Aristotle on Kinds of Thinking

MALCOLM F. LOWE

A widespread, and perhaps currently prevalent, view of Aristotle's discussion of the mind in *De Anima* III 4 is that he assimilates the process of thinking as far as possible, if not totally, to that of sensation. It will be argued in the following, however, that Aristotle is in fact concerned to explain where thinking differs from sensation. When the chapter is read as a whole, his aim can be seen to be to distinguish between two kinds of thinking: one which is closely related to sensation and one which is a process peculiar to mind. These may be termed "apprehensive thinking" and "autonomous thinking" respectively. The latter, as it appears from *De Anima* III 7-8, includes both contemplative thinking and thinking about concrete objects in their absence; furthermore, it employs the imagination where apprehensive thinking employs sensation.

I

From the commentaries (both ancient and modern) on *De Anima* III 4, one might receive the impression that it is a collection of loosely connected observations about thinking. In fact, however, it is a single continuous discussion organised in three parts in a typically Aristotelian manner. Aristotle first starts with a view on thinking that is found widely among his predecessors and he shows that various objections to it can be raised (429 a 10-b 9). Then he introduces a distinction that enables one to see to what extent the widespread view is correct and to what extent it needs to be modified (429 b 10-22). Finally, he mentions and disposes of two problems, showing that they do not constitute difficulties for his own account (429 b 22-430 a 9).

The common view of most of Aristotle's predecessors is precisely that sensation and thinking are processes of an entirely analogous kind, if indeed they are distinct processes at all. This is made clear by Aristotle both at the beginning of *De Anima* III 3 and at greater length in the introductory discussion on his predecessors' views in the first book of the *De Anima*. In *De Anima* I 2, he discusses various philosophers who supposed that all "knowing and sensing" (404 b 9) come about through the action of like upon like (such as Empedocles, 404 b 11-15, and Plato, 404 b 16-27, and
perhaps Heraclitus, 405 a 25-28), or who did not even distinguish between mind and soul (Democritus, 404 a 27-28), or who did not distinguish clearly between them (Anaxagoras, 404 b 1-3 and 405 a 13-16). Towards the end of the same chapter, Aristotle makes a more general statement on the same lines (in which he reflects his predecessors' attitude by himself using "sensation" and "knowing" virtually interchangeably).

All indeed, it may be said, define the soul by three things — by movement, sensation and the incorporeal — while each of these is traced back to the principles. That is why those who define it by knowing also make it an element or make it out of the elements, saying much the same as each other, with one exception: for they say that knowing is of the like by the like.  [405 b 11-15]

Aristotle comes back to this widespread view at the beginning of De Anima III 3, the chapter immediately preceding the one with which the present paper is chiefly concerned.

... thinking and understanding seem to be a kind of sensing, for in both of them the soul judges and comes to know some existing thing. And indeed, the ancients say that understanding and sensing are the same. [427 a 19-22]

After citing Empedocles and Homer, as also in De Anima I 2, he continues:

For all of them suppose that thinking is corporeal like sensing, and that both sensing and understanding are of the like by the like, as we also explained in our introductory discussion. [427 a 26-29]

But they are all wrong, he adds. Sensation belongs to all animals, but understanding only to some (427 b 6-8). Thinking belongs only to humans; moreover, it can be true or false, whereas sensation of its proper objects is always true (427 b 8-14).

II

This, then, is the background to De Anima III 4. In the latter, having stated that his aim is to examine what distinguishes the part of the soul that is concerned with knowing and understanding and "how thinking ever comes about" (429 a 10-13), Aristotle opens his account of thinking with the statement: "If indeed thinking is like sensing, it would be either some way of being affected by the object of thought or something else of this sort" (a 13-15). In view of the earlier discussions already quoted, Aristotle's "If indeed . . . would be" (ei δὴ . . . ἂν εἴη) can be taken as a hint that thinking is not entirely like the process of sensation. He continues, however, by pursuing at length the consequences of assuming that the two processes are analogous, namely, that both consist in the psychic faculty concerned being