THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS IN THE
DE ANIMA COMMENTARIES

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1. Before discussing the subject referred to in the title, I may have to say a few words on the genre. As the term itself is a modern coinage one might be suspicious about its application to issues in antiquity. What we have to see, I believe, is that there might have been a style of argumentation that fits in with the framework of thought experiments. To find it, the first question to be raised is this: what is the difference between what was later to be called thought experiment and other kinds of philosophical reasoning? First, it seems that thought experiment does not require abstract language, but contains a story. Take Archytas’ argument. It is not heavily loaded with abstract terms and has a clear story. If someone gets to the boundary of the universe, he may or may not be able to stretch his stick beyond that limit. The style does not remind of Plato’s Parmenides or Aristotle’s Metaphysics. Thus we have a kind of philosophical narrative which differs from direct argumentation. However, there is another type of narrative which was also considered as a philosophical reasoning, the myth. The best examples are given in Plato’s dialogues, but we find such kind of narrative in later authors, such as Plotinus, abundantly. Although Plato’s myths are for the most part invented, Plotinus could also adopt traditional stories for his own purposes. What, then, is the difference between philosophical myth and thought experiment? One might suggest that the former does not only contain a story but is also hard to translate into straightforward philosophical reasoning, whereas thought experiments, such as Archytas’, are more concise and serve to illustrate a thesis. There is an important borderline case, however, the story about Gyges’ ring in Plato’s Republic (359B6–360D7). It may take the form of a conditional saying that, “if you can avoid all the punishment consequent on your being unjust—by using a ring which makes you invisible—then you would abandon justice for injustice.” But we have to make a

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1 For the term, see Brown, “Thought Experiments”; Zalta, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; and the introduction of this volume. For a pioneer analysis of thought experiments in antiquity, see Ierodiakonou, “Ancient Thought Experiments,” 125–141.
distinction here. One is the myth about the Lydian boy Gyges finding the ring and thereby advancing his interest ruthlessly to the effect of establishing himself as the king. Another is the question the myth carries over to the dispute about justice. The myth is a straightforward story with a clear end (Gyges becomes king) which does not leave us with a problem to solve.\(^2\) By contrast, thought experiment leaves us with something to explain, even if it is not always aporetic. Even if we are left with a question in the end, the solution is to be worked out and we are not compelled to admit that the problem is intractable in the present state of argument.

Thus we have established three conditions. A thought experiment is not formulated in abstract language, has a story and leaves us with an explanandum. We can refine the thesis by saying that they are hypothetical or counterfactual states of affairs.\(^3\) The question is whether this kind of reasoning fits our modern conception of thought experiment. Can we explain our ancient thought experiments in terms of counterfactual reasoning? To give a positive answer we have to rely on the distinction between weak and strong counterfactuals.\(^4\) Strong counterfactuals refer to events or states of affairs that cannot happen. On the other hand, by weak counterfactual we mean statements referring to events that do not occur actually, though it is not inconceivable that they may occur. As a matter of fact, we find in antiquity ample examples of such kind of reasoning that qualifies as thought experiment in the weak sense. It does not rule out, however, that many arguments draw on an inconceivable scenario.

An example of the second kind has been discussed in Katerina Ierodiakonou’s paper. It has a strong metaphysical commitment and concerns a Stoic query, the solution of which is not quite clear, anyway. The problem of identity was illuminated by the example of Dion and Theon, the latter being the same as the former except for lacking a leg.\(^5\) What happens if Dion loses the leg that Theon is lacking? One of them has to perish because they will occupy the same portion of space and share the same substrate. On Stoic views, however, two individuals cannot occupy exactly the same place and cannot possess the same qualities, since the principle of the identity of indiscernibles rules it out. Unfortunately, for


\(^4\) The distinction is made in the introduction to this volume.

\(^5\) Referred to in Philo of Alexandria, De aeternitate mundi 48 (SVF II 397).