary philosophy, you indicate an unexplored direction in the analytical philosophy's “appropriation” of Aristotle's thought, stressing the necessity to move from a merely formal ontology to an “integral” one, an ontology capable to inquire on the “first causes of being as being and to “take into account any kind of explanation, not only the logical-linguistic**

<sup>5</sup>I would like to thank Fabio Ceravolo for suggesting this question.

**ones, but also the causal ones, in the sense of a real, ontological causality, concerning the being, not just the language”<sup>6</sup>. In order to reach this aim, you consider as a possible way a resumption of Aristotelian arguments related to the notion of “act” as the primary meaning of “being”. How can this Aristotelian concept “complete” the formal ontology as you suggest?** The limit that I have found in the use of Aristotle by Analytic Philosophy is its primary focus on certain doctrines, which relate exclusively to what has traditionally been called «general metaphysics» or «ontology», i.e. the doctrine of categories (*Categories*), of predicative discourse (*De interpretatione*) and of substance (*Metaphysics Zeta*). Analytic Philosophy generally neglects the Aristotelian concept of metaphysics as a search for first causes, understood in all the ways in which the causes may provide an explanation for the considered facts, namely as matter, form, efficient cause and final cause. In the tradition of Western Metaphysics this aspect of Aristotelian philosophy, developed in the final books of *Metaphysics*, but also in *Physics*, *De anima*, in his works on biology, ethics and politics, even in *Rhetorics* and *Poetics*, has been connected to the so called «special metaphysics», namely rational theology, rational cosmology and rational psychology. I think this division is wrong and that it has nothing to do with the authentic Aristotle’s metaphysics, which is precisely the search of all type of first causes of being as being (namely of type of objects). Metaphysics divided into general and special is the one developed by modern philosophy, especially German, and criticized by Kant’s arguments, on which it would be worth dwelling.

I am also convinced that some of the first causes sought by Aristotle have been largely brought to light, in the modern and contemporary ages, due to non-philosophical sciences (Aristotle did not distinguish between science and philosophy, but only between first philosophy, or science, and other philosophies, or sciences, called “second”, such as convenience). Some instances are the first material cause by atomic and subatomic physics (particles, energy, dark matter), the first formal cause by chemistry and biology (chemical formulas, DNA, etc.). From a genuinely Aristotelian point of view we must rely heavily on the particular sciences. Today the task of philosophy, I think, is the discourse on the efficient and final first causes (on the ultimate aim of human being, at least). Here I expect more significant contributions by Analytic Philosophy.

About the first efficient cause, I do not think we should over-emphasize the importance of the concept of act, as I may have done in some of my writings, probably due the influence of neo-scholastic philosophy, which made the Thomistic concept of *actus essendi* the pivot of the whole Aristotelian metaphysics (for instance, as I mentioned above, Etienne Gilson and Cornelio Fabro). Instead I agree with the criticism of analytical philosophers (Peter F. Geach and A. Kenny) towards the concept of *actus essendi*, and I think that the notion of act has to be connected, with Aristotle, to the form, or first act. But to this extent the analysis would take too long. I would line to conclude by referring, again in analytic tradition, especially to the work of Geach.

<sup>6</sup>E. Berti, *La presenza di Aristotele nella filosofia odierna*, in S.L. Brock (ed.), *L'attualità di Aristotele*, Armando, Roma 2000.

