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Teleology, First Principles, and Scientific Method in Aristotle's Biology, by Allan Gotthelf, Oxford, 2012

Tiberiu Popa

Butler University, tpopa@butler.edu

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Teleology, First Principles, and Scientific Method in Aristotle's Biology

by Allan Gotthelf, Oxford, 2012

Reviewed by Tiberiu Popa

Most readers of Aristotle are familiar with his ethics and political philosophy. More devoted students are also acquainted with his works on metaphysics and natural philosophy. His biological works, however, tend to be less widely read, despite a steady tendency in recent scholarship to make them a centerpiece of any comprehensive attempt to grasp several crucial facets of Aristotelian philosophy. Biological writings such as *Generation of Animals*, *Parts of Animals*, and *History of Animals* ('history' should be taken in its original sense of 'inquiry', Aristotle vigorously resisted the notion that animal species have evolved through successive stages) are certainly fascinating on their own. Despite their obvious limitations, they often display extraordinary insight and dazzle even modern readers with surprisingly accurate observations, inspired causal explanations, and a peculiar division of genera of animals (quite different from modern taxonomy). These treatises can also shed light on defining aspects of Aristotle's theories about matter, cause, and substance. The 16 essays gathered by Allan Gotthelf in this volume elucidate key passages especially from the three treatises mentioned above, and investigate their many connections with Aristotle's metaphysics, "physics", and philosophy of science. Gotthelf, a preeminent authority in Aristotelian studies, is also careful to give the measure of the enduring admiration for Aristotle's biology and of the influence it has exerted. Indeed, Chapter 15 starts by quoting this line from a letter by Darwin: "Linnaeus and Cuvier have been my two gods, though in very different ways, but they were mere school-boys to old Aristotle." A careful reading of *Generation of Animals*, etc. can also reveal methods, concepts and claims which are relevant to contemporary debates, e.g., in philosophy of biology. Gotthelf's compelling account is thus a most helpful guide to understanding not only the first major episode in the history of what we call today biology but also the heart of Aristotle's science, philosophy of science, metaphysics and natural philosophy.

- Tiberiu Popa is associate professor of Philosophy at Butler University.