DISCUSSION NOTE

Aristotle and Copernican Revolutions

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Aristotle, Professor Irwin tells us, was a realist.¹ There are, of course, many different sorts of realist: realists as opposed to nominalists, realists about possible worlds, realists about moral values, realists as opposed to idealists. Like the word “real” on Austin’s view of the matter,² the word “realist” gets its meaning in any given context from its contradictory in that context, from what it is opposed to. We do not understand William when he tells us that the ducks over there are real ducks until we see that he is telling us that they are not decoy ducks. Similarly, a philosopher can be intelligibly said to be advancing a realist doctrine, only if we have some idea what the “-ism” is which she is supposed to be rejecting. The realism Irwin is attributing to Aristotle is the realism that is opposed to idealism. The trouble here is that it is difficult to see that there were in Aristotle’s day any idealist doctrines around for him to take the trouble to oppose.³ Protagorean teachings might reasonably be described as subjectivist, but they hardly amounted to idealism in the sense in which the term applies to eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophies. Kant had not yet made his monstrous proposal: “Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge

³ This point of view has been urged most strongly and with many compelling reasons by M.F. Burnyeat in “Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed”, Philosophical Review, 91, 1982. Burnyeat’s remarks on p. 33 are especially relevant to the point I am making: “... it is not until someone brings the question ‘Is there anything other than the mind?’ into the center of philosophical attention that the replies to it – the affirmative reply of realism, and a fortiori the negative reply of idealism – will commend themselves as worthy of, and requiring, explicit defense. (What I have ascribed to antiquity is an unquestioned, unquestioning, assumption of realism: something importantly different from an explicit philosophical thesis.)” Burnyeat’s blanket claim about antiquity has been questioned by Richard Sorabji, who cites Gregory of Nyssa (Time, Creation and the Continuum, London: Duckworth, 1983, pp. 287-96). Whether or not Sorabji’s information is important, it makes little difference to the exegesis of these passages of Aristotle. Bernard Williams (“The Legacy of Greek Philosophy” in The Legacy of Greece: A New Appraisal, ed. M.I. Finley, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) is credited by Burnyeat with noticing the absence of idealism from the ancient world.
must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them a priori, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge." Aristotle was not concerned to resist someone’s attempt to set in motion a Copernican Revolution.

The justification Irwin gives for describing Aristotle as a realist of this sort is to be found in remarks he makes in two places in the Categories and one in the Metaphysics, to the effect that the judgement or statement that something is so and so is true because the thing is so and so, not the other way round. But there is no suggestion that anyone has seriously suggested that it is the other way round. Where Aristotle denies that the truth of the statement that so-and-so is the case is the cause of its being the case, rather than asserting the converse of this, he is concerned to emphasise the asymmetry of the “causal” relation here, by contrast with the symmetrical character of the corresponding implicative relation.

The most interesting question that arises, however, is the question of what “cause” can mean in this context. What does it mean to say that your being pale is the cause of the truth of the statement that you are pale? This is a philosophical question which is worth discussing independently of any point of Aristotelian exegesis. Let us begin, however, by looking a little more closely at the passages in question.

The first of these is in the Categories, 4b 8-10: τῷ γὰρ τὸ πρόγυμα εἶναι ἢ μὴ εἶναι, τοῦτο καὶ ὁ λόγος ἀληθῆς ἢ ψευδῆς εἶναι λέγεται, which Ackrill translates “For it is because the actual thing exists or does not exist that the statement is said to be true or false”. The chapter in which this sentence occurs is the chapter concerned with substance. Aristotle has maintained that a characteristic feature of substances, shared by none of the other categories, is its capacity to receive contraries, that is, to be at one time F and at another time not-F. He then considers a possible objection, namely, that statements and beliefs, which are not substances, are capable of receiving contraries. “For the same statement seems to be both true and false. Suppose, for example, that the statement that somebody is sitting is true; after he has got up this same statement will be false. Similarly with beliefs. Suppose you believe truly that somebody is sitting; after he has got up you will believe falsely if you hold the same belief about him.” (4a 23-8.)

He first attempts to deal with this objection by distinguishing between the way in which a substance is receptive of contraries and the way in which statements or beliefs are so receptive. When the substance changes from being hot to being cold, it is because the substance itself has changed. In the case of

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