COMMENTARY ON POLANSKY

MARTIN ANDIC

For Aristotle soul is the power of living things to nourish and reproduce themselves, more especially to move themselves and to perceive, and in the case of living human beings the power to think, for this is characteristic of us and essential to us. He clarifies these powers of the soul by comparing them with those of other things and with one another. In his interesting and helpful discussion, Ronald Polansky focuses on Aristotle's comparison of perceiving and thinking, and it is to his credit that in his close and imaginative reading of the text of De Anima III.4-8 he gives us an Aristotle that we can recognize and might have expected, while preserving (without overstating them) those anticipations of the theology and divine psychology of Metaphysics XII that so inspire his Neoplatonic commentators.

I. An Aristotelian Aristotle

Polansky shows carefully how for Aristotle (in III.4) both sense and thought enable us to discriminate things by receiving their forms without their matter and thus are both "impassible" or not altered by things. Both sense and thought become what they discriminate and thus can be what these are, so that the forms of their objects are already in the soul potentially. But thought is more of a potentiality than sense is and more "unmixed" with the body or "separable" from it because we can think more than we sense; our thought is not limited to or by any (specific) bodily organ, as vision is to or by the eye,

1 Not only are they not changed for good; their action does not take time to complete and then stop, but is complete at any moment and can go on. To see red and to think what it is are actualizations of potentialities that are never actual as potentialities, so that in the famous definition of Physics III1.201a10 (cf. An. III 2, 201b31, An. III 7, 431a6) they are not "motion" (kineσις), the actuality of an incomplete potentiality, but "activity" (ἐνέργεια). Seeing the Oedipus for the first time and thinking it out, in the sense of coming to understand it, working out its meaning, are motions, however, insofar as these are interruptible.

2 We can think out a painting that we examine with our eyes as we paint it or just look at it on display, but can go on even when it is taken away. Likewise we can think out a piece of music that fills our ears as we compose it or play it from a score at the keyboard or hear it performed, but we can keep thinking it and developing it after the instrument is closed and all is outwardly still. If we can be said to be thinking with...
and so thought is less actually anything before we exercise it; similarly it is less impaired by its fullest exercise, as vision is by direction to what is most visible, the sun. Again, in becoming what they discriminate, both sense and thought are aware of themselves incidentally. But our thought is aware of essences that as such are without matter, as it itself is; and that is to Aristotle a further reason why it can think itself as well as them, as a tablet can take writing because it is blank: it is fully united to them, and once we have learned them, nothing, that is to say no matter, prevents our thought and these essences remaining the same even when we are not actually thinking them.3

When Aristotle goes on to explain (in III.5, the most controversial passage) that just as sensible things actively transform the sense, so thinkable ones do thought, he means that it is our knowledge of them that makes or enables us to think at will what we can think, as light makes or enables colors to be actual, and when he adds that this is "essentially actual," he refers, so Polansky argues, to knowledge in its first grade of actuality (412a10, 417a23, 429b5), as when we have learned and actually know grammar. Our knowledge then is what we know, and if it is generally prior even in time to potential, this means that we learn when we are taught by those who know already and even before we need and are able to learn. And if our knowledge does not think sometimes and sometimes not, this is to say that it is we who think what we know or our thought that does.4 Our knowledge, considered as such, is what is deathless and eternal in us, but we have no memory of it, in the sense that what we know does not remember how we learned it, and is "impassible";5 but the passive (παθητικός) thought and in whatever we use to express our thought, e.g., brushes or piano keys or spoken words (as when we "think out loud"), we can also think without expressing it. (Gilbert Ryle would say that when as a continued action we think in or with unexpressed images or words, it is in order to show or say to ourselves what we think; but as a momentary act thinking our thought is not doing something in and with these words or images that we might as well do by other means and in other media, as we paint in oils or acrylics or build with bricks or wood.)

3 It may seem incoherent to say that thought lacks matter and that it is pure potentiality and becomes what it thinks, if matter is the potentiality for change; but let us repeat that this kind of becoming is not a change or motion, but an activity or a perfection in the sense of a completion or fulfilment.

4 Cf. Republic VII.518de. Another possibility, I suggest, is that it is our knowledge that, in the same sense in which it is "essentially actual," thinks its objects, always, as they are.

5 This may be a dialectical move: Aristotle may be asking the Platonists to explain, how can learning be recollecting, and who can recollect forgotten knowledge, if this is what knowing is?