

# Aristotelian Dialectic as Midwifery

## The Epistemic Significance of Critique

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Dialectic in Plato's sense typically proceeds as critique. This is true in particular of the supposedly early dialogues, where Socrates invites his friends to submit their most cherished beliefs to critical scrutiny, in order to assess their underlying rationale. He who exposes himself to the Socratic elenchus will perhaps not increase his knowledge about the world, but is at least given an opportunity to recognize his own ignorance and, thus, to reach a higher degree of self-awareness, which Socrates takes to be indispensable for the possibility of intellectual and moral enhancement alike. For his own part, he would consider himself ridiculous, were he to seek knowledge of the external world before he could claim to know himself, as the particular kind of being he is (*Phdr.* 229e5–230a6). As a matter of fact, the life which is unexamined (ἀνεξέταστος) is not worth calling a human life at all (*Ap.* 38a5f.).

It is not immediately clear to what extent the critical spirit of Socrates and Plato is still alive in Aristotle, not least in consideration of his apparent depreciation of dialectic as a philosophical method. One might wonder, however, whether this depreciation is not prepared for already in Plato, precisely as he lets Socrates voice the suspicion that his elenctic art may turn out to only have negative results, in that its principal aim is to release us from the illusion that we know what we in fact do not know. When Socrates nonetheless in the *Republic* (531d–534e) confidently asserts that dialectic indeed is the royal road to science, it is therefore tempting to conclude that the very concept of dialectic must have changed, probably because Plato had realized the shortcomings of the elenctic method. But whereas Plato never gave up hope of being able to develop dialectic in a direction that would let it meet the requirements for its role as the supreme science, without sacrificing too much of its original critical flavor, Aristotle, it seems, saw no other way out of the Socratic predicament than to abandon dialectic altogether.

In the *Topics*, Aristotle famously declares that dialectic, in contrast to philosophy, cannot deal with problems in accordance with truth but only with an eye to

opinion (105b3of.).<sup>1</sup> Aristotle always speaks of dialectic as if it were a single thing, but at least in the *Topics* it is relatively clear that his model is Socratic dialectic, in the sense of a concrete practice of questions and answers. In any case, he apparently thinks that the most prominent feature of dialectic, whether Socratic or not, is that it explores, on any given topic, the implications of ἔνδοξα, such opinions as are accepted πᾶσιν ἢ τοῖς πλείστοις ἢ τοῖς σοφοῖς: “by all or most men or by the wise”;<sup>2</sup> and evaluates them in the light of yet other, preferably more reputable or acceptable opinions. For this reason, its results are on principle always open to further questioning and critique. A dialectical inquiry, in other words, is bound by the limits of the dialogue format, rather than by reality itself, as it were.<sup>3</sup> But according to Aristotle’s conception of science, only demonstration based on evidently true premises can bring explanation to a satisfying end. It is therefore essential that philosophy be γνωριστική, knowledgeable, about its subject matter, while not remaining πειραστική, probing, in the manner of dialectic (*Metaph.* 1004b25f.). As Aristotle knows very well, however, the demonstrative ideal of science leaves unanswered the question of how we acquire knowledge of the premises upon which our arguments are based. And it is only at this level, it seems, that it is possible for science to make progress in the sense of genuine discovery, since a demonstrative syllogism merely spells out the implications of its premises, no less than its dialectical counterpart. How, exactly, Aristotle thinks we come to know the premises of scientific demonstration is a much-debated issue in the scholarly literature, as is also the question whether or not he is prepared to see a role for dialectic here.<sup>4</sup> A key passage in this connection is *Topics* 101a37–b4, where it is stated that it is impossible to discuss the fundamental principles of science on the basis of the principles that are proper to the particular sciences, since the former are presumably prior to everything else: διὰ δὲ τῶν περὶ ἕκαστα ἐνδόξων ἀνάγκη περὶ αὐτῶν διελθεῖν. τοῦτο δ’ ἴδιον ἢ μάλιστα οἰκεῖον τῆς διαλεκτικῆς ἐστίν· ἐξεταστικὴ γὰρ οὕσα πρὸς τὰς ἀπασῶν τῶν μεθόδων ἀρχὰς ὁδὸν ἔχει. “Instead one has to pursue the inquiry concerning them through the commonly accepted opinions on each particular point. And this

1. A similar distinction is made in *APo.* 81b18–23.

2. ARISTOTELES, *Top.*, ed. W. D. Ross, Oxford 1958, 100b21f. All translations of quotations from Aristotle’s works are my own.

3. Cf. O. PRIMASEVI, *Die Aristotelische Topik*, München 1996, 57; C. RAPP, *Aristoteles Rhetorik*, vol. IV.1, Berlin 2002, 243.

4. Informative expositions of this debate are found in R. BOLTON, “The Problem of Dialectical Reasoning (*sullogismos*) in Aristotle”, in: *Ancient Philosophy* 14 (1994), 99–132; R. BOLTON, “The Epistemological Basis of Aristotelian Dialectic”, in: M. Sim (ed.), *From Puzzles to Principles? Essays on Aristotle’s Dialectic*, Lanham 1999, 57–105; and M. SIM, “Introduction”, in: *From Puzzles to Principles?*, ix–xxv.

task belongs properly, or most of all, to dialectic: since it is critical it affords the path to the principles of all fields of research” (*Top.* 101b1–4). So by examining the ἔνδοξα of the other sciences, dialectic moves upwards to the first principles, which are seen to be silently presupposed by the former. It is far from uncontroversial, however, how these brief remarks by Aristotle are to be understood, since the *Topics* does not really make it into an issue how it is that dialectic can grant us access to these principles, let alone enable us to justify them – whatever that may mean in the present context.<sup>5</sup> And to the best of my knowledge, there are no other passages in the Aristotelian corpus that make a similar claim about the powers of dialectic.<sup>6</sup>

The point of the above remarks is to suggest that Aristotle’s ambiguous attitude towards dialectic reflects a worry concerning the epistemic relevance of critique, which he shares with Plato. Granted that not only the target but also the armament of dialectical critique is our views of the world, which is to say, the realm of what is intelligible to us, how can it ever aspire to achieve knowledge of that which is supposedly intelligible by nature?<sup>7</sup> To see how Aristotle responds to that worry, we cannot, for reasons given above, confine ourselves to the *Topics*, but need to turn to his own attempt at establishing the foundations of science. The work in which he takes on that task to the full is the *Metaphysics*, where we also find his most systematic attempt at writing the history of philosophy. This is, as far as I can see, hardly a coincidence, but indicates that Aristotle expects a confrontation with the tradition to help improve his comprehension of the thematic field of metaphysics, the ultimate principles and causes of reality. A number of scholars have argued that the interrogation of his predecessors that Aristotle launches in the *Metaphysics*

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5. Primasevi has argued that dialectic as conceived by Aristotle in the *Topics* can in fact not afford the way to the principles of science, precisely because it is tied to the realm of ἔνδοξα. See PRIMASEVI, *Die Aristotelische Topik*, 57. For an opposing view, see E. BERTI, “Does Aristotle’s Conception of Dialectic Develop?”, in: W. Wians (ed.), *Aristotle’s Philosophical Development: Problems and Prospects*, Lanham 1996, 105–130. See also J. BRUNSCHWIG, *Aristote, Topiques*, tome I, Paris 1967, 117, who leaves it an open question as to how we are to understand the claim of the *Topics* in this respect.

6. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (ed. L. Bywater, Oxford 1894), Aristotle explains that ἐὰν γὰρ λύηται τε τὰ δυσχερῆ καὶ καταλείπηται τὰ ἔνδοξα, δεδειγμένον ἂν εἴη ἰκανῶς: “if one dissolves the objections and leaves the commonly accepted opinions unharmed, one will have proved the case sufficiently” (1145b6–7). But this remark does not add anything to our query concerning the powers of dialectic as a road to primary principles, since it gives the impression that it is the business of ethics to achieve harmony with popular belief, rather than to exercise critique of it in order to reveal its presuppositions.

7. Cf. T. IRWIN, *Aristotle’s First Principles*, Oxford 1988, 8f. For the distinction between what is intelligible to us and what is intelligible by nature, see ARISTOTELES, *Metaph.* 1029b3–12; *Ph.* 184a16–18; *de An.* 413a11f.; *EN* 1095bf.; *Apo.* 71b34–72a5; *Top.* 141b.

deserves to be called dialectical, even though its stated aim is truth, rather than merely more convincing opinions.<sup>8</sup> If this is granted, we must conclude that one of Aristotle's major achievements in the *Metaphysics* is to have overcome his own opposition between philosophy and dialectic. My contribution to this discussion will mainly consist in an attempt to show that the key to Aristotle's achievement lies in his conception of critique. In contrast to Socrates' elenctic art, the ideal of critique governing Aristotle's assessment of his interlocutors prevents him from considering refutation epistemically valuable in itself.<sup>9</sup> Rather, critique in the proper sense finds its fulfillment in verification, for its overall aim is not simply to overthrow the theories put forward by the tradition, but above all to release their as yet hidden potentiality for the benefit of scientific progress. However, this turn away from elenchus may profitably be regarded as a turn to another Socratic art, midwifery, which I take to constitute Plato's most sustained attempt to show how Socrates' critical pursuit can generate positive results.<sup>10</sup> When Socrates acts as a midwife, he certainly exposes his interlocutors to cross-examination, but not simply because he wants to release them from whatever false beliefs they might entertain; above all, his aim is to help them articulate as well as develop a knowledge that they in a sense were already in possession of, though without being aware of it themselves.

In what follows, I shall argue that the Socratic art of midwifery provides us with a fruitful perspective on Aristotle's dialectical work in the *Metaphysics*, most notably so when this work assumes the form of an explicit encounter with the thinkers of the past.<sup>11</sup> The suggestion is not that Aristotle would have consciously

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8. Among the works that emphasize the historical dimension of Aristotle's dialectic, the most important is still P. AUBENQUE, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*, Paris 1962, but see also J.-M. LE BLOND, *Logique et méthode chez Aristote: Étude sur la recherche des principes dans la physique aristotélicienne*, Paris 1996 [1939], 50; H. D. P. LEE, "Geometrical Analysis and Aristotle's Account of First Principles", in: *Classical Quarterly* 29 (1935), 113–124; and S. MANSION, "Le rôle de l'exposé et de la critique des philosophies antérieures chez Aristote", in: S. Mansion (ed.), *Aristote et les problèmes de méthode*, Louvain 1961, 35–56.

9. As indicated above, Aristotle cannot even credit dialectic with the power of conclusive refutation (since the refutation itself might be questioned), but even if he were prepared to do so, he would not consider the elenctic art of arguing satisfactory for the purposes of science, because the discovery that a certain belief is false is not enough, on his view, to count as genuine progress. On this point I disagree with R. BOLTON, "The Aristotelian elenchus", in: J. Fink (ed.), *The Development of Dialectic from Plato to Aristotle*, Cambridge 2012, 270–295.

10. But see W. MESCH, *Ontologie und Dialektik bei Aristoteles*, Göttingen 1994, 89f., who suggests that the so-called method of hypothesis is introduced in Plato's middle dialogues for a similar purpose.

11. I believe that this claim could be extended to other works where Aristotle engages in a dialogue with the tradition, like the *Physics*, *De Anima* and *De Generatione et Corruptione*. Primarily

modeled his dialectic on Socratic midwifery, but that the latter can help us understand better the overall aim of Aristotle's critical assessment of his predecessors, as well as the spirit in which it is conducted. Conversely, with the aid of the conceptual resources of Aristotelian metaphysics, it becomes possible to see that the analogy between dialectic and midwifery in Plato finds its basis in a teleological conception of knowledge and learning.<sup>12</sup> When pursued as a maieutic practice, dialectic is no longer simply an argumentative technique or an art of refutation. It makes use of critique in order to actualize the natural potential for knowledge belonging to the one who is exposed to criticism. Dialectic in this sense is still an art, a τέχνη, but one that seeks to promote our natural cognitive capacities, not to replace them with an artificial method. With Aristotle, we could say that dialectic as midwifery both fulfills (ἐπιτελεῖ) and imitates (μιμείται) nature (*Ph.* 199a15–17). But whereas Socrates primarily directed his maieutic efforts to improving the souls of his fellow men, the overall aim of Aristotle's dialectic is the delivery of truth from the tradition. I shall call this Aristotle's 'depsychologization' of dialectic.

### 1. Socrates' Art of Midwifery

One way to describe the position inhabited by Socrates in several of Plato's dialogues is that it is centered on a dilemma that immediately concerns his own powers, but ultimately the powers of dialectic as such. On the one hand, Socrates is convinced that the kind of critique that he has made into his primary concern in life is absolutely indispensable, for moral as well as epistemic reasons.<sup>13</sup> But on the other hand, he also fears that this critique may turn out to be entirely useless, not to say positively damaging, exactly like sophistical argumentation. This is, however, not simply due to any shortcomings on the part of Socrates, but has to do with the fact that the knowledge at which he aims, namely of virtue, is of a highly peculiar

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for economical reasons, I focus on the *Metaphysics*, though it will also be of some importance to my argument that this work aims at precisely first philosophy. It would certainly be possible to approach the question concerning the nature and aim of dialectic in Plato and Aristotle from another vantage point, like the concept of division (διαίρεσις), which is so central to Plato's mature dialectic. Such an attempt has been made by C. PIETSCH, *Prinzipienforschung bei Aristoteles*, Stuttgart 1992.

12. By 'teleology' I shall understand the view that everything that happens is an actualization of a potentiality. The fact that every actualization essentially involves the achievement of an end, τέλος, will be less important in the present context.

13. See in particular PLATO, *Phdr.* 229e5–230a6; *Ap.* 21d2–8, 29d2–e8; *Chrm.* 167a1–7; *Men.* 86b5–c2; *Hp.Mi.* 372a6–373a2.

kind: it seems that it cannot be taught, which also implies that it is highly uncertain that there exists a method, τέχνη, which would be such as to guarantee progress in this area.<sup>14</sup>

With the introduction of the theory of ideas in the middle dialogues, this problem acquires a new dimension. To possess virtues now amounts to knowing their ideas or forms. To act bravely, for example, is in other words not possible without some, however vague, notion of bravery itself.<sup>15</sup> The fact that people do act bravely from time to time thus shows that they actually have some acquaintance with the form of bravery. But if virtue cannot be taught, then the step from mere acquaintance to a fully articulate conception of the forms of virtue must be achieved by some other means. It seems that it must involve something like an ability to go back to that which in a sense had already been present in us, albeit not as such.

The idea that learning essentially involves a return to something already given culminates with the suggestion that knowledge is recollection, ἀνάμνησις, which Plato elaborates most thoroughly in the *Meno* and in the *Phaedo*. Granted that we are always already in possession of some basic intellectual competence, so that knowledge can be conceived as a kind of actualization of a pre-given cognitive make-up, we no longer need to be troubled by the Presocratic dilemma, according to which it is equally incomprehensible that something could be generated out of being as out of not-being, which would make it just as impossible to search for what one knows as for what one does not know.<sup>16</sup> With the theory of recollection, Plato anticipates Aristotle's solution to the Presocratic problem, which is that motion, κίνησις, is the actualization of the potential precisely as such (*Ph.* 201a10f.).<sup>17</sup> The conception of knowledge and learning that is made possible by such an understanding of motion paves the way for a new role for Socrates, where his aptitude for criticism can be shown to have positive results. Even though recollection is an internal process, it does not come about by itself, but needs an external source of motion, someone like Socrates, who can awaken us with his critical questions. In

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14. That virtue cannot be taught is explicitly stated in PLATO, *Men.* 96b6–c10, but it is also the implicit conclusion in the dialogues where Socrates examines the sophists' claim to be able to teach virtue; see *Euthd.* 273d1–274a4; *Prt.* 319a8–d7; *Grg.* 459c6–460a2; *La.* 186b8–c5.

15. See PLATO, *R.* 432d2–e7, 517b7c5; and also *Chrm.* 158e7–159a1.

16. See PLATO, *Men.* 80d5–e5. In that dialogue, recollection is of true opinions, but in the *Phaedo*, it concerns above all ideas, e. g. of beauty as such (74a–75d), which gives the impression that Plato imagines recollection to give us both fully articulate propositional knowledge as well as the very building blocks of knowledge.

17. See ARISTOTELES, *Ph.* I.8.

this pursuit, however, Socrates does not need to have any positive knowledge of his own, if only he is able to exploit people's opinions or ἔνδοξα in a fruitful way.

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates' peculiar ability is likened to the art of midwifery (μαιευτική τέχνη), and the dialogue as a whole constitutes Plato's most far-reaching attempt to account for cognition in terms of generation or 'birth'.<sup>18</sup> In the dialogue, Theaetetus is said to be pregnant with various conceptions of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), which need to be brought to the surface so that they can be examined, in order hopefully to arrive at a satisfactory definition of knowledge. The analogy with midwifery is, thus, particularly well-suited to give a 'positive' picture of both the very process of forming judgments and the exercise of dialectical critique, in the sense that both of them are regarded as generative rather than as destructive processes. This is worth noting, not least when considering that several commentators regard this dialogue as decisively skeptical, since it ends with a refutation of all proposed definitions of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> However, one of the more important ways in which this dialogue is skeptical actually concerns not the possibility of knowledge (of the nature of knowledge) but, on the contrary, the possibility of ignorance, in the sense of mistaking something that one does not know for something that one knows.<sup>20</sup> If this is not possible, then clearly, we have no need for Socrates' elenctic art, whose aim was precisely to release us from the illusion that we know things of which we are actually ignorant. He therefore has to change his art.

In dialogues such as *Gorgias* (521d6–522a7) and *Charmides* (155a–157c), Socrates compares himself to a doctor who seeks to cure people from their mental illness. He

18. Knowledge is compared to birth at length in the *Symposium* 208e1–209e4, and several scholars have compared Socrates' role in this dialogue with the one he assumes in the *Theaetetus*, though primarily for the sake of contrast. But for an attempt to show that Socrates in the *Symposium* acts as a midwife in more or less the same sense as in the *Theaetetus*, see R. G. EDMONDS III, "Socrates the Beautiful: Role Reversal and Midwifery in Plato's *Symposium*", in: *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 130 (2000), 261–285.

19. See S. BERNADETE, *The Being of the Beautiful: Plato's Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman*, Chicago 1984, xviii, and R. ROBINSON, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, Oxford 2<sup>1953</sup> [1941], 83f. Burnyeat has argued that the analogy with midwifery implies a return to the early, aporetic dialogues; cf. M. BURNYEAT, "Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration", in: *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 24 (1977), 7–16. In his commentary on the dialogue, however, he states that its outcome is "not defeat but progress"; see *The Theaetetus of Plato*. With a translation of M. J. Levett, revised by Myles Burnyeat, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1990, 2. For further references, see E. BENITEZ, L. GUAMARAES, "Philosophy as Performed in Plato's *Theaetetus*", in: *The Review of Metaphysics* 47 (1993), 297–328; and BURNYEAT, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, 235. The reception of the dialogue has been nicely summed up by D. SEDLEY, *The Midwife of Platonism. Text and Subtext in Plato's Theaetetus*, Oxford 2004, 4–6.

20. See PLATO, *Tht.* 192a1–c6, 200a11–b5.

uses his art, τέχνη, to correct nature, φύσις, as it were. But in his capacity as a midwife, Socrates assists people in a process, the ‘birth’ of beliefs, which as both natural and healthy occurs of its own accord, though it will be safer when given artificial help. This is also to say that Socrates is not so much engaged in the refutation of false beliefs as in assisting the deliverance of beliefs to begin with, whether true or false. Herein is implied that his maieutic art does not simply consist in the ability to help us retrieve what we already had within ourselves but also to develop our cognitive powers, by encouraging us to exercise them in new ways. However, Socrates remarks, most people do not know that he practices this art, and that is why they think that he is an odd person who just makes people feel confused, ἀπορεῖν (*Tht.* 149a6–10). This is a key passage for us, since Socrates here reinterprets his elenctic, supposedly destructive art, claiming that it in fact should be understood as a kind of midwifery.<sup>21</sup>

Since Socrates himself is barren of wisdom, he may focus on assisting the cognitive labor of others, having the power to bring on pains as well as to relieve them (*Tht.* 149c9–d3), and in this way to govern the dialectical process. He helps others to give birth to ideas that they already had within themselves but which are now seen for the first time, just like the birth of a child is not the creation of the child but the entering of a new mode of existence for it. As a fetus, it was only a child in potentiality, but with the birth it becomes a child in actuality. Further, just as this no doubt makes a big change for the mother, the one who has given birth to ideas with the aid of Socrates will experience a great intellectual enhancement.

There is, however, one thing in particular that distinguishes Socrates’ art from midwifery in the ordinary sense, namely, a concern for the distinction between phantoms (εἶδωλα) and realities (ἀλήθεια) (*Tht.* 150a9–b2). This, it should be noted, is the main reason why we need midwifery: the beliefs we form about the world do not by themselves or ‘naturally’ fall into the two distinct classes truth and falsity – not for us who hold them, that is. Socrates, presumably, is able to distinguish between them and to decide whether or not people are wise. Being devoid of wisdom for his own part, he possesses instead the largely formal capacity to analyze arguments with respect to their conclusions and presuppositions, and so to check their consistency by measuring them against beliefs that are generally agreed to be sound. In this way, he can judge whether a belief has been refuted or at least found temporary corroboration. And when communicating his verdict on the ‘child’ that has been delivered, whether it is a phantom or reality, he enhances its ‘mother’s’

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21. See SEDLEY, *The Midwife of Platonism*, 9–11, who makes a similar point, though with the addition that Socrates in the *Theaetetus* acts as the midwife of Platonic metaphysics, which he himself is unable to share. A similar kind of reasoning is found in J. STENZEL, *Studien zur Entwicklung der platonischen Dialektik von Sokrates zu Aristoteles*, Stuttgart 31961 [1917], 38.



self-knowledge. This is in perfect agreement with Socrates' elenctic art, as we know it from the early dialogues.

On the face of it, the *Theaetetus* seems to end up like many other Socratic dialogues, in an ἀπορία, as all of Theaetetus' proposed definitions of knowledge are refuted. With respect to this result, Socrates remarks that even if Theaetetus will remain barren of knowledge also in the future, he will at least be less of a nuisance to his friends, since he will no longer believe that he knows what he in fact does not know. This, Socrates adds, is all his art, τέχνη, is capable of (*Tht.* 210c4f.). But as noted above, this assumption on Socrates' part has in fact been challenged in the dialogue. It has been shown that it is virtually impossible to explain how someone might think that he knows something of which he is completely ignorant. Even though Theaetetus proved himself unable to find a fully satisfactory definition of knowledge, this very failure indicates that he knows something about knowledge, for one of the lessons of the dialogue is that ignorance cannot be of nothing: it has to involve some kind of mistaken application of what one 'knows' in a broad sense.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Theaetetus objects that Socrates has in fact made him say πλείω ἢ ὅσα εἶχον ἐν ἑμαυτῷ: "more than I had in me" (*Tht.* 210b6f.).<sup>23</sup>

Theaetetus has achieved clarity about his own conception of knowledge, which he initially did not even know that he possessed. Let us just take a brief look at some of the main stages in the dialogue. In the beginning, Socrates confesses bewilderment about the nature of knowledge, and asks his audience whether they think that they will manage to give an account (λέγειν) of it (*Tht.* 146a1). Theaetetus is encouraged to say what knowledge seems (δοκεῖ) to be in his view (*Tht.* 146c3), but he answers by means of examples, such as geometry and cobbling (*Tht.* 146c7–d3), apparently misunderstanding the very question. Socrates indicates, however, that this in fact shows that Theaetetus has at least a 'perception' (first definition) of the nature of knowledge, because a person who is completely ignorant of what knowledge is will not understand what, for example, cobbling is (*Tht.* 147b8f.). Socrates' critique of Theaetetus' first answer makes him understand better what is required for an answer to be a definition, and he recalls an earlier attempt to define mathematical potency (*Tht.* 147d). Mathematics is Theaetetus' own field of expertise, and

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22. Cf. PLATO, *Tht.* 196d8–e7.

23. PLATO, *Theaetetus*, ed. E. A. Duke et al., Oxford 1995. My translation. Vlastos has argued that this dialogue is no longer peirastic, since Socrates goes so far in developing the consequences of Theaetetus' reasoning, as when he extracts a Heraclitean ontology from the idea that knowledge equals perception, which ontology could not "have been fished out of Theaetetus' own belief system" (G. VLASTOS, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, New York 1991, 266). True, but it is still a consequence of Theaetetus' beliefs we are dealing with, albeit not evident to Theaetetus himself.

the dialogue is to no small extent an explication of the broader implications of his particular kind of knowledge, whereby Theaetetus is not simply invited to reflect upon his own mathematical capacity, but also to develop it in new directions, beyond the confines of mathematics.<sup>24</sup> Theaetetus immediately shows that he has a true opinion, a δόξα ἀληθής (second definition), of mathematical potency, and he is also able to give an intelligible account, λόγος, of it. The definition of knowledge as justified true belief that is achieved at the end of the dialogue is thus in place already at a very early stage of the inquiry. For his own part, though, Theaetetus admits to be incapable of translating the example from mathematics into an answer to the question concerning the form of knowledge as such (*Tht.* 148b6–9), and the dialogue breaks down precisely in its attempt at a universalization of his conception of knowledge, as one finally concludes that one cannot find a satisfactory account of what it means to provide λόγος in the sense of justification of belief (*Tht.* 209e7–210b2).<sup>25</sup>

On the reading proposed here, the reason why the *Theaetetus* ends in an ἀπορία is that its attempt at providing justification, λόγος, for its own suggested definition of knowledge, which justification can probably be provided only by the dialectical discussion itself,<sup>26</sup> remains tied to the perspective of Theaetetus. There is no doubt that he has undergone substantial intellectual enhancement, but the strictly objective result of his transformation remains uncertain. This means that dialectic cannot simply be a ‘logic of scientific discovery’, to borrow Popper’s expression. It cannot merely be concerned with the realization of a specific scientific ideal, including the establishment of well-defined notions of truth, justification, etc. It has to be a kind of psychology as well, in the sense of centering on the individual soul’s ascension to the realm of truth. This is one reason why it is important that Socrates’ critique

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24. Note that Theaetetus is made to *recall* an earlier mathematical exercise. This is not the place to address the complex issue of the relation between the art of midwifery and the theory of recollection, but see J. McDOWELL, *Plato. Theaetetus*. Translated with notes by John McDowell, Oxford 1973, 116f., and K. DORTER, “Levels of Knowledge in the *Theaetetus*”, in: *The Review of Metaphysics* 44/2 (1990), 343–373.

25. As the image of the aviary suggests, it is when actualizing previously acquired knowledge that mistakes can arise; see PLATO, *Tht.* 199a6–b6. Similarly, Theaetetus fails when he tries to give a universal articulation of his previously more or less inarticulate conception of knowledge. Burnyeat notes the parallel between the distinction Socrates makes here between possessing and having knowledge and Aristotle’s distinction between first and second actuality (or, better, between acquired potentiality and actuality), and so does McDowell, but none of them seems prepared to ascribe to Socrates (or Plato) a teleological conception of knowledge and learning; cf. BURNYEAT, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, 107, n. 42; McDOWELL, *Plato. Theaetetus*, 220.

26. This is because the grounding of one’s beliefs in dialectic may include different kinds of λόγος: definition, explanation, analysis, etc. Cf. BURNYEAT, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, 240f.

is not external to Theaetetus' own position, but instead aims at spelling out its implications. This is the strength as well as the weakness of dialectic as a philosophical method. We cannot be taught the truth about the forms, for example of knowledge, but each one of us has to realize their meaning for his- or herself, imperfect though this realization might be. And that is why Socrates, while being able to activate the cognitive potential of Theaetetus, in his role as midwife is not drawn into the dialectical process himself, but remains essentially passive. Throughout the dialogue, he retains this aspect of the standard picture of himself, that he is not wise, as when he remarks that those who criticize him for merely posing questions without ever giving answers, are right (*Tht.* 150c4–7). But this is no longer merely a sign of impotence, for it has been shown that it is precisely in this capacity that Socrates is able to help others give birth to knowledge that is innate to them as a potentiality. So a major lesson of this dialogue is that cognitive development is the actualization of a potentiality that is internal to the person undergoing the development in question, which actualization gets triggered, as it were, by critique of the Socratic kind. And as Theaetetus is encouraged, first, to articulate conceptions of knowledge that he already had within himself, and then to evaluate their implications, he succeeds not merely in 'recalling' innate beliefs, but also in developing new beliefs and ultimately his own powers of reflection and understanding.

## 2. Tradition vs. Nature in Aristotle's Account of the Genesis of the Supreme Science

In contrast to Plato's dialogues, Aristotle's mature writings are monologues where he speaks in his own voice. But at the same time, Aristotle conceives of his own work as a stage within a tradition that is not exhausted by his particular contribution, which is to say that he is able to look upon himself as part of a joint venture no less than Plato. This is in itself an incentive to engage in dialectic, in the broad sense of integrating into one's own work a dialogue with other voices. In the beginning of the second book of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle makes some remarks on the nature of philosophy as a science of truth, observing that, since no one can grasp the truth in its entirety, no single contribution is particularly important when taken by itself. Still, all contributions together make up something significant. Therefore, he adds, we should be grateful also to those who have expressed relatively superficial views, for this is also a contribution (*Metaph.* 993b11–14).

These statements no doubt give the impression that Aristotle considers the transmission of tradition to be an essential element in scientific work. In science, it seems, we never really begin from the beginning, but each one of us who is involved in the pursuit of science works within a field the contours of which have been

drawn up by others. In case we make any progress in our research, it will count as such only when assessed in relation to the achievements of our predecessors.<sup>27</sup> But the image of science and its presuppositions that emerges from the opening books of the *Metaphysics* is far from unambiguous. On a number of occasions, Aristotle indicates that the project in which he is engaged in this work is at the outset more or less unknown: it is, more precisely, an ἐπιστήμη ζητουμένη,<sup>28</sup> a sought-for science, and it is only in book IV that it receives the label ‘first philosophy’. Apparently, then, we cannot simply read off either its scope or nature from the metaphysical theories handed down to us from the tradition. What Aristotle does consider himself entitled to assume is that wisdom, σοφία, is concerned with primary causes and principles, because this is what everybody, πάντες, believes (*Metaph.* 981b29).<sup>29</sup> He does not immediately make any effort to sustain this assumption, but probably his later exposition of previous attempts at identifying the causes and principles of the world is intended to prove him right. In that case, it seems that ‘everybody’ does not include laymen but only philosophers or scientists. As a matter of fact, however, far from all of the earlier philosophers mentioned by Aristotle explicitly talked about causes (αἰτίαι) and principles (ἀρχαί).<sup>30</sup> It is Aristotle who applies these terms onto their teachings. What is more, there is nothing to suggest that any thinker prior to Aristotle had used σοφία in the sense stipulated by him. Usually, σοφία appears to have been just another name for skill.<sup>31</sup> If this is correct, then we must conclude that Aristotle has in fact construed a δόξα of his own, in order to

27. Cf. ARISTOTELES, *Metaph.* 1076a15–16; and *Cael.* 294b7–10.

28. See ARISTOTELES, *Metaph.* 982a4, 982b8, 983a21, 995a24, 996b1–5, 997b25–26.

29. Further, Aristotle apparently takes it for granted that the science he is seeking must be the supreme science, and that this can be identified with wisdom.

30. To the best of my knowledge, αἰτία becomes a technical term for cause only with Plato; see *Phd.* 96a–99d. According to Simplicius, Anaximander spoke about the unlimited as a principle (ἀρχή) and element of beings (cf. fr. B1), but we should note that this is his wording (SIMPLICIUS, *in Ph.* 24, 13f). Barnes conjectures that the term ἀρχή “did not assume its Aristotelian sense of ‘explanatory principle’ until much later”; J. BARNES, *The Presocratic Philosophers*. London/New York 1982 [1979], 29f. Heraclitus speaks about ἀρχή in the sense of beginning (fr. B103), and so does Anaxagoras, as when he says that mind laid down the beginning for the rotation of the world (fr. B12, 5f.). This is of course one possible sense of ἀρχή as used by Aristotle, but it hardly exhausts his understanding of what it means to be a ‘principle’. All references to Presocratic fragments follow H. DIELS, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Bd. I–II, ed. W. Kranz, Berlin 1956.

31. This is the first sense of the term listed in *LSJ*, the second being ‘skill in matters of common life’, that is, practical wisdom and the like. Aristotle’s understanding of σοφία as wisdom is listed together with occurrences in Plato (*Ap.* 20e), and Euripides (*Heracl.* 615, *Ba.* 395), but none of these corroborates Aristotle’s interpretation of σοφία as given above.

show that his preliminary conception of the thematic field of metaphysics can be retrieved from a popular view of wisdom, rather than being his own invention.<sup>32</sup> We will have reason to return again to Aristotle's tendency to be a bit liberal with the facts when reconstructing other people's beliefs.

In any case, Aristotle does not confine himself to seeking support for his conception of wisdom from previous thinkers, but is also eager to show that it is a quite natural conception, because even pre-scientific, 'practical' knowledge (τέχνη) is essentially about causes (981a25–28). From this point of view, science (ἐπιστήμη) appears as basically a development to a higher level of abstraction of our commonly shared understanding of the world, that is to say, insofar as we all to a greater or lesser extent possess various kinds of skills, which enable us to cope with the world in an effective way. More precisely, Aristotle thinks that our very aptitude for science ultimately is rooted in our nature as humans. That is why he begins the *Metaphysics* with the statement Πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει: "all men naturally desire knowledge".<sup>33</sup> To engage in science is, thus, to realize one's potential as a human being. This view motivates Aristotle to explain the possibility of science, including the science he himself is seeking, in terms of a genetic account of knowledge that does not include any mention at all of the role of tradition in this respect. Instead, he describes how the distinctive achievement of science, knowledge of causal relations, and in general the faculty of forming judgments, presupposes and to some extent grows out of 'lower' faculties such as sense perception, memory and experience. Since already art involves some comprehension of causality, Aristotle imagines that the first man who invented an art must have been admired by his fellow men, and not only on account of the various uses or practical applications of his art, but also just because of his wisdom (*Metaph.* 981b13–17). Therefore, the experienced man, ὁ ἔμπειρος, is thought to be wiser than those who only have sense-perception, αἴσθησις, and the artificer, ὁ τεχνίτης, than those who only have experience, the architect, ὁ ἀρχιτέκτων, than the handicraftsman; and, finally, the theoretical, θεωρητικά, sciences are believed to be more wise more than the productive, ποιητικά (*Metaph.* 981b30–982a1). This hierarchy paves the way for a conception of philosophy according to which philosophy, as pure love of wisdom, is the fulfillment of human nature, since the development from lower to higher cognitive faculties is essentially a development towards an increasing desire for knowledge for its own sake, rather than for the sake of practical utility. At the

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32. See also ARISTOTELES, *Metaph.* 982a6–7, where Aristotle draws on this supposedly common understanding of σοφία in order to argue that when inquiring into its object, the ultimate principles and causes, we may begin by considering the assumptions we make about the wise, σοφός, person.

33. ARISTOTELES, *Metaphysica*, ed. W. Jaeger, Oxford 1957.

same time, however, insofar as philosophy arises out of wonder, θαυμάζειν (*Metaph.* 982b12f.), as to why the world is as it is, it involves a radical shift of perspective as compared to the mental outlook governing ordinary practical competence.

We saw earlier how Socrates in virtue of his maieutic art could give Theaetetus an impetus to actualize his natural capacity for philosophical reflection on the nature of knowledge. But when introducing the experience of wonder in his account of the genesis of philosophy, Aristotle apparently wishes to suggest that the impetus comes from the world itself, namely, from its appearing wonderful and strange, instead of ordinary and familiar. It looks, in other words, as though the incentive to pursue philosophy comes to us through our more or less direct encounter with the world, though we should note that the very idea that philosophy begins in wonder at the world, rather than in a dialogue with other thinkers, is something that Aristotle extrapolates from his own encounter with the early natural philosophers (*Metaph.* 982b10–17).<sup>34</sup> Further, the experience of wonder presupposes the possession of practical knowledge, in the broad sense of that term. It is only against the background of a concerned preoccupation with the world that you can experience the shift of perspective that Aristotle describes, from being immersed in practical affairs to wondering at the world. In that sense, at least, there can be no absolute beginning in metaphysics. Now he who wonders is perplexed (ἄπορῶν) and believes himself to be ignorant, Aristotle remarks. He has lost his former sense of familiarity with the world, and it was to regain this and to escape their ignorance that people originally studied philosophy (*Metaph.* 982b17–20). This implies that philosophy not merely constitutes a break with ordinary intelligibility, but also involves a return to it, in order to ‘recollect’ it from a new angle. To experience perplexity concerning the nature of the world gives you an incentive not merely to search for those ultimate principles and causes that can explain reality to you, but also to explore the comprehension of causality that you were already in possession of, in order to see if that might give you any clues to its scientific conception. We could also say that scientific knowledge of causality is the actualization of our natural capacity for understanding this phenomenon, whereby we develop a more refined and conceptually informed knowledge of it than we had before. This process is precisely what Aristotle is describing in book I of the *Metaphysics*, and in some sense in the entire work. The ἀρχαί that he is seeking throughout his metaphysical investigations are not merely the basic constituents of reality but equally that in terms of which we make sense of reality, and not simply in our role as philosophers or scientists but also just insofar as we are humans. This is perhaps particularly clear in the case of the law of non-contradiction, which in book IV.4 is shown

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34. See PLATO, *Tht.* 155d2–4, where Socrates declares that there is actually no other beginning for philosophy than in wonder.

to constitute the most fundamental and certain metaphysical principle that there is – and a necessary presupposition for meaningful discourse, rational thought and sensible action alike. But even distinctions between, for example, substance and attribute, form and matter, potentiality and actuality, though they as technical concepts may not form part of our common vocabulary, nonetheless organize our ordinary experience of the world.<sup>35</sup> A craftsman would not be able to make a bronze sphere, to use one of Aristotle's favorite examples,<sup>36</sup> without some comprehension of the difference between form and matter, and when he molds the bronze into a sphere he exhibits an understanding between the potentiality of the material and the actuality of the finished product. One way to understand Aristotle's project in the *Metaphysics* is, therefore, as an interrogation into our more or less inarticulate ἔνδοξα, though this is done not so much with a view to evaluating them with respect to their consistency, reasonableness, etc., but rather so as to raise them to a higher level of intelligibility and clarity. This is how I read Aristotle's recurrent statement that we must begin from what is clearer and more intelligible to us, and then move to what is clearer and more intelligible by nature.<sup>37</sup>

When we as philosophers analyze these ἀρχαί as basic metaphysical notions, thus trying to make what is intelligible by nature intelligible to us,<sup>38</sup> we move to a level of abstraction that is supposedly out of reach for the craftsman and his likes, who mainly perform their work through habit (*Metaph.* 981b2–5). As universals, the primary principles and causes are maximally detached from the senses (*Metaph.* 982a25).<sup>39</sup> In Aristotle's own language, they are the object of λόγος rather than of αἴσθησις: concepts rather than products of sensation (cf. *Ph.* 188b30–189a9). We therefore need to enter the realm of λόγος, of articulate discourse, in order to access them and give them their proper articulation. It is at this point that the ἔνδοξα of the philosophical tradition become important, that is to say, in distinction from the

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35. Aristotle apparently uses ἀρχή to speak about principles (notably definitions) as well as about single concepts, like that of substance. In the latter sense, it comes close to Plato's understanding of ὑπόθεσις, which to him is first of all an εἶδος or the 'look' of an object, preferably a geometrical figure; see PLATO, *R.* 510b4–c5. However, when Socrates helps Theaetetus to 'recollect' his conception of knowledge and to develop it into a definition, the understanding he achieves by this is obviously not a simple, inarticulate form. I therefore disagree with F. Solmsen's sharp distinction between Plato and Aristotle on this point; cf. F. SOLMSEN, *Die Entwicklung der aristotelischen Logik und Rhetorik*, Berlin 1929, 92–107.

36. See ARISTOTELES, e. g. *Metaph.* VII.7, *Ph.* II.3.

37. Cf. above, n. 7.

38. Cf. ARISTOTELES, *Metaph.* 1029b3–12; *Top.* 142a9f.

39. Cf. ARISTOTELES, *Metaph.* 981b10–12; *APo.* 72a1–5.

opinions of the majority. For when we take on this task, we encounter a series of problems, ἀπορία, which to a varying degree also have haunted our predecessors.

This is a point that Aristotle makes right at the beginning of the third, so-called aporetic book of the *Metaphysics*:

Ἀνάγκη πρὸς τὴν ἐπιζητούμενην ἐπιστήμην ἐπελθεῖν ἡμᾶς πρῶτον περὶ ὧν ἀπορησαί δεῖ πρῶτον· ταῦτα δ' ἐστὶν ὅσα τε περὶ αὐτῶν ἄλλως ὑπειλήφασί τινες, κἂν εἴ τι χωρὶς τούτων τυγχάνει παρεωραμένον. ἔστι δὲ τοῖς εὐπορήσασιν βουλομένοις προὔργου τὸ διαπορηῆσαι καλῶς· ἡ γὰρ ὕστερον εὐπορία λύσις τῶν πρότερον ἀπορουμένων ἐστί, λύειν δ' οὐκ ἔστιν ἀγνοοῦντας τὸν δεσμόν, [...].

It is necessary, with a view to the science that we are seeking, that we first go through the difficulties with which we should first be concerned. These are both other assumptions that some have made regarding the first principles, and any point besides these that happens to have been overlooked. For those who wish to find their way through difficulties it is advantageous to go into them well; for the subsequent way out consists in the solution of the previous difficulties, and solution is not possible when we do not know the bond. [...]<sup>40</sup> (995a24–30)

In fact, Aristotle continues, without a clear grasp of previously encountered difficulties, the end, τέλος, of our research will remain hidden to us. We will be like people who do not know where they are heading, and in case we would find what we are looking for, we will not be able to recognize our findings as a solution to our problem (*Metaph.* 995a33–b3).<sup>41</sup> So even though philosophy might very well begin in naked wonder at the world, we need the tradition to help us exploit our initial sense of perplexity in such a way as to transform it into a scientific problem. Just as Socrates would not be of much help to his fellow men if he only made them confused, without also giving them some clues as to how they might tackle their sense of confusion, the experience of wonder in the face of the world will hardly by itself make us realize that the science we are seeking is one that centers on the question of being as being. Aristotle frames this question only at the beginning of book IV, after having examined, in book I, his predecessors' attempts to distinguish the ultimate principles and causes of the world, as well as various ἀπορία associated with these attempts, which, as we have just seen, is the objective of book III. When he introduces his 'aporetic' approach to philosophy cited above, he adds that he who

40. To be troubled by an ἀπορία is, thus, like being paralyzed: one cannot move forward because one is tied or ensnared by the problem. Cf. P. AUBENQUE, "Sur la notion aristotélicienne d'aporie", in: Mansion (ed.), *Aristote et les problèmes de méthode*, 3–19.

41. As Evans has pointed out, this is a clear allusion to Meno's problem concerning the possibility of searching for something which one does not already know; cf. J. D. G. EVANS, "Dialectic, Contradiction, and Paraconsistency in Aristotle", in: Sim (ed.), *From Puzzles to Principles?*, 137–149.



has heard both sides in a debate is more competent to judge (*Metaph.* 995b2–4).<sup>42</sup> An ἀπορία in Aristotle's sense arises when you are faced with two equally plausible yet incompatible answers to one and the same question. Accordingly, the problems listed by Aristotle in book III concern such issues as whether or not there are only sensible substances (*Metaph.* 995b14f.), or whether the principles of perishable and imperishable things are the same or different (*Metaph.* 996a2f.).

From Aristotle's account of the ἀπορία it is clear that he does not consider them to be his own invention but that he has retrieved them from previous thinkers, just like Socrates and his interlocutors often discover together that the received views on a given topic on closer scrutiny turn out to be intrinsically aporetic. We should not fail to notice, however, that Aristotle formulates the ἀπορία from the vantage point of his own philosophical position. The εὐπορία, the 'way out' or free passage through the difficulties, first requires that these difficulties be given a proper articulation. Aristotle's critical assessment of his predecessors, his act of διαπορεῖν, thus involves a reconsideration of the problematic he has inherited. By scrutinizing previous responses to the 'wonderful' appearance of the world, he gets not merely an incentive but actually the very possibility to formulate the right ontological questions, because the need for these questions stems from the tradition. This implies that Aristotle's metaphysics, his theory of being as being, could not have been developed at just any point in history. It presupposes a tradition of attempts to uncover the nature of reality; attempts that have not been entirely successful, so that Aristotle's own theory essentially proceeds by means of spelling out what is simply implied while still 'unthought' in them.

Something similar can be said about the relation between the science of being as being and the particular sciences. Without the existence of other sciences, Aristotle's metaphysical project could hardly have come about at all, or at least not in the form it now has, since the science of being as such is motivated in part at least by the fact that the existing sciences only deal with a portion of being, while leaving aside the question of being in general (*Metaph.* 1003a21–26). Their limited scope thus shows the necessity of a science that will be strictly universal because it deals with what is primary (*Metaph.* 1026a30f.). We can compare Aristotle's line of reasoning at this point to Theaetetus' attempt to spell out the implications of

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42. See also ARISTOTELES, *Top.* 101b35–36, 163b9–13; *APo.* 99b17–19. Some scholars have suggested that Aristotle's follows an aporetic method in the *Metaphysics*, to be distinguished from dialectic; see H. CHERNISS, *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy*, Baltimore 1935, xii; and V. POLITIS, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle and the Metaphysics*, London 2004, 75–78. This is because one wants to reserve the label 'dialectic' for an inquiry that remains tied to ἐνδοξα, whereas the aporetic reflection would be concerned with problems as such, independently of their historical reception; see L. SICHIROLLO, *Dialegethai – Dialektik*, Hildesheim 1966, 156.

his mathematical knowledge for the nature of knowledge as such. Just as his understanding of mathematics to some extent rests upon some notion of the nature of knowledge in general, which constitutes the objective of the entire dialogue, all sciences silently presuppose an understanding of reality, otherwise they would not have been able to demarcate their particular field of inquiry in the first place. Once again, we see how the science of metaphysics is motivated both by the existence of problems that are waiting to be solved and by a felt need to develop an overall framework within which more limited approaches to reality can be understood precisely as such. As we shall see, this is how Aristotle regards the achievements not merely of the particular sciences but also those of his philosophical predecessors. On closer scrutiny, it is not possible to simply fill in what is still missing in their accounts of reality, but the latter have to be evaluated against the background of a refined understanding of the very nature of metaphysics.<sup>43</sup>

### 3. Dialectic as a Charitable Dialogue with the Past. The Limits of Method

In Plato's dialogues, Socrates and his fellow men come together for a joint discussion. By contrast, in his critical encounter with the tradition, Aristotle addresses dead and absent thinkers from the past. Thereby, he seeks to establish a kind of dialogue, but one that must be pursued as a monologue. Note that Aristotle's use of the monologue format makes him look upon even contemporary thinkers, like the Platonists of his own day, as parts of a tradition that is antecedent to his own work. He has no other option but to treat their teachings as fixed, so in that sense they are no less 'past' than the views held by older philosophers like Parmenides or Heraclitus. As Socrates observes in the *Apology*, this is a difficult, perhaps even dangerous situation. When defending oneself against accusations stemming from the past, as he has to do at his trial, one has to fight with shadows, *σκιαμαχεῖν*, and cross-examine them, *ἐλέγχειν*, without receiving an answer (*Ap.* 18d5–7).<sup>44</sup> When addressing his past accusers Socrates has to take the dialogue upon himself and act as both complainant and defendant. He therefore considers them far more

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43. Cf. ARISTOTELES, *SE* 183b22–26, where he says that the beginning is the truly difficult part, whereas those who enter into an existing tradition may just build upon previous work; this statement applies to his own work only insofar as he in his role as a successor simultaneously aspires to be a beginner. See also MESCH, *Ontologie und Dialektik bei Aristoteles*, 122–131, who emphasizes the power of dialectic to liberate itself from its liaison with a specific set of problems, so as to turn into a reflection on the very meaning and possibility of scientific knowledge about reality. It is dialectic, in other words, that grants to ontology its transcendental dimension.

44. PLATO, *Apologia*, ed. E. A. Duke et al., Oxford 1995.

dangerous than the ones who are present at the trial. We would perhaps be inclined to say that Aristotle's situation is rather the reverse to this: he is the complainant and the tradition the defendant. Nevertheless, he shares Socrates' predicament of having to assume responsibility for both questions and answers. The changed dialectical situation calls for a new kind of midwife. In her new role she must be more active than before: she can no longer confine herself to assisting others in their labor but has to go into labor herself. To the extent that this is the role that Aristotle assumes in his concrete dialectical work, to stand in for a tradition that cannot speak of its own accord, he will run the risk of misrepresenting it, which is precisely what he is often charged with by his readers. The charge in question is that Aristotle, deliberately or not, misreads the history of philosophy from his own point of view, so that he without hesitation reformulates earlier theories and arguments in his own terminology, with the result that his own work comes out as the perfection of more primitive ancestors.<sup>45</sup> As compared to the dialogue between the living, where the presence of several voices is likely to produce some friction between opposing views, Aristotle's discourse with his predecessors would thus in effect just be a solitary monologue.

After having concluded, in the first book of the *Metaphysics*, that the science we are seeking will deal with primary causes and principles, Aristotle summons us to benefit from those who previously ἐπίσκεψιν τῶν ὄντων ἐλθόντας, "have approached the investigation of beings" (983b2). For they too, he continues, have identified some principles and causes, so by studying them we will either discover some cause of which we have been unaware or become more confident that the list of the four causes presented in the *Physics* is accurate. So it looks as though Aristotle is both willing to learn from the tradition and is at the same time out to

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45. This view constitutes the point of departure for CHERNISS, *Aristotle's Criticism*, though criticized by W. K. C. GUTHRIE, "Aristotle as a Historian of Philosophy: Some Preliminaries", in: *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77/1 (1957), 35–41. Aubenque expresses a similar view, though with some caution, adding that Aristotle in fact has no option but to situate himself within a history that he in theory only investigates in order to find confirmation of his own views; AUBENQUE, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*, 71 and 78, n. 1. See also K. VON FRITZ, "Die Bedeutung des Aristoteles für die Geschichtsschreibung", in: *Histoire et historiens dans l'antiquité*, Geneva 1956, 15–145, who however also emphasizes that Aristotle is the first to conceive of himself as part of a tradition. The idea that Aristotle's point in fact is to show that one will not be able to make any progress in science without a confrontation with the tradition, has been advanced by E. WEIL, "La place de la logique dans la pensée aristotélicienne", in: *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 56/3 (1951), 283–315. A similar view is found in LEE, "Geometrical Analysis". But apart from von Fritz, who draws a parallel to Aristotle's biological conception of development, none of these thinkers sees the teleological dimension of Aristotle's understanding of history. This is also true of Mansion's balanced account of Aristotle's critique of his predecessors; cf. MANSION, "Le rôle de l'exposé et de la critique des philosophies antérieures chez Aristote", 35–56.

judge it by his own standards. As he browses the work of his predecessors, he finds that, down to the time of Empedocles, two of the causes he himself has identified in the *Physics*, the material cause and the source of motion, had been discovered but only vaguely perceived (*Metaph.* 985a10–13). These thinkers therefore deserve to be compared to untrained soldiers: for just as the latter can happen to strike a good blow, the former εὐοικασιν εἰδέναι ὃ τι λέγουσιν: “do not seem to know what they are saying” (*Metaph.* 985a16f.). No doubt this attitude is rather patronizing. It does not occur to Aristotle that other philosophers might have theorized about the world in a manner radically different from his. My present concern, however, is not to evaluate Aristotle’s interpretation of his predecessors, with respect to its tenability, but to point out what seems to me to be the guiding motives behind his critical assessments of them. And the eagerness with which Aristotle tries to reconstruct a tradition for himself can also be regarded as a sign of a genuine commitment to that very tradition: a readiness to acknowledge that the questions he struggles with were also the concern of his predecessors. We see a similar attitude reflected in Socrates’ behavior towards those he invites to discuss philosophical problems, namely, the assumption that they are all united under one and the same objective: to uncover the truth about a particular matter. The commitment to truth is what occasionally causes him to be somewhat insensitive to his friends’ feelings, but also prepared to overlook their intellectual shortcomings. In a similar fashion, Aristotle appears at times to be a bit ruthless to his interlocutors, yet at the same time hospitable, since he does not hesitate to invite them to join him in his search for the truth about reality.

We saw earlier how Aristotle on the one hand claimed that an important task that his metaphysical project has to face is to find solutions to problems that are not his own invention but identified by his predecessors, and on the other hand had no scruples about appropriating their views so that they corroborate precisely his conception of metaphysics. As I indicated then, these seemingly opposing tendencies are in fact just two sides of one and the same coin, for even when Aristotle addresses problems he claims to have inherited, he develops his own take upon them, as when he declares in the *Metaphysics* that the old question ‘What is being?’ is in truth a question concerning the nature of substance, οὐσία (1028b2–4), even though he introduces a radically new use of οὐσία. But when Aristotle goes through the work of his predecessors, like the natural philosophers, he believes himself entitled to the verdict that these thinkers, when trying to explain the world of nature, were assuming a specific notion of being (in short, to be is to be material), which they did not reflect upon as such, which is also to say that they did not thematize the concept of substance (according to which substance equals material substrate, ὑποκείμενον) that nonetheless is implied by their material ontology (cf. *Metaph.* 984a). When reconstructing older theories in terms of his own conceptuality, Aristotle aims at not

simply the truth about these theories but also, and perhaps primarily, the truth that is embedded in them. He tries, in other words, to pinpoint what has caused problems for his predecessors, whether or not they were aware of it themselves, as well as to assess their achievements in the light of his own understanding of the matter at hand. One problematic aspect of this maneuver, which I have already hinted at, is that it drives Aristotle to create the impression that the history of thought preceding him is a tradition of ‘normal science’, to borrow Kuhn’s expression, rather than a ‘pre-paradigmatic’ or perhaps even revolutionary age.<sup>46</sup>

But the other side to this unifying tendency in his reading of the tradition is that he is trying to help it approach the truth – and to get help from it in his turn – rather than to do justice to it as a historian. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle remarks that history has to do with singular events, and describes what actually has been, whereas poetry speaks about what might be, and in this way aims at something universal. For this reason, poetry is more philosophical than historical research (*Po.* 1451b4–6). Philosophy can never have as its aim merely to render the past accurately. Its task is not to treat the past as a (single) fact but as a (universal) possibility. This is, in a way, not to treat it as something past and finished at all, but as a challenge for the future. This is not necessarily an act of injustice against the past. The fact that Aristotle evaluates, often critically, the findings of his predecessors should not make us blind to the possibility that he also regards himself as a vehicle of the tradition, and not merely as its judge. Through his work, the tradition comes alive and speaks anew, albeit with a different voice. In fact, it is only by being confronted and transmitted that history is alive and speaks to the present at all. This perspective on Aristotle’s role as a critic also fits in nicely with the overall outlook of Socratic dialectic. When Socrates interrogates other people, he certainly hopes to learn something from them, but as a rule it soon turns out that it is they who need him, more than the other way round. By exposing themselves to his critical interrogation, they develop both morally and intellectually, because their particular potentialities are released, as we saw earlier in the case of Theaetetus. Similarly, the tradition needs Aristotle to come to its own.

What drives Aristotle is no doubt first of all a quest for truth, but also the ambition to anchor his own philosophy within a broader historical setting. With this move, he seems actually to undermine his own attempt to make a clear-cut distinction between philosophy and dialectic, as conceived by him in the *Topics* and elsewhere. For apparently, his own project aims simultaneously to uncover

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46. It is worth noting that it is only after having reconstructed a more or less unified thinking on causality, in *Metaph.* I.3–6, that Aristotle introduces a genuinely critical perspective on the theories of his predecessors, which is announced at the end of chapter 7, where he declares that it is now time to go through the ἀπορίαι issuing from them (988b20f.).

the truth about reality and to show that this truth agrees with ἔνδοξα, while being in fact anticipated by it in various ways.<sup>47</sup> This suggests that Aristotle's work has at least the aim to set up a dialogue between himself and other thinkers, where they all both give and take. We can relate this to what he says in the *Physics* III.3 about the relation between a teacher and his student: when a teacher teaches a student who simultaneously learns something, this is just two aspects of one and the same motion, in which both teacher and student actualize their respective capacities. In a genuinely dialectical situation, however, each party is simultaneously both a teacher and student.

I therefore propose that the ethos of Socratic dialectic is still very much alive in Aristotle's dialogue with the tradition in the *Metaphysics*. When venturing into the issue of Aristotle's attitude towards dialectic, we are perhaps a bit too prone to supposing that the relevant question in this connection must concern the reason why he would think it worth while to engage in an exploration of ἔνδοξα to begin with, that is, what benefit he could draw from such a pursuit. This was also my focus above, when I described how dialectic enters into Aristotle's search for the supreme science. But if we take Socratic midwifery as our guide, we can see that it is equally important to pose the opposite question, what benefit Aristotle believes he may bring to the tradition. In case the latter question is not as natural to us as the former, this is because we assume that dialectic in Aristotle has been degraded to the status of a mere method or τέχνη, resulting in a total loss of its former ethical dimension. This is no doubt the impression Aristotle himself gives in the *Topics*, where it is stated right at the beginning that the aim is to find a way, μέθοδος, that makes it possible to reason from ἔνδοξα about every kind of problem, and also αὐτοὶ λόγον ὑπέχοντες μηθὲν ἐροῦμεν ὑπεναντίον: "to avoid saying anything inconsistent when we ourselves are maintaining an argument" (100a18–21). More precisely, when thus conceived, dialectic cannot even aspire to be a scientific method, as it rather seems to be just a discursive tool or technique: a purely formal capacity that does not require any specialist knowledge about the subject that is up for discussion.<sup>48</sup>

47. Cf. ARISTOTELES, *EN* 1145b2–7 and above, n. 6.

48. Such a view has been defended by, among others, F. DIRLMEIER, *Merkwürdige Zitate in der Eudemischen Ethik des Aristoteles*, Heidelberg 1962, 13; C. D. C. REEVE, "Dialectic and Philosophy in Aristotle", in: J. Gentzler (ed.), *Method in Ancient Philosophy*, Oxford 2001, 227–252; ROBINSON, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 72; F. SOLMSEN, "Dialectic Without the Forms", in: G. E. L. Owen (ed.), *Aristotle on Dialectic: The Topics*, Oxford 1968, 49–68; and R. SMITH, "Dialectic and Method in Aristotle", in: Sim (ed.), *From Puzzles to Principles?*, 39–55. Herein is implied that Aristotle would agree with the sophists, against Plato, that it is possible to master a completely 'empty' art of argumentation, one that is detached from all questions concerning truth. For interpretations that move in this direction, see AUBENQUE, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*, 286 and J. MOREAU, "Aristote et la dialectique platonicienne", in: Owen (ed.), *Aristotle on Dialectic: The Topics*, 80–90.

But whereas there might be an art of argumentation, there does not seem to be an art or method available to the philosophical search for the primary principles and causes, at least not in the sense of a specific set of rules the application of which would guarantee that we reach our goal. To Socrates, an important reason why dialectic cannot be reduced to a method to be applied in order to achieve universal knowledge about any given area is that he sees it as his task to help individuals in their particular situation, on the basis of their specific capabilities. Aristotle, on the other hand, clearly seeks objective truth, but in this pursuit he considers himself a part of a factual history to which he has to adjust. As a consequence, he does not approach the tradition from outside, as if he were standing over against it, but seeks to continue it from within so as to be able to exploit its possibilities. As far as I can see, Aristotle is actually not that worried about the possibility of securing knowledge. Rather, he wants to be clear about what it means to acquire knowledge, assuming that this is in fact possible. And his suggestion is that the acquisition of knowledge, like all other processes, has the form of an actualization of a previously dormant potentiality. Dialectic in his sense aims to initiate this actualization, and as such it constitutes an ideal centering on the conviction that progress in science requires dialogue or a joint effort, to put it as briefly as possible. For it is in virtue of the friction between different views that science can move forward.<sup>49</sup>

Accordingly, even though it is the task of dialectic to provide access to the primary principles, as the ultimate constituents of ἔνδοξα, this does not mean that we may be certain that it ever will achieve this. It is the principles that are certain, not the path to them. This is, we may note in passing, a major difference between the ancient and the modern, Cartesian notion of certitude. To Aristotle, the principles in question cannot be proven or derived, which means that they are not the object of λόγος but of νοῦς; either you get them or you do not (*Metaph.* 1051b30–1052a4). But if you do, you realize their necessity.<sup>50</sup> So whereas the path to the principles is dialectical, the ensuing understanding is not: it is simply a question of having or not having them, and this final step is one that we have to take ourselves, exactly as Plato's dialogues exhort us to do. In that sense, Aristotle does not contradict himself

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49. Cf. H. W. AUSLAND, "Socratic Induction in Plato and Aristotle", in: Fink (ed.), *The Development of Dialectic from Plato to Aristotle*, 224–250.

50. Cf. ARISTOTELES, *Top.* 100a30–b21. Some scholars have argued that one should distinguish between dialectic on the one hand, and the insight provided by νοῦς and induction on the other, assuming that dialectic is confined to syllogistic reasoning; see PRIMASEVI, *Die Aristotelische Topik*, 57; SOLMSEN, *Die Entwicklung der aristotelischen Logik*, 107f., and WEIL, "La place de la logique dans la pensée aristotélicienne", 284. For an opposing view, see H.-D. VOIGTLÄNDER, *Der Philosoph und die Vielen*. Wiesbaden 1980, 508f.; and A. BÄCK, "Aristotle's Discovery of First Principles", in: Sim (ed.), *From Puzzles to Principles?*, 163–182.

when he on the one hand follows a dialectical procedure in his metaphysics, and on the other hand claims that the sought-for science is not dialectical.<sup>51</sup>

#### 4. Aristotle as a Midwife

All knowledge proceeds from previously acquired knowledge. This is, as the Greeks were well aware, what threatens to make a mystery of the possibility of learning something new at all, as long as we believe that the only alternatives are those stated by the early natural philosophers, who believed that everything that comes into being does so either from being or from nothing. Aristotle's solution to this problem, which is foreshadowed in Plato, is twofold.<sup>52</sup> On the one hand, he insists that there must be some primary and self-evident principles, which can guarantee that explanation will come to an end. Further, knowledge does not arise out of fully articulate knowledge, nor out of complete ignorance, but is an actualization of a potentiality, which is to say that it arises out of being as well as out of not-being, though in different senses. As Aristotle makes particularly clear in *De Anima* (417a–b16), the ideal case in his view is when the passage from potentiality to actuality does not involve any change but simply consists in the enactment of a given capacity, as when Socrates exercises critique without being affected by it for his own part. Though this conception of activity is not explicit in Plato, it seems to be silently assumed by the theory of recollection. When the slave boy in the *Meno* is exposed to Socrates' mathematical questions, he does not really learn anything new, but simply manages to bring to the surface a piece of mathematical knowledge which had been innate to him all along. But when this process involves change, as I believe is the case with Theaetetus when he gets exposed to Socrates' midwifery, we have a case of genuine learning. If we let this latter case be our model for Aristotle's encounter with

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51. This view has also been defended by W. A. DE PATER, *Les topiques d'Aristote et la dialectique platonicienne: méthodologie de la définition*, Freiburg 1965, 83–86. It is another question (which I leave to the reader) whether the *Metaphysics* achieves its goal, to end in the contrary to wonder (cf. ARISTOTELES, *Metaph.* 983a11–21), or if it remains essentially probing in character, just like dialectic. The latter is suggested not only by the outlook of the first books, where Aristotle is still searching for a conception of the science-to-be, but perhaps even more by the central books on substance (VII–IX), where the discussion moves back and forth between on the one hand the discernment of various difficulties associated with the different criteria for substancehood, and on the other hand various attempts at surmounting these difficulties, which in their turn give rise to new problems, and so on. For an interpretation along these lines, see MOREAU, "Aristote et la dialectique platonicienne", 88f.

52. Nevertheless, Aristotle is suspicious of the universal ambitions of dialectic, precisely in this respect; see *Metaph.* 992b29f.



the tradition, the conclusion is that he is dealing with a ‘material’ that is in need of treatment in order to develop as it should. In that sense, the search for the first principles via the ἔνδοξα of the tradition is to some extent a constructive process, though one that is limited by nature, that is, by the boundaries of its potentialities. You cannot, in other words, make the tradition say just anything you like.

Obviously, we do not create the ἔνδοξα of our predecessors, but face them as a challenge for our own thought. Nevertheless, history becomes a tradition only insofar as people respond to it. From Aristotle’s point of view, the tradition needs him to be able to speak truthfully, for the earliest philosophy appears to falter, ψελλιζομένη, on all subjects (*Metaph.* 993a15f.). This remark comes at the end of Aristotle’s survey of his predecessors’ attempts to discern the principles and causes of the world, and his final verdict on this point is that the causes he himself has identified have previously been only vaguely perceived, so that in one sense they have been stated before, but in another sense not (993a14f.).<sup>53</sup> So the task of dialectic as midwifery is to bring out the truth in what has only been inaccurately stated before. Just as a midwife intervenes in a natural process, not in order to replace it but to assist it with her art, the history of thought will evolve with or without Aristotle’s aid, but it can nonetheless profit from his ‘art’ of exploiting it. It will certainly give birth to ideas without him, but it is only within the framework of his metaphysical project that it will give birth to genuine knowledge and scientific progress. To enable this transition from potentiality to actuality is, thus, Aristotle’s task as a midwife.<sup>54</sup>

If maieutic dialectic is intrinsically teleological, so that it mirrors a structure that is constitutive of reality itself, then this is a further reason for not regarding it as a method in the usual sense, but rather as an activity whereby we both follow nature and bring it to fulfillment. Herein is implied that Aristotle does not view the tradition as simply a succession of different theories held by various thinkers, but rather as the unfolding of different issues, like that concerning substance, and ultimately of reality itself. In his survey of the φυσιολόγοι in the *Metaphysics*, which ends with the conclusion that the only cause they were able to identify was the material one, Aristotle adds that, eventually however, the matter itself, αὐτὸ τὸ πρᾶγμα, compelled them to seek further (984a18f.).<sup>55</sup> There is a reality to which scientists have responded in various ways and with varying degrees of success. These responses,

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53. See also ARISTOTELES, *Metaph.* 988a22f.

54. Evans has suggested that Aristotle’s method here is inductive: he sees that the theories of his predecessors contain some truth, and therefore seeks to raise their particular insights to a higher level of universality; cf. J. D. G. EVANS, *Aristotle’s Concept of Dialectic*, Cambridge 1977, 23. But this misses the element of fulfillment and change involved in Aristotle’s treatment of other thinkers.

55. See also ARISTOTELES, *Metaph.* 984b9–11; and *Ph.* 188b29–30.

in which the dormant possibilities of the world are actualized, are what constitute a tradition. In the end, it is actually nature itself that is both imitated and fulfilled in midwifery. The dialogue among thinkers is, thus, equally a dialogue between thinkers and the world. It should be noted, however, that Aristotle does not seem to think that the history of ideas is a continuous progress towards the truth; rather, history is made up of various responses to one and the same reality and, therefore, to the same basic set of problems.<sup>56</sup>

But if this is what takes place in dialectic, then it is hardly correct to claim that it is tied to the boundaries set up by ἔνδοξα, as opposed to taking truth as the measure. Once again, we see that, in practice if not in theory, Aristotle denies the existence of a clear-cut distinction between an inquiry into reality on the one hand and an inquiry into man's discourse on reality on the other hand.

When Socrates exposes his friends to the elenchus, it is important that they follow in every step of the way and agree to what he says. In his capacity as a midwife, Socrates inquires into precisely Theaetetus' conception of knowledge, but the objective is to eventually move beyond this and reach strictly universal knowledge (of knowledge), albeit that one never gets there in the dialogue. Instead, Socrates claims that the outcome of their conversation is moral improvement in Theaetetus, though this was not the initial aim. The tendency to move away from elenchus aiming at moral enhancement, and towards critique for the sake of scientific development, is reinforced in Aristotle. It is a fairly widespread view that he 'depersonalized' dialectic in the *Topics*, in such a way that the person being interrogated does not necessarily need to endorse his own statements, because what matters is no longer personal improvement but the formal structure of arguments, together with questions concerning validity.<sup>57</sup> But we can see a similar tendency also in the *Metaphysics*, since, among other things, this work is not a dialogue in the common sense at all, nor does it have for its task to analyze the dialogue format. There is no way in which Aristotle can check whether or not his 'interlocutors' are able to follow his line of argument or whether they will agree to his statements (though

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56. More precisely, Aristotle seems to think that the progress of science is cyclical; see *Metaph.* 1074b10–12, and Aubenque's discussion of this passage (AUBENQUE, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*, 72–77). This view is probably prescribed by his teleology: every actualization of a human potentiality is finite, which means that its fulfillment is simultaneously the beginning of its destruction.

57. See R. BOLTON, "Aristotle's Account of the Socratic Elenchus", in: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 11 (1933), 121–152; L.-A. DORION, "Aristotle's Definition of Elenchus in the Light of Plato's *Sophist*", in: Fink (ed.), *The Development of Dialectic from Plato to Aristotle*, 251–269; F. RENAUD, "Humbling as Upbringing: The Ethical Dimension of the Elenchus in the *Lysis*", in: G. A. Scott (ed.), *Does Socrates Have a Method?*, University Park 2002, 183–198.

he can perhaps make a fair guess on the basis of their teachings).<sup>58</sup> And there is no point in trying to make them better, either morally or intellectually (they are dead), except in the sense of enhancing their posthumous reputation by crediting them with a perception of the truth of the issue at hand. Whatever benefit can come out of his interrogation of the tradition, it will necessarily take place in Aristotle – being himself a part of that tradition. And that benefit is truth.

If Aristotle regards the tradition as a source of δυνάμεις, potentialities, that are to be explored and actualized for the sake of scientific progress, while disregarding the personal or subjective dimension of its teachings, then this helps explain why he emphasizes reinterpretation and reconstruction above refutation. This is not to deny that we can find attempts at refutation in Aristotle's works. A particularly severe critique that Aristotle develops in the *Metaphysics* is directed against those who want to reject the law of non-contradiction. But even here, the chief aim is not really to refute people like Heraclitus and Protagoras, who apparently believe that this law can be rejected, but to demonstrate the truth of the law, precisely by means of attacking the purported rejection. Aristotle finds it hard to believe that people know what they are saying when they appear to wish to deny this law,<sup>59</sup> or that they would be prepared to hold on to their views when faced with his critique, which is simultaneously an elucidation of the content and implications of the law. And the reason for his disbelief is not psychological but logical or transcendental: as soon as you pursue a course of action or utter something meaningful, you confirm the principle of non-contradiction. By taking into consideration these views, seemingly diametrically opposed to his own, Aristotle thus gets an opportunity to strengthen his own case: even when you try to refute the principle of non-contradiction, you confirm it. The critique is, thus, fulfilled in an act of verification.<sup>60</sup>

ἀρχὴ δὲ πρὸς ἅπαντα τὰ τοιαῦτα οὐ τὸ ἀξιοῦν ἢ εἶναι τι λέγειν ἢ μὴ εἶναι (τοῦτο μὲν γὰρ τάχ' ἂν τις ὑπολάβοι τὸ ἐξ ἀρχῆς αἰτεῖν), ἀλλὰ σημαίνειν γέ τι καὶ αὐτῷ καὶ ἄλλω· τοῦτο γὰρ ἀνάγκη, εἴπερ λέγοι τι. εἰ γὰρ μὴ, οὐκ ἂν εἶη τῷ τοιοῦτῳ λόγος, οὔτ' αὐτῷ πρὸς αὐτὸν οὔτε πρὸς ἄλλον. ἂν δέ τις τοῦτο διδῶ, ἔσται ἀπόδειξις· ἤδη

58. At the end of *Metaph.* I, when Aristotle remarks that Empedocles had some hunch of the concept of essence, because he says that bone exists in virtue of its proportion (λόγος, fr. B96, 98), though he did not spell out the universal implication of this, that material things in general are what they are in virtue of their proportion and not because of their matter, he adds that if anyone else would had told Empedocles, the latter would necessarily have agreed (993a22–24).

59. Cf. ARISTOTELES, *Metaph.* 1005b25f.

60. Aristotle's 'charitable' logic may therefore be said to find its basis in the principle that everything follows from a contradiction. Or, rather, the best example of critique finding its fulfillment in verification is when the negation of the critique (which simultaneously is its target) involves a self-contradiction.

γάρ τι ἔσται ὠρισμένον. ἀλλ' αἴτιος οὐχ ὁ ἀποδεικνύς ἀλλ' ὁ ὑπομένων· ἀναιρῶν γὰρ λόγον ὑπομένει λόγον.

The starting-point for all such arguments is not the demand that our opponent shall say that something either is or is not (for this one might perhaps take to be a begging of the question), but that he shall say something which is significant both to himself and to another; for this is necessary, if he really is to say anything. For, if he means nothing, such a man will not be capable of reasoning, either with himself or with another. But if anyone grants this, there will be a demonstration, for we shall already have something definite. The person responsible, however, is not he who demonstrates but he who listens; for while rejecting reason he listens to reason.

(*Metaph.* 1006a18–26)

And Aristotle returns to this point in book XI, where he remarks that if one would have pressed Heraclitus, it is possible that he would have been forced to recognize the absurdity of his own doctrine. As it is, however, he did not realize its implications (*Metaph.* 1062a31–35). The demonstration of the principle of non-contradiction is no doubt a special case, since the very attempt to refute it immediately leads to its verification. More precisely, since there is no way in which to prove this principle (it is a presupposition of the possibility of giving proofs), you can only demonstrate it by means of refuting attempts to refute it. Obviously, there is no kernel of truth to be saved or actualized in, for example, Heraclitus' sayings on this matter, in the same way as Anaxagoras' thoughts on mind as the ruling principle of the world might give food for thought. In the former case, the potentiality is rather a truth presupposed and confirmed by Heraclitus, insofar as he says something intelligible at all, and which Aristotle brings to the surface with his critique. Even if this is an ideal case, I believe it brings out the general spirit of Aristotle's critical encounter with the tradition: he wants to show that his principles and conceptual distinctions, which he sees foreshadowed in different ways in his predecessors, are something you cannot really do without when you try to account for the intelligible structure of reality.

Another example of harsh critique that ends in verification is Aristotle's attack on Parmenides in the *Physics* I.3. If the Eleatic thesis on the unity of being were true, this would mean nothing but the end of natural science as such, since if being is one, motion is impossible (*Ph.* 184b25–185a5). It therefore needs to be refuted. It soon turns out, however, that the refutation is equally an opportunity for Aristotle to demonstrate the necessity of his own ontological distinction between substance and the other categories, which will be of decisive importance to the main objective of the entire *Physics*, namely, to elucidate the phenomenon of motion, and to show that it is constitutive of the being of natural objects. Because the very attempt to think being as a unity, Aristotle argues, leads to a collapsing of this unity, and forces you to make a distinction between substance and attribute – which we realize as soon as we try to make sense of Parmenides' statement that 'being is' (*Ph.* 186a22–32).

To some extent, the *Physics* as a whole is Aristotle's reply to Parmenides' attempt to equate motion and change with nothingness. But what is seldom acknowledged is that even though Aristotle obviously finds Parmenides' position absurd, the *Physics* in fact ends with a kind of reappraisal of his monism. After having defended the reality of motion throughout this work, Aristotle concludes with the observation that, on the cosmic level or taken as a whole, the world of nature does not change. For the existence of continuous motion implies that being itself, τὸ ὄν αὐτό, must remain ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ: "within itself and in the same condition".<sup>61</sup> The critique of Parmenides does not merely pave the way for an alternative ontological theory; it also restores Parmenides' teaching to its proper place, which requires another framework. Once again, we see that Aristotle's critique does not have as its final aim refutation of an opponent's views but verification of his own views, which are believed to be foreshadowed in the opponent's position, albeit in an as yet unclear way, since the opponent did not really understand the true implications of his own theory.

Speaking of Parmenides, Plato's treatment of him in the *Sophist* is a clear expression of this positive or productive use of critique that I am trying to get at. This is perhaps not particularly surprising, considering that Parmenides to Plato is the only predecessor who is really worth taking seriously: someone whom he would rather help than refute.<sup>62</sup> I will not go into the details of the argument, just make the reminder that in the *Sophist*, when the discussants realize that they are forced to disobey Parmenides' command that one should not try either to think or to pronounce not-being (it is actually impossible), the Eleatic stranger insists that he is not committing patricide, but is in fact trying to save Parmenides (241d3f.). And he does so by reinterpreting not-being in terms of difference instead of identifying it with absolute nothingness, as Parmenides did. It is true that it is not possible to think or say that which is not in an absolute sense, but once you agree that not being this or that implies being different from this or that, you realize that not-being in that sense has a share in being, which means that the sophist cannot hide himself any more. He is real, and so are his fake images of the world. Accordingly, the productive critique of Parmenides is really what saves Plato's (or the stranger's) project in the *Sophist*.

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61. ARISTOTELES, *Physica*, ed. W. D. Ross, Oxford 1936, 259b26.

62. As a matter of fact, however, in the dialogue one also tries to improve the materialists, even though they are considered to be quite rude and awful people, so perhaps we should say that the entire dialogue is conducted in a charitable spirit, which is an interesting addendum to what appears to be the stranger's overall ambition to accuse Socrates for being unable to fight sophism in an effective way; see PLATO, *Sph.* 246d.

When dialectic is pursued in this way, it is no longer a question of an individual, like Theaetetus, having his soul turned around as his particular beliefs are exposed to critical questions. Differently put, to the extent that the aim of dialectic is to enable us to recollect what we in a sense already knew, the subject of this recollection is no longer you or me, at least not as the individual persons we are, but only to the extent that we are vehicles of the tradition. It is not our personal mental lives that are up for questioning. This is, in short, what I prefer to call Aristotle's depsychologization of dialectic, in distinction from the abovementioned depersonalization. Aristotle is highly suspicious of the idea of innate knowledge, so central to the theory of recollection.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, it is a prominent feature of his adaptation of maieutic dialectic that it relieves us from the need to speculate about the psychological mechanisms and motives behind people's beliefs. The potentialities of our predecessors are no longer located in their souls, but in the content of their statements. Further, if our task as midwives is to help the tradition express what we believe it was trying to say, without being entirely successful, we cannot pay too much attention to the language or style of their statements either. One example of this attitude is Aristotle's decision to call Empedocles' two principles, love and strife, causes: this is possible, he remarks, if one grasps Empedocles' intention, *διάνοια*, while disregarding what he says in a faltering way, *ψελλίζεται* (*Metaph.* 985a3–7).<sup>64</sup> Aristotle discerns, in other words, an inconsistency between on the one hand the intention and on the other hand the expression, though it is important that 'intention' is not understood psychologically but dynamically, that is to say, as a potentiality.<sup>65</sup>

In sum, then, Aristotle's maieutic dialectic reflects a quest for objectivity, rather than centering on the subjective dimension of knowledge. The truth and sense of what someone says cannot be settled by using the author's intentions as a measure.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, the primary task of scientific critique can never be to do justice to

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63. Cf. ARISTOTELES, *Metaph.* 992b33–993a2.

64. See also ARISTOTELES, *Metaph.* 989b4–6, for a similar remark concerning Anaxagoras's saying that originally, everything was mixed (fr. 12). See also *GC* 314a13f.

65. Aubenque also notes this distinction drawn by Aristotle between *διάνοια* and *λόγος*, but he does not interpret the former in teleological terms; cf. AUBENQUE, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*, 80. Instead, he labels Aristotle's method an archeology, aiming to uncover the "plausible motivation" (86) of his predecessors' work, which they were unable to express.

66. In this respect, Aristotle's development of dialectic is echoed in the way in which Heidegger and Gadamer developed hermeneutics in relation to its founding fathers, Schleiermacher and Dilthey. The idea governing the latter, that to understand the meaning of a text essentially involves reconstructing the author's intention, is in modern hermeneutics challenged by the notion that the truth and meaning of a text are settled or actualized only in the act of explicating it, and therefore transcend the author's horizon.

other thinkers in that respect. Apparently, it is Aristotle's 'positivist' ideal of science that lets him take this step, and shift perspective from person to truth. On the other hand, though, he preserves the dialectical insight that scientific progress requires dialogue with others. In that sense, the pursuit of truth is never entirely impersonal, though it is perhaps transpersonal. The potential of the tradition can only be realized if we pose our questions to it and use our conceptual tools to help it give birth to knowledge: a birth that takes place in us, as carriers of this very tradition. Herein is implied that the task of dialectical critique is not merely to enhance our powers of reflection, nor to develop our self-awareness in a Socratic fashion, but to take a step forward and make use of our cognitive powers for new purposes. Differently put, the aim of critique is not so much either to refute or to justify ἔνδοξα, but to actualize, and that is to say, to develop the truth that they contain as a possibility.

## Abstract

### *Aristotelian Dialectic as Midwifery: The Epistemic Significance of Critique*

In *Topics* I.2, Aristotle famously claims that dialectic, as a critical inquiry, affords the path to the primary principles of science. This article sets out from the assumption that Aristotle shares with Plato the suspicion that dialectical critique cannot contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge as long as it is of the Socratic, elenctic kind, since its only benefit is to refute false beliefs. But when Plato in the *Theaetetus* has Socrates act as a midwife to his fellow men, he offers an alternative picture of dialectical critique that also, it is argued, captures the spirit of Aristotle's dialectical work, especially as pursued in the *Metaphysics*. In Aristotle, however, the mission of Socratic midwifery, to help other individuals give birth to knowledge that was already innate to them, is transformed into a project that centers on the liberation of the as yet dormant and inarticulate truth of the tradition.