The Meaning of ΝΟΥΣ in the Posterior Analytics

JAMES H. LESHER

In the Posterior Analytics, Aristotle confronted a problem that had troubled the members of the Academy and threatened his vision of scientific knowledge as an axiomatic system: if scientific knowledge is demonstrative in character, and if the axioms of a science cannot be demonstrated, then the most basic of all scientific principles will remain unknown. If the first principles are not actually known, but merely supposed to be true, then neither can we be said to know the conclusions which follow from them. Aristotle's response is that not all knowledge is demonstrative (72b 18-19) but his first argument for this shows only that knowledge of first principles (if we have it) must be indemonstrable, not that we actually possess such knowledge. In a fuller account at the end of Book II, we are said to possess νοὺς of first principles rather than ἐπιστήμη, but the abrupt manner in which νοὺς is there introduced makes it difficult to understand its nature or the grounds for claiming that we possess it. At the very least, the 'solution' seems hopelessly ad hoc: we possess νοὺς of first principles because we must have some knowledge of them, and no other kind of knowledge seems possible. But even worse, the account seems inconsistent: first principles are said to be known through

---

1 Except where noted, the Greek text is that of W. D. Ross, Aristotle's Prior and Posterior Analytics (Oxford, 1949), and for the other Aristotelian works, the texts of the Oxford classical series. The English translations appearing within double quotation marks are those of the Oxford translations, most notably that of G.R.G. Mure for the Posterior Analytics.

2 The inadequacy of Aristotle's solution is reflected in Morrow's remark that "There is a certain disingenuousness in Aristotle's rather smug solution. To affirm that not all knowledge is demonstrable is to reject what he has given every show of affirming in the preceding chapter of this very treatise. Worst of all, the 'necessity' which he says compels us to assert that knowledge of immediate premisses is independent of demonstration is itself a consequence of the assumption that knowledge in the strict sense is possible - which is the very point at issue." (Glenn R. Morrow, "Plato and the Mathematicians: An Interpretation of Socrates' Dream in the Theaetetus", The Philosophical Review, Vol. LXXIX, No. 3 (July, 1970), p. 333.)

3 Cf. N. Ethics, 1141 a 5-7; it cannot be either φρόνημα, ἐπιστήμη, or σοφία; that leaves νοὸς (λέιπεται νοὸν εἰναι τῶν ἀρχῶν).
'induction' (ἐπίγνωσις); i.e., from a series of observations of particular cases, but νοῦς is generally thought of as a faculty of intuition (or 'intellectual intuition' or 'intuitive reason') and it is difficult to see why we should need to proceed by induction when we possess such a faculty. Thus in spite of the empiricism which characterizes much of his account (the genetic account from 99b 34 to 100b 5) Aristotle seems to revert to a faculty which, at least as described by Plato, operates independently of sensory observation and yet enjoys an immediate and infallible vision of the real world.4 In light of these defects, Aristotle cannot be said to have solved the problem of how first principles can be known, and given the centrality of this issue, his account of scientific knowledge must be judged very imperfect.

Such at least is a familiar and widely accepted picture of Aristotle's account, and it is not without foundation. But it is an over-simplification: too much is known about the meaning of νοῦς in pre-Aristotelian writings to think of it solely in terms of Plato's conception of νοῦς; νοῦς and νοεῖν occur too often in Aristotle's writings (both in the Analytics and elsewhere) to think of νοῦς simply as a contrived solution to this single problem; too much is said about the relations between perception, induction, and universal principles to summarily dismiss Aristotle's account for want of cogency; and the terms 'intuition' and 'intellectual intuition' have too varied a history to be thought of as simple equivalents of νοῦς or νόησις. It is my contention that a more detailed examination of νοῦς, νοεῖν and related notions supports a rather different understanding of their significance and of Aristotle's account of our knowledge of first principles. In particular, I wish to draw attention to those passages in which Aristotle seems to think of νοῦς, not simply in terms of grasping first principles, but more generally as 'insight', or the 'grasping of a universal principle', without regard to the position of the principle in the deductive system. Further, by pointing out the ways in which νοῦς relates to αἴσθησις, ἐπίγνωσις, καθθλοῦ principles, I hope to show that νοῦς is not properly thought of as intuition or intellectual intuition, at least in any sense of these terms which would force us to distinguish νοῦς from ordinary empirical knowledge; and, finally, that the account of νοῦς of first principles at II,19 is neither ad hoc nor inconsistent with other features of Aristotle's epistemology.

4 The opposition inherent in these two strains of II,19 is developed in detail by J. M. LeBlond, Logique et Méthode chez Aristote (Paris, 1939), p. 131 ff.