

A Note on the Simile of the Rout in the *Posterior Analytics* ii 19

James Lesher

In the *Posterior Analytics* (*APo*) ii 19, Aristotle compares the way in which sense perception (αἴσθησις) gives rise to knowledge of the universal (τὸ καθόλου) with the way in which one soldier's ceasing his flight from the enemy leads other soldiers to do the same (100a12-13).¹ While the philosophical lesson appears to be that the human soul has the capacity to retain and organize multiple sense impressions (just as soldiers have the capacity to stop and form themselves into an effective fighting unit), the simile's concluding phrase, ἕως ἐπὶ ἀρχὴν ἦλθεν, has no clear meaning. In Lesher 2010a I argued that the phrase should not be taken to mean 'until the soldiers return to the original location or arrangement' since that would suggest that in grasping the universal the mind returns to a prior state or condition (a view proposed by Plato but rejected by Aristotle at *APo* 99b25-7). I also noted that no surviving ancient account of a battle makes any mention of soldiers who cease their flight from the enemy and 'come or go to an ἀρχή. Accordingly, I proposed that we take the subject of the verb ἦλθε to be the stabilizing of the sensible image in the soul and the ἀρχή toward which this process advances to be 'the ἀρχή of art and scientific knowledge' mentioned in the previous sentence.

It seems clear that the process Aristotle was seeking to explain consists (initially) in the stabilizing of the sensible image (99b36-110a2) and (subsequently) in the situating of the universal within a network of broader universals (100a15-b3). We also have clear textual warrant for identifying the universal with 'that from which arises the ἀρχή or "starting point" of art and scientific knowledge' in so far as *Metaphysics* i 1.981a5-7 and a24-31 speaks of the universal generalization as the hallmark of art and scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, one other way of reading the problematic phrase deserves consideration.²

We can begin by reviewing the two other occurrences of the rout simile in the Aristotelian corpus.³ In *Problems* xviii the topic under discussion is why we

¹ As the simile is usually quoted and translated: οἷον ἐν μάχῃ τροπῆς γενομένης ἐνὸς στάντος ἕτερος ἔστη, εἴθ' ἕτερος, ἕως ἐπὶ ἀρχὴν ἦλθεν. 'Just as in battle, when a rout happens, if one stops, another stops, then another, until it comes to a starting point' (100a12-13).

² The existing alternative readings are: (1) until the original arrangement or formation has been restored; (2) until the process reaches the first man who gave way; (3) until the process reaches the place where the rout began; (4) until the soldiers reach the starting point of a new battle, and (5) until the soldiers have achieved a position of strength (reading ἀλζην for ἀρχήν). For a more detailed review of the options, see the account in Lesher 2010b.

³ Although some portions of the *Problems* cannot be attributed to Aristotle, both doctrines

sometimes have difficulty staying awake and yet sometimes have difficulty falling asleep. During his explanation the author states that:

when the intelligence is fixed on one thing (ὅταν στῆ πρὸς ἓν ἡ διάνοια) and does not keep changing from one subject to another, every function in that region (the inactivity of which is sleep) is at a standstill (ἴσταται καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ὅσα περὶ τὸν τόπον). Similarly during a rout (ἐν τροπῇ) if the leader halts (ἐνὸς γὰρ κυρίου στάντος), all the forces under his command halt also (καὶ τὰ ἄλλα μόρια ἴστασθαι πέφυκεν). For naturally that which is light rises, while the heavy sinks.⁴ (917a29-33)

In short, in our mental life as on a field of battle, a calming down in one region of activity can lead to a broader calming down. The players in this version of the simile are ‘the leader’ (ὁ κύριος) and all the forces under his command (literally: ‘the other units’, τὰ ἄλλα μόρια), with these corresponding to the ‘one thing’ that is fixed on by our intelligence (στῆ πρὸς ἓν ἡ διάνοια) and ‘the other functions in that region’ (τὰ ἄλλα ὅσα περὶ τὸν τόπον).

In *Problems* xxvi the matter under discussion is why a cloudy sunset serves as a harbinger of stormy weather on the next day. After stating that the strength of the sun’s rays may or may not be sufficient to clear away any clouds remaining at the end of the day,⁵ the author explains that when some portion of a cloud remains:

the rest of the air quickly densifies (ταχὺ δὲ συνίσταται καὶ ὁ ἄλλος), because a beginning of the process has already been made (διὰ τὸ ἔχειν ἀρχήν) and there is a rallying point to receive and collect anything which comes to it (ὃ δέξεται καὶ ἀθροίσει τὸ προσιόν), the same thing occurring in the air as happens in a rout (ὡσπερ γὰρ ἐν τροπῇ), where if one man makes a stand, the rest will also remain firm (ἐνὸς ἀντιστάντος καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι μενοῦσιν). (941a9-13)

The players in this version of the simile are the ‘one who makes a stand’ (or ‘the one who resists’: ἀντιστάντος), and ‘the rest’ (οἱ ἄλλοι), with these corresponding to the cloud that serves as a starting, receiving, or collecting point, and ‘the rest of the air’ (ὁ ἄλλος) or ‘anything which comes to it’ (τὸ προσιόν). Both similes embody a contrast between the person who initiates some action and ‘the rest’ or ‘the others’ who are affected by it. We should also note that during the

explained by means of the simile are stated in other Aristotelian treatises.

⁴ Cf. *On Sleep* 1: ‘Sleep is, in a way, or, as it were, a motionless bond, imposed on sense perception, while its loosening or remission constitutes the being awake’ (454b25-26). Except where noted, I follow the Revised Oxford Translation (Barnes ed. 1984). Aristotle’s full explanation, alluded to here but developed at length in *On Sleep*, is that sleep is caused by the rising, stopping, and subsequent falling of the exhalation produced by the consumption of food and drink (see *On Sleep* 456b17ff.).

⁵ The view that the heat of the sun dissipates clouds is stated in *Meteorology* i 339b25-30.

presentation of the second simile the author speaks of the cloud around which the air condenses as ‘an ἀρχή’ and as ‘the ἀρχή’. First, at 941a10 (as above) where the leftover cloud is said to be ‘a beginning of the process’; and second at 94a19 where the continued presence of a cloud following a storm is said to be less alarming than when it represents ‘the beginning of condensation’ (ἀρχή συστάσεως). It is also relevant that the other clouds in the area are characterized as that which comes to it (τὸ προσιόν).

These uses of the simile at least suggest the possibility that when Aristotle crafted the simile in *APo* ii 19 he was thinking in terms of two pairs of contrasting items: a first soldier who comes to a halt as contrasted with the other soldiers who are led to stop and gather around him, with these corresponding to the first sense impression that settles down in the soul as contrasted with the other impressions that coalesce around it.⁶ In addition, the repeated reference to the first cloud as an ἀρχή at least suggests the possibility that the ἀρχή in the *APo* simile relates in some way to the soldier whose coming to a halt leads the others to do the same. And since the other clouds are said to go to and coalesce around the first one, we might extrapolate that the other soldiers are going to and coalescing around the soldier who was the first to stop. All of this would suggest that we should read the *APo* simile as ‘just as in battle, when one stops, another stops, next another, until they come to the one who initiated the process’.

This way of reading the passage, however, raises three questions: (1) what justification would we have for regarding the two masculine singular nominatives ἕτερος and ἕτερος as constituting the subject of the third person singular verb ἦλθε? (2) What justification would we have for thinking that the ἀρχή was neither an original location nor an initial stage of a process but rather the person or thing initiating the process? and (3) What sense might we be able to make of the idea of soldiers who ‘stop until they come somewhere’?

(1) We are entitled to regard the two masculine singular nominatives ἕτερος and ἕτερος as the subject of the third person singular verb ἦλθε in so far as Greek permits the verb to agree with the nearest or most important of two or more subjects.⁷ We actually have a close parallel at *APo* 89a13-14: ‘Both the man who knows (ὁ εἰδώς) and the man who opines (ὁ δοξάζων) will proceed by means of the middle terms *until they reach the premises* (ἕως εἰς τὰ ἄμεσα ἔλθῃ)’ (Trendenick trans.).

⁶ This appears to be how Philoponus understood the simile, at least in part: ‘[Aristotle] presents through this example how the universal is assembled (ἐπισυνάγεται) in us from sense perception. And he says: take as an example how a hundred men are brought into conflict in a war against enemies. Then they are scattered and the fighting is brought to an end. Next, one of those fleeing, regaining his strength, returns from his flight and stands to face the enemy. Thereupon, when another of those who fled sees this man standing there, he comes to him to give him aid (τοῦτον ἰδὼν σπάντα συνῆλθε τούτῳ εἰς βοήθειαν).’ Philoponus proceeds to explain how the non-rational parts of the soul, spirit and appetite, attempt to gain command over the rational part of the soul and destroy its existing knowledge of the universal, a story without parallel in Aristotle’s account (see Philoponus, *In An. Post.* 436.22-437.2).

⁷ For two or more subjects with a singular verb, see Smyth 1920, sec. 966c.

(2) Ἀρχή with the meaning of ‘a person or thing initiating a process’ is attested elsewhere in Aristotle’s writings. In the *Generation of Animals* v 7, for example, Aristotle speaks of the testes as the ἀρχαί or key factors in determining the pitch of the voice: ‘the principles (ἀρχαί), though small in size, are great in potency; this is indeed what is meant by a principle (ἀρχή), that it is in itself the cause of many things without anything else being higher than it’ (788a13-16).⁸

We learn also from *Metaphysics* v 1.1013a8-10 that the ἀρχή is, among other things, ‘that from which, not as an immanent part, a thing first come to be, and from which the movement or change naturally first begins, as a child comes from its father and its mother, and a fight from abusive language’. At *Physics* 194b29-30 the efficient cause is described as ‘the primary source of the change or coming to rest’ (ἡ ἀρχή τῆς μεταβολῆς ἢ πρώτη ἢ τῆς ἡρεμύσεως). And, as we have seen in the *Problems* passage, a leftover cloud is spoken of as an ἀρχή and the ἀρχή in so far as it serves as a catalyst for the formation of a new storm.

(3) We are given a clue to what might be going on when the soldiers ‘stop until they come to the one who started the process’ by a passage in *Iliad* xi that may have been the inspiration for Aristotle’s simile. At one point in his account of Ajax’s ‘fighting retreat’ Homer states that:

But when Eurypylos, the glorious son of Euaemon,
Observed him oppressed by thick-flying missiles,
He came and stood by his side (στῆ ῥα παρ’ αὐτὸν ἰών, 575-577)

Here we have not just one verb, but two verbs: στῆ (Ionic for ἔστη as in the rout simile) and ἰών (the present participle of εἶμι, ‘go’, a rough equivalent of the simile’s ἔρχομαι). To put the point in the terms of the *APo* simile: the soldiers who are led to stop by the action of the first soldier both cease their flight from the enemy and they come to the side of the one who was the first to stop. To draw the philosophical moral: the sense impression not only settles down in the soul, it also becomes associated with other sense impressions.

The entire process Aristotle seeks to illuminate through his simile, I have argued (Leshner 2010a), proceeds in two phases or stages. In the first stage, individual sense impressions gain a purchase in the soul in much the same way in which a seal imparts its design to a malleable substance. The second stage begins when we realize that one of the sensible particulars retained in our memory is a thing of a certain kind, or as Aristotle would put it, when we are able to identify a ‘this’ as a ‘such’. This, I take it, is the point at which the first or ‘entire universal’ (παντὸς...καθόλου, 100a6-7) comes to reside in the soul.⁹ The process contin-

⁸ Similarly *GA* i 2.716b5-7 where a small change in the ἀρχή is said to be attended by many changes in the things dependent on it; and *GA* iv 1.766a23-29: ‘As one part of first-rate importance changes, the whole system of the animal differs greatly in form along with it. This may be seen in the case of eunuchs, who, though mutilated in one part alone, depart so much from their original appearance and approximate closely to the female form. The reason of this is that some of the parts are ἀρχαί and when an ἀρχή is moved many of the parts that go along with it must change with it.’

⁹ In *Physics* i 1 Aristotle speaks of the initial object of our inquiries as a ‘confused mass’ and ‘a

ues on as we become aware of other kinds to which the sensible particular belongs or does not belong. So, for example, once we have perceived enough individuals to be able to identify one as a human being, we can also go on to think of him or her as a kind of animal distinct from other kinds of animals (horses, oxen, etc.) and as an animal distinct from other kinds of things (plants, artifacts, etc.).

I would not claim that because we can make sense of the *APo* simile on the basis of two passages in the *Problems* and one in *Iliad xi* the simile *must* be understood in this way. For all we know, Aristotle might have chosen to put an old simile to a new use. But I would claim that in so far as this way of reading the passage is both grammatically possible and consistent with Aristotle's philosophical teachings it deserves a place among our interpretive options.¹⁰

Department of Philosophy
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill NC 27510

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universal that is a kind of whole since it comprehends many things as parts'. The 'entire universal' here in *APo* ii 19 might then be the one that has not yet been defined in terms of its essential elements. This reading would also make sense of Aristotle's characterization of 'the first universal' with 'one of the undifferentiated ones' (τῶν ἀδιαφόρων ἐνός) at 100a15-16, since 'undifferentiated' could mean just '(so far) unanalyzed', as opposed to *infima species* as has often been supposed. I owe this last point to Tuominen (in Leshner 2010b).

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