



## **Aristotle as a Historian of Philosophy: Some Preliminaries**

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## ARISTOTLE AS A HISTORIAN OF PHILOSOPHY: SOME PRELIMINARIES

THE work of Cherniss on Aristotle's criticism of the Presocratics may be compared with that of Jaeger on the development of Aristotle's own thought as contained in his *Aristoteles* of 1923. Jaeger modestly described that epoch-making work as a *Grundlegung* or foundation for the history of the philosopher's development, and as such it has been of value not only for itself but in the stimulus it has given to further study, in the course of which the balance of its conclusions has been to some extent altered. Cherniss's own study is of the same pioneer kind, and if I confess to a feeling that it goes rather too far, the comparison with the now classic work of Jaeger will, I hope, make clear my general admiration and appreciation of the fact that it is a permanent contribution with which all future scholarship will have to reckon.

I cannot at this stage even begin to discuss in detail the mass of erudition on which Cherniss's case is built up. Nevertheless, the very widespread acceptance of his strictures on Aristotle's historical sense suggest that anyone to whom they seem extreme should lose no time in giving voice to his misgivings, even in general terms, before they become irrevocably canonical. This thought has been prompted by the recent monograph of Mr. J. B. McDiarmid, *Theophrastus on the Presocratic Causes*,<sup>1</sup> at the beginning of which we read simply that 'the question of Aristotle's bias has been dealt with exhaustively by H. Cherniss', whose views then become, without further remark, the starting-point of the younger scholar's own inquiry into the reliability of Theophrastus. Since in what follows I may speak critically of McDiarmid on several points, let me say that his main thesis, the dependence of Theophrastus on Aristotle in much of his φυσικῶν δόξαι and the consequent danger of regarding him as a separate authority for Presocratic thought, seems true enough. The derivation of Theophrastus's judgments from those of his master was already beginning to be recognised with fruitful results,<sup>2</sup> and the time was ripe for a general review of the evidence. Here we are concerned with Aristotle himself. The length to which acceptance of Cherniss's criticism as 'exhaustive' may lead is seen in the section on Anaximenes and Diogenes of Apollonia, where we read (p. 104) that Theophrastus probably had the writings of Diogenes available, but 'Diogenes's writings are at any rate no protection against the influence of Aristotle'. Now for anyone to whom, as to ourselves, the writings of Diogenes are *not* available, that seems an assertion of unparalleled boldness, matched only by the statement on p. 121, concerning a Peripatetic interpretation of Parmenides's Way of Opinion, that 'there is nothing in Parmenides's poem to justify this interpretation'. If Mr. McDiarmid had written what is all that any of us has a right to say—i.e. 'there is nothing in the extant fragments of Parmenides's poem . . . '—we should have been properly reminded of how miserably scanty the surviving fragments of the Way of Opinion are. That he does not do so is due to his antecedent conviction, based on Cherniss, of Aristotle's 'complete disregard' for anything that Parmenides said.

Cherniss's views are summarised by McDiarmid at the beginning of his study as follows (p. 86):

'Aristotle is not interested in historical facts as such at all. He is constructing his own system of philosophy, and his predecessors are of interest to him only insofar as they furnish material to this end. He believes that his system is final and conclusive and that, therefore, all earlier thinkers have been groping towards it and can be stated in its terms. Holding this belief, he does not hesitate to modify or distort not only the detailed views but also the fundamental attitudes of his predecessors or to make articulate the implications that doctrines may have for him but could not have had for their authors.'

Cherniss himself says:<sup>3</sup>

'Aristotle as a philosopher is, of course, entirely justified in inquiring what answer any of the Presocratic systems could give to the problem of causality as he had formulated it; but to suppose that such an inquiry is historical, that is, to suppose that any of these systems was elaborated with a view to the problem as formulated by Aristotle, is likely to lead to mis-

<sup>1</sup> *Harvard Classical Studies*, vol. lxi (1953), pp. 85–156.

<sup>2</sup> As by Kirk in his *Heraclitus: the Cosmic Fragments* (1954). Cf. e.g. p. 319: 'The theory of an ἐκπύρωσις in Heraclitus was perhaps directly derived by Theophrastus (like most of his historical judgments) from Aristotle.' (Italics mine.)

<sup>3</sup> 'Characteristics and Effects of Presocratic Philosophy', *Journ. of the Hist. of Ideas*, xii (1951), p. 320. This

article contains a most valuable and lucid summary of some of the results of his book on *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy* (Baltimore 1935), and in making what at present can be no more than some *prolegomena* to a commentary on his views, I hope it is legitimate to refer to its statements rather than to the detailed analysis in the major work.

interpretation of those systems and certainly involves the misrepresentation of the motives and intentions of their authors.'

Now if Aristotle's interpretation of the Presocratics is entirely unhistorical, it is scarcely worth while our continuing to study them. Through Theophrastus he influenced the whole doxographical tradition, and as Cherniss remarks, not only do we possess no single complete work of any Presocratic thinker, but such fragments as we have are a selection determined by the interpretations and formulations of Presocratic philosophy in the post-Socratic philosophers for their own philosophical purposes, chiefly by Aristotle. 'If', asks McDiarmid with reference to Anaximander (p. 101), 'Aristotle has misinterpreted both the nature of the Infinite and the nature and functions of its constituent parts, and if Theophrastus has merely repeated his misinterpretation, what positive historical value have their accounts?' He tries to answer his own question, but the only reasonable answer would be that we should have no possible means of knowing. If Aristotle and Theophrastus were capable of distortion to this degree, our independent sources are quite insufficient for an assessment of it. We should be in the position of the (doubtless apocryphal) theologians who having proved the Pauline Epistles one by one to be spurious, found themselves left with no criterion by which to recognise a genuine epistle if they met one.

Those who dismiss Aristotle's statements about his predecessors as unhistorical should at least be aware of what they are doing. They probably agree that Aristotle's was one of the greatest intellects of all time. They probably agree that he founded formal logic, grasped the principles of scientific method in an even more systematic way than Plato had done, and applied these principles to zoology with such success that his achievement in this sphere can even now excite the admiration of an expert and considering the limited facilities of his age was nothing short of prodigious. They know that he was greatly interested in the historical study of political constitutions, and so aware of the need to have a solid basis of fact underlying any edifice of political theory that he promoted and supervised a series of separate studies of the constitutions of the Greek states, some of which he wrote himself. Moreover, he composed several monographs devoted to separate Presocratic philosophers or schools (and some of us would give much for a sight of his work on the Pythagoreans), in addition—and perhaps preparatory—to the discussion of them in his own philosophical works. I have not yet mentioned his more strictly philosophical greatness, the intellectual force with which he attempts the perhaps impossible task of mediating between Platonism and the scientific outlook, between the conflicting demands of *λογικῶς* and *φυσικῶς ζητεῖν*. But I think it would be agreed that no philosopher has shown himself more determined to reduce to a minimum the distorting effects of temperament and prejudice from which not even the most rational of human beings can be entirely free.

After the test of over two thousand years, there is something faintly ridiculous about defending one of the world's greatest philosophers as being on the whole clear-headed and methodical, sane and cautious. Yet it is evidently not superfluous, for we are now asked to believe that whereas on other topics he generally displays these qualities in the highest degree, as soon as he comes to assess his predecessors in the philosophical tradition he is so blinded by the problems and pre-suppositions of his own thought that he loses all common sense and even any idea of the proper way to handle evidence. Nor is the implication of dishonesty absent. ('His silence about Intelligence falsifies Diogenes's doctrine, but his motive is clear', McDiarmid, p. 105.)

Book A of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, says Cherniss (*o.c.*, p. 320), 'interprets all previous philosophy as a groping for his own doctrine of fourfold causality and is, in fact, intended to be a dialectical argument in support of that doctrine'. But we do not need Professor Cherniss to point this out. Aristotle tells us it himself, and indeed repeats it more than once, so alive is he to the danger of our forgetting it. In the *Physics*, he says (*Metaph. A*, ch. 3), I have dealt adequately with the subject of the four causes. Nevertheless it will be a useful check on the rightness and sufficiency of this classification of the modes of causation if we run through what earlier philosophers have had to say on the subject. Either we shall find that they adduce some different type of cause, or if we do not, it will give us more confidence in our own results.<sup>4</sup>

This respect for the work of earlier thinkers is shown in his writings on other subjects too. The point of view is well brought out in *Metaph. a*, 993b11-19:

'We should in justice be grateful not only to those whose opinions it is possible to share, but also to those whose accounts are more superficial. These too made their contribution, by developing before us the habit of thought. Without Timotheus, we should lack much lyric poetry; but without Phrynus, there would have been no Timotheus. The same holds good among those who expressed themselves on the truth. From some of them we have accepted certain views, whereas others were responsible for the existence of these some.'

<sup>4</sup> For a repetition of his intentions see ch. 5, 986a13: *καὶ παρὰ τούτων τίνας εἶναι τῶνάσιν τὰς ἀρχάς, καὶ πῶς ἄλλ' οὐδὲν χάριν ἐπερχόμεθα, τοῦτ' ἐστὶν ὅπως λάβωμεν εἰς τὰς εἰρημένους ἐμπέουσιν αἰτίας.*

τὴν ἔξω προήσκησαν ἡμῶν expresses a proper and historical attitude to earlier thought, and there is no doubt that it was Aristotle's. To treat one's predecessors like this, instead of (like many scientists and philosophers) dismissing them out of hand as immature, ill-informed or otherwise out of date, is a mark of intellectual maturity. It is not a premise which encourages the conclusion that he will go on to cook their results in order to make them square with his own. He is indeed less likely to do this than the man who conceals, or is unconscious of, his own real intention. The application of this kind of test in addition to his own reasoning shows a stronger historical sense than most original philosophers possess.

In addition to the four causes, another conception fundamental to Aristotle's philosophy is that of natural and violent motion. Each of the elements has for him its natural place in the universe and it is its nature to move towards that place and, once arrived there, to remain still. He therefore divides all movement into natural and enforced. Cherniss (*ACP* 196-209) complains that here too he criticises his predecessors only from the standpoint of his own theory. He refers particularly to the discussion of the shape and position of the earth in *De caelo*, ii. 13. Yet at the conclusion of this discussion Aristotle says (294b30):

'But our quarrel with the men who talk like that about motion does not concern particular points, but an undivided whole'. (i.e. the behaviour of a particular element, earth, must not be considered in isolation, but only as a part of the cosmos with its universal laws.) 'I mean that we must decide from the very beginning whether bodies have a natural motion or not, or whether, not having a natural motion, they have an enforced one. And since our decisions on these points have already been made' (this refers to discussion in chapters 2-4) 'so far as our available powers allowed, we must use them as data.'

The reader could not ask for a clearer warning from the philosopher himself that he is proceeding on certain assumptions of his own, of which he is fully conscious; and in the words κατὰ τὴν παρούσαν δύναμιν we have a becoming admission that his results may not be final.

There is, of course, much plausibility in the argument that because he was already convinced of the validity of his own scheme of causation he could not but distort his predecessors to fit it, thus 'thoroughly concealing and misrepresenting' their thought (Cherniss, *JHI*, 1951, p. 320), but at the same time we must remember the mote and the beam. We are all to some extent at the mercy of our own philosophical presuppositions, and Aristotle had at least the advantages over us that he was an Ionian Greek like the men of whom he was writing and that he was judging them on fuller evidence than we are. He sometimes says of one or other of them that if one seizes what we must suppose him to have meant, instead of judging by the inadequate language at his disposal, one will see that he was trying to say this or that (e.g. of Empedocles at *Metaph.* A 985a4, of Anaxagoras, 989a30). This practice of his can easily be held up to derision as an obvious case of distorting what the philosopher actually said in order to make it fit what Aristotle thinks he ought to have said. But can any of us hope to do better? The arrogance, if such it be, of assuming that one knows what a man wanted to say better than he did himself, is an arrogance from which none of us is free. It was Whitehead who wrote: 'Everything of importance has been said before by someone who did not discover it', and this statement represents Aristotle's attitude very fairly.

It may be replied that today our aim in studying the Presocratics is purely historical, to find out the truth about them, whereas Aristotle's was the substantiation of his own philosophical views. But in the first place, this again is to underrate the quality of Aristotle's mind as it appears clearly enough in other parts of his works. He did not feel about his philosophical views as an evangelist does about his religion. His interest was in the truth, and he was more capable than most of discarding irrational presuppositions in its pursuit. 'Amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas' is *bien trouvé*; 'Amica veritas sed magis amicum quattuor esse genera causarum' is, for a man of Aristotle's stature, nonsense.

Further, is it such an advantage that in studying the Presocratics we have only historical considerations in mind? Aristotle at least knew that he was investigating a particular question, namely, how far they anticipated his fourfold scheme of causation (or, it may be, his conception of the nature of motion or the *psyche*). Indeed the full consciousness and frankness with which he sets about the task is an excellent guarantee that he will not unduly distort their views. The modern interpreter, just because he is not thinking of his own philosophical presuppositions, is much more likely to be influenced by them unconsciously; and it is absurd to say that because we are not philosophers we have no philosophical presuppositions. It is the philosopher who, because his view of things is framed consciously, is best able to free himself from the preconceptions of his time. The rest of us are more likely to apply them without realising it.

Here is an example from a scholarly modern discussion of a Presocratic philosopher, Mr. J. E. Raven's article on Anaxagoras in the *Classical Quarterly* for 1954. The instance is all the more

telling because the writer conforms to the highest standards of scholarship.<sup>5</sup> On p. 133 he writes:

'Whereas every single one of the Presocratics was striving after an incorporeal principle . . . one and all they ended in failure';

and on the next page he adds: 'Anaxagoras . . . in the last resort failed too.' Here we look back, from the standpoint of an age to which the distinction between corporeal and incorporeal is familiar, to an age before such a distinction was known, and we say that the men of that age were 'striving' to reach that distinction. Were they? That is a difficult question to answer, but no blame attaches to Mr. Raven for putting it in that way, since we can only study these philosophers in the light of our own conceptions, nor would the study be of much value if we did not. But let us at least grant Aristotle a similar freedom without accusing him of distorting his sources any more than we are. He looked at them in the light of his own view of reality, and like the modern scholar (only with much more evidence at his disposal) saw them as 'striving' to reach the same view.

In Cherniss's criticism much less than full weight is given to Aristotle's extreme conscientiousness in reporting the views of others. His statements about Empedocles and Anaxagoras in *Metaph.* A, already mentioned, are often taken as an instance of his 'reading into' their words what they did not say. If we would justly assess his trustworthiness, it is even more important that he himself is careful to let us know when he ceases to quote the 'stammering utterance' and puts his own interpretation on it. Criticising his interpretation of Anaxagoras at 989a30, McDiarmid writes: 'As Aristotle admits, he is not stating Anaxagoras's doctrine but giving it a logical development that Anaxagoras had neglected.' He does not seem to see what an enormous debt we owe to the historical sense of the man who so long before the age of scholarship takes the trouble to warn us explicitly<sup>6</sup> when he departs from the text of his author and goes on to his own interpretation. It justifies a certain confidence when we approach the interpretation itself.

In this connection may be cited what, if too much respect were not due to its author, one might be tempted to call the *reductio ad absurdum* of Professor Cherniss's view. Thales, Aristotle tells us (*Metaph.* A 983b20), said that the ἀρχή, or source of all things, was water, and for this reason he also said that the earth rests upon water. A little later (984a2), Aristotle's historical conscience leads him to put the original statement more cautiously: Thales, he repeats, is said to have declared himself thus about the first cause. He is, however, sufficiently satisfied on the point himself to regard Thales as the first figure in the Ionian philosophical tradition which ascribed the ultimate origin of all things to a single principle, this principle being, as Aristotle saw it, a material one. Thales was ὁ τῆς τοιαύτης φιλοσοφίας ἀρχηγός. This will not do for Professor Cherniss.

'What we know', he writes (*JHI*, 1951, p. 321), 'of Aristotle's general method of interpreting his predecessors, however, and the specific purpose of his dialectical history in this book arouses the suspicion that Thales was not led from the general doctrine that all things come to be from water to draw the conclusion that the earth rests upon water, but conversely from the tradition which ascribed to Thales the notion that the earth rests upon water Aristotle inferred that he had made water the origin of everything.'

I would draw particular attention to this passage because it is far from my intention to argue that Aristotle was a faultless historian or that we can never be in a position to see his faults. He can certainly be detected in misinterpretation, and sometimes in self-contradiction, on the subject of an earlier philosopher.<sup>7</sup> But to put it at its lowest, he was intellectually mature, and the fault

<sup>5</sup> The appositeness of this parallel was pointed out to me by my daughter, Anne Guthrie, of Somerville College.

<sup>6</sup> λόγον δὲ ἐκεῖνος μὲν οὐ διήρρωσεν. . . .

<sup>7</sup> An obvious example is the contradictory senses which he gives to the word φύσις in the same passage of Empedocles (fr. 8) in *Gen. et Corr.* A314b5 and *Metaph.* A 1014b35. Change and revision of his opinions, and even forgetfulness of what he has said before, are not surprising in writings 'many of which', as Düring has recently reminded us (*A. the Scholar, Arcos*, 1954, p. 66), are 'continually revised series of lectures' and were never prepared by their author for publication. Cherniss's book provides many instances, though he sometimes exaggerates Aristotle's inconsistency, e.g. in his strictures on the general treatment of Empedocles (*ACP*, p. 196 n. 211, pp. 352-3). Aristotle's complaint that 'Empedocles does not allow one to decide whether the Sphere or the elements were prior' (*Gen. et Corr.* 315a19, Cherniss n. 211) was from his own point of view justified, and does something to mitigate the heinousness of interpreting in different

ways what was to him a self-contradictory system. Some instances offered are not inconsistencies at all. Thus *ACP* 357 says: 'The theory of Anaxagoras may be praised as "modern" when νοῦς is interpreted as final cause and yet held to be inferior to that of Empedocles when Aristotle is arguing that a finite number of principles is preferable to an infinite number.' But why should Aristotle not have regarded it as superior in some respects but inferior in others? Again (same page) 'Anaximander is at one time just another Ionian monist, yet elsewhere he is linked with Anaxagoras and Empedocles'. The inconsistency here may lie in the nature of Anaximander's somewhat primitive ideas rather than being imposed on them by Aristotle. Whether τὸ ἀπειρον, from which things could be 'separated out', was originally a single substance or a mixture, is a question which he had not faced. 'Uncertainty on Aristotle's part as to what Anaximander really meant' (p. 25) is very probable, but is not the same as the kind of self-contradiction that is attributed to him elsewhere.

must in each case be proved before it can be assumed. Here, on the other hand, we are asked to suspect him of an elementary blunder for which there is not a shred of evidence, solely on the prior assumption that he 'is not interested in historical facts as such at all'.

If Aristotle were capable of playing fast and loose with facts to this extent, it would hardly be worth while to consult such a slipshod author on any subject, whether the previous history of philosophy or anything else; so let us look at the manner of his references to Thales. They should throw an important light on his methods and consequent trustworthiness, since in this case we know him to have been relying on intermediate sources only. If Thales ever wrote anything, it was lost before Aristotle's day.

As already noted, the statement about the first cause is given as what 'is said' about Thales. But can we trust Aristotle to distinguish between what he has found in tradition and what is merely his own conjecture? A further glance at his practice should help us to decide. Having repeated the simple statement, he goes on to suggest a reason which may have influenced Thales in making it. His words are (983b21): 'He said that the ἀρχή is water, *getting this idea perhaps from* (λαβὼν ἴσως ταύτην τὴν ὑπόληψιν ἐκ τοῦ) seeing that the nourishment of all things is moist and that heat itself arises out of moisture and lives by it . . . and because the seed of all creatures is of moist nature.' The reason for the statement is clearly distinguished from the statement itself as a conjecture of Aristotle: we are not left wondering. I would add, because though not directly relevant to the present point it has a bearing on Aristotle's general trustworthiness as an interpreter of early thought, that Mr. McDiarmid does no service to the history of philosophy by simply repeating (on p. 93) Burnet's statement that 'arguments of this sort are characteristic of the physiological speculations that accompanied the rise of scientific medicine in the fifth century B.C. At the time of Thales the prevailing interest appears to have been meteorological'. Terms like 'physiological' and 'meteorological', with their suggestion of modern scientific departmentalism, are highly anachronistic. No technical interest in physiology is implied in the simple explanation given by Aristotle, and a general curiosity about the origin and maintenance of life far antedates the rise of scientific thought. As Professor Baldry showed in an important article, 'interest in birth and other phenomena connected with sex is a regular feature of primitive societies long before other aspects of biology are even thought of. . . . There is every reason for supposing that the Greeks were no exception to this rule'.<sup>8</sup>

The statement that the earth rests on water is referred to again in *De caelo* (294a29) as one which 'they say Thales made' (ὃν φασιν εἰπεῖν Θ. τὸν Μιλήσιον). In *De anima* we find an interesting form of words whereby Aristotle lets us know with admirable precision (a) that he has found something in his authorities about Thales, and (b) that he feels justified in drawing a conclusion from it which nevertheless rests on no authority but his own inference:

'It looks, from what is recorded about him, as if Thales too thought of the soul as a kind of motive power, if he said that the loadstone has a soul because it attracts iron.'<sup>9</sup>

Later in the same treatise we have another of Aristotle's conjectures, clearly distinguished as such from the statements which he has found in earlier sources:

'Some say that soul is mingled in the whole, which is perhaps the reason why Thales believed that all things are full of gods.'<sup>10</sup>

The careful wording of these passages is, for its period, remarkable, and provides the valuable information that in sources available to Aristotle the following statements were attributed to Thales: (i) water is the ἀρχή; (ii) the earth rests on water; (iii) the loadstone has a soul because it attracts iron; (iv) all things are full of gods. To doubt this is to abandon all critical standards and stultify any study of the Presocratics. I would go further, and suggest that the caution and sanity exhibited by Aristotle compel us also to pay serious attention to his own conjectures, and I have tried to show that one of these has been much too hastily dismissed.

In considering a so-called fragment, says Professor Cherniss (*JHI*, p. 319 f.), one must take into consideration the whole context in which it has been preserved, 'a context which is sometimes as extensive as a whole book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*'. I would go even further, and say that in judging Aristotle's account of any of his predecessors one must take into consideration his whole philosophical and historical outlook, which can only be understood by a wide and deep reading of his works on a variety of subjects. Mr. McDiarmid, for instance, holds that doubts about the

<sup>8</sup> *Embryological Analogies in Presocratic Cosmogony*, C.Q. xxvi (1932), p. 28. B. refers to Aristotle's version of Thales's motive on p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> 405a19: εἴκοι δὲ καὶ Θ. ἐξ ὧν ἀπορρημονεύουσι

κινητικὸν τι τὴν ψυχὴν ὑπολαβεῖν, εἴπερ τὴν λίθον ἐφη ψυχὴν ἔχειν ὅτι τὸν σιδηρὸν κινεῖ.

<sup>10</sup> 411a7: καὶ ἐν τῷ ὅλῳ δὲ τινας αὐτὴν μεμῖχθαι φασιν, ὅθεν ἴσως καὶ Θ. φήθη πάντα πλήρη θεῶν εἶναι.

view of matter which Aristotle attributes to the early physicists are made antecedently not unreasonable 'by the fact that he can seriously comment on the material theory of Homer in the same context with those of the physicists' (p. 92). This is a very misleading statement. It is true that Aristotle is remarkably patient with the views of even poets and mythographers (to whom he once stretches out a hand in a sudden flash of sympathetic insight: *διὸ καὶ ὁ φιλόμυθος φιλόσοφος πῶς ἔστω*, *Metaph.* A 982b18), owing to his unshakable and attractive conviction that there must be *some* grain of truth in any sincerely held belief. But there is much in that *πῶς*. The lover of myth shares with the philosopher the all-important gift of curiosity, but no more. This is the same critic who could write (*Metaph.* B 1000a18): *ἀλλὰ περὶ μὲν τῶν μυθικῶς σοφισμένων οὐκ ἄξιον μετὰ σπουδῆς σκοπεῖν, παρὰ δὲ τῶν δι' ἀποδείξεως λεγόντων δεῖ πυνθάνεσθαι*, and who reveals himself in the passage of *Metaph.* A which McDiarmid is discussing. There is no question of Aristotle's putting Homer on a level with the Milesian philosophers; otherwise he could not designate Thales with clear-cut emphasis as *ὁ τῆς τοιαύτης φιλοσοφίας ἀρχηγός*. Only after the serious part of his exposition is over does he add that 'there are some who say' that the old *θεολόγοι* like Homer took this view of nature, then immediately dismissing that as something scarcely susceptible of verification and not worth further thought, he returns to Thales as the earliest thinker relevant to his inquiry. It is sad to be forced into such heavy-handed exegesis of the expressive dryness with which, after the mention of Homer's Okeanos and Tethys, Aristotle continues (983b33): *εἰ μὲν οὖν ἀρχαῖα τις αὕτη καὶ παλαιὰ τετύχηκεν οὔσα περὶ τῆς φύσεως ἢ δόξα, τάχ' ἂν ἄδηλον εἶη, θαλῆς μὲντοι λέγεται οὕτως ἀποφύνασθαι*. Homer and Thales in the same context?<sup>11</sup>

To substitute uncritical rejection for sympathetic criticism of Aristotle's account leads, in the absence of any better source of information, to the erection of a purely modern dogmatism in its place. Many examples could be quoted, but space will scarcely permit of more than one. Of the origin of motion in the system of Leucippus and Democritus, Aristotle says in *Metaph.* A (985b19) that they 'like the others, lazily shelved' this question. In *Phys.* (265b24) he refers to them as those who 'make the void the cause of motion'. Mr. McDiarmid notes (p. 126 f.) that Aristotle, and Theophrastus where he is dependent on him, give the impression that the Atomists considered the assertion of the void's existence to be sufficient answer to the Eleatic denial of motion, and continues: 'Clearly it was not, and the atomists can hardly have thought that it was.' By this unsupported assertion he closes the door against any use of Aristotle's hint as an aid to reconstructing the problem as the Atomists saw it. If, instead, we follow that hint, we may discover the ingenious way in which they safeguarded their system from the objections to which those of Empedocles and Anaxagoras were open. Parmenides had finally condemned any system which, like the Milesian or Pythagorean, combined the notions of a one and a many. An original one could never become many, for change and motion were impossible because, among other reasons, true void was an inadmissible concept. Empedocles and Anaxagoras had tried to save the phenomena by abandoning the original unity. Positing an everlasting plurality, and accepting the Parmenidean denials of (a) *γένεσις* and *φθορά* and (b) void, they evidently thought they could retain the possibility of locomotion by a kind of reciprocal replacement (the motion which later writers compared to that of a fish through water, *Simpl. Phys.* 659. 26 Diels).

For motion even to start in such a plenum, an external cause seemed necessary. Otherwise it would remain locked in a solid, frozen mass. Thus whereas to blame the Milesians for omitting to provide a motive cause is anachronistic, to demand it in any post-Parmenidean system is right. The need was there and was known to be there. Hence the Love and Strife of Empedocles and the Mind of Anaxagoras. But to an age for which there was still only one type of entity (that which we should call corporeal, though this term could not come into use until its contrary, the incorporeal, had been conceived), the introduction of Mind over the mixture must have seemed suspiciously like the reintroduction of unity, of a one behind the many, by a back door, thus laying Anaxagoras's system wide open once more to criticism of the Eleatic type.

What is difficult for us to realise is the complete *novelty* of the idea that a true void might exist. Before Parmenides the concept had not been grasped, so that the Pythagoreans could actually identify *κενόν* and *πνεῦμα* (*Ar. Phys.* vi. 213b22). Later it had been understood only to be denied as impossible. I suggest, therefore, that the Atomists had consciously faced the problem of the origin of motion and considered that they were providing a new, sufficient, and positive answer by attributing it to the existence of void.<sup>12</sup> The difficulties which had faced the pluralist attempts to rescue phenomena from the grip of Eleatic logic were the difficulties of accounting for a beginning of motion in a mass of matter heterogeneous indeed, but locked together without the smallest chink of empty space between its parts. Substitute for that picture the alternative of an infinite number

<sup>11</sup> It may be, as Ross suggests, that Aristotle's introduction of the ancient *theologi* here is a reminiscence of Plato's remarks in the *Cratylus* (402d) and *Theaetetus* (152e, 160d, 180c), though Plato is quoting them as fore-

runners of Heraclitus rather than of Thales. In any case, if Plato, as Ross says, is 'jesting', may we not allow Aristotle to have his joke too?

of microscopic atoms let loose, as it were, in infinite empty space, and it is at least as reasonable to ask 'Why should they stay still?' as 'Why should they move?'

Eleatic logic compelled the Atomists to describe the void as τὸ μὴ ὄν; but this had an advantage of its own. τὸ ὄν being still what we should be inclined to call some form of body, space was something different, a mere blank; it is μὴ ὄν. Yet, Leucippus insists, in its own way it exists, it is there (Ar. *Metaph.* A. 985b4 ff.), and not only that, but it is what makes motion possible. Thus Leucippus played on Parmenides the kind of trick which Odysseus played on the Cyclops. When asked what started motion, Anaxagoras replies 'Mind', i.e. a positive ὄν somehow different in kind from the matter of which the cosmos is composed. Asked the same question, Leucippus replies, first, that motion has been from all time, but secondly, that what makes it possible is τὸ μὴ ὄν. If οὐτις με κτείνει, the neighbours cannot expect to catch the murderer.

Aristotle is often astonishingly close to our own point of view. Like Mr. McDiarmid, he thinks the existence of void is no sufficient explanation of the possibility of motion. It is a *sine qua non*, but not the positive cause—e.g. weight—which his own (incidentally erroneous) mechanics demanded. Hence although he records that they gave this answer, it does not in his eyes absolve them from the charge of 'light-mindedness' (ράθυμια) in this respect. But if we use the evidence which he is a good enough historian to give us, we may succeed in overcoming both our own preconceptions and his and getting nearer to the mind of a pre-Platonic thinker. The Atomists came at a stage in the history of thought when the need for a positive cause of motion was bound up with the lack of a true conception of void. The setting free of the atoms, therefore, though to Aristotle it appeared as no more than a *sine qua non*, seemed to them a sufficient explanation, a positive αἴτιον, of their motion. They combined it with the assertion that motion was from eternity, and considered that no further, more positive, cause was required. In this the physics of Leucippus and Democritus are more nearly in accord with the views of motion current in Europe since Galileo and Descartes than with the imperfect theories of Aristotle. He is certainly open to criticism, but not to immediate dismissal on the grounds that the Atomists could never have thought of the void as a sufficient answer to the Eleatic denial of motion.

The proper treatment of Aristotle's evidence is vital for the whole history of Presocratic thought. Here I have done no more than suggest a few reasons for believing that it calls for further investigation. Professor Cherniss has not so much 'dealt exhaustively' with the subject as opened our minds to new and fruitful possibilities—perhaps a greater service. As an historian Aristotle has serious failings, but he deserves less wholesale condemnation than he is at the moment in danger of receiving. Too hasty rejection of some of his judgments may be of less service than sympathetic criticism if we wish to see through his mind to those of his predecessors. A small contribution towards this sympathetic understanding will, I hope, be an acceptable tribute to the great Aristotelian in whose honour it is written.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> One must remember that Melissus had argued directly from the non-existence of void to the impossibility of motion, in contradiction of Empedocles and Anaxagoras. (Fr. 7 sect. 7, Cherniss *ACP* 402.)

<sup>13</sup> I should like to express my thanks to Mr. D. J. Allan for helpful comments and suggestions made while this paper was in draft.