

Aristotle and Plato

No philosopher has been so much praised and censured as Aristotle; but he had this advantage, of which some of the most eminent scholars have been deprived, that he enjoyed during his life a splendid reputation. Philip of Macedon must have felt a strong conviction of his merit when he wrote to him on the birth of Alexander:—"I receive from the gods this day a son; but I thank them not so much for the favour of his birth, as his having come into the world at a time when you can have the care of his education; and that through you he will be rendered worthy of being my son."

Diogenes Laertius describes the person of the Stagyrite.—His eyes were small, his voice hoarse, and his legs lank. He stammered, was fond of a magnificent dress, and wore costly rings. He had a mistress whom he loved passionately, and for whom he frequently acted inconsistently with the philosophic character; a thing as common with philosophers as with other men. Aristotle had nothing of the austerity of the philosopher, though his works are so austere: he was open, pleasant, and even charming in his conversation; fiery and volatile in his pleasures; magnificent in his dress. He is described as fierce, disdainful, and sarcastic. He joined

to a taste for profound erudition that of an elegant dissipation. His passion for luxury occasioned him such expenses when he was young he consumed all his property. Laertius has preserved the will of Aristotle, which is curious. The chief part turns on the future welfare and marriage of his daughter. "If, after my death, she chooses to marry, the executors will be careful she marries no person of an inferior rank. If she resides at Chalcis, she shall occupy the apartment contiguous to the garden; if she chooses Stagyra, she shall reside in the house of my father, and my executors shall furnish either of these places she fixes on."

Aristotle had studied under the divine Plato; but the disciple and the master could not possibly agree in their doctrines: they were of opposite tastes and talents. Plato was the chief of the academic sect, and Aristotle of the peripatetic. Plato was simple, modest, frugal, and of austere manners; a good friend and a zealous citizen, but a theoretical politician: a lover indeed of benevolence, and desirous of diffusing it amongst men, but knowing little of them as we find them; his "republic" is as chimerical as Rousseau's ideas, or Sir Thomas More's Utopia.

Rapin, the critic, has sketched an ingenious parallel of these two celebrated philosophers.

“The genius of Plato is more polished, and that of Aristotle more vast and profound. Plato has a lively and teeming imagination; fertile in invention, in ideas, in expressions, and in figures; displaying a thousand different turns, a thousand new colours, all agreeable to their subject; but after all it is nothing more than imagination. Aristotle is hard and dry in all he says, but what he says is all reason, though it is expressed drily: his diction, pure as it is, has something uncommonly austere; and his obscurities, natural or affected, disgust and fatigue his readers. Plato is equally delicate in his thoughts and in his expressions. Aristotle, though he may be more natural, has not any delicacy: his style is simple and equal, but close and nervous; that of Plato is grand and elevated, but loose and diffuse. Plato always says more than he should say: Aristotle never says enough, and leaves the reader always to think more than he says. The one surprises the mind, and charms it by a flowery and sparkling character: the other illuminates and instructs it by a just and solid method. Plato communicates something of genius by the fecundity of his own; and Aristotle something of judgement and

reason by that impression of good sense which appears in all he says. In a word, Plato frequently only thinks to express himself well; and Aristotle only thinks to think justly.”

An interesting anecdote is related of these philosophers:—Aristotle became the rival of Plato. Literary disputes long subsisted betwixt them. The disciple ridiculed his master, and the master treated contemptuously his disciple. To make this superiority manifest, Aristotle wished for a regular disputation before an audience where erudition and reason might prevail; but this satisfaction was denied.

Plato was always surrounded by his scholars, who took a lively interest in his glory. Three of these he taught to rival Aristotle, and it became their mutual interest to depreciate his merits. Unfortunatley one day Plato found himself in his school without these three favourite scholars. Aristotle flies to him—a crowd gathers and enters with him. The idol whose oracles they wished to overturn was presented to them. He was then a respectable old man, the weight of whose years had enfeebled his memory. The combat was not long. Some rapid sophisms embarrassed Plato. He saw himself surrounded be the inevitable traps of the subtlest logician.

Vanquished, he reproached his ancient scholar by a beautiful figure:—"He has kicked against us as a colt against its mother."

Soon after this humiliating adventure he ceased to give public lectures. Aristotle remained master in the field of battle. He raised a school, and devoted himself to render it the most famous in Greece. But the three favourite scholars of Plato, zealous to avenge the cause of their master, and to make amends for their imprudence in having quitted him, armed themselves against the usurper.—Xenocrates, the most ardent of the three, attacked Aristotle, confounded the logician, and re-established Plato in all his rights. Since that time the academic and peripatetic sects, animated by the spirits of their several chiefs, avowed an eternal hostility. In what manner his works have descended to us has been told in this volume in the article *Destruction of Books*. Aristotle having declaimed irreverently of the gods, and dreading the fate of Socrates, wished to retire from Athens. In a beautiful manner he pointed out his successor. There were two rivals in his schools: Menedemus the Rhodian, and Theophrastus the Lesbian. Alluding delicately to his own critical situation, he told his assembled scholars that the wine he was accustomed to drink was injurious to him, and he desired them to

bring the wines of Rhodes and Lesbos. He tasted both, and declared they both did honour to their soil, each being excellent, though differing in their quality.—The Rhodian wine is the strongest, but the Lesbian is the sweetest, and that he himself preferred it. Thus his ingenuity designated his favourite Theophrastus, the author of the "Characters," for his successor.