QUASI-ELEMENTS IN ARISTOTLE

BY

MAURICE WHITBY

There is a well-known group of passages in Aristotle in which he refers to certain unnamed thinkers (πνέες) who spoke of an element 'between' (μεταξόν or μέσον) some pair of the conventional elements, or rarer than one element, denser than another 1); or of an element 'additional to' or 'alongside' (as we interpret παρά) those usually posited 2). These entities are mentioned, largely speaking, in discussions of ἄρχαι and elements, without properly being elements; I shall refer to them as a whole as 'quasi-elements'. The first group I shall call 'intermediates', and those who posited them 'intermediate theorists', without thereby prejudging their existence or number. For the second group I shall use the phrase 'the apeiron': Aristotle applies this only quite differently, as a predicate, to the intermediates, but seems to suggest, at least in gen. corr. B 1 and B 5, that the thinkers there discussed use it as a name.

These passages have usually been discussed as possible evidence for Anaximander, though with little in the way of agreed results. Aristotle describes the quasi-elements so variously that the upshot has tended to be almost a dismissal of his evidence, as randomly inconsistent, even vague 3). Perhaps finding Aristotle, of all writers, vague should be a warning that one might have missed the point;

1) 9 references, at phys. A 4 and A 6; phys. Γ 4 and Γ 5; de caelo Γ 5; gen. corr. B 1 and B 5; and metaph. A 7 and A 8.
2) This phrase at phys. Γ 5; possibly similar language at gen. corr. B 1 and B 5.
but the impatience with which this problem has often been handled is at least understandable. If Aristotle does not refer to Anaximander his remarks seem to have no evidential value for anything whatever; if he does, they seem to have remarkably little value in relation to the complex and chameleonic nature of his references. No one, after all, supposes that Anaximander did posit an intermediate in anything like the sense required by Aristotle, and there seems to be no way of deducing from Aristotle's account that which in Anaximander might have prompted it. Nevertheless, I wish to argue: first, that these passages of Aristotle, far from being at best marginal evidence for Anaximander, are in the strict sense crucial for our understanding of him; secondly, that they are interesting in their own right, and that scholars tempted to snatch too precipitately at possible evidence for a badly documented phase of Presocratic thought have missed a curious and revealing instance of Aristotle's methods in handling traditional δόξα.

Historically the identification of the intermediate theorists with Anaximander derives from the ancient dispute reported by Simplicius in phys. 149: Alexander surmised that Aristotle was referring to Anaximander, Porphyry and Nicolaus of Damascus that he was referring to Diogenes of Apollonia; Simplicius himself sometimes follows the former (e.g. 459, 1), sometimes the latter (e.g. 203, 3), and sometimes sits on the fence (probably 36, 14). Modern scholars usually rule out Diogenes because his άδοξον is known to be

4) The problems raised by these quasi-element theories are sufficiently complex and neglected to be treated first in isolation. But the whole background of Aristotle's historical discussions of the concept of matter is problematic. Why does he so doggedly treat his predecessors' theories in the framework of the four elements, though it hardly works for the star example, Empedocles? 'Those who posit one element' are not really positing elements at all, for elements (or στοιχεῖα) must by the sheer logic of the concept be plural. It is almost a sort of pun that air and fire are members of the set of four elements, and also play a role in early cosmologies: the distortion this produces in Aristotle's interpretation of Heraclitus is clear from the fragments; what it does for Anaximenes is obscured by our ignorance. A further step comes when Aristotle treats as quasi-elements those Presocratic concepts which do not even bear the names of elements: the homoioimere of Anaxagoras, the 'full and empty' of the atomists. But the present paper may throw some light on the tone and manner of Aristotle's discussions.