

## ARISTOTLE AS HISTORIAN OF PHILOSOPHY

DOUBTS about the reliability of Aristotle's accounts of his predecessors have been current for some time, at least since Heidel's 1906 paper in which he aimed to show that the presocratics did not, *pace* Aristotle, have Aristotle's conception of *ἀλλοίωσις*, involving as it does the notions of unchanging substance or essence, and attribute.<sup>1</sup> Such doubts were given massive substantiation in Cherniss' famous book.<sup>2</sup> More recently McDiarmid has shown<sup>3</sup> that Theophrastus' *Physical Opinions*, the main source for the subsequent doxographical tradition, while it may quote extensively from the writings of the presocratics, is heavily dependent (in wording, selection of quotations from the presocratics, and organisation of material) on Aristotle's account.<sup>4</sup> I only mention McDiarmid's work here because some of what he says provides the point of departure for Guthrie's defence of Aristotle,<sup>5</sup> which I want chiefly to examine. My thesis is that there are some misunderstandings and pseudo-issues which crop up among what may be referred to as the three parties (Cherniss, McDiarmid, and Guthrie) to the dispute over the trustworthiness of Aristotle's accounts of the presocratics; but that once these are cleared away there remains a genuine disagreement over the reliability of Aristotle's interpretations; and that in this disagreement Guthrie has not given arguments sufficient to prove his point.

1. *What Cherniss showed.* Quite simply, what Cherniss aimed to demonstrate is that 'when Aristotle's references to Presocratic philosophy have been read in their contexts and when these references and criticisms have been studied as integral parts of the positive arguments in which they are set, it becomes clear that one cannot safely wrench them away to use as building-blocks for a history of Presocratic philosophy'. (*ACPP*, 347.) And I think there can be no doubt that he did demonstrate this general thesis, even though there is plenty of room for dispute on particular points, both with regard to Cherniss' remarks on Aristotle's 'references and criticisms', and to the picture of presocratic philosophy which he reconstructs.<sup>6</sup>

It should be noted that McDiarmid sometimes exaggerates in his restatements of Cherniss' results, and that Guthrie sometimes does the same in restating McDiarmid or Cherniss. For example, Cherniss holds that in his discussion of his predecessors in *Metaphysics A* Aristotle 'assumes that from the first the problem of nature was met as a problem of causality'. (*ACPP*, 218.) With McDiarmid this becomes: 'Behind his argument is the assumption that the main problem of earlier philosophy was causality.' (*TPC*, 180.) And

<sup>1</sup> W. A. Heidel, 'Qualitative Change in Pre-Socratic Philosophy', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 19 (1906), 333-79.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy* (Baltimore, 1935). Henceforth cited as *ACPP*.

<sup>3</sup> J. B. McDiarmid, 'Theophrastus on the Presocratic Causes', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 61 (1953), 85-156; reprinted, with abridgments, in David J. Furley and R. E. Allen, eds., *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*, Vol. I: *The Beginnings of Philosophy* (London, 1970), 178-238. (The abridgments are of a couple of detailed philological comparisons of passages [pp. 88-91, 135-6 of the original], and discussions of Hippo, Hippasus, Archelaus, Xenophanes, and Metrodorus the Chian [on pp. 92-3, 95-6, 114-15, and 128-9, respectively, of the original] are omitted.) McDiarmid's monograph will be

cited as *TPC*, and references will be to the reprinted version.

<sup>4</sup> More precisely: McDiarmid attempts to show this only of the first book of the *Physical Opinions* (see *TPC*, 181), and he also attempts to show that there are certain features of Theophrastus' work which derive, not just from his use of Aristotle, but from his method of using Aristotle (see *TPC*, 233-7).

<sup>5</sup> W. K. C. Guthrie, 'Aristotle as a Historian of Philosophy: Some Preliminaries', *JHS* 77 (1957), 35-41; reprinted as 'Aristotle as Historian' in *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*, Vol. I, 239-54. Henceforth cited as *AHP*, with references to the reprinted paper.

<sup>6</sup> A convenient summary presentation of this picture can be found in Cherniss' 'The Characteristics and Effects of Presocratic Philosophy', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951), 319-45; reprinted in *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*, Vol. I, 1-28.

finally, in Guthrie's defence of Aristotle, he feels constrained to point out that '“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.' (*AHP*, 245.)

2. *The general issue.* The general question at issue in the dispute may be put as: Is Aristotle trustworthy? But this question has two aspects, one of which acts as a red herring. This aspect, which is, I think, of little interest or importance for the historian of philosophy, but which often crops up among all three parties to the dispute and obscures the real issue, might be called the 'moral' aspect: the dispute becomes a quasi-moral matter of praising or blaming or denigrating Aristotle. This aspect comes especially to the fore in Guthrie, who talks of having to ' . . . [defend] one of the world's greatest philosophers'—defend his intellectual maturity and sanity against a loss of common sense, and against dishonesty. (*AHP*, 242–43.)

The other aspect is the methodological question of how trustworthy the writings of Aristotle are as a source of knowledge about the presocratics, i.e., of how Aristotle can best be used to find out 'what was really going on' in presocratic philosophy. Once this distinction is made explicit, it will be immediately obvious, I think, that it is only the methodological aspect of the question which is important and interesting.<sup>7</sup>

3. *Some points of agreement.* There are some points which I take to be agreed upon by all parties, and which it will be as well to clear out of the way before finally coming to the real question at issue:

(a) Nowhere was Aristotle trying to write a history of philosophy. He was always looking at his predecessors with definite questions in mind, and that he is doing so is usually quite obvious and explicit.<sup>8</sup>

(b) Aristotle is often an unsympathetic *critic* of others' philosophies. As Taylor says, talking of one of Aristotle's criticisms of the construction of the particles out of the elementary triangles in the *Timaeus* (at *Cael.* 305<sup>b</sup>28–307<sup>b</sup>24),

Aristotle is here assuming the truth of his own theory that there is no such thing as space unoccupied by body. As usual, he shows himself quite incapable of examining a rival theory simply on its merits as 'saving the appearances'. This tacit assumption that his own hypothesis is admittedly the truth makes him one of the most unsympathetic of all philosophical critics of other men. He *never* succeeds in fairly seeing what anyone else's theory has to say for itself.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, leaving hyperbole aside, Aristotle's criticisms are 'external' rather than 'internal'. This is of course generally what is to be expected of a philosopher (or someone in any discipline) who is sincerely convinced of his own theses, but it will sometimes have implications for the answer to the methodological aspect of our question.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the answer to the quasi-moral question is surely also obvious: no blame attaches to Aristotle for proceeding in the manner he did. No one can expect a philosopher to write of his fellow philosophers with the expectation that their works will be lost, and that his will have to serve as a main source for the reconstruction of their doctrines and arguments! This is not to deny that Aristotle was sometimes guilty of carelessness in statements about other philosophers, bending or omission of recalcitrant facts which refused to fit generalizations he wanted to make, and other human frailties.

<sup>8</sup> Although I cannot find that either Cherniss or McDiarmid mention this fact, they would no doubt

agree that it is a fact. Guthrie rightly emphasises it (*AHP*, 242–3) (as does Suzanne Mansion, 'Le rôle de l'exposé et de la critique des philosophies antérieures chez Aristote', *Aristote et les problèmes de la méthode* (Louvain & Paris, 1961), 36).

<sup>9</sup> A. E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* (Oxford, 1928), 405.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Aristotle's convictions about what the important problems are in a particular area usually lead him to look for solutions to just these problems in older systems, although these problems may have been unimportant or even quite foreign to the thinkers examined. As Cherniss emphasises, this fact, among others, makes it imperative that

(c) Aristotle often draws out what are from his standpoint the necessary consequences (or antecedents) of a theory, consequences which *may* not even be validly inferred, given the theoretical framework or assumptions of the person of whom he is writing.<sup>11</sup>

(d) Sometimes Aristotle contradicts himself in attributions to the presocratics at different places.<sup>12</sup>

4. *Aristotle's interpretations.* If, then, any exaggerations which McDiarmid may have made of Cherniss, or Guthrie of McDiarmid or Cherniss, are withdrawn, if the issue of quasi-moralistic praise and blame is ignored, and if the four points above are taken into account, it becomes clear that there is much agreement among the disputants. Is there any disagreement left, aside from questions of detail concerning particular passages, on the methodological issue? There is—on the question of the reliability of what are admittedly Aristotelian *interpretations*.

Cherniss' view is summed up near the beginning of his last chapter:

For him—as for every philosopher—the doctrines of his predecessors were materials to be remoulded for his own purpose; in their new form they can be of use to the historian of philosophy only if Aristotle's process of interpretation can be reversed so as to regenerate them in the form they had before Aristotle employed them as his material. (*ACPP*, 347.)

McDiarmid thinks that Cherniss has shown that 'there is no constancy in the historical value of his comments; nor is there even such a thing as *the* Aristotelian interpretation'. (*TPC*, 180.)

One of the main objects of Guthrie's paper is to argue that Aristotle's interpretations *should* be trusted. Aside from his general admonitions to the effect that Aristotle was sane, mature, etc., he has three arguments to this effect. I cannot find that two of them, however, stand up at all, and the third is by no means conclusive.

The first argument is contained in the following sentence: 'Now if Aristotle's interpretation of the Presocratics is entirely unhistorical, it is scarcely worthwhile our continuing to study them.' (*AHP*, 241.) The argument is evidently in the form of a *modus tollens*:

If Aristotle's interpretation is entirely unhistorical, then it is scarcely worthwhile continuing to study the presocratics.

But it is worthwhile continuing to study the presocratics.

Therefore, Aristotle's interpretation is not entirely unhistorical.

Leaving aside the question of whether anyone is claiming that Aristotle's interpretations are *entirely* unhistorical, it is evident that the first premise is false: even if Aristotle's *interpretation* is entirely unhistorical, we can base a study of the presocratics on the fragments.

The second argument, I think, fares no better. After mentioning that Aristotle, in the cases of Empedocles and Anaxagoras in *Metaphysics* A, 'is careful to let us know when he ceases to quote the "stammering utterance" and puts his own interpretation on it', Guthrie says that McDiarmid

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 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. (*AHP*, 246.)<sup>13</sup>

statements about presocratics be not just lifted out of Aristotle without further ado.

<sup>11</sup> Cherniss gives some examples of this: *ACPP*, 355–66. When Guthrie comes closest to discussing this practice, he does not deny it of Aristotle, but is

concerned to claim that no one can be completely free of it. (*AHP*, 244–6.)

<sup>12</sup> Guthrie is at pains to point out that he is not denying that this is true: *AHP*, 247 and note.

<sup>13</sup> Between the two sentences, parts of which are

However, I do not see that it follows, from the fact that someone separates report or quotation from interpretation, that one is justified in feeling confident that the interpretation is a correct one.

Finally there is Guthrie's strongest argument:

We are all to some extent at the mercy of our philosophical presuppositions, and Aristotle had at least the advantage 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. (*AHP*, 244.)<sup>14</sup>

On the issue of 'philosophical presuppositions', Guthrie goes on to claim that (*a*) Aristotle 'did not feel about his philosophical views as an evangelist does about his religion' (*AHP*, 245) (so that, presumably, he could modify them if he saw good reason to do so); (*b*) a philosopher, like Aristotle, has the advantage over the modern interpreter that he, 'because his view of things is formed consciously, is best able to free himself from the preconceptions of his time' (*AHP*, 245); and (*c*) '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' (*AHP*, 246). Of these points, (*a*) does not seem to have much to do with the value of Aristotle's interpretations, and (*b*), if true, would only show that historians of philosophy ought to be philosophers (i.e. it does not give Aristotle a privileged position as against a modern philosopher-historian). Now while (*a*) and (*b*) seem to presuppose that one ought to discard one's own philosophical views in interpreting past philosophers, (*c*) seems to be saying that keeping such views is a prerequisite for the value of a study in the history of philosophy. While I doubt that Guthrie really wants to hold this position, it is at least clear that this too gives Aristotle no advantage over the present-day interpreter.

However, the main point of the quotation is that being an Ionian Greek and having access to fuller evidence are advantages which Aristotle had over us. This is doubtless true. But what it shows is that Aristotle had the *opportunity* to be a better interpreter than we have even the chance to be. Whether he realised this opportunity is a question which can only be answered by the usual philological and historical methods.

In other words—and this may serve as a conclusion—there is no general or *a priori* way of deciding whether Aristotle's interpretations of the presocratics are on the whole reliable or trustworthy. The question must be asked with regard to each interpretive passage, and answered in the light of all the evidence available (including, of course, the context of the passage). This is hardly an earth-shaking conclusion, but in view of Guthrie's stature and the facts that his paper has been widely read and recently anthologised, and that he has reaffirmed his commitment to the arguments and views therein,<sup>15</sup> it seems worth-while to enunciate and emphasise it.

Indeed it may be that Guthrie's beliefs about the general reliability of Aristotle's interpretations, founded, as I hope to have shown, on inadequate arguments, have led to some

here quoted, Guthrie cites what he takes to be McDiarmid's criticism of Aristotle's interpretation of Anaxagoras (*Metaph.* 989<sup>a</sup> 30). However, McDiarmid is *not* there (*TPC*, 217–18) criticising Aristotle's interpretation, but Theophrastus' use of it.

<sup>14</sup> Following this quotation (*AHP*, 244–6), Guthrie goes on to talk about 'philosophical presuppositions' and their influence upon the statements of 'the modern interpreter'. As an instance he gives a statement by J. E. Raven to the effect that the presocratics were 'striving' to reach the distinction between the corporeal and the incorporeal. However, this is not an instance of interpreting the pre-

socratics 'from our own point of view'; Raven is saying that they were 'striving' to reach a distinction which was in fact reached not long afterwards, by persons in the same tradition of thought. It is because of these considerations that Guthrie is right in saying that 'no blame attaches to Mr Raven for putting it in that way', *not* 'since we can only study these philosophers in the light of our own conceptions'. (*AHP*, 246.)

<sup>15</sup> Besides its inclusion in *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*, a German translation of Guthrie's paper appears on pp. 212–31 of *Aristoteles in der Neueren Forschung* (Darmstadt, 1968), hg. Paul Moraux.

shortcomings in his *History of Greek Philosophy*. Thus although Guthrie shows himself on occasion quite capable of simply discounting an Aristotelian interpretation,<sup>16</sup> there is at least one instance in which he has given what seems to be a muddled account of a presocratic doctrine, and in which he has perhaps been lured into giving this by his beliefs about Aristotle's trustworthiness.

The instance to which I refer is Guthrie's account of the Pythagorean doctrine or doctrines concerning the relation between numbers and things (*HGP* I, 229–38). As is well-known, Aristotle gives three doctrines having to do with this relation: (1) all things are numbers (e.g., *Metaph.* 987<sup>b</sup>28); (2) the ἀρχαί of mathematics are the ἀρχαί of all things, and hence the elements of numbers are the elements of all things (*Metaph.* 985<sup>b</sup>25 and 986<sup>a</sup>1); (3) things exist by μίμησις of the numbers (*Metaph.* 987<sup>b</sup>11). Now Cherniss claims that (1) is incompatible with each of the others.<sup>17</sup> Guthrie is surely right to point out (*HGP* I, 230), that, far from their being incompatible, (1) entails (2). His attempt to show the compatibility of (1) with (3) is not, however, so happy. This attempt is made by means of three explications of (3), which I will now examine.

First Guthrie reminds us that 'Aristotle was able to equate Pythagorean *mimesis* with Plato's notion of physical objects as "sharing in" the Ideas' (*HGP* I, 230). But (1) and (3) would seem to be equally incompatible, whether μέθεξις replaces μίμησις or not, so this does nothing to solve the problem.

Second, Guthrie notes that '*mimesis* meant acting as much as imitation', reminds us that drama began as a religious ritual, asserts that remembering that Pythagorean thought was primarily religious is a necessary condition for understanding it, and draws a parallel between Dionysian worship and Pythagorean beliefs in universal kinship and transmigration (*HGP* I, 230–31). In so far as this is supposed to be an argument and not just a tenuous train of associations, it would seem to go as follows: One meaning of μίμησις is 'acting'; acting was originally a religious activity among the Greeks; the Pythagoreans were primarily a religious group; Dionysiac religious worship involved a supposed identity of the worshippers with Bacchus and his divine attendants, and Pythagorean beliefs 'were in the full stream of these religious ideas'; therefore μίμησις might well have meant, for the Pythagoreans, what we or Aristotle would call identity. But it is obvious that this string of statements, reminiscent of some of Cornford's suggestions,<sup>18</sup> does not show the likelihood of the conclusion in the absence, at least, of any evidence of Dionysiac use of μίμησις to characterise the relationship between the worshippers and Dionysius and his attendants.

Third, Guthrie says that the Pythagoreans 'claimed to have made the tremendous discovery that the world of nature was constructed on a mathematical plan' (*HGP* I, 231), and that it is not surprising that they expressed this by both (1) and (3). I.e., both (1) and (3) should be seen as expressions of

(4) The world of nature is constructed on a mathematical plan.

Now the argument for the claim that this need not be surprising is the argument dealt with in the previous paragraph. But it is possible that in making this claim Guthrie is also confusing the *meaning* of, say, (1) for the Pythagoreans with their *evidence* or *grounds* for asserting (1). That is, it may be that the most that the Pythagoreans were entitled to say,

In *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. I (Cambridge, 1962) (henceforth cited as *HGP* I), after having repeated many of the things mentioned above (although not the two arguments which I characterized as invalid), Guthrie says: 'These remarks about Aristotle's merits as an historian are expanded in Guthrie, *JHS*, 1957 (i), 35–41' (p. 43 n.).

<sup>16</sup> See his remarks on some of Aristotle's interpretations of Heraclitus, *HGP* I, 437–8.

<sup>17</sup> 'The one certain point from which we must start is the incompatibility of the thesis, "things are numbers," with the other two'. (*ACPP*, 387.)

<sup>18</sup> See F. M. Cornford, 'Mysticism and Science in the Pythagorean Tradition', *CQ*, 16 (1922), esp. 142–3.

on the evidence available, was (4). But this does not, of course, mean that when they said (1) they really meant, or were really just expressing, (4). Aristotle, indeed, goes to some pains to emphasise that they thought that things actually were numbers.<sup>19</sup>

Cherniss points out (*ACPP*, 392) that there is only one passage in which Aristotle attributes (3) to the Pythagoreans, and that this is in a context in which Aristotle is trying to assimilate Plato to the Pythagoreans as much as possible. It is not necessary to believe Cherniss' further speculations about the influence of Aristoxenus in order to think that this may well be a distortion on Aristotle's part. Certainly, it seems to me, Guthrie's proposed reconciliation of (3) with the other attributions does not go through, and it may be that his belief in Aristotle's general credibility has led him into what I think a mistaken attempt.

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<sup>19</sup> See Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, ad 986<sup>a</sup> 16.