Professor Pritzl has given us a wonderful treat: a paper that fittingly corresponds exactly to its subject matter. He has combined together the different topics that ought to be combined and divided those which ought to be divided; and he has done so in an admirably clear manner, that simultaneously remains faithful to the texts. We have excellent reason to hope for a large measure of truth here, if not the full truth itself. His sole misfortune is that of having a commentator who agrees with him on a good many points. I will therefore raise questions about Aristotle’s account I find puzzling, not because they will be troubling for Professor Pritzl, but in the hopes that we may together find further illumination.

As Professor Pritzl has demonstrated, it is impossible to understand Aristotle’s views on truth without understanding his psychology. For according to Aristotle mental states are the primary bearers of truth and falsehood; and it is by reference to these that other uses of ‘true’ and ‘false’ are to be understood. But even when we restrict ourselves to mental states, we find that there are still two kinds of truth: the truth of propositional thoughts, literally of “thinking through” (διάνοια), and the truth of conception (νοέω). To understand the nature of these two kinds of truth and the relation between them, we first have to understand the nature of these two states, their relation to one another, and the relation of each to the world. In particular, we need to know the kind of content each state can have, since only then can we evaluate what ‘correspondence’ might amount to in Aristotle. Reflections on truth quickly yield to reflections on content more generally.

I. Thinking just one thing

One of the central themes in Professor Pritzl’s paper, as indeed in Aristotle, is the role of unity as a constraint on what can be thought. In Metaphysics 4.4, Aristotle remarks that “it is not possible to think anything if one does not think one thing” (οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐνέδεχεται νοεῖν μὴ νοούντα ἑν, 1006b10). Obviously, one cannot be thinking anything if one attempted
to think less than one thing. But in context Aristotle seems more concerned to rule out the notion that we might think more than one thing in a single act of thinking. And that seems perplexing. Don’t we often think of many things in one go? It seems like one can easily think of a dozen eggs or the population of Boston. (There—you just did it.) But Aristotle has an equally easy answer. In cases where we seem to think of more than one thing, he insists that if it is not to be merely a series of thoughts, strung together like beads on a chain, the content of thought must have a certain unity (μὴ τὸ ἐπεξῆς ἀλλ' ἐν τι, Metaph. 6.4, 1027b24-25), however complex. Thus, while I could think of the population of Boston by first thinking about its first inhabitant, and then its second, and so on through the census roster, instead I generally think of them together. In the first case, I treat the population as a multiplicity, by thinking separately of each individual; in the second, I think of them as a group, united by the fact that they are all citizens of this fair city. Whichever way I do it, each individual thought will be of just one thing.

The problem with this answer is that, far from being absurd, it now seems utterly trivial. Couldn’t anything have “unity” in this way? It doesn’t seem there is any conglomeration that I must think of sequentially. When I think of the square root of two, the Brooklyn Bridge and Albert Einstein as a set of three items, haven’t I thereby thought of them, in some sense, as one? Now, a trivial answer at least has the advantage of being true; and Aristotle, as we all know, does not shy from stating the obvious. But if this is all he means by the claim that every thought is of exactly one thing, it does not constitute a constraint on what can be thought and so does not deserve the emphasis he seems to attach to it. In short, it does no work. To be illuminating, the notion of unity must be a substantive one that we can distinguish from others senses of ‘one.’

II. The Unity of Form

A natural suggestion is the one to which Professor Pritzl seems inclined towards the end of his paper (pp. 198-200), namely, that the kind of unity at issue is one based on Aristotle’s conception of form. What is one in the relevant sense is what is indivisible in form (ἀδιάφρεστον εἶδει), which Aristotle regards as the “origin of what can be known” (ἀρχὴ τοῦ γνωστοῦ, Metaph. 5.6, 1016b20) and the measure or standard against which our own knowledge is to be measured (10.1, 1052b16-26; 10.6, 1057a11-12). This linkage, moreover, is confirmed explicitly by Aristotle. In Metaph. 10.1, he says that