A Basic Aristotle Glossary

Part I. **Key Terms** These explanations of key terms in Aristotle are not as in-depth nor technically as precise as those in the glossary of Irwin and Fine's *Selections*. They are merely designed to give you the “hang” of Aristotle’s terminology. So beware: all these concepts are more complicated than the following explanations make them look. Note also that Irwin and Fine's translations depart from traditional translations of the Greek (e.g. translating *techne* as "craft" rather than as "art").

**Actuality**: See potentiality.

**Affection**: This translates the Greek word *pathos*, a term that refers to how things happen to you or affect you, and especially how you are affected by emotions (which move you, hence the "motion" in e-motion).

Older translations will call these "passions." The root sense is of passivity, things happening to you and affecting you. Hence the opposite of affection or passion action. If I hit you, I am active and you are passive; I am acting and you are being acted upon or affected. Another way to put this is: action means *doing*, passion or affection means being *done to*.

All emotions used to be called affections or passions, because the assumption was that they were responses to what was done to you (e.g., anger) or what might happen to you (e.g., fear). They are also closely connected to the notion of suffering, i.e. having things done to you. That is why the story of Jesus’ sufferings is traditionally called “the Passion of Christ”—it’s the story about what was *done to* him.

**Art** See craft.

**Coincidental** always implies “non-essential” (it used to be translated “accidental”). So for instance, the essential (efficient) cause of a statue is its sculptor. But coincidentally, that sculptor may be a flute-player as well, so “flute-player” is a coincidental cause of the statue (see *Physics* 2:4, 194a32-195b3).

**Compound**: Aristotle uses this term to refer to the combination of form and matter in a concrete individual thing. Human nature is form, flesh and blood is matter, and Socrates is compound. (See form, matter).

**Craft** (Greek *techne*): This term is usually translated "art" (also in Plato). Irwin and Fine’s translation is closer to the original meaning of the term, which refers to any skilled activity that can be learned. Hence for any ancient or medieval writer, carpentry and housebuilding were arts, because they were skills you could learn (not inborn abilities, which are faculties or powers). For Aristotle, art is to nature as artificial is to natural. Art and nature are two ways for things to take shape or come into being—either by the skill of someone who makes them or by some process of growth internal to them.
Thus for Aristotle (and all ancient and medieval writers) what we now call “art” is only part of a more general category. What we now call “art” was originally called “fine arts” as opposed to the “mechanical” arts. The fine arts (“beaux arts” in French) made beautiful things, while the mechanical arts made useful things. Eventually, when people no longer made things by hand, the new term “technology” was invented to describe the mechanical arts.

While Irwin and Fine's translation or techne as “craft” is closer to the original meaning of the word, it unfortunately obscures this historical development in the meaning of "art." And of course no translation reveals the historical development which led from Greek techne to our words “technology” and “technique.”

End (Greek telos): This word means “goal,” not just termination--end as in end of a journey or process, when you arrive at the point you’re trying to get to. Thus when an Aristotelian philosopher says the end of childhood is adulthood, this means childhood is a process of growth whose goal is to reach the adult state. In this sense, the end of human life is not death but adulthood (in your body) as well as virtue and wisdom (in your soul). The end has traditionally (by later philosophers) been called “final cause” (see 4 causes, below).

The term teleology (from the word telos) refers to the notion of purpose. Aristotle has a teleological view of nature, in that he thinks natural processes have purposes (as for instance childhood is a natural process whose end is adulthood). He also has a teleological view of ethics, in that he thinks what we are supposed to do with our lives is to achieve the goal of human life, which is happiness.

Telos is also part of the Greek word for perfection, a word which has changed its meaning a lot recently. When ancient and medieval thinkers call something “perfect” they mean it has reached its goal and is complete. Paul uses a phrase literally translated “perfect man” (Eph. 4:3, KJV) to refer to a fully grown adult—not a person who has absolutely no faults, just a person who’s fully grown up. Perfection, in this sense (which is the original sense of the word) means completion: when you’re finished building a house, it’s perfect, in precisely this sense: not flawless but completed, fully built. Likewise, an unfinished symphony is called in Latin, opus imperfectum, meaning “imperfect work,” not because it has flaws but because it is incomplete.

Essence: From a complex Greek phrase meaning something like “what it is for it to be.” To state something’s essence, you give a definition. For Aristotle, the form of a thing is also its essence. Substance, in the secondary sense, is the same as essence.

Form (Greek eidos): This is the same key term as in Plato’s philosophy. Unlike Plato, Aristotle insists that the form of a natural thing is always found “embodied” in its material or matter. Thus for instance you only find the form of a horse in flesh-and-blood horses. (See “compound,” above).

For Aristotle “form” is the same as “essence.” Thus the form of a horse is its essence, the definition of what it is. Form is also linked to the kind of thing something is (“What kind of thing is that? A horse”). Hence it was translated into Latin as species. (“A horse is a species of animal” is another way of saying “A horse is a specific form of animal”).

Sometimes “form” can also mean “shape” (Greek morphey). Thus the form of a statue is its shape, and bronze or wood or whatever it’s made of is its matter.
**Genus:** a general category, as opposed to species, which is a specific category. (*Genus* is the word from which we get "general," as *species* is the word from which we get "specific.") “Mammal” is a genus, “horse” is a species. (Mammal is more general than horse; horse is more specific than mammal.)

**Good:** Aristotle uses this term to refer to good things, things that are good to have. Hence for Aristotle the concept of “good” is closely connected with the concept of end or goal. Good things are things worth having. So when Aristotle talks about goods, don’t think automatically of “morally good.” That’s only one kind of good, and Aristotle’s primary term for that is *virtue*.

**Matter** (Greek *hyle*): refers to the material out of which something is made. (When you see “matter,” think “material”).

**Motion or process** (Greek *kinesis*): Aristotle uses this term in a very broad sense, to mean any process of change, including growth and learning. Thus childhood is a motion or movement toward adulthood, and learning is a motion toward knowledge. For Aristotle natural motions or processes go from potentiality to actuality (e.g. from child to adult, from egg to chicken, from ignorant to knowledgeable, from a pile of wooden boards to a house).

Motion in the physical sense of movement through space is called "travel" or "local motion" (whence the word "locomotion").

**Nature** (Greek *physis*): This term in Greek means the *kind* of thing something is (e.g. human nature, horse nature). In Aristotle it refers specifically to the kinds of things that change, move and grow. Hence a natural thing (as opposed to an artificial thing) is something that moves or grows on its own.

Physics is the science of nature, i.e. the science of *physis*. *Physis*, translated into Latin, is *natura*—hence our word "nature." But 500 years ago the preferred English translation of *physis* was "kind"—hence "mankind" was the original English term for "human nature."

**Passion** See Affection.

**Potentiality** (Greek *dynamis*; also translated "capacity," "potency," or "power"): the natural ability to do something, or the built-in possibility of becoming something. Thus the eye has the power of seeing and the child has the potential to become an adult. The fulfillment of a potentiality is called its “actuality” or “act,” or sometimes its “exercise” or “use.” (An eye that is closed is potentially, not actually seeing. It has the power to see but is not using or exercising that power. And when you’re actually seeing, that is the *act* of vision, whereas vision itself is a power or potentiality).

**Produce** (in older translations, "make") refers to things made by human craft or art, as opposed to things that come into being by nature. So *products* are always artificial rather than natural. Artificial things (like houses) are *produced* or made, whereas natural things (like trees) *grow*.

**Species** (taken directly from the Latin word *species*): a translation of the word “form” (*eidos* in Greek). See also *genus*. 
Soul (Greek psyche): The principle which makes a body live. The soul is the life of the body. (Hence psyche in the New Testament is sometimes translated “soul,” sometimes “life,” as in “what does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his own soul/life?”)

Because soul means life, all living things have souls, according to ancient thinkers like Aristotle (and according to all Christian thinkers until a few hundred years ago). What we now call “souls” are what they would have called rational souls, immortal souls, or minds. Plants have souls that are neither rational nor immortal. But because they are alive, they do have souls.

Substance: A key term in Aristotle, this means a thing that exists, in the fullest and most independent sense. In the sentence “Socrates is snub-nosed and white,” the words “snub-nosed” and “white” designate things that are dependent on Socrates. Hence they are not substances, but Socrates is. Anything which has its existence only in relation to another thing (such as color, size, location, disposition etc.) is not a substance. (See the 10 categories.)

Socrates is a substance, in the primary sense. In a secondary sense, “man” is a substance. Likewise, the Black Stallion is a substance in the primary sense, while “horse” is a substance in the secondary sense. Thus in general, individuals are primary substances, and species are secondary substances. Primary substances tend to be designated by proper nouns, secondary substances by common nouns. Substance, in this secondary sense, is the same as essence.

What Promotes the End is an overly literal translation of a phrase in Aristotle that means what we now call a “means,” as in “means and ends.”

Without Qualification is like saying “period.” What’s good for me is one thing; what’s good, period, is another. What’s good, period, is what Aristotle calls good “without qualification.”

Part II. Familiar terms used in unfamiliar ways. Aristotle uses many terms in specialized or unfamiliar ways. Also, Irwin and Fine depart from traditional translations of the Greek. Some of these departures are helpful, bringing out the distinctive meaning of Aristotle’s terminology. Others are less helpful, such as translating phronesis as “intelligence” (see below). All can be confusing in that the words are different from those used in familiar translations of Plato and other authors (e.g., when Irwin and Fine translate techne as “craft” rather than “art”).

Account (logos) Traditionally translated “definition.” (Note: this is not the only translation of the term logos! In other contexts, it can be translated “reason,” “speech,” “argument,” or “word.” See Fine and Irwin’s glossary).

Character always means moral character. The phrase “virtues of character” is traditionally translated “moral virtues.”

Continence is no longer a familiar term. Think “self-control.” Addictions and alcoholism are forms of incontinence, loss of self-control.
Correct Reason (orthos logos) is traditionally translated “right reason,” which becomes a very important term in medieval philosophy.

Correction means punishment. So when Aristotle says, “correction is a form of medical treatment” in *N. Ethics* 2:3,1140b17, he means that all punishment is remedial, rather than retributive or deterrent: its purpose is not vengeance or scaring people into good behavior, but making the criminal a better person, healing the diseases of their soul. But in order to be healed, you’ve got to take your medicine, which may be unpleasant.

Decision: The older translation, which I still prefer, is “choice.”

To deliberate means specifically “to figure out what to do.” So deliberation is a form of practical reasoning, which always concerns action. That’s why they call Congress a deliberative body. It deliberates about what laws to enact, whether to go to war, etc. Scientific inquiry, by contrast, is theoretical rather than practical. It’s about what is, not what to do, and is therefore not a form of deliberation.

Demonstration: This is a technical term for what most people nowadays would call “absolute proof.” It’s the kind of argument which starts with premises known with certainty to be true, and arrives at an absolutely certain conclusion. The most familiar examples of demonstration are mathematical proofs. Aristotle, in contrast to modern scientists, thinks that the investigations of natural science can result in a set of demonstrations. However, he denies that there can be demonstrations in ethics or practical reasoning, because these are about things that change.

Emotion (*thumos*) does not mean just any emotion (the term for that is passion or affection) but specifically the tendency toward anger or “spiritedness” (as in a “high-spirited” horse). This is one of Fine and Irwin’s most unfortunate and misleading translations. Whenever you see “emotion” in their translation, think “anger.”

Fine (*kalos*) is a very Greek notion. It’s the word for “beautiful” but also means “noble” and “admirable.” Thus “fine deeds” are characteristic actions of noble and virtuous people, like deeds of courage in battle or wisdom in government. And when God looks at creation and calls it “good” in Genesis 1, the Greek translation used by the early church has him calling it *kalos*: fine, beautiful, noble, admirable—all of the above.

Force describes a kind of movement. Movement is either natural or by force. A stone falling is moving naturally, whereas a stone thrown upward is being moved by force against its natural inclination. The old translation for this was “violent” movement.

Intelligence (*phronesis*) This is a very important term that has nothing to do with how well you score in IQ tests. It is perhaps best translated as “practical wisdom.” It is in fact very close in meaning to the Hebrew term translated “wisdom” in the book of Proverbs. The old translations called it “prudence,” but unfortunately this word is no longer understood in the old way. Nowadays prudence means calculated self-interest. Originally it meant wisdom in moral decision-making, which is what Aristotle means by *phronesis*. Unfortunately, “intelligence” is
not a very good translation for this term. So when you see “intelligence” in Fine and Irwin’s translation, think “practical wisdom.”

**Justice**: It’s useful to bear in mind that this is exactly the same term rendered in older translations of the New Testament as “righteousness.” There are two words for this in English, but only one in Greek.

**Perception** (*aisthesis*) means specifically perception by the 5 senses, as opposed to the intellect (see “understanding”). Compare Plato’s sensible/intelligible distinction.

**Principle** (*arche*) When you see this word, think “starting point” or “source.”

**Production** (*poiesis*) Traditionally translated “making.” Aristotle often contrasts this with “action” (*praxis*), in which case it is useful to re-translate the contrast using the terms “making” and “doing.” Making, unlike doing, has an end which is a product outside the activity itself (think of the difference between housebuilding and flute playing). Note also that despite their verbal similarity, *action* is not the only kind of *activity*; production is also an activity. (I.e., doing and making are both activities). See also “produce” in Part I.

**Scientific Knowledge** (*episteme*): Usually just translated “science” (the Latin translation is *scientia*). Notice that unlike our notion of science, this is a virtue, i.e. a state of the soul. That’s why the translation “scientific knowledge” is actually rather helpful.

**State** (*hexis*): It will often be more helpful to think of this important ethical term as “habit” or “disposition” (the Latin term for it is *habitus*), or else specifically as state of character (see above).

**Study** (*theoria*): This is better translated by the traditional term, “contemplation.” It is not like studying for an exam but like thinking about something you already know. The term means literally, “looking at.” You contemplate a piece of knowledge in roughly the same way you contemplate a painting or a piece of music. Aristotle often contrasts contemplation with action (*praxis*). These are in fact the Greek words from which we get our terms “theoretical” and “practical.” For Aristotle, the contemplative or theoretical life is characteristic of the philosopher or scientist, whereas the active or practical life is characteristic of the ruler or politician.

**Temperance** is often translated “moderation.” It specifically means not over-indulging in pleasant things of the senses, such as food or drink. Gluttony and drunkenness are forms of *intemperance*.

**Understanding** (*nous*) has been translated many ways. In Latin it is *intellectus*, and hence has been translated into English as “intellect” or “intelligence.” These are good translations for the power or faculty of *nous*. The act of *nous*, on the other hand, is often translated as “intuition” (from the Latin word *intuitus*, meaning to behold or look at). An act is related to a power the same way the act of seeing is related to the power of vision (a power you have even when you’re...
not using it, like when you’re asleep). So the act of *nous* is what you are doing when you “see” something with your intellect and understand it.
Part III.  4 Causes and 10 Categories

A.  4 causes (= four ways to answer the question, “why is it like that?”).

Matter (traditionally called “material cause”)
Aristotle uses the phrase "that from which"--as in the material or stuff out of which something is made.

Form (traditionally called “formal cause”)
Aristotle calls this the essence or pattern of a thing, as specified by the account or definition (logos) of the thing.

Source of Change (traditionally called “efficient cause”):
This is what we nowadays usually mean when we use the word “cause” (as in the phrase "cause and effect"). This is the kind of cause that makes something move or produces something: like a baseball player throwing a ball, a builder building a house, or a father begetting a son.

End (traditionally called “final cause”) Aristotle calls this the "what it is for" cause, as in the goal or purpose of a thing, the end toward which it's aiming.

B.  10 Categories (= 10 ways to answer the question “what is it?”).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substance (lit. “being”)</th>
<th>e.g. horse, human being</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantity (“how much”)</td>
<td>two, two feet long</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality (“such”)</td>
<td>black, knowledgeable, sick</td>
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<tr>
<td>Habit</td>
<td>knowledgeable, courageous</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disposition</td>
<td>sick, healthy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relation (“to this”)</td>
<td>double, taller, son of</td>
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<tr>
<td>Place (“where”)</td>
<td>in the classroom, on campus</td>
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<td>Time (“when”)</td>
<td>yesterday, last year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Position or posture</td>
<td>lying down, sitting</td>
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<tr>
<td>State (“having”)</td>
<td>shoes on</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action (“doing”)</td>
<td>cut, burn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passion (“suffering”)</td>
<td>being cut, being burned</td>
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