CHAPTER 2

Discursivity in Aristotle’s Biological Writings*

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1 Introduction

Contrary to a widespread dictum that Aristotle had a dogmatic-systematic style, everyone who becomes involved in reading Aristotle’s scientific works notices that, quite the reverse, they are characterised by a certain spontaneity and, again and again, a promised systematics is not rigidly held to.1 Dirlmeier spoke of Aristotle’s “oral style” which was the reason why his scientific works did not convey the impression of literature.2 Aristotle did not really conduct a monologue ex cathedra in his internal writings either, but a dialogue. The reflections presented here below are intended to contribute to the question: in what manner is the medium of literature used to constitute and impart knowledge in the field of biology? I would also like to direct attention to the discursive mode of representation which is found not only in Aristotle’s ethical writings and his Metaphysics, but—surprisingly for modern expectations—in many parts of his biological writings, too.

2 The Importance of Aristotelian Biology

The importance of Aristotelian biology in the history of science can be summarised in three points:

1) Aristotle founded the discipline of biology in that he—unlike Plato—advocates the possibility of a science of developing things, i.e. those that are coming to be, thus a natural science.3 But not only did he have to justify his research towards differing knowledge interests, but probably

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2 Dirlmeier 1962: 12.
also towards a public opinion which was not receptive for such research but only took something to be sensible which promised to be a practical help in life.\(^4\) One important passage in this respect is at the beginning of his work *De partibus animalium* (1.5, 644b22ff.). Here he makes a plea for the pleasure in research which results from the dissection of lower animals:

\[\ldots\text{it remains to speak about animal nature, omitting nothing in our power, whether of lesser or greater esteem. For even in the study of animals disagreeable to perception, the nature that crafted them likewise provides extraordinary pleasures to those who are able to know their causes and are by nature philosophers.\ldots}\text{For this reason we should not be childishly disgusted at the examination of the less valuable animals. For in all natural things there is something marvellous. Even as Heraclitus is said to have spoken to those strangers who wished to meet him but stopped as they were approaching when they saw him warming himself by the oven—he bade them enter without fear, “for there are gods here too”—so too one should approach research about each of the animals without disgust, since in every one there is something natural and good. (Tr. Lennox)}\(^5\]

2) His merits lie in the field of individual zoological research. Here he made and collected an incredible quantity of material and observations of animal behaviour which still surprise biologists even of our own time—regardless of the fact that some details are wrong.

3) Perhaps his main attainment lies in the fact that he did not stop at collecting facts, but tried to integrate the facts into connected statements of reasons in accordance with his theoretical opinion of science that aetiology was indispensable for science.\(^6\)

Among his biological works are to be reckoned (I mention just the main works): *Historia animalium*, a collection of zoological facts, the writing *De partibus animalium*, the first book of which is a programme of zoology (cf. the passage quoted before) and which can be described as being a portrayal of the comparative morphology of animals, then *De generatione animalium*, which presents Aristotle's views on procreation, genetics and ontogenesis. As the works

\(^4\) Cf. Isocrates, *Panathenaikos* 26ff. and the ridiculing of natural history research and research in general in Aristophanes' *Clouds* (143ff.).
