

ARISTOTLE, *METAPHYSICS* 981 b 13–25:  
A FRAGMENT OF THE ARISTOTELIAN  
*ON PHILOSOPHY*

Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 981 b 13–25, reads as follows: “At first he who invented any art or technique whatever which went beyond the common and ordinary perception of man was naturally admired by men, and this not only because there was something useful in these inventions, but also because he was thought to be wise as well as superior to the rest. However, as more and more arts were invented, and some of these arts were concerned with the necessities of life, others with recreation (or pleasure), the inventors of the latter were naturally regarded as being wiser than the inventors of the former, because their branches of knowledge did not aim at utility. Hence, when all such inventions [namely, those inventions which did cope with the necessities of life or survival and those which were concerned with pleasure or leisure] had been made, the sciences which are not concerned with giving pleasure or with providing the necessities of life, were discovered, and this first in those places where man first began to have leisure [because he had succeeded in solving the problems of survival and subsequently had attained a state of technological efficiency]. This is the reason why the mathematical (or liberal) arts were started in Egypt. For there the priestly cast was in a position to enjoy leisure.”<sup>1)</sup>

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1) Similar views can be found in Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982 b 22–28: “It was when almost all of the necessities of life as well as the things that make for comfort and leisure had been secured that [philosophic] knowledge [that is, the scientific pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge] began to be sought. Evidently we do not seek this knowledge for the sake of any other advantage ... and we pursue this science as the only free science, for it alone exists for its own sake.” In his paper, “A Fragment of Aristotle’s *On Philosophy*? Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982 b 11–983 a 11,” *Rivista Critica di Storia della Filosofia*, vol. 27, fasc. 3 (1972), pp. 287–292, the present author has attempted to show that *Metaphysics* 982 b 11–983 a 11, is probably a fragment of the Aristotelian *On Philosophy*. – In the *On Philosophy* Aristotle insisted that philosophy started with the Magi. See Diogenes Laertius I (Proem.) 8 (6); frag. 8, Rose<sup>2</sup>; frag. 6, Rose<sup>3</sup>; frag. 6, Walzer; frag. 6, Ross; frag. 11, Untersteiner. In *Meteorologica* 352 b 21, and *Politics* 1329 b 32, Aristotle maintains that the Egyptians were the most ancient of men.

Closer scrutiny of book A of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* should divulge that there exists a definite "break" between the account contained in *Metaphysics* 980 a 21-981 b 13, and that found in 981 b 13-25; between the report found in 981 b 13-25, and that contained in 981 b 25-29; and between the content of 981 b 25-29 and the report found in 981 b 29 ff. *Metaphysics* 980 a 21-981 b 13, which incidentally may also refer what Aristotle had said in his *Protrepticus*<sup>2</sup>), discusses in an essentially philosophic manner the progressive sequence of sense perception (*αἰσθησις*), experience (*ἐμπειρία*), and the art of scientific reasoning (*τέχνη*) as well as the causes (*αἰτίαι*) of this philosophic progression. Then suddenly and without any transitional remarks Aristotle deals with the "external history" of this progressive sequence (*Metaphysics* 981 b 13-25). Subsequently, and again without a transitional remark, Aristotle (981 b 25-29) inserts a sort of excursion which seems to be somewhat out of place. Then (981 b 29 ff.) he resumes the narrative interrupted by *Metaphysics* 981 b 13-35 and 981 b 25-29.

It is contended here that the insertion found in Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 981 b 13-25, refers to what the Stagirite formerly had said in his *On Philosophy*<sup>3</sup>) about the history or vicissitudes of philosophy, or to be more specific, about the cultural and intellectual progress of man from utter "survival primitivism" necessitated by some major natural catastrophe to the sophistication of purely philosophic speculation for the sake of philosophic speculation.

It is commonly known that in several of his writings Plato mentions great natural catastrophes which had taken place in the remote past<sup>4</sup>). These catastrophes, Plato insists, occurred and re-occurred in long intervals<sup>5</sup>). They destroyed or wiped out all or almost all of the economic, technological, cultural and intellectual accomplishments of the past, thus compelling technical and intellectual civilization to start all over again from most primitive beginnings<sup>6</sup>). Aristotle likewise mentions such cyclic

2) See W. Jaeger, *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development* (Oxford, 1948), pp. 68 ff., and *ibid.*, p. 173.

3) In book I of the lost *On Philosophy*, to be exact.

4) See Plato, *Timaeus* 22 A, and *ibid.*, 22 C; 22 D; 23 A; Plato, *Critias* 109 D, and *ibid.*, 111 B; 112 A; Plato, *Laws* 677 A ff., and *ibid.*, 702 A.

5) Plato, *Timaeus* 22 D, and *ibid.*, 23 A; Plato, *Critias* 111 B.

6) Plato, *Timaeus* 23 A ff. These cyclic catastrophes also wipe out all memories or recollections of previous cultures and cultural or technological achievements. See also Plato, *Statesman* 268 E ff., and *ibid.*, 273 A; Plato, *Critias* 109 E; Plato, *Laws* 677 D ff.

catastrophes which occur at great intervals<sup>7</sup>). According to Aristotle, "great cyclic floods" or deluges destroy part of mankind, including parts of human civilization. But these great cyclic deluges, which are followed by prolonged periods of gradual desiccation, do not always happen in the same regions of the earth<sup>8</sup>). It is fair to surmise that in his *On Philosophy*, book I (which along with other matters discusses the history of philosophy), Aristotle also touched upon the theory of the "great deluges", and that he did so in order to explain the cyclic "ups and downs" in the history of philosophy and that of intellectual culture in general<sup>9</sup>). This is also brought out in the report of Censorinus, *De Die Natali* XVIII. 11, where we are informed that "there is a year which Aristotle called not the great year but the greatest year. This greatest year is completed when the spheres of the sun, the moon and the five planets return together to the same constellation with which they were formerly in conjunction<sup>10</sup>). The winter of this [greatest year] is the occasion of a cataclysm which we call 'deluge'." This passage from Censorinus, which has been identified as a fragment of Aristotle's *On Philosophy*<sup>11</sup>), maintains that Aristotle believed in a "greatest year" (*maximus annus*), which is a period of great catastrophes, or to be more exact, of disastrous floods which inundate certain parts of the earth thus wiping out all technical and cultural attainments

7) See Aristotle, *Meteorologica* 339 b 19ff., and *ibid.*, 352 a 28ff.; Aristotle, *De Caelo* 270 b 16ff.; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1074 a 38ff., and *ibid.*, 1074 b 10; Aristotle, *Politics* 1264 a 3ff., and *ibid.*, 1269 a 5ff.; 1329 b 24ff.

8) Aristotle, *Meteorologica* 352 a 28ff.

9) It is commonly held that book I of the lost *On Philosophy* also discussed the beginnings and evolution of present-day philosophy. Synesius, *Calviti Encomium* 22. 85 C, relates that "Aristotle called certain ancient proverbs relics which were saved by their conciseness and cleverness when ancient or pre-diluvian philosophy perished in the wide-spread destruction of mankind by the great deluge. Synesius' account is called a fragment of Aristotle's *On Philosophy* by V. Rose (frag. 2, Rose<sup>2</sup>); frag. 13, Rose<sup>3</sup>), R. Walzer (frag. 8, Walzer), W. D. Ross (frag. 8, Ross), and M. Untersteiner (frag. 1, Untersteiner).

10) See here also Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* II. 20. 51-52.

11) See, for instance, B. Effe, *Studien zur Kosmologie und Theologie der Aristotelischen Schrift "Über die Philosophie,"* Zetemata, Heft 50 (Munich, 1970), pp. 64ff. It will be noted that in their respective collections of fragments of Aristotle's lost works V. Rose (frag. 25, Rose<sup>3</sup>), R. Walzer (frag. 19, Walzer), and W. D. Ross (frag. 19, Ross) assign this fragment (and Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* II. 20. 51-52) to the lost Aristotelian *Protrepticus* rather than to the *On Philosophy*. M. Untersteiner, in his *Aristotele: Della Filosofia, Temi e Testi*, no. 10 (Rome, 1963), does not list Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* II. 20. 51-52, among the authentic fragments of the *On Philosophy*.

of the past, reducing the survivors to a most primitive subsistence level<sup>12</sup>).

The theory of recurrent though localized great deluges should also explain Aristotle's insistence that "each art and each science has often been developed as far as possible and has again perished [in one of the recurring though localized great floods]"<sup>13</sup>; that "we ought to remember that we should not disregard the experiences of the ages... For almost everything has been found out [during some previous epoch]"<sup>14</sup>; that "the primaeval inhabitants, whether they were born of the earth or were the survivors of some destruction, may be supposed to have been no better [or worse] than ordinary or even foolish people among ourselves"<sup>15</sup>; and that "the same ideas... occur and re-occur in the minds of men, not just once, but again and again"<sup>16</sup>). In brief, the recurrence of cyclic local deluges temporarily reduced men to a cultural primitivism. They compelled men to start from the beginning by concentrating first on the absolute necessities of plain physical survival. Only after these problems were somewhat resolved, man progressed technologically and thus managed to improve his material status. When he had reached a certain level of material comfort he began to enjoy leisure and because of this leisure he was able to engage in philosophic speculation<sup>17</sup>).

In this connection it might be interesting to note that in his *De Communi Mathematicae Scientiae Liber* (ed. N. Festa, Leipzig,

12) See, in general, A.-H. Chroust, "The 'Great Deluge' in Aristotle's *On Philosophy*," *Antiquité Classique*, vol. 42, no. 1 (1973), pp. 113-122.

13) Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1074 b 10ff. See also Pseudo-Ocellus (Lucretius), *De Universi Natura Libellum* 38ff., in: R. Harder, *Ocellus Lucanus*, Text und Kommentar, Neue Philologische Untersuchungen I (Berlin, 1926).

14) Aristotle, *Politics* 1264 a 3ff. Similar notions can be found in Plato, *Statesman* 274C; Plato, *Timaeus* 22D; Plato, *Laws* 677B.

15) Aristotle, *Politics* 1269 a 5ff.

16) Aristotle, *De Caelo* 270 b 19-21. See also Aristotle, *Meteorologica* 339 b 20.

17) See, for instance, Philoponus, *Comment. in Nicomachi Arithmeticae Isagogen* (ed. R. Hoche, Leipzig, 1864) I. 1 ff.: "[According to Aristotle] men perish in diverse ways... and above all by more violent cataclysms [that is, by the great recurrent deluges],... [But] herdsmen and those who have their occupation in the mountains or the foothills are saved... Those who are saved from the water must then live in the highlands... These survivors, then, not having the means of plain sustenance, were compelled by necessity to think of useful devices, such as the grinding of grain, sowing, and the like; and they gave the name of 'wisdom' to such thought, that is, to thought which discovered what was useful regarding the necessities of life [or survival], and the name of 'wise' to anyone who had such thoughts. And then they devised the arts, ... that is, something which is not limited to the

1891), Iamblichus stresses the fact that the acquisition of philosophic knowledge is (a) possible, (b) useful, and (c) relatively easy<sup>18</sup>). Then suddenly and without a transitional comment (*ibid.*, 83, 6-22, Festa)<sup>19</sup>) Iamblichus shifts to a historical account in which the preoccupation with philosophic issues is called the latest among all human endeavours. After the "great deluge", we are told here, men were compelled to concentrate all their efforts on plain physical survival. Only after they had achieved this, they developed certain "arts" or techniques which also gave them some leisure. But now, because men are able to enjoy leisure, great and novel advances have been made in the domains of geometry, abstract reasoning and the other fields of learning. This cultural and intellectual progress, which actually started from modest beginnings<sup>20</sup>), soon turned out to be greater and more rapid<sup>21</sup>) than

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necessities of life, but which is concerned with the creation of beauty and elegance. And this, too, men have called 'wisdom,' and its discoverers 'wise' ... And again, they turned their attention to politics, and invented laws and all the things which hold together a body politic. And such thoughts, too, they called 'wisdom' ... Then they went further and turned to ... 'nature,' and this they called by the special name of 'natural science,' and the possessors of this science we call 'wise' as regards the problems connected with nature. Fifthly, men applied the name [of wisdom or wise] to the preoccupation with things divine ... and called the knowledge of these things the 'highest wisdom.'" V. Rose (frag. 2, Rose<sup>2</sup>; frag. 13, Rose<sup>3</sup>), R. Walzer (frag. 8, Walzer), W. D. Ross (frag. 8, Ross), and M. Untersteiner (frag. 1, Untersteiner) regard this passage from Philoponus an authentic fragment of Aristotle's *On Philosophy*. See also I. Bywater, "Aristotle's Dialogue *On Philosophy*," *Journal of Philology*, vol. 7 (1877), pp. 64 ff.; E. Bignone, *L'Aristotele Perduto e la Formazione Filosofica di Epicuro*, vol. II (Florence, 1936), pp. 511 ff.; A. J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, II: *Le Dieu Cosmique* (Paris, 1949), pp. 587 ff. Other scholars, however, have denied that this passage is an authentic fragment of the Aristotelian *On Philosophy*. See, for instance, W. Haase, "Ein Vermeintliches Aristoteles-Fragment bei Johannes Philoponos," *Synusia - Festgabe für W. Schadewaldt* (Pfullingen, 1965), pp. 323 ff.

18) Iamblichus, *De Communi Mathematicae Scientiae Liber* 82, 14-84, 5 (Festa). It is interesting to note that in his *Protrepticus* 40, 12-41, 5 (ed. H. Pistelli, Leipzig, 1888), Iamblichus discusses the same topic. It is widely held that the *Protrepticus* of Iamblichus follows rather closely Aristotle's lost *Protrepticus*.

19) This passage is listed among the fragments of the Aristotelian *Protrepticus* by V. Rose (frag. 1, Rose<sup>2</sup>; frag. 53, Rose<sup>3</sup>), R. Walzer (frag. 8, Walzer), and W. D. Ross (frag. 8, Ross). See also I. Düring, *Aristotle's Protrepticus: An Attempt at Reconstruction*, *Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia*, vol. XII (Göteborg, 1961), p. 131, and *ibid.*, pp. 228-229. Düring denies that Iamblichus, *De Communi Mathematicae Scientiae Liber* 83, 6-22 (Festa) is an authentic fragment of Aristotle's *Protrepticus*.

20) See here also Aristotle, *De Caelo* 292 a 15 ff.

the advances in the arts and techniques, and this without the inducement of any material reward. Needless to say, Iamblichus' reference to the three post-diluvian stages, namely, the age of plain physical survival, the age of the arts and techniques which grant man some leisure, and the age of philosophy – incidentally a sequence which is identical with that mentioned in *Metaphysics* 981 b 13–25 – ultimately goes back to the *On Philosophy*. Hence, Iamblichus, *De Communi Mathematicae Scientiae Liber* 83, 6–22 (Festa), too, may be called a fragment of the Aristotelian *On Philosophy*<sup>22</sup>). The only difference between *Metaphysics* 981 b 13–25, and *De Communi Mathematicae Scientiae Liber* 83, 6–22 (Festa), is that Iamblichus refers to the “great deluge”<sup>23</sup>), while *Metaphysics* 981 b 13–25, omits such a reference.

In the light of the evidence submitted here it is reasonable to surmise that Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 981 b 13–25, which incidentally is a sort of “historical report”, summarizes what the Stagirite previously had said in book I of his *On Philosophy* about the gradual technological, cultural and intellectual progression of man after one of the great cataclysms or floods. In this sense *Metaphysics* 981 b 13–25 may properly be called a fragment of the Aristotelian *On Philosophy*<sup>24</sup>). It is actually a highly compressed “out-of-place insertion” which has been taken from another work, namely, from the *On Philosophy*.

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21) See here also Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes* III. 28. 69: “Aristotle [maintains] ... that since [in the domain of philosophy] much progress has been made in a few years, philosophy will in a short time be brought to completion.” This passage has been assigned to Aristotle's *Protrepticus* by V. Rose (frag. 1, Rose<sup>2</sup>; frag. 53, Rose<sup>3</sup>), R. Walzer (frag. 8, Walzer), and W. D. Ross (frag. 8, Ross). It is quite possible, however, that this passage is actually a fragment of Aristotle's *On Philosophy*, that is, of book I of the *On Philosophy*. – In *Rhetoric* 1363 a 21 ff., Aristotle insists that “things are done easily when they are done without pain [or without great labor] or speedily.”

22) See also I. Düring, *op. cit. supra*, note 19, pp. 228–229.

23) See P. Aubenque, *Le Problème de l'Être chez Aristote* (Paris, 1962), p. 74, note 2; A. J. Festugière, *op. cit. supra*, note 17, pp. 225 ff.; I. Bywater, *op. cit. supra*, note 17, pp. 69 ff.

24) Against the thesis that *Metaphysics* 981 b 13–25, is a fragment of the Aristotelian *On Philosophy* it might possibly be argued that in book A of the *Metaphysics* (981 b 23–24), Aristotle insists that philosophy began with the Egyptians, while in the *On Philosophy* he apparently maintains that it started with the Magi. See note 1, *supra*. See also W. Jaeger, *op. cit. supra*, note 2, pp. 128 ff.