

A NON-ARISTOTELIAN SIMILE IN *METAPHYSICS* 2.1

It is now fairly well agreed that *Metaphysics* 2 is not the work of Aristotle himself, and on the basis of an ancient tradition it is commonly ascribed to his pupil Pasicles of Rhodes.<sup>1</sup> At the same time this fact is not generally thought to affect the substance of the book; indeed, one commentator summarizes the consensus by saying that it is thought to contain "a doctrine as well as a language that are . . . genuinely Aristotelian."<sup>2</sup> What has not been sufficiently noticed, perhaps, is that Book Two contains a simile purporting to elucidate the Aristotelian epistemology which (on the basis of current interpretations, at least) seems to be wholly non-Aristotelian in character. The passage in question occurs at 993b9–11 and reads as follows: ὥσπερ γὰρ τὰ τῶν νυκτερίδων ὄμματα πρὸς τὸ φέγγος ἔχει τὸ μεθ' ἡμέραν, οὕτω καὶ τῆς ἡμετέρας ψυχῆς ὁ νοῦς πρὸς τὰ τῇ φύσει φανερώτατα πάντων.

Given the context in which it occurs the meaning of the simile is commonly accepted to be this. To know the truth is both easy and difficult—easy in the sense that no one can ever completely fail to have some of it, difficult in the sense that few if any ever have it perfectly. The source of difficulty lies, however, not with the objects to be known but with ourselves. That is, it is not because the objects of knowledge are somehow lacking in intelligibility that we find it difficult to know with perfection. Rather, just as the eyes of bats, accustomed as they are to the darkness, are blinded by daylight, so it is with man, whose

mind "is dazzled by the very brightness of the object."<sup>3</sup>

Now although this simile (like any other) is not wholly lacking in truth, still it cannot reasonably be said to render a very accurate picture of the Aristotelian epistemology, and it seems doubtful that Aristotle himself would ever have employed it. That is, it may well be possible to construe man's intellect, since it is ordered toward the senses, as not being "accustomed" to the most intelligible things—for sensible objects are not most intelligible in themselves.<sup>4</sup> But the apparent poetic suggestion that the human intellect could ever be blinded by direct contact with that which is most intelligible in itself is wholly non-Aristotelian on two counts. First, because it is not with the mind as it is with the senses; although the senses may be upset by strong stimulation "in the case of mind, thought about an object that is highly intelligible renders it more and not less able afterwards to think objects that are less intelligible."<sup>5</sup> And second, because according to Aristotle man's intellect never comes into any immediate contact with that which is most intelligible in itself; all human knowledge is acquired through the senses.<sup>6</sup>

It is, in fact, rather difficult to imagine that the question which the *νυκτερίς* simile is designed to answer would ever naturally have occurred to Aristotle at all. It seems much more likely that he would have considered the difficulties involved in knowing to be quite

1. Cf. W. D. Ross, *Aristotle's "Metaphysics"* (Oxford, 1924), I, xxiv–xxv.

2. J. Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian "Metaphysics,"* rev. ed. (Toronto, 1963), p. 89.

3. Ross, *op. cit.*, in his commentary, I, 214. One may also note that Alexander and Asclepius give the same commentary. And a number of translations, such as that by J. Warrington in the Everyman's series, even go a long way toward incorporating such an interpretation right into the text.

Cf. also H. Bonitz, *Aristotelis "Metaphysica": Commentarius* (Bonn, 1849), p. 129: "Veritatis cognitio non est difficilis τῇ φύσει, sed πρὸς ἡμᾶς, de quo discrimine cf. ad Z 4. 1029b 4 sqq. Nimirum animae humanae ea pars, quae veritatem amplectitur (cf. A7), τῆς ἡμετέρας ψυχῆς ὁ νοῦς sive ὁ ἀνθρώπινος νοῦς, A9. 1075a 7, quasi praestringitur nimio veritatis splendore."

4. It is interesting to note that Thomas Aquinas in his commentary finally arrives at what is essentially this interpre-

tation, but only after experiencing obvious difficulty with the text. At one point he simply concludes that "it is evident that this simile is not adequate." (Might one not even suggest that the strain Thomas is forced to place on the simile is itself some evidence against its Aristotelian character?) Peter Fonseca, the sixteenth-century Portuguese commentator, gives a similar interpretation.

5. *De an.* 3. 4, 429b2–3. All translations are from the Oxford edition of the *Works of Aristotle* unless otherwise indicated.

6. Cf., e.g., *De somniis* 458b2 and *De an.* 3. 8. Bonitz' suggestion that that which is *ἄνυστος* knowable by nature is the unmoved mover is doubtless correct, but it is difficult to see how this confirms his interpretation. For Aristotle never indicates that the unmoved mover might be immediately present to the human mind in such a way that it could be "weakened by its excessive splendour."

straightforward and self-evident. For in the order of knowing, as he repeatedly points out, our knowledge proceeds from what is more known to us though less knowable in itself to what is more knowable in itself though less known to us.<sup>7</sup> The reason we do not easily acquire perfect knowledge is not that we are in any way blinded by the inherent intelligibility of the most perfect object, but simply because it is only sensible substance that is immediately present to us. It is only in sensible things that being is immediately present to man, but in sensible things being is not found as it is in itself. The object of First Philosophy, being qua being or the highest being, is known to us only by way of demonstration from its effects in an activity which is by its very nature difficult. One's task must be "to make (ποιῆσαι) what is knowable by nature knowable to oneself."<sup>8</sup> But discursive reasoning is not easy. And Aristotle spends no little time discussing the aporetic character of this enterprise. In brief, the ultimate reason why man does not readily acquire perfect knowledge, according to Aristotle, is because the order of our knowing does not correspond to the order of being, the way it does (for instance) in some Platonic philosophies, where, given the possible immediate presence of pure form to mind, something like this simile is much more appropriate.<sup>9</sup> Judging from the philosophical evidence, then, the simile would appear to be much more Platonic than Aristotelian in character.

One may also observe that the conclusion which follows from this simile appears to be somewhat out of place. Immediately following the simile Aristotle argues that since men's

minds are, as it were, blinded by the intelligibility of things, "we should be grateful, not only to those with whose views we may agree, but also to those who have expressed more superficial views; for these also contributed something, by developing before us the power of thought."<sup>10</sup> The cumulative character of knowledge is an eminently Aristotelian idea, and this might at first sight appear to argue for the strictly Aristotelian character of the text under consideration. And yet, at other places in his works where such a notion is discussed,<sup>11</sup> Aristotle fails to give a reason for it that even remotely resembles what the simile seems to imply. In fact, he gives no explanation at all, apparently in the belief that the reason is obvious.

Finally, one may suggest that there is some rather interesting circumstantial evidence for the non-Aristotelian character of this simile. At seven places in his biological works Aristotle discusses bats.<sup>12</sup> He notes that they are nocturnal,<sup>13</sup> have leather-like wings and imperfectly formed feet,<sup>14</sup> are ambidental (ἀμφώδοντα) with cotyledons (κοτυληδόνες) in the uterus,<sup>15</sup> and are difficult to classify.<sup>16</sup> At no point, however, does Aristotle ever suggest that he thinks bats are blinded by the sun or that they cannot see as well during the day as they can at night. And, as it happens, it is not the case that bats are in any way blinded by daylight. Bats, unlike (say) owls, which Aristotle rightly notes do tend to be somewhat "dim-sighted by day,"<sup>17</sup> are like most other animals (even habitually nocturnal ones) and can see better during the day than at night. Hence, in the absence of any evidence to the

7. Cf. *Metaph.* 7. 3, 1029b3–11; *Ph.* 9. 1, 184a16–18.

8. *Metaph.* 7. 3, 1029b5–9. I have slightly altered the Oxford translation and italicized in order to emphasize my point.

9. Although τὰ τῶν νυκτερίδων ὄντα are not mentioned by name, one might compare, for instance, the myth of the divided line and the allegory of the cave in the *Republic*.

It is interesting to note that Averroes in his commentary on the allegory of the cave identifies Aristotle's theoretical science with the science of the good and writes, "As for the philosophers, they are those who have gone out of that cave into the dazzling light and see the things in their reality in the sunlight. Just as the eyes of a man when he suddenly comes out of a cave into the sunlight are dimmed, and he cannot see anything, so in the same way with this category of men . . ." E. I. J. Rosenthal, ed. and tr., *Averroes' Commentary on Plato's "Republic"* (Cambridge, 1966), p. 198. (One may also note that of all the classical commentators Averroes' remarks

on the νυκτερίς simile appear the strangest. He simply says the simile does not prove that it is impossible for us to understand abstract substances, then gives an argument to this effect which is, as Thomas rightly observes, somewhat "ridiculous.")

10. *Metaph.* 993b12–15.

11. Cf., e.g., the opening chapters of *Metaphysics* 1.

12. Although R. Hope (*Aristotle: "Metaphysics"* [New York, 1952]) translates "owl!" rather than "bat" this simply seems to be a failure to distinguish between νυκτερίς and νυκτικόραξ.

13. *Hist. an.* 488a25.

14. *Spir.* 485a19; *Hist. an.* 487b23 and 490a8.

15. *Hist. an.* 511a31.

16. *Part. an.* 697b1–12; *IA* 714b13.

17. *Hist. an.* 609a10.

contrary, it would seem reasonable to assume that Aristotle the naturalist did not think bats were affected by day in ways which they are not, and would, therefore, never have constructed the simile in question even if he had

believed that it accurately represented the facts of epistemology.

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*ANTHOLOGIA LATINA* 666 (RIESE) IN CODEX  
PAL. LAT. 920

Item 666 of Alexander Riese's edition of *Anthologia Latina* is a poem of twenty-eight verses entitled, "Rescriptum Honorii scholastici contra epistolas Senecae ad Iordanem episcopum."<sup>1</sup> In the poem Honorius lauds Jordanes as a teacher of morals, affirming that he in his works presents to him, Honorius, a better set of principles than Seneca was able to provide for Lucilius (here called Lucillus) in his *Epistolae*.

The text of the poem as published by Riese is based on two manuscripts: Valentinus 88, saec. ix (=V), and Parisinus 4860, saec. x (=P). A third copy, not mentioned by Riese, is to be found in Codex Vat. Pal. Lat. 920, fols. 1<sup>r</sup>-1<sup>v</sup> (here designated Q). Since Q dates from the early part of the ninth century, it is certainly older than P and probably older than V.

Codex Pal. Lat. 920, of which Q is the first folio, is made up of 106 folios in all, of which the remaining 105 contain a copy of the *Romana* and *Getica* of Jordanes. The hand which copied the codex proper is the same as that which produced the lines of Honorius at the beginning of the manuscript. Although there are no abbreviations of *-tur* in the poem, the use of *t* surmounted with an apostrophe symbol for *-tur* is frequent in other parts of the codex. This indicates that the document as a whole almost certainly dates from some period preceding A.D. 820.<sup>2</sup>

A note on the flyleaf which reads "Codex sancti Nazarii de monasterio quod dicitur

Lauresham" indicates that the manuscript comes from Lorsch. Its Lorsch origin causes it to be included by W. M. Lindsay in his article on the early Lorsch scriptorium where it is dated as early ninth century.<sup>3</sup>

In view of the relatively early date of Q it might be expected that it would have much to contribute to our knowledge of the work contained in it. Unfortunately such is not the case. Q adds nothing which is not already known from V, to which it is obviously very closely related. In fact, Q reproduces every error contained in V, as will be seen from the following list of variants: 4 *lympa*] *nymfa* QV; 8 *imbutis*] *inbutis* QV; 10 *factor opus*] *fator* (corr. V) *opis* (corr. Q) QV; 12 *quique monens*] *quem ut moneas* QVP; 17 *commenta*] *monumenta* QV; 21 *beatos*] *beato* QVP; 22 *obitu*] *obito* (corrected by a second hand in Q) QV; 25 *alium*] *aliam* QV; 28 *duce*] *disce* QVP. In addition, Q adds three minor errors of its own, two of which were later corrected: 1 *si*] *sic* Q; 6 *sterilis*] *sterelis* Q (corrected by a second hand); 11 *sed*] *set* Q (corrected by a second hand). Q, like VP, has *Lucillus* for *Lucilius*.<sup>4</sup>

In view of the close affinity existing between Q and V, it clearly must be assumed either that one of these derives from the other or that both come from a common archetype. Since V contains no errors which are not also present in Q and has the correct *si* (line 1) where Q has *sic*, it might be concluded, on the basis of the evidence of the poem alone,

1. A. Riese, *Anthologia Latina*, Part I, fasc. 2 (Leipzig, 1906), pp. 137-38.

2. See W. M. Lindsay, *Notae Latinae* (Cambridge, 1915), pp. 376-77, and E. K. Rand, "Prickings in a Manuscript of Orléans," *TAPA*, LXX (1939), 338-39.

3. W. M. Lindsay, "The (Early) Lorsch Scriptorium," *Palaeographia Latina*, III (1924), 20. In a discussion of Lorsch manuscripts this document is also listed by T. Gottlieb, *Über mittelalterliche Bibliotheken* (Leipzig, 1890; repr.

Graz, 1955), p. 335, where it is dated simply "saec. ix." H. Stevenson, Jr., *Codices Palatini Latini Bibliothecae Vaticanae*, I (Rome, 1886), 327, dates the manuscript as "saec. ix vel x."

4. These citations are taken from a microfilm copy of Codex Vat. Pal. Lat. 920 placed at the disposal of the writer by The Knights of Columbus Vatican Film Library at Saint Louis University.