A REINTERPRETATION
OF AELIUS ARISTIDES 33.30–31 K.

IVARS AVOTINS

The University of Western Ontario

As we learn from the *Lives of the Sophists* of Philostratus, even the greatest sophists of the second century A.D. not only declaimed but also taught. Those who clearly did not need to teach for a living nevertheless had students.[1] For whatever reasons, teaching appears to have been considered an integral part of a sophist's career. As could be expected, not each of the successful sophists of the day was automatically a willing or successful instructor. Among them one of the least popular appears to have been Aelius Aristides, the well-known Smyrnaean sophist and valetudinarian.[2] His empty establishment was remembered in this well-known distich:

χαίρετ' 'Αριστείδου τοῦ ῥήτορος ἑπτὰ μαθηταί,
   τέσσαρες οἱ τοῖχοι καὶ τρία συψελία.[3]

Failure to teach also threatened at one time to deprive him of his immunity (*ateleia*).[4] Aristides himself complains about poor attendance at his declamations in his work Πρὸς τοὺς αἰτιωμένους ὅτι μὴ μελετῴη.[5] According to him, those who ought to have hung on his lips preferred to luxuriate at the baths.[6] In section 30 he states the chief reason which in his opinion caused them to lead this dissolute life; in section 31 he refutes

---

[1] The most obvious example is, of course, Herodes Atticus, the richest Athenian of his age. Among others in the same league one could name the Ephesian Damianus (*V.S.* 605–6) and the Thessalian Hippodromus (*V.S.* 617).

[2] For his life and a representative bibliography see G. W. Bowersock (ed.), *Approaches to the Second Sophistic* (University Park 1974) 31–32 and 36–37. A more detailed treatment can be found in C. A. Behr, *Aelius Aristides and the Sacred Tales* (Amsterdam 1968), A. Boulanger, *Aelius Aristide et la sophistique dans la province d'Asie au IIe siècle de notre ère* (Paris 1923), and B. P. Reardon, *Courants littéraires grecs des IIe et IIIe siècles après J.-C.* (Paris 1971) 120–154 and *passim*. For the difficulties of Aristides with respect to his immunity (*ateleia*) see the account of G. W. Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire* (Oxford 1969) 36–41.

[3] F. W. Lenz, *The Aristeides Prolegomena* (Leiden 1959) 117.

[4] Bowersock (above, note 2).

[5] B. Keil (ed.), *Aelii Aristidis Smyrnaei quae supersunt* II (Berlin 1898) Or. 33.

[6] 33.25–29 K.

their reasoning. Although in a general way the meaning of these passages
is fairly clear I think that they contain parts which have so far not been
properly understood.[7] In this article I shall attempt to explain them.

This is the Greek text of sections 30–31 Keil:[8]

τὸ δὲ πλείστην ἅπασιν ἁπάντων ὀλιγωρίαν ἐμπε-   30
ποιηκὸς ἡ ἀδιήγητος αὕτη φθορά. πᾶς γάρ τις
δεδιὼς μὴ φθάσειεν προδιαφθαρείς, αὑτὸν ἐλπίζων
ἀπόλλυσιν, πάντα μὲν τὰ αἴσχιστα ἐν κέρδους τάξει
τιθέμενος, πᾶν δ᾽ ὅσον χρηστὸν ζημίαν καὶ πόνους
ἄλλως ὑπολαμβάνων, ὡς εἰ μὴ ἀμφότερα λωβηθεὶς
ἀπίοι παρὰ τοὺς πλείονας, καὶ τὴν γνώμην καὶ τὸ
σῶμα, οὐκ ἐσομένης αὐτῷ χώρας ἐκεῖ. τὸ δ᾽,   31
οἶμαι, πᾶν τοὐναντίον ἦν, ἐπειδὴ τοιαῦτα
ἐφέστηκεν· ἀπολαῦσαι τοῦ βίου τὰ κάλλιστα, ἕως
ἔξεστιν, ἵν᾽ εἰ μὲν τῆς σωζομένης μοίρας εἴημεν,
ἐν τοῖς καλλίστοις σωζώμεθα, ἐν μαθήμασι καὶ
λόγοις, καὶ μὴ τὴν ὕειον ἁρμονίαν ἡρμοσμένοι
νύκτα ἐκ νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέραν ἐξ ἡμέρας κυλινδ-
ώμεθα, εἰ δὲ μή, κέρδος γ᾽ ᾖ πᾶν ὅ τί τις
προὔλαβεν.

One of the sections in the Greek which I believe has not been under-
stood correctly is the phrase εἰ μὲν τῆς σωζομένης μοίρας εἴημεν . . .
Reiske explains it as follows: "Si superstites a morte erimus, neque animus
cum morte prorsus interibit." The next conditional clause (εἰ δὲ μή . . .)
he interprets thus: "Quod si vero in morte funditus perimus, id saltem
lucri feramus ut literati excedamus."[9] He understands Aristides as offering
two possibilities: either we survive in some way after death or we do not.
As far as I know, this interpretation is shared by all scholars who have
expressed an opinion on this sentence.[10]

It seems to me much more likely that by σώζεσθαι Aristides meant
escaping death in this life rather than surviving bodily death. The bare
σώζω in non-Christian Greek does not normally refer to survival after
death. Proponents of this unusual meaning ought to adduce other
occurrences.[11]

---

[7] Reardon, too, writes, "le passage comporte des obscurités" (above, note 2, p. 153).

[8] The textual variations given in Keil's *app. crit.* do not affect my argument.

[9] All statements by Reiske have been taken from W. Dindorf (ed.), *Aristides ex recen-
sione Guilielmi Dindorfii* II (Leipzig 1829) 582–83, *app. crit.*

[10] August Hug, *Leben und Werke des Rhetors Aristides* (Solothurn 1912) 100, Boulanger
(above, note 2) 196, and U. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, "Der Rhetor Aristeides," *Sitzungs-
berichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 28 (1925) 348.

[11] No examples of such meaning in non-Christian writings are given in LSJ or, for Aris-
tides, in W. Schmid, *Der Atticismus in seinen Hauptvertretern* (Stuttgart 1887–97).

Furthermore, in section 31 Aristides is refuting the justification for debauchery offered in section 30. In this section a profligate life is said to be caused by men's fear of premature death. Anticipating such death men abandon honourable conduct as burdensome and without profit and give themselves over to all that is most disgraceful. Section 31 clearly contains Aristides' refutation of this reasoning. When such a situation impends—ἐπειδὴ τοιαῦτα ἐφέστηκε—[12]we must enjoy the finest things in life rather than comport ourselves like swine. Clearly this swinish life points back to τὰ αἴσχιστα in section 30 and τὰ κάλλιστα refers to πᾶν ὅσον χρηστόν (ibid.). In other words, even if one fears premature death—μὴ φθάσειεν προδιαφθαρείς—he should nevertheless remain engaged in the best pursuits.

In the next sentence, when giving his reasons for preferring honourable pursuits, Aristides considers two alternatives: εἰ μὲν τῆς σωζομένης μοίρας εἴημεν . . . εἰ δὲ μή . . . Since these alternatives refer to survival and non-survival, an unforced interpretation will connect them by preference with the concern for survival already found in section 30: μὴ φθάσειεν δια-φθαρείς. Now, the fear of dying before one's time is here obviously in no way concerned with afterlife. If, as I maintain, the two if-clauses pick up this fear and consider its implications, then they too should be concerned with life here and now. Aristides, then, would be considering two possi-bilities: one who fears premature death will either die prematurely or will not. If not, he will belong to the σωζομένη μοῖρα. The two conditional clauses refer to these two possibilities, neither of them involving the ques-tion of afterlife. It seems, then, that both the ordinary meaning of σώζω and the connection in the context of sections 30–31 of the notions προδιαφθαρῆναι and σώζεσθαι oppose the assumption that in section 31 Aristides was considering survival after death.

Another point in this work requiring elucidation is the exact meaning of φθορά in section 30. Reiske rendered it as "corruptio morum, luxuries."[13] He explained the passage as follows: "Omnis enim metuens ne prius pereat, h.e. moriatur, quam illis imaginariis voluptatibus, balneis, natatione in flumine Melete, contemplatione statuarum et similibus frua-tur. φθορά εστ corruptio morum, luxuries."[14]

This interpretation has two weaknesses. First, it does not bring out in section 30 the force of πλείστην in πλείστην . . . ὀλιγωρίαν. The πλείστην implies that the φθορά was the chief of the causes responsible for the ἁπάντων ὀλιγωρία. A chief cause implies lesser causes. In what

---

[12] τοιαῦτα is vague but must in the context refer to what has just preceded.

[13] Above, note 9. Behr's translation (P. Aelius Aristides. The Complete Works, II: Ora-tions XVII–LIII [Leiden 1981] 171), the only other available to me, also renders φθορά as corruption; however, he also interprets τοιαῦτα in section 31 as "such corruption." There-fore, I am not certain precisely what meaning Behr intends to attribute to φθορά.

[14] Above, note 9.

immediately precedes, the only other causes given are the different types
of baths. If the φθορά is the chief cause of the ὀλιγωρία, it should be a
cause different in some way from these other causes. Yet, Reiske inter-
prets the φθορά precisely as the passion for the various types of waters. If
he were correct, there would have been no point in adding πλείστη to
ὀλιγωρία. What we require is a φθορά different from the profligacies
mentioned earlier.

   Also, the interpretation of Reiske would give an unlikely explanation
for the preference of men for shameful pursuits. Aristides would then be
asserting that the fear of premature death afflicts all men. Afraid that in
the time remaining to them they might not be able to experience every
type of dissipation, they then concentrate on debauchery to the complete
neglect of the higher things. Even a casual acquaintance with the world
at large would have revealed to Aristides that this explanation of human
conduct did not agree with the observable evidence. It is far-fetched,
therefore, to attribute such notions to him.

   Finally, the natural flow of the Greek indicates that it was the φθορά that
was causing the fear of premature death rather than being caused by it.

   All these difficulties disappear if φθορά is taken to refer to pestilence,
the disease, possibly smallpox, which broke out in Cassius' army at Nisibis
in the summer of A.D. 165 and was brought back to Europe by the army
of Lucius Verus on its return from Seleucia in A.D. 166.[15] Aristides himself
mentions this disease in the present work when he reminds his audience
that he had spoken to them about the same matter when the pestilence
was at its peak.[16] Its injurious effects may very well still have been felt in
Smyrna, especially if we follow Behr in dating the present work to Sep-
tember A.D. 166.[17] The equation of φθορά with the pestilence is supported
by one of Aristides' sources here. It does not seem to have been previously
noticed that at the beginning of section 30 he is leaning very heavily on
the description of Thucydides of the Athenian pestilence during the
Peloponnesian war.[18] Even more significantly for the interpretation of our
passage, he borrows from that section of Thucydides which remarks on
the deleterious effects of the pestilence on the morals of the Athenians.
This is the Thucydidean observation: πρῶτόν τε ἦρξε καὶ ἐς τἆλλα τῇ
πόλει ἐπὶ πλέον ἀνομίας τὸ νόσημα.[19] Here Thucydides implies that the
moral effects of the disease persisted even after it had run its course.[20]

---

[15] *Hist. Aug.*, Vita Veri 8.1-4, Cassius Dio 71.2.4, and Behr (above, note 2) 96.

[16] 33.6 K.

[17] Above, note 13, p. 396, note 1.

[18] Thuc. 2.53.

[19] Above, note 18.

[20] This implication is pointed out by A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thu-
cydides* II (Oxford 1966) 159, and given great prominence by H.-P. Stahl, *Thukydides. Die
Stellung des Menschen im geschichtlichen Prozess* (München 1966) 79 ff.

Similar effects are ascribed to his φθορά by Aristides: τὸ δὲ πλείστην ἅπασιν ἁπάντων ὀλιγωρίαν ἐμπεποιηκὸς ἡ ἀδιήγητος αὕτη φθορά. Thucydides furthermore remarks that because of the fear of imminent death all things pleasurable were considered to be honourable and useful as well: καὶ τὸ μὲν προσταλαιπωρεῖν τῷ δόξαντι καλῷ οὐδεὶς πρόθυμος ἦν, ἄδηλον νομίζων εἰ πρὶν ἐπ᾿ αὐτὸ ἐλθεῖν διαφθαρήσεται. ὅτι δὲ ἤδη ἡδὺ . . . τοῦτο καὶ καλὸν καὶ χρήσιμον κατέστη.[21] The indebtedness of Aristides here is absolutely clear. He shares with Thucydides the notion of premature death, the uselessness of toiling at honourable pursuits, and the equation of the pleasurable with the useful. The aftereffects of the φθορά on the citizens of Smyrna were, according to Aristides, similar to the effects of the earlier pestilence on the citizens of Athens.

Although the debt of Aristides here to Thucydides cannot be denied, it could perhaps be argued that he could have borrowed from Thucydides the description of the aftereffects of the pestilence but connected them not with the same disease but rather with some other affliction, not necessarily a disease, which could produce similar consequences. However, the superior suitability of the meaning pestilence for φθορά in the passage of Aristides, as well as the presence of a similar disease in Smyrna, speaks against such an assumption.

As I mentioned before, the interpretation of section 30 in Aristides would encounter fewer difficulties if the φθορά were interpreted as the pestilence of the 160s rather than a mere corruptio morum and luxuries. The adjective πλείστην in πλείστην . . . ὀλιγωρίαν would be given its full force. A deadly disease might obviously induce greater neglect of everything than a propensity for baths. Also, it would now be the φθορά that induced the fear of early death. As was pointed out above, this interpretation suits the natural flow of the Greek better than making it mean that the fear of death caused the φθορά.

Finally, we would not have to wonder any more why the normal condition of ancient human life—the possibility of death at any time—would so drastically have affected the sense of values of the audience of Aristides. However, if the φθορά was the pestilence, then the memory of the dead and dying was very likely to maintain the fear of imminent death and, in consequence, to induce the changes in behaviour observed by Thucydides and Aristides.

Therefore, I propose that φθορά in the passage of Aristides was meant to refer to the pestilence present in Smyrna around A.D. 165–166. This interpretation is also entirely compatible with the meaning of τῆς σωζομένης μοίρας in section 31 proposed by me earlier in this paper. When such a situation (sc. the dangers of the disease) impends (τὰ

---

[21] Above, note 18.

τοιαῦτα ἐφέστηκε), says Aristides, we must enjoy the finest things (rather than τὰ αἴσχιστα) as long as we may. εἰ μὲν τῆς σῳζομένης μοίρας εἴημεν refers to surviving the disease, εἰ δὲ μή to the opposite.