On the Terminology of 'Abstraction' in Aristotle

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If we look at the standard commentaries on Aristotle's philosophy, we find the term 'abstraction' constantly being used to characterize his epistemology in contrast to that of Plato. Historically speaking, it may have been Aquinas\footnote{St Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* (tr. John P. Rowan) Chicago, 1961, sections 158, 251, 404-5, 1683, 2426, 2259-64.} who was responsible for making 'abstractionism' the byword for a kind of empiricism which holds that all knowledge derives from the senses. Indeed, the unanimity of the commentators appears to be such that it has congealed into the dogma that Aristotle's theory of knowledge is basically abstractionist in character\footnote{cf. Charles de Koninck, "Abstraction from Matter", *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* XIII (1957), 133-96; XVI (1960), 53-69, 169-88. It is quite obvious that de Koninck's reading of Aristotle is heavily influenced by the commentaries of St Thomas.}. In spite of the weight of opinion, I must confess myself to be sceptical about this dogma. Since this may appear heretical to some readers, I hasten to clarify my scepticism. I do not doubt that Aristotle opposed Plato's theory of recollection with his own claim that all of our knowledge ultimately derives from the senses. What I do question is whether Aristotle ever gives the name 'abstraction' to the process by which we grasp universals through sense experience. It is a well-known yet puzzling fact that such terminology does not appear in those few passages where Aristotle actually describes this process; cf. APo. II, 19 and Met. I, 1. Now what are we to make of this fact? Perhaps one might object that this is purely a philological issue but I am convinced that it has more general significance for the interpretation of Aristotle.

In this paper, therefore, I propose to make a fresh analysis of the terminology of 'abstraction' as it is used in the Aristotelian corpus. Significantly enough, such an analysis has not been done recently\footnote{As far as I can ascertain, no detailed analyses have been published since the articles by de Koninck and Phillippe.} in the...
literature on Aristotle presumably because the question has been taken as settled. The definitive article on this was published almost forty years ago by M.-D. Philippe\(^4\) who was clearly influenced by Mansion’s\(^5\) reading of Aristotle. For a number of reasons, I do not accept his conclusion that there are a number of different and unconnected meanings of \(\alpha\phi\alpha\iota\rho\epsilon\sigma\varsigma\) strewn throughout the corpus. I will argue, by contrast, that there is a core meaning of \(\alpha\phi\alpha\iota\rho\epsilon\sigma\varsigma\) which is derived from a logical technique of ‘subtraction’ whose purpose is to identify the primary and proper subject of any particular attribute. By means of selected passages from the *Topics*, I will show that this technique was a standard tool in the dialectical practice of the Academy and the Lyceum. As such, it was doctrinally neutral and could be used for many different purposes. In order to establish what I claim to be the central meaning of \(\alpha\phi\alpha\iota\rho\epsilon\sigma\varsigma\) (together with the correlative term \(\pi\rho\omicron\sigma\delta\dot{e}\varsigma\)), I will explain how its other uses within different contexts can be referred to this focal point for clarification. In this respect, I think, the concept of ‘abstraction’ in Aristotle is similar to the concept ‘medical’ insofar as both refer to a central activity which lends meaning to the peripheral uses of the respective terms. For instance, just as the notion of ‘medical things’ depends for its meaning on the focal activity of medicine, so also when Aristotle talks about \(\tau\alpha\varepsilon\varepsilon\delta\xi\varepsilon\alpha\rho\iota\epsilon\varsigma\varepsilon\omega\varsigma\) \(\lambda\varepsilon\gamma\omega\omicron\mu\epsilon\nu\alpha\) he is referring to the dialectical activity of ‘subtraction’.

I. A Puzzle about Terminology

In order to place the puzzle about Aristotle’s usage in its proper perspective, I will begin with a passage from the *Posterior Analytics* where the terminology of abstraction appears side by side with terms like ‘induction’ and ‘demonstration’. Incidentally, this is a very famous passage which is often cited as evidence of Aristotle’s so-called “empiricism”. Of course, my choice of this passage is not coincidental since it supports the negative part of my thesis; i.e. that Aristotle did not have an epistemological theory of abstraction. The passage itself stands as a self-contained unit which is worth quoting in full:

\begin{quote}
It is also clear that the loss of any one of the senses entails the loss of a corresponding portion of knowledge, and that, since we learn either by induction or by demon-
\end{quote}

\(^4\) M.-D. Philippe, “\(\alpha\phi\alpha\iota\rho\epsilon\sigma\varsigma\varepsilon\pi\rho\omicron\sigma\delta\dot{e}\varsigma\chi\omega\riota\omicron\mu\omicron\varsigma\) dans la philosophie d’Aristote”, in *Revue Thomiste* XLVII (1948), 461-79.