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## Robin Smith

# Foundationalism, Coherentism, and Aristotle

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### Synopsis

1. Posterior Analytics I.3 is often taken to be the core of an argument for a foundationalist epistemology. But on such an understanding, Aristotle's position leaves us disappointed, for he never explains clearly how we come to know the foundational first principles in the absolutely secure way which foundationalism requires. Instead, his answer (in An. Post. II.19) is mystifying.
2. Some have responded by trying to find evidence elsewhere for the needed absolute security. Kahn finds it in the Unmoved Mover and proclaims Aristotle a 'super-rationalist.' Nussbaum builds on Owen's observation that the 'phenomena' which inquiry must take account of include established opinions to conclude that with respect to the principles, Aristotle is a sort of Putnamian internal realist.
3. There are also problems about the relationship between this foundationalist and apriorist epistemology evidently espoused in the Analytics and the actual practice of the treatises, which often emphasize the importance of thorough observation, normally begin with a survey of the views of predecessors, and never appeal to any sort of self-evidence. This has sometimes been taken as an indication that the scientific treatises are working studies rather than fully articulated theories (Barnes).
4. Irwin has built a comprehensive interpretation of Aristotle's philosophy in order to resolve these issues. Very briefly summarized, his position is that the Posterior Analytics does indeed put forward a foundationalist epistemology in which all justifications rest ultimately on indemonstrable first principles. These first principles, in turn, are certified as true and secure by the somewhat mysterious agency of  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  (thus, Irwin's reading of II.19 is substantially traditional). However, Irwin holds not only that this is an intrinsically unsatisfactory account of knowledge, but also that Aristotle himself eventually came to see it as inadequate: in later treatises, Aristotle revised his view of the role of dialectic in reaching the first principles and came to believe that first principles could be established (roughly as Kantian-like background principles) by beginning with 'common beliefs' and refining and correcting them through procedures resembling those of dialectic (Irwin refers to this procedure, which he takes to be Aristotle's mature conception of the method of philosophy, 'strong dialectic').
5. But another approach to the Posterior Analytics, one which altogether eliminates these problems, was put forward over a decade ago by Burnyeat. He proposes that Aristotle mingles together issues that we assign to epistemology with issues that we assign to the philosophy of science. The result is that much of what is often taken for epistemological argument, concerned with justification, actually is about scientific explanation. This holds in particular for the central theory of demonstration in the Posterior Analytics:  $\epsilon\pi\iota\sigma\tau\eta\mu\eta$  has rather more in common with scientific understanding than with knowledge in general.
6. Burnyeat's position does much to clarify what seems to be missing from the Posterior Analytics. If the positions debated in I.3 are not alternative views of justification but alternative views of explanation, then Aristotle is not arguing for foundationalism, against coherentism and skepticism, but for the very different thesis that not everything can be explained. In that case, he will not be primarily concerned to show that we have an absolutely secure cognition of the first principles (as foundationalism requires of the ultimate justifying beliefs) but will instead need to show how they can be explanatory primitives. Burnyeat argues that in fact Aristotle is not much concerned about justification and its companion, certainty; instead, the question he asks is 'How is it possible for us to acquire understanding?' Aristotle's general picture is that we understand when

we have made those principles which are objectively first (in the sense that they truly explain the way things are) also subjectively first (in the sense that they seem most convincing or evident to us): our goal is to make what is γνωριμώτερον τῇ φύσει become also γνωριμώτερον ἡμῖν. This requires practice and habituation, just as, in the moral sphere, it takes practice and habituation to make what is genuinely good (and thus 'pleasant in itself') seem pleasant to us (when we have acquired moral virtue). Thus, Burnyeat is able to explain why An. Post. II.19 seems at once to embrace an empiricist view (we come to know the principles through induction) and a rationalist one (we know the principles through νοῦς, which develops in us by nature). The answer is that Aristotle is not trying to explain how we can avoid error but instead to explain what we must be like if we are to bring about in ourselves that state of understanding of the first principles required for scientific explanations.

7. Now, if Burnyeat is right that in the Posterior Analytics Aristotle is not really doing epistemology, not really concerned with justification and certainty, then Irwin's project loses its point. Irwin recognizes the difficulty, but he does not think that Burnyeat's arguments are sufficient to establish this point. In particular, he does not think Burnyeat has established that An. Post. I.3 is about scientific explanation rather than justification, because: (1) Aristotle takes the types of demonstration discussed in I.3 to violate 'general conditions for knowledge,' not merely constraints on demonstration; (2) Aristotle's language often uses general epistemic terms (εἰδέναι, γνωριμώτερον, ἀγνώστους) rather than terms derived from ἐπιστάσθαι; (3) the various possibilities considered are 'three ways of answering a question about justification'; (4) even if it is explanations and not justifications that Aristotle is concerned with, 'he will have to appeal to those very claims about priority and independence in knowledge that support claims about justification.' (All quotes from Irwin 1988, 530.)

8. Now, point (2) is effective only if we can be certain that Aristotle is not using these more general terms as stand-ins for ἐπιστήμη. But it is more likely that Aristotle regards ἐπιστήμη not so much as one species of knowledge alongside others, but instead as what knowledge in its most representative state--knowledge κυρίως, to use his idiom. If that is the case, then he might occasionally use more generic epistemic terms simply because, in talking about what is most properly knowledge, he is talking about what knowledge really is.

9. Point (1) could best be expanded as the claim that the constraints violated by infinite regresses of premises, regresses which terminate in unknown first premises, and circular demonstrations are all constraints which are most intelligible if taken to apply to knowledge generally. But this is answered if there is another equally, or more, plausible way to read them. In fact, there is: the response to this point is inseparable to the response to (4) (see below, sect. 11).

10. Point (3)--if I am fair in treating this as a separate point--is evidently that there is a close parallel between the contents of An. Post. I.3 and much argument typical of contemporary epistemology. I concede that the parallels are striking, and in fact I note shortly below some further parallels of my own. However, there is a crucial dissimilarity which, in my opinion, shows precisely that justification is not what is important for Aristotle.

11. Point (4) amounts to the claim that an account of explanation must ultimately depend on an account of justification. This response is in fact the most critical. An explanation can be an explanation only if it is true; therefore, any adequate theory of explanation must rest on an underlying theory of justification or otherwise be vulnerable to skeptical objections. But while this point may be epistemologically correct, it does not follow that Aristotle appreciated it or that he had a response to it. Modern (i.e. post-1637) epistemology, like any other area of theoretical inquiry, takes its origins in certain problems which it tries to solve. Aristotle's advice in Met. B is appropriate: before we can

understand or appreciate the solutions which it offers, we need to understand just what these problems are.

12. To a very great extent, the arguments which drive modern epistemology are what I call subjective-illusion arguments. Such an argument revolves around a hypothetical case in which: (1) a subject S believes a proposition p (which may even be true), but (2) there is some alternative situation such that, (2a) were S in that other situation, S would not be able to discern it from the situation S is actually in, and (2b) in that other situation p would be false. Arguments of this type dominate epistemology from Descartes's Meditations to Gettier problems, twin-earth cases, and brains in vats. The point about subjective-illusion cases is that they depict, prima facie, cases in which a subject might have a false belief but not be able to tell it. We do not like such cases, especially when they can be constructed so as to apply to our own experience: they seem to imply that we do not know what we think we know. Thus, epistemology arises as the response to these threats to our conception that we do have a certain amount of knowledge.

13. Of course, there are a variety of responses to these threats: one may argue that they can be met, one may give in and become a skeptic, or one may try to argue that somehow the threats are not real. However, a common thread running through much epistemological argument is the concept of justification. A justification, from this perspective, is a remedy against the threat of an undetected illusion: if one of my beliefs is justified, then I may stop worrying about whether or not it is true. This suggests that justification is really of merely instrumental value, as a means to having true beliefs and avoiding false ones (some, e.g. Sartwell, have so argued). But whether or not there is any further value to justification than as a defense against undetected error, its importance to modern epistemology stems directly from epistemology's fundamental preoccupation with the possibility of illusion. (I argue for this point by surveying a range of recent epistemological literature: Haack, Lehrer, Chisholm, Bonjour, Goldman.) In a few words, subjective-illusion cases serve as the defining ἀπορία of modern epistemology, raising the general puzzle: how are these cases to be reconciled with our initial conviction that we do indeed know a few things? The responses epistemologists offer make sense only if we have first come to appreciate these puzzles as needed solutions.

14. If we look for a concern with a similar kind of puzzle in Aristotle, or for that matter in Plato, we will be disappointed: neither seems very worried about the possibility of undetected illusion. For that matter, neither Plato or Aristotle seems too concerned to explain how it is that we (that is to say, the mass of humanity) have knowledge: on the contrary, they both think that most of us just don't really know much. To mention just one famous image, the prisoners in the cave of Republic VII are like us; they actually know nothing of any consequence, despite their illusions to the contrary, and they are no judges at all of the knowledge of those who do know. (Instances are multiplied in the full paper.) Aristotle likewise regards knowledge generally as something the philosopher strives for, not something most people manage to have. According to Met. A, the highest truths of philosophy are at first startling, confusing, unbelievable to the unphilosophical multitude. But Aristotle exhorts us to try to make ourselves into gods, viewing the world from a perspective quite remote from that of ordinary humanity. Thus, the refutation of Cartesian skepticism and the defense of our ordinary knowledge claims are not significant concerns for Aristotle and Plato. But if they were not concerned with the underlying problems that give rise to modern epistemology, then they did not offer solutions to those problems. If we read such solutions into them, we must be missing the point.

15. Socrates, of course, said that virtually everyone he encountered had illusions, but those are illusions of a very specific kinds. He met politicians who thought they knew about important things, poets who thought they knew about the gods, craftsmen who thought they knew about things outside their craft. What he rejects in these people is their claims to more than ordinary understanding: he

does not try to convince them that they do not know whether they are asleep or awake, whether they are perceiving or being deluded by Zeus. Indeed, he does not question the craftsmen's knowledge of their crafts, only their claims to know about important things (such as the welfare of the state) besides.

16. There are in fact a few places in Plato (Theaetetus 158b-d) and Aristotle (Met. Γ 6, 1011a3-14) which do seem to raise the possibility of massive general error or illusion. Now, even if these do constitute counterexamples to my general claim, it is still true that there is much discussion of knowledge in both Aristotle and Plato in which undetected illusion is simply not an issue, and thus my general thesis could be sustained. However, I believe it can be shown that even in these places, the refutation of the Cartesian skeptic has nothing to do with Plato's or Aristotle's concerns. But before I argue for this point, we must take up another which has been suspended for some time. I have argued that since Aristotle and Plato do not worry about the possibility of general illusion, they were therefore not motivated by the same problematic as modern epistemology. What, then, was their problematic, and how do they try to resolve their own particular problems?

17. Part of the answer is this: both Plato and Aristotle devote considerable attention to the question 'how is false belief possible at all?' Plato addresses this in the Republic, Theaetetus, and Sophist; Aristotle in the An. Pr. (II.21), An. Post. (I.16-17), and indirectly elsewhere. They are thus more worried about the possibility that we cannot be mistaken than about the possibility that we are always liable to error. This should surprise us: it is nearly diametrically opposed to modern epistemology, which arises out of the worry that false belief might be lurking everywhere. Why is this important to them?

18. A brief look at their historical context will help. The thesis that false belief is impossible has a long pedigree, going back to Parmenides. It also bears a strong resemblance to a thesis associated with Protagoras: whatever each of us believes is true (for each of us). Other more prosaic versions of the same thesis can be located in such sources as Herodotus' occasional implication that each society's judgments about what conduct is right are authoritative for that society. What is at issue in all these cases is the question whether anyone or anything is in a position to judge (κρίνειν) what is true. It is only if there is in fact a judgment-independent truth that there can be judges.

19. Now, Plato and Aristotle both maintain that philosophy can judge what is true and false, and also what is right and wrong, for everyone. This is precisely the important dimension of Plato's argument in Republic V that philosophers should have political power: on the assumption that knowledge of the human good is possible, those who possess it should have the power to judge not only for themselves but for the rest of us. Many will agree with this conditional but find its antecedent totally implausible. Thus, it is critical for Plato to be able to establish that knowledge--or more correctly science--is possible about such things. The attention these philosophers give to the possibility of false belief now makes good sense. If there are false beliefs, then people make mistakes; therefore, there may be experts who truly know better. Thus, an epistemological project of the first importance for Plato and for Aristotle is establishing that philosophy, or science, is humanly attainable. A higher cognition than the ordinary, which is by rights the judge of how things really are, is a possibility only if a rather large amount of what most of us suppose we know is in fact not knowledge at all.

20. In several places, Aristotle addresses puzzles that turn on the apparent impossibility of having inconsistent beliefs: if S simultaneously believes p and does not believe p; but then it is simultaneously true and false of S that S believes p; thus, S simultaneously has and does not have one and the same property, in violation of the principle of non-contradiction. Such passages include An. Post. I.16-17, An. Pr. I.21, De An. III.3, 428b2-9 (I discuss Met. Γ separately).

This type of argument can be used to attack the possibility of ἀκρασία (see EN VII.2). It can also form the basis of an argument that scientific knowledge, which must be universal rather than particular, cannot be learned: if I know that every *F* is *G* but fail to believe of *a*, which is an *F*, that it is *G* (because I am unaware that *a* exists, because I have failed to carry out an inference, because I have some other conflicting belief), then it appears that I simultaneously do and do not believe the same thing. This leads to the dilemma of An. Post. I.1, 71a17-b8: either I cannot learn anything or I already know everything. To solve this puzzle, Aristotle introduces various senses of 'believe' (actual versus potential, universal versus particular, and a rather sophisticated distinction between believing all the premises of an inference separately and considering them all together) which allow him to say that none of these cases actually involves both affirming and denying the same predicate of the same subject.

21. Against this background, we can better understand what is up in Met. Γ. Aristotle's purpose there is not to confront the Cartesian global skeptic. In fact, in the one passage in which he comes closest to dealing with a Cartesian illusion argument (6, 1011a3-14), he dismisses the possibility that we might all be dreaming with remarkably little concern: he treats this as an obvious instance of a problem not worth pursuing, not a serious ἀπορία. This makes sense in the light of his overall purpose in Γ 3-6, which is not to refute the skeptic but to reject the relativist's position that everyone's beliefs are as good as anyone else's. Aristotle's strategy in response is to argue that the principle of non-contradiction is, in an objective way, cognitively prior to any other principle. This explains why he begins with what looks like a terrible argument: no one can disbelieve the principle of non-contradiction, for to do so would be simultaneously to believe and not believe the same thing, which would violate the principle of non-contradiction (1005b26-32). Although this seems to be a petitio, its purpose is not to establish that the PNC is true but that it is cognitively primary by nature (γνωριμώτατον τῆ φύσει). (I also include a brief discussion of the dream puzzle in Theaetetus 158b5-d6, arguing that this also is not concerned with the Cartesian skeptical possibility of undetected illusion but rather with the relativist objection that nobody is in a position to judge which opinions are correct: the dream argument simply makes this internal to one person's perceptions.)

22. Therefore, it is the need to respond to various forms of relativism, with their nihilistic consequences for philosophy and science, that was the primary epistemological goal for Plato and Aristotle. Such a goal is a far more credible and a far more urgent one for them than the refutation of Cartesian radical skepticism, a position they do not even seem to take seriously. Later Greek skeptics (at least as represented by Sextus Empiricus) appear to have had exactly the sort of view Plato and Aristotle wanted to reject. They maintained, not that every one of our everyday beliefs is subject to doubt, but that no one has the kind of deep understanding of the causes of things that philosophers claim to have (Frede, Burnyeat). Though it is unwise to read Sextus' views back into the fourth century, the relationship of his arguments to those used by Protagoras and other sophists is telling.

23. Much more would have to be done to complete an argument for my claim that Plato and Aristotle were simply not concerned with the defining issues of modern epistemology. This is especially true in the case of Plato: given that the Theaetetus is treated by epistemologists as something of a locus classicus for the justified-true-belief analysis of knowledge, what I am advancing is bound to seem outrageous and will require a much fuller defense. Likewise, a great deal more is required to respond to the enormous quantity of detailed analysis of passages on which Irwin's position is founded. However, I would at least claim to have raised a problem which further study of ancient epistemology must address.

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