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## Message from the President

*Francis Peddle*

In *Hegel's Dialectic*, Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the foremost philosophers of the twentieth century, states:

It seems to be a fundamental trait of philosophical consciousness in the nineteenth century that it is no longer conceivable apart from historical consciousness.

The inherent antinomial nature of reason awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumber. The post-Kantian development of philosophy is primarily an odyssey of the increasing historicity of truth. While this development diminished faith in the universal validity of philosophy it did not eradicate the conviction that thought could somehow dwell outside of time. The result was the formation of a fifth underlying antinomy of reason in which the thesis asserted the possibility of scientific and philosophical truth, while the antithesis presented an unbounded historical relativism based on the radical historicity of subjectivity and objectivity. Hence the source of most contemporary dogmatisms and scepticisms.

Kant's four antinomies originated in inferential and syllogistic reasoning. They are circumscribed by reason's higher powers and are not in any sense destructive of the rational faculty itself. Recognition of the mutual validity of thesis and antithesis renders nugatory a constitutive employment of the transcendental cosmological ideas. Reason is protected from the darker onslaught of its own possible self-annihilation as long as it is delimited to a regulatory function.

The fifth antinomy of post-Kantian modernity juxtaposes reason and anti-reason, universal validity and historical relativism. However, in this antinomy thesis and antithesis are not innocent and mutually plausible adversaries. The assertion of one necessarily undermines the foundation of the other. This total incompatibility is rooted in the fact that if truth is irretrievably historicized, then universal transhistorical validity is not rationally entertainable as a possibility, unlike the inferences reason makes in the antitheses of Kant's original four antinomies.

The antithesis in the primary antinomy of post-Kantian thought declares that a human being can never stand outside of time and history. A transhistorical absolute is unattainable. Does such an affirmation of the historicity of consciousness necessarily entail a thoroughgoing denial of rationality and lead to nihilism? And is such an antithesis inextricably dependent upon and surreptitiously assumptive of the universal reason which it denounces? Denying the possibility of positing something outside of time and history may very well necessarily presuppose certain logical and formal structures of thinking that are indeed unrevisable and atemporal. The proofs of the antinomy of modernity would therefore seem to involve the same assumptions of their opposites as are found in the Kantian cosmological proofs.

Speculative metaphysics must not simply confront the crisis of historical relativism, radical historicism and the question of whether or not historical existence *per se* has any meaning. It is conclusionary as much as it is heuristic, critical and reflective. This is a perennial mandate even though historicity as such often disguises and sidetracks our metaphysical endeavours.

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ἀλλ' ὑπεράνω κείμενον μόνον τοῦτο ἀληθείᾳ ἐλεύθερον, ὅτι μὴδὲ δουλεῦδον ἐστὶν ἑαυτῷ, ἀλλὰ μόνον αὐτὸ καὶ ὄντος αὐτό  
*Alone, it rests above in truth and free, since it is not enslaved to itself, but is itself alone, absolutely.*

## METAPHYSIC AND DIALECTIC: ANCIENT AND MODERN

*James Lowry*

### PART I - THE ANCIENTS

Dialectic is a hard term to define with precision. This is because dialectic is really a process of thought communing with itself. There is both a circularity and a linearity to its self-development. Most simply and influentially we need only look to Plato to understand its epic quality and to Hegel to see its perennial attraction.

In Plato dialectic is associated with a certain open-endedness - a kind of literary ambiguity which combats the apparent precision and relativity of the sophists by rendering every possible position suspect. Then in the hands of Plato's later followers a primarily sceptical orientation emerges which eventually asserts itself in the scepticism of Pyrrho. This ancient scepticism remains the model for all time in terms of its complete rendering of any empirical stability unstable.

There is, however, in the Platonic dialectic another less accessible dimension which is understood only by Aristotle and later Neoplatonism in so far as it is a species of Neoplatonism. This is the dimension that understands the Parmenidean dialectic of Plato as being a sustained effort to comprehend rather than to simply negate Heraclitean metaphysics. Aristotle understood this effort as being the key to understanding the esoteric teaching of Plato concerning the One and the Dyad. Neoplatonism develops this side by understanding, primarily in the acute mind of Proclus, that the genuine teaching of the Parmenidean dialogue is that it produces a positive rather than a negative result.

### THE ANCIENT PROBLEMATIC

It is no easy task to penetrate into the mysteries of ancient metaphysics. To do so one must begin by giving up both a modern and a Christian cosmology. In addition one must be able to appreciate the ancient tradition that takes for granted that Aristotle actually did understand

Plato; that Plato did, in fact, have an esoteric as well as an exoteric teaching; that Pythagoras and Parmenides and Heraclitus are the ultimate sources of Plato's metaphysical education; that Socrates is the other source of his education; and, finally, that it is in Plato not Aristotle that for pre-Christian philosophy is to be found the ultimate solution to ancient scepticism. The full access to those who would follow this tradition is twofold. The first pathway is via Aristotle's unrelenting dissatisfaction with Plato's solutions to the problematica of Greek religion. The second is via the equally unrelenting criticism of Aristotle by the Neoplatonic masters. This double pathway has yet to be fully traversed because either the desire to unlock these ancient mysteries has been blocked by modern assumptions, scientific or Christian; or has been sidetracked by failing to understand what were regarded by ancient philosophers as the most crucial questions and texts.

To give up scientific assumptions means to give up empiricism, to give up asymmetrical non-anthropomorphic cosmology and to accept an hierarchical order of beings in which the natural is the most insignificant. To give up Christian assumptions means to give up the idea of personal salvation, of providential history, and most crucially the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. Now for moderns or post-moderns (bearing in mind that Aristotle, indeed any theorist of the new, regards himself as a kind of post-modern) this giving-up is well nigh impossible because it assumes a knowledge of what must be given-up. The most common barrier is sheer ignorance; the less common the certainty that thought is not transcendental enough to overcome historical temporality.

### ANCIENT QUESTIONS AND TEXTS

Ancient questions are rooted in a self-evident belief that getting out of this world is the only intellectually valid option for the educated man. There is no Christian consolation and no *graceful* exit. Existential reality is cold and transcendental. The face of fate is inscrutable and help is not to be

found outside of the self. Such a world is the crucible of philosophy and philosophy is nothing less than metaphysics as speculative theology. There is no divide between philosophy and theology. Such divide is a later development impossible without Christianity. The texts are the ones moderns find most esoteric, because most inaccessible to their assumptions and interests. The best access is to begin with the Neoplatonic curriculum and then to transpose it by formulating an Aristotelian critique of it. Late Neo-platonism, which Plotinian devotees think mainly to be a derogation from the poetic enlightenment of their master, would have its scholarship begin with Aristotle as the philosophic major domo of this world and the higher levels above ending with Nous as an ultimate intermediary craftsman (the Platonic demiurgos) between heaven and earth mythically understood. True to Aristotle one would begin with the teachings about dialectic (Aristotelian logic or syllogistics) and nature (Aristotelian physics) and progress to speculative theology (Aristotle's *Metaphysics*), which we have on the authority of Porphyry was the one Aristotelian treatise Plotinus never had out of mind or thought as he wove his garlands for Plato. Once Aristotle was mastered, Plato was begun and, oddly to a modern, the works most eagerly studied in the contemporary twilight of classical studies at our best universities, where at least a smattering of ancient lore is regarded as positive as long as the doses are small enough to bear inoculation, were not by Plato's true devotees in the twilight of classical antiquity regarded so highly. The student in Athens under his Platonic (nee Neo) master would imbibe the mysteries of Plato as follows: *Alcibiades I*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Philebus* - then he would be ready to grapple with Plato's true masterworks - *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*. *Philebus*, *Timaeus* and *Parmenides* would be read in the light of the esoteric Platonic teachings assumed in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Thus the final educational programme of late Athenian Neoplatonism was to understand the exoterica of Plato's most speculative dialogues - *Philebus*, *Timaeus* and *Parmenides* - in the light of Aristotle's polemics against Plato's esoteric and exoteric doctrines as found in Books A, M and N of the *Metaphysics* (which by and large are not understandable to the exoteric interpretations of modern scholarship) esoterically.

## ARISTOTLE AND PLATO

Simply put, Aristotle was the greatest pupil Plato ever had that did not remain a Platonist. Aristotle thought he had completed Plato. Aristotle is perfectly clear that what we call Greek philosophy reached its finality in his teachings. With his doctrine of final causality understood as actuality as an ultimate teleology Aristotle regarded the defects of Plato as perfected. Aristotle considered that he had squeezed the ambiguity, the metaphor out of Plato's teaching and that he had truly corrected and completed an intellectual enterprise that had begun with Parmenides and Pythagoras and had progressed through Anaxagoras and Socrates and Plato. Aristotle is so clear as to how he achieved this victory over his master that one can but wonder why those who came after him rejected his solution. This is the ultimate question of ancient philosophy - not who is right - Plato or Aristotle - but why Neoplatonism prefers Plato to Aristotle when it comes to metaphysics. The answer to this question is not that Aristotle did not understand Plato or that the Neoplatonists did not understand Aristotle. It is not a question of the defects of ancient scholarship and the supposed superiority of modern scholarship with its empiricist historicist biases. The question and its answer lies much deeper. It has to do with a very simple yet very profound conundrum. Put boldly it is just this: it is impossible to "naturalize" Plato. The esoterica of Platonic theology in its dialectic purity cannot be reduced to physics. Conversely such a fate can befall Aristotle. To get anywhere near an understanding of ancient Greek philosophy without assumption we must understand the transparency of this conundrum well.

## STOICS, EPICUREANS, AND SCEPTICS

The historical and intellectual mediation between Aristotle and Neoplatonism are the popular schools that grew to fruition between the brief luminescences of Aristotle and the more sustained if not particularly widespread private scholia of Athenian Neoplatonism, which found its initial enthusiasm in Plotinus and worked its way through Porphyry and Iamblichus to Proclus. The Stoics and Epicureans are not famous for their metaphysics, which are notably weak, ambiguous and dogmatic. Their fame rests on their ethics, on their unswerving serenity in the face of a faceless Fatum. The turn to ethics is a turn to inwardness

which is immobilized by an inability to find an objective principle which can go beyond naturalism. What one finds in these philosophies is either a relapse into a form of Presocratic metaphysics as in the case of the Epicureans or a reduction of Aristotelian metaphysics to physics as occurs with the Stoics. The best access to this dual problematic of metaphysical anachronism is by way of the Sceptic critique of these two mainstream popular philosophies. The sceptic attack is an unrelenting and perfectly logical empirical counterattack.

In the end Scepticism, Stoicism and Epicureanism are dogmatic systems. They are dogmatic because they are positive and negative forms of empiricism. What the Stoics and Epicureans assert are forms of physics which have no inner or objective stability. Contradictorily their stability is simply subjective. This the Sceptic tropes show conclusively with dialectic precision, particularly the five tropes as found in Sextus Empiricus. What the Stoics and Epicureans posit in the name of tranquility the Sceptic dismantles in order to reach the same imperturbability. All three turn inward and achieve an impersonal quietude. The position has a certain nobility and resignation that cannot but be admired. We see the same thing religiously in Buddhism. It is typical of the ancient world to find a path of disengagement from the world. The world as such is of no interest to them. That simple fact is the great impasse which is so incomprehensible to our time and place ravaged as it is by the empiricism of the here and now. Lethe must soothe the waters if our story is to continue on.

The problematic of Scepticism is not that it misinterprets Stoicism and Epicureanism. Its interpretation is unassailable. The five tropes are a complete dialectic which must be mastered by any student wishing to enter into the spirit of ancient philosophy. The problematic of Scepticism lies in scepticism itself. Scepticism is negativity. It must feed on the positive dogma of its prey. Without Stoic and Epicurean dogmas Scepticism can have no life of its own. Its negative destruction of positive empiricism does not, like that of Plato and Aristotle, lead to a transcendental certainty - to a full blown intellectuality certain and clear in its position and confident of a world beyond the mundane here and now.

#### NEOPLATONISM - THE SUBORDINATION OF ARISTOTLE TO PLATO

The genius of Ammonius Sacchus and the school he began is rooted in this insight: only by a return to the critique of Plato and Aristotle can we move beyond the metaphysical regression of the Stoics and Epicureans to physics and the sheer negativity of the Sceptic. And move beyond we must or the tranquility gained remains in the here and now and precludes a meaningful union of the human soul with its source. The Neoplatonic position is an extended effort to get beyond the plausible anachronism of the Stoic and Epicurean and Sceptic without giving up their ethical gains. This is the true meaning of Neoplatonism. But its success or failure cannot begin to be understood unless we understand how it was that Neoplatonism found its solution in the subordination of Aristotle to Plato. To trace this dialectic and its problematic is the most difficult but necessary task if we are to be able to transcend time and place by the power of imagination and intellect and make actual the possibility of becoming ancients ourselves. Not to remain there but simply to be there. This is the excitement of philosophy. It is the only activity that transports the human soul to and fro in the historicity of time.

If the question before us were simply to see how the Neoplatonist reverted to Plato and Aristotle, it would be easy enough, but that is to misunderstand the question at hand. The question is again why did the Neoplatonists subordinate Aristotle to Plato but insist on keeping Aristotle and regarding him as essential to their own self-understanding as devotees to Plato. It is this question which will give us access to the full import of ancient philosophy and to its connection with Christianity.

The short answer has already been alluded to. Plato's doctrine cannot be reduced to physics, whereas Aristotle is susceptible to a reduction to a thisworldly position. But this answer is in and of itself insufficient, just because there is a true sense that Aristotle did in fact go beyond Plato and "correct" him. The problem is that this correction entailed the transformation of metaphor into logic, which, as long as one question and one question only did not get asked [the question of *procession from the principle*], answered all the questions Plato asked. If we study Plato carefully we notice that he first wanted to overcome the Presocratics and then

came under the spell of Socrates. Aristotle puts it perfectly when he says that the Presocratics were looking for physical (natural) principles while Socrates tended to ethical issues. Most interestingly Aristotle credits Socrates with discovering dialectic - which dialectic he did not use to correct Anaxagoras and the others. This was Plato's great task. His struggle against the Sophists is parallel to Aristotle's against him. Plato must overcome the Sophists in order to solve the problem which Socrates gave up - namely, how the world of physical (natural) appearance is rooted in an ideality of being and unity which is stable and beautiful. Aristotle in fact credits Plato with using dialectic (which we must surmise he learned at the feet of Socrates) to show how the whole order of nature is reducible finally to the One and the Infinite Dyad. The esoteric teaching of Plato, so we learn from Aristotle, was an extensive metaphysics of the One wherein ideas and finally Number are the true intermediate between physics and ultimate reality - an ultimate reality that goes beyond Being to a One.

#### ARISTOTLE'S SUBORDINATION OF PLATO

What is left for Aristotle is to try and figure out how Plato's two great principles, the One and the Dyad, correspond to Unity and Being and further how these principles are mediated by ideas and numbers in such a way that the physical (natural) world is their actual participation. Aristotle spent his whole life thinking about this problematic in Plato, which he traced back to Parmenides and Pythagoras. Aristotle evidently thought that the ultimate problem recognized by Plato was the one posed by Parmenides:

"For they [Plato and his followers, particularly Speusippus and Xenocrates, who represent for Aristotle the important logical variants if Plato's esoteric thought is developed beyond metaphor] thought that all things that are would be one (viz. Being itself), if one did not join issue with and refute the saying of Parmenides: *for never will this be proved, that things that are not are*. They thought it necessary to prove that that which is not is; for only thus - of that which is and something else - could the things that are be composed, if they are many. [*Meta*: N 1089a1ff. Ross trans.]

And Aristotle evidently thought Plato found the answer by studying Pythagoras. Into this mix Aristotle also includes Heraclitus whom he says Plato studied in his youth. The picture we get when we think these remarks of Aristotle through - remarks generally accepted by Plato's later followers as accurate - is that Socrates freed Plato from the problematic posed by Heraclitus' solution to Parmenides and showed Plato how to use dialectic to counter Zeno's defence of Parmenides, which led to Plato's theory of Ideas. Plato then turned back to Pythagoras' theory of number combining it with his theory of Ideas to finally refute Parmenides and formulate an esoteric teaching about the One and the Dyad as a final solution to the ultimate metaphysical problematic first enunciated by Parmenides.

Aristotle's solution to what he considered to be Plato's inability to solve the Parmenidean problematic is contained mostly in the work which came to be called the "Metaphysics" or "the books after the physics" [what Aristotle called "first philosophy" or "theology"], which Aristotle himself considered to be sufficiently esoteric, that he is said to have written Alexander (later "the Great"), who chided him for publishing his esoteric teaching, that it remained unpublished though published. The solution to Plato which we find in the *Metaphysics* is based on a critique of Plato the main claim of which is that the Platonic Dyad as well as the Ideal Numbers are abstractions, and are, therefore, as intermediates or mediations between the One and natural things, not up to the task to which Plato appointed them. Aristotle further argues that the solutions of Speusippus and Xenocrates, which essentially rid the Platonic universe of the Ideas, while keeping the One, the Dyad and Number(s), just exacerbate the original Platonic abstraction. In order for Aristotle to solve the problematic of Plato, to put to rest the ultimate problematic of Greek philosophy which he traced through Plato back to Parmenides, he must come up with a theory of predication that can solve an essentially dualistic problematic. From an Aristotelian perspective the inadequacy of Plato is rooted in the Pythagorean assumption that reality is numbers and that number is finally as posited by Plato reducible to the One. The ultimate dialectic here is that Plato must show how the One produces the Dyad or the principle of the Many - the principle which Parmenides says is tied up with the negation of the

One. And then further Plato must be able to show how the interplay of the One and the Dyad through setting limits produce Ideas which then filter down to things. Aristotle regards the process of this whole series as finally impossible because of its dyadic nature. In his way of speaking being and unity cannot be subjects but only predicates. They are not substances. Only Substance, just because it alone cannot be a predicate, can have predicates.

By making Plato's ultimate principles predicates Aristotle is able to make the Platonic solution a moment of his own. By the invention (from a Greek perspective the discovery) of syllogistic logic Aristotle is able to simplify Platonic mysticism and cut out altogether the intermediance of numbers and ideas. He substitutes an harmony of substances based on the idea of a teleology of actuality [ἐνέργεια, ἐτελέχεια]. But Aristotle's solution is rendered invisible to the modern eye as long as it obscured by a scientific Christian cosmology which already takes creation and production from simplicity as givens. The Greeks had no such givens. Thus Aristotle introduces the idea of fourfold causality as a solution to what he regards as Plato's twofold causality. According to Aristotle Plato's theory of reality [τὸ ὄντως ὄν] has no efficient (moving) or final (that for the sake of which) cause. While he allows that Plato sort of has an efficient cause when he talks about a self-moving soul principle, he is emphatic that he is the first to have the insight of a final cause.

Now final causality for Aristotle is tied up inextricably with his theory about actuality as being prior both substantially and in time to potentiality [δύναμις]. Thus he finally defines his ultimate principle as having no potentiality whatever, as being a purely actual and self-involved substance [ουσία]. In other words as an efficient and final cause it is so *passively*; that is, in so far as it is *desired by all other* substances. For it must absolutely not be forgotten that in the Greek cosmos *everything* in so far as it *is* anything, is so in so far as it has being *and* unity. For even for Aristotle as a Platonist (remember he does not reject Plato, he simply supersedes him) every substance is a substance only in so far as it *is* and it is *one*; that is, these Platonic terms are for him ultimate as metaphysical predicates. Thus Aristotle is able to do what he thought Plato unable to do. He was able to reduce physics to metaphysics. Temporal substances and

eternal substances find their unity and being in their dependence on the unmoved mover which not incidentally is absolute substance because it is absolute thought. And it is absolute thought just because it is *fully unique*. It is the one and *only* instance where subject and predicate are identical and so completely actual. All possibility and so all substances hang on literally to this principle (*Meta*: 1072b13ff.) But this principle does not make them or desire them or produce them. All the substances simply are.

#### THE NEOPLATONIC PROBLEMATIC

At this point the problematic of Neoplatonism can become clear. Aristotle's great insight into Plato and the problem of Platonism he states in Book N of the *Metaphysics* when he refers to the problematic of Parmenides alluded to above. In other words the Platonic philosophy is ultimately one in which possibility devours actuality. A world of metaphor swallows up the real world. Put another way Aristotle's great effort is to save this world in order to achieve a reduction of this world to its principle. This is the ultimate paradox of Aristotelianism. And it is its Achilles heel. And it is this paradox that Neoplatonism exploits. Both Plato and Aristotle and all who preceded them are caught up really in only one problematic: what is the principle upon which everything that exists and which is inherently unstable and changing depends. The so-called dualism of Greek philosophy is a sustained metaphysical and theological effort to reduce the duality to unity.

Greek philosophy in this way is an answer to Greek religion. Aristotle's *Nous* [νοῦς] and Plato's One [τὸ ἓν] are monotheistic conclusions to polytheism, but without giving up polytheism. The dilemma of this reduction only occurs *after* the successful reduction is completed. When the Neoplatonists are confronted by ethical dogmatists to which the only successful criticism seems to be a scepticism that makes ethics and metaphysics alike problematic, they naturally revert to the success of Plato and Aristotle, but this very success poses to Neoplatonism its greatest problem and the one with which Neoplatonism and the intellectual life of antiquity ends.

The solutions of Plato and Aristotle force one to *begin* with the principle. They *already* reduced

metaphysically everything to one principle. But if the reduction is valid, it should follow that if one were to *begin* rather than *end* with the principle one should be able to *produce from the principle* all of the substances or possibilities as actualities which were reducible as dependent on the principle in the first place. It was possible for Aristotle to become naturalized simply because he fought Plato so hard in trying to preserve the reality of this world. Aristotle did claim that the ideas were *not* substances. It is possible to forget that he *also* claimed that matter without form is mere potentiality. But there is much ambiguity in this position. It seems that the *Nous* is a pure form, but that would make the ultimate substance a form which any reading of Aristotle would show to be tantamount to an abstraction and hence a nonentity. One obvious solution is to remove the ambiguity by making everything material - by removing a duality latent in Aristotle. The irony is that this latency produces a conclusion the opposite of that intended by Aristotle. But *if* the Stoic interpretation is wrong and the idealistic interpretation right a more sophisticated reading of Aristotle, if contrary to his claims, is that the *Nous* is indeed a form - a perfect form in so far as a form can be perfect. And on an esoteric reading of Plato - one which accords with Aristotle's own account of the esoteric teaching - only the One is beyond Being and only the One is beyond duality. So that the *Nous* becomes the ultimate intermediary, the form of forms, the demiurgos, the one-many in which the duality is so slight it almost is not a duality - or in Aristotle's claim, it is simple. But, say the Neoplatonists, its simplicity is still dual. It is a many-one. [Plotinus: *Enneads*: V, 3 esp. 10; V, 4 esp. 2; Proclus: *El. Th. Prop.* 59; 165; 166]

By thus incorporating Aristotle into Plato the Neoplatonists are able to explain the production of the Many from the One metaphysically. They can use the Platonic metaphor of light and can build up a whole theory of emanation. In this way they can incorporate positively the empiricism of the Stoics and Epicureans and the negative dialectic of the Sceptics into a metaphysical theory which allows for the union of the soul with its principle in a fashion far more explicit than anything to be found in Aristotle. The only caveat in all this is that the Neoplatonists have to explicitly reject Aristotle's overt criticism of Plato. This they do by denying that substance is the ultimate

category. They can do this by sticking to the idea that unity has priority over multiplicity - a principle which Aristotle basically agreed with. By denying substance an ultimate place logically Neoplatonism can deny the Aristotelian reduction of being and unity to predicates of substance. The Neoplatonists turn this around by saying that unity makes possible for substance to keep its predicates together.

#### THE CONCLUSION OF ANCIENT THOUGHT

The ground Neoplatonism gains by subordinating substance to unity it loses by reducing *Nous* to a derivative form of Being. Aristotle's great merit lay in overcoming Platonic myth with thought. In so doing he is able to carry out the Platonic programme of subordinating religion to philosophy, belief to knowledge. But Aristotle's solution to Plato is unable to provide a paradigm for procession as well as return. Plato, because his idealism cannot be reduced to naturalism is able to provide a platform in his esoteric doctrines for procession. Ironically, when Plato and Aristotle both are thus transformed by Neoplatonism, religion, as a story [ $\mu\hat{\upsilon}\theta\omicron\varsigma$ ], as a theology of effects and causes in which *Nous* is the great demiurgic intermediary, transcends philosophy. This transformation remains unsatisfactory in so far as the cosmology of the ancient world cannot provide for more than an emanation in which matter remains as an ultimate though ambiguously acknowledged principle at the bottom of an hierarchy of being. Procession remains a metaphor while reversion maintains the strength it always had for Greek cosmology. The asymmetry to this cosmic dialectic is the longing for consolation which the ancient world cannot provide. Neoplatonism is the epic intellectual struggle to overcome Homeric grief, but its fruition only comes with the infusion of esoteric willfulness in the form of divine personality, first finely formed with the transformation of Judaism into Christianity.

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## ARISTOTLE AND PLOTINUS ON THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF Νοῦς

*Mark Nyvit*

εἶτι δὲ τὸ ἐν καὶ τὸ ἀπλοῦν οὐ τὸ αἰνό  
[Aristotle: *Metaphysics*, 1072a 33-34]

Plotinus<sup>1</sup> claims that Aristotle's first principle, νοῦς, as thinking thinking on thinking, is essentially complex, albeit a type of unity, since this highest activity of thinking necessarily presupposes a dual distinction between thought and its object. Consequently, νοῦς requires an absolutely simple principle causally prior to itself, i.e., the One. Aristotle, however, argues that νοῦς is a simple nature, which admits no potentiality, since it is pure actuality. Aristotle's division of being according to act and potency enables him to soundly assert the simplicity and indivisibility of νοῦς, as a purely actual substance. This ontological position renders Plotinus' interpretation of νοῦς as containing the distinction between thought and object of thought suspect, and *a fortiori* his ascension towards the One as the ultimate simple principle. This essay first examines Plotinus' charge against Aristotle. This is necessary in order to elucidate Plotinus' Platonic presuppositions, which, no doubt, influenced his interpretation of Aristotle. By arguing this claim, however, I am not suggesting that Plotinus is unfamiliar with Aristotle's or Alexander of Aphrodisias' works and arguments. On the contrary, Plotinus is admirably well read in not only Aristotle, but also Alexander, who had a direct influence upon his development of νοῦς.

Aristotle's argument for the simplicity and indivisibility of νοῦς is examined in the light of his correlative ontological division of act and potency in order to show that Thought must be the primary

substance, and, thus, cannot admit another causally prior principle, upon which νοῦς would depend. For the most part, this essay is restricted to the *Enneads* V.3, V.4, and V.6; and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 12, chps. 7 and 9, and *De Anima* III. 4-6.

### PLOTINUS

In *Enn.* V.4.2, Plotinus states the following, with respect to the nature of νοῦς:

Thus it [νοῦς] is not a simplex; it is a manifold; it exhibits a certain composite quality - within the Intellectual or divine order, of course - as the principle that sees the manifold. It is, further, itself simultaneously object and agent of intellection and is on that count also a duality: and it possesses, besides, another object of intellection in the order following upon The First (*Enn.* V.4.2).<sup>2</sup>

Two interrelated assertions are made here: νοῦς is not simple, and, as a result, is subordinate to a causally preceding simple principle, the One. However, Plotinus also asserts that νοῦς is itself "simultaneously object and agent of intellection ..." Taken on its own, this passage would confirm Plotinus to be a full adherent to the Aristotelian doctrine of the absolute simplicity of νοῦς. However, the sentence ends with a very enigmatic interpretation: "... and it is on that count also a duality ...": thus relegating νοῦς to a subordinate status to that of the One. Plotinus asserts, therefore, his interpretation that the thinking principle, divine Intellect, albeit simultaneous with its object, is complex.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Professor James Lowry, whose insights provided orientation for this paper.

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the *Enneads* are from the Loeb Classical library edition edited and translated by A.H. Armstrong.



The focus of the debate is on the nature of the object. Plotinus is aware of Aristotle's argument that the object of thought is the act of thinking itself. However, Plotinus concludes that  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  is dual. The Intellectual Principle, as an unchangeable Being, produces its Intellectual Act, hence its object, which, because it derives its source from the Intellectual Principle, is "another intellectual being, resembling its source, a reproduction and image of that" (*Enn.* V.4.2). The thinking principle is one with its first produced object of thought, but this unity is composite in nature.<sup>3</sup> The thinking principle could not be first, since it admits a degree of plurality, and, thus, cannot, by its very nature, be responsible for the order in the world of multiplicity: only a single principle which does not admit potentiality and complexity can be responsible for the hierarchical order of the hypostases.

Plotinus' argument is based on Aristotle's presentation of the process of thinking itself, found in the *De Anima* III. 4-6. Aristotle recognizes thinking as an immaterial potential which is actualized by its reception of forms. In the apprehension of forms, the intellect and the forms become a unity. Yet, it is only upon the reception of these forms that the intellect begins to think actively. Aristotle develops, therefore, two types of intellects: passive and active. It is the preliminary step in demonstrating the process of thinking in *De Anima* III. 4-6 that enables Aristotle to explain the divine simplicity and indivisibility of  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  in *Metaphysics* 12. 7 & 9.<sup>4</sup>

Let it suffice here to show that 1) Plotinus has prolific knowledge of Aristotle's argument on the thinking principle, and 2) that Plotinus disagrees with Aristotle's claim that the divine Intellect is simple, since a subject-object duality still exists, and, thus, in Aristotelian terms, the divine Intellect still contains a degree of potentiality. It is for this reason that Plotinus will supersede  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  to affirm a principle prior to  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ , and most simple, since nothing can be predicated of the One (*Enn.* VI.37). Thus, Plotinus' crucial step in asserting the One as the simple principle is based upon his argument that Aristotle's  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  is multiple and composite.

3 Cf. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, Intro. and Ed. E. R. Dodds. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), prop. 167, who argues that this unity is numerically one.

4 O'Meara, Dominic J., *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 49-50.

This conclusion is confirmed in *Enn.* V.6.1-2, where Plotinus argues that  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  is dual in reality, but conceptually is one:

Now we in our discourse have made one out of two; but [in reality] the reverse is true and two came from one, making itself two because it thinks, or, better, because it thinks it is two and because it thinks itself, one. (*Enn.* V.6.1).

The One causally precedes Intellect, since the One is self-sufficient, and, thus, it does not desire, or is in need, as Intellect necessarily is: the One, then, will not think, since it is causally prior to thinking, and is *simple* (*Enn.* V.6.2). Since  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  is composite, it is in potentiality. If in potentiality, then it is dependent upon a prior principle, which  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  yearns to intellectualize; and, in its act of intellection of the One, which is impossible, since the One is inexhaustible and nothing can be predicated of it,  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  scatters its thought, rendering it composite (*Enn.* V.3.11). The act of intellection and the object of Intellect are separate.

It should be noted that Plotinus' Aristotelian influence, with respect to the topic of the divine  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ , was most likely filtered through the alembic of Alexander of Aphrodisias' commentaries.<sup>5</sup> Alexander was an Aristotelian commentator and a near contemporary of Plotinus.<sup>6</sup> Alexander's Aristotelian psychology, especially of the Active Intellect, was studied in considerable depth within Plotinus' school.<sup>7</sup> Alexander's interpretation and commentary of Aristotle's *De Anima* III. 4-6 is an attempt to make explicit what seemingly appears

5 Merlan, P. "Aristocles and Alexander Aphrodisias," in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*. Ed. A. H. Armstrong. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 117-123. Cf. also de Gandillac, Maurice. "Plotin et la 'Métaphysique' d'Aristote," in *Études sur la "Métaphysique" d'Aristote*. Ed. Pierre Aubenque. (Paris: Vrin, 1979), p. 258; and, de Koninck, Thomas. "La 'Pensée de la Pensée' chez Aristote," in *La Question de Dieu selon Aristote et Hegel*. Eds. Thomas de Koninck et Guy Planty-Bonjour. (Laval-Québec et France: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), pp. 69-152.

6 Armstrong, A. H. "The Background of the Doctrine 'That the Intelligibles are not Outside the Intellect,'" in *Plotinian and Christian Studies. Essay IV*. (London: Variorum Reprints, 1979), p. 405.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 406.

to be an ambiguous and cryptic reflection on the nature of intellect and intellect's relation with its object. More specifically, his interpretation of Active Intellect impressed and influenced Plotinus, as can be seen in Plotinus' argument for the *immanent* activity of Intellect's apprehension of its self-transparent objects, which are *not* outside of the intellect (*Enn.* V.3.5).

This resembles Aristotle's argument in *Metaphysics* 9, that νοῦς is simple because its object of thought is itself; thus, they are one.<sup>8</sup> However, whereas Aristotle argues that part of the soul is separable and unmixed, without which the passive intellect could not think, Alexander suggests the whole soul is passive, thus arguing for a universal, cosmic Active Intellect that actualizes the human passive intellect.<sup>9</sup> It is the Active Intellect which enables us to think. Furthermore, the transcendent Active Intellect does not require external forms to act upon it.<sup>10</sup> It is, therefore, self-sufficient and simple.

After having argued that the human intellect is composite, Alexander argues that the divine Intellect, the Agent Intellect, is pure actuality and simplicity. It is worth citing Alexander's argument in its entirety in order to perceive 1) Alexander's interpretation of Aristotle, and 2) the doctrine that influenced Plotinus' consideration of the Intellect.

But the first intellect is superior to [our] intellect, in that it knows nothing other than itself.... [It] knows itself as intelligible object, inasmuch as it is an intellect; that it is constantly in the act of knowing itself, inasmuch as it is both intellect and intelligible in act; and that it knows only itself, inasmuch as it alone is simple [intellect and intelligible]. As the uniquely simple intellect, it is oriented to the knowledge of some simple object; as uniquely simple among the intelligibles, it is itself this simple object.<sup>11</sup>

8 Cf. Aristotle's *De Anima* III. 4.

9 Merlan, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

10 Cf. Aristotle's *De Anima* III.4 (429b24-5).

11 Alexander of Aphrodisias. *De Anima*. 109, 22-23, in Fotinis, Athanasios P. *The De Anima of Alexander of Aphrodisias: A Translation and Commentary*. (New York: University Press of America, 1980) pp. 143-4.

As is clear in *Enns.* V.3.5, V.4, V.6, Plotinus will deny the absolute simplicity of νοῦς, since any thinking activity presupposes a want, and every want is necessarily an indication of incompleteness and potentiality. Yet, Plotinus will agree with the Peripatetic doctrine that Intellect's object of thought is not outside itself, but generated from within. Plotinus thus affirms an identity between Intellect and its object. Alexander's reflections, no doubt, furnished Plotinus with a substantial starting point, from where Plotinus will develop his conclusion about the *identity* of intellect with its object.<sup>12</sup>

However, Plotinus' agenda is to assume the "simplicity" of Aristotle's νοῦς into Plato's world of Forms, subordinating νοῦς to a dual activity, as is the world of Forms, which mutually interact via the divine logos. As mentioned above, the divine νοῦς is complex; though, its complexity is derived from *within* its nature, and not from without, as is the case with sensible composite beings. The reason Intellect cannot be the first principle is not due to the multiplicity of the Forms within the Intellect, but because of the *distinction* between thought and the object of thought, which is albeit only a logical one.<sup>13</sup> Plotinus, then, agrees with Alexander and Aristotle about the simplicity of νοῦς (*Enn.* V.3.5), but disagrees with them concerning the *degree* of simplicity of νοῦς. νοῦς will necessarily require a first principle, due to its distinctive parts: thought and the object of thought.

#### ARISTOTLE

Plotinus' interpretation is, however, inaccurate, in spite of his extensive knowledge of Aristotle's teachings.

Aristotle's claim is that νοῦς, thinking thinking on thinking, is an eternal, indivisible, simple, and purely actual *substance*. Aristotle's doctrine of νοῦς is an answer to an *aporia* raised in the *De Anima* III.4 (429b26): "is mind a possible object of thought to itself?" Aristotle answers a few lines later:

Mind is itself thinkable in exactly the same way as its objects. For (a) in the case of

12 Armstrong, *op. cit.*, 1979, p. 408, with reference to *Enn.* V.3.5.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 409.

objects which have no matter, what thinks and what is thought are identical; for speculative knowledge and its objects are identical (DA 430a2-4).<sup>14</sup>

The question elicits the possible answer that thought has immediate apprehension of itself, such that the act of thinking and the object are identical. The claim is quite striking when, for Aristotle, thinking is a discursive activity, and since discursive, it is dual in nature: the subject and object are distinct from each other. The nature of discursive thinking is that its knowledge is always mediated by a middle term. The above citation, then, depicts mind as pure actuality, since a) it is devoid of matter, and b) it grasps itself immediately, thus apprehending itself without the mediating role of contraries, since contraries include matter. With respect to νοῦς, νοῦς must admit no contraries, since it would otherwise include a degree of potentiality, and, therefore, be dependent upon a prior principle.<sup>15</sup>

Aristotle further confirms this in *Metaphysics* 12.7 (1072b19-21) in an extraordinary text:

All thought thinks on itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its object, so that *thought and object are the same*. [italics added]

Thus, in the very same act of thinking, mind and the object of its thought are reciprocally ordered in such a way that one is not subordinate or dependent on the other, since they are not dual, but simple. In *Metaphysics* 12.9, Aristotle argues that the divine Intellect must be pure actuality. If it were not so, then its thinking activity would depend upon a causally prior and external operating principle (1074b27-34). For Plotinus, νοῦς has a degree of potentiality, since it is complex; whereas, for Aristotle, νοῦς is purely actual, and therefore simple. This is the central gravamen of the Plotinian-Aristotelian debate. Actuality always precedes potentiality, absolutely considered. If this were not the case, then the thinking activity of νοῦς

could *not* be the best activity. Thus, the divine Intellect's intellectual activity is a thinking on thinking, and its act of intellection must be generated from within itself.

Aristotle justifies this claim by introducing the correlative principles of act and potency. In introducing these correlative principles, Aristotle distances himself from the static, quantifiable characteristics of Platonic substances, which do not account for motion. Motion is caused by the Unmoved Mover, who inclines all beings to itself by being the ultimate object of desire, of love (*Meta.* 12.7 (1072b3)). The Unmoved Mover is, therefore, pure actuality, since its movement does not depend upon an external substance ontologically prior to it.

It cannot be doubted that both Aristotle and Plotinus sought an absolute principle upon which to *found* the world of movement (complexity) and multiplicity, respectively considered. However, the Aristotelian genius is manifested in his separation from the Platonic quantified "paradigm" of dividing reality, and introduction of the correlative divisions of being according to act and potency in order to account not only for motion, but also for the degrees of complexity of perishable sensible and eternal sensible substances, and the simplicity of νοῦς, considered as an Unmovable (non-sensible) substance.

The pivotal text in Aristotle is found in *Meta.* 12.7 (1072a33-34); a text, surprisingly, in brackets: "(The one and simple are not the same; for 'one' means a measure, but 'simple' means that the thing itself has a certain nature.)" This striking text clearly indicates Aristotle's separation from Plato's quantifiable and measurable Forms, to which Plotinus adhered and placed in primacy over Aristotle's correlative act-potency distinction. While Plotinus must have been aware of this text, he, nevertheless, opted for the Platonic method of measuring reality according to the One and the Many. In Books M and N, Aristotle argues at length against the Platonic and Pythagorean view that Forms and Numbers exist substantially, in favour of individual substantial beings, although some separable, but each individual, and which are composed of act and potency, except νοῦς, which, as a unique substance, is pure actuality. It is within

<sup>14</sup> All quotations from Aristotle are from Oxford editions translated by W.D. Ross.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Meta.* 12.10 (1075b20-24)).

the Platonic, "measured" methodology that Plotinus evaluates the status of Aristotle's νοῦς, and judges it to be multiple, and, therefore, containing a degree of potentiality *in relation to the One*. In Book N (1087b33-1088a5), Aristotle argues that in all cases, there is an "underlying thing with a distinct nature." In the case of quality, measure is in kind; whereas, in the case of quantity, measure is related to sense. Since, according to Aristotle, 'the one' is a measure, it follows that 'the one' itself is not a substance of any possible thing, "for 'the one' means the measure of some plurality, and 'number' means a measured plurality and a plurality of measures." Taken as a quality of some thing, 'the one' cannot be its substance, since as a measure it is a predicate, and a predicate cannot appropriate the status of first principles, since a measure is related to the common things measured.<sup>16</sup> While for Plotinus, the accent is on the One, considered as a quantified principle, although it is a principle that cannot have anything predicated of it. Nevertheless, *it is always an act of intellect*

*to measure a quantifiable object*, and this emphasizes the primacy of Thought. If this is true, then Plotinus must stand to be corrected, since his primary principle supersedes Intellect. According to Aristotle, Intellect must be the primary principle, upon which all of reality depends, and towards which the cosmos aspires. The contrast between the "measure" and the "nature" is resolved when considering the accurate and *necessary* status of Intellect as the primary principle of the cosmos. Plotinus' analysis of Aristotle's νοῦς, therefore, is a suspect interpretation, for, as Aristotle clearly shows, the quantified measure of substance cannot render an *intelligible* account of the *nature* of substance. It is the latter as a simple entity, whose intelligibility is *in* itself, that allows for a progressive order of act and potency in substances to ascend towards an eternal, actual, and simple substance, which cannot admit any complexity or duality, since its act of intellection and object are identical.

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<sup>16</sup> Ross, W. D. *Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Vol. 2. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 467.

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