NOTE FOR BOOK ONE OF NATURAL HEARING, READING 2

In the second reading of the First Book of *Natural Hearing*, Aristotle divides the thinking of his predecessors thus:

> Surely it is necessary that there is one beginning or many.
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> And if one, surely either immovable, as Parmenides and Melissus say, or movable, as the natural philosophers say, some saying the first beginning is air and others, water.
>
> And if many, either limited or unlimited; and if limited but more than one, either two or three or four or some other number; and if unlimited, either as Democritus, one in kind but differing in figure or form, or also contrary.
>
> Those seeking how many are the things that are also sought in the same way. They sought from what first are the things that are, whether one or many, and if many, limited or unlimited, so that they sought the beginning and element, whether one or many.....

This distinction or division of the opinions of the thinkers before Aristotle is a sign of the weakness of human reason. Since no two thinkers have the same position or opinion about the causes of natural things, either all are mistaken or all but one. Human reason is thus usually mistaken, if not always. This is discouraging, to say the least.

And this kind of diversity and opposition in what they think is not unusual in men.

Hence, it is appropriate to ask here and in similar situations: Where do we go from here? How should we act when faced with such a situation?

One reaction, and perhaps the most common, is to despair. The disagreement of men is a sign of their inability to arrive at the truth. If one comes to this conclusion, one either gives up the life of the mind (or at least that part where there is such disagreement) or treats ideas as ping-pong balls (something to knock around but not take serious).

But this despair and giving up goes against our inborn desire to know truth.

But there is a second reaction to the above disagreement. Descartes, in his autobiographical sketch in the *Discourse on Method,* recounts how he suffered something of the above despair or discouragement. But then his desire to know reviving, he decided to set aside these disagreeing thinkers (since they must not have found the truth if they cannot agree) and do it himself.

Now although this reaction avoids the despair and giving up, it seems to manifest a certain boldness in the pursuit of truth. If everyone else has failed, what reason is there to think that by yourself you will succeed rather than add another opinion to an already too long list? This do-it-yourself approach lacks the fear of mistake that Socrates saw as so necessary for the philosopher.

Is there another way to go from this disagreement of thinkers than the above two?

Is there a way to go forward with the help of those who disagree? Such a way would avoid the despair of those who give up and the boldness of the one who tries to do it by himself.

One such way is suggested by Empedocles in this magnificent fragment:

> For narrow are the means spread throughout the limbs and many are the miseries that burst in and blunt the thoughts. And having seen only a small part of life during their lives, and doomed to early death, they are lifted up and carried off like smoke, and believing only that which each one meets with as he is driven every way, they boast of having found the whole. But things are not thus seen or heard by men or grasped by their minds. You, however, since you

> have withdrawn to here, shall not learn more than mortal wisdom can attain.[1]

Empedocles states that men, starting from the narrow means of knowing which are the senses and prevented by the miseries of human life from sharpening their thoughts and not living very long, are apt to see only a part of the truth although in their pride they may boast of having seen the whole. Thus when thinkers of some ability and prominence disagree, it is likely that each of them has seen some part of the truth which they may exaggerate into being the whole truth. By comparing them, we can pick out the parts of truth divided among them, seeing what is strong in their thought and what is weak therein. When the Achaean or Greek army meets the Trojan, the weak men on both sides tend to go down and the strong men to survive the first clash. If we could gather up those who remain on both sides, we would have a better army than either of the original ones. We would have both Hector and Achilles in our army. Thus one way of going forward with the help of those who disagree is to gather the parts of truth divided among them.

Another way of going forward with the help of those who disagree is to find something they have in common, despite their disagreement. This way of going forward is suggested by the fragments of Heraclitus on following the common. These fragments almost seem to be a commentary on the situation Aristotle finds when he divides here the opinions of his predecessors on the causes of natural things and the way of going forward from that situation. A brief consideration of those fragments is in order here.

In this fragment, Heraclitus makes a statement that most men would tend to agree with even without seeing fully what it means:

> We should not act and speak like those asleep.[2]

Those who are asleep are cut off from their senses and perhaps following their imagination. Some even when awake are doing this and this is not good. But in the following fragment, Heraclitus sees something else:

> For the waking there is one world, and it is common; but when men sleep, each one turns aside into a private [world].[3]

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[1] Empedocles, DK 2

[2] Heraclitus, DK 73

In this fragment, Heraclitus is hinting that the awake are aware of the true world which is one and common to all who know it while those who are asleep have turned aside to many private worlds that are false. (The word *idiot* comes from the Greek word for private.)

When we read the opinions of the natural philosophers before Aristotle and see the division of their disagreement in this reading, we are apt to apply the words of Heraclitus to them. They are like those asleep. They seem to have turned aside from the one true world and each one has turned to his own private world which is false.

What is the way out of this sleep? It must be by a return to the common. In the following fragment, Heraclitus urges this way out:

> Therefore, we ought to follow what is common. Although reason is common to all, the many live as if having a private wisdom.[4]

In the first statement here, Heraclitus urges us to follow what is common. But what is common? In the second statement, he tells us one thing which is common: reason. And then, as if saying in opposition to this, "the many live as if having a private wisdom." If reason is common to all and wisdom is the highest perfection of reason, then wisdom should also be common and not private. Moreover, if wisdom is most of all knowledge of the truth (as Aristotle shows in the second book of *Wisdom)*, and truth is a good common to all as Socrates says, then wisdom should be common and not private.

In another fragment, he touches upon wisdom or thinking as common depending upon how we translate the first word which can be translated as *to think* or *to be wise:*

To be wise is common to all.

To think is common to all.[5]

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[3] Heraclitus, DK 89

[4] Heraclitus, DK 2

[5] Heraclitus, DK 113

To be wise is common to all who are wise. This means that wisdom is a common good, a good that all can share in it. Wisdom cannot be the private good of any man. Since wisdom is the highest perfection of reason, wisdom could not be common to all if reason was not also common to all. But if we translate the first word by *to think*, it might seem false if we mean that everyone thinks the same. Everyone thinks, but not the same. But maybe Heraclitus means that when we do not think the same, it is because of a defect or failure to think, a defect or lack in our thinking.

In another fragment, Heraclitus urges us to listen, not to him, but to reason:

> It is wise, listening not to me, but to reason, to agree that all things are one.[6]

But someone might say that there is only your reason, my reason and the next man's reason. There is no reason to listen to besides my reason, your reason and the next man's reason. What does it mean to listen to reason and not to me or to yourself? Perhaps it means to listen to what is *common* to your reason, my reason and the next man's reason. This is also what is natural to reason, as to look for order and unity as in the rest of the fragment.

One more fragment from Heraclitus which is a key as we shall see, for much of what Aristotle does in the rest of the First Book of *Natural Hearing*

> Those who speak with understanding must be strong in what is common to all, as much as a city is strong in its law, and even more so. For all human laws are fed by one divine law which governs as far as it wishes and is more than sufficient for all.[7]

As life together in the city demands a common law, so also the life of the mind together depends upon something common to all or both. Sometimes one man teaches another and sometimes men converse, often disagreeing with each other. When the teacher leads the student to see or understand something the student has not already seen, he must use what is known already to the student. But he could not use what is already known to the student if it was not already known to him (the teacher) also. Hence, the teacher leads the student

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[6] Heraclitus, DK 50

[7] Heraclitus, DK 114

to something which at first only the teacher knows but through what is known in common by himself and the student. And when men disagree in conversation, they need to get back to something common to both of them, which they can use to decide between them. Otherwise, they get nowhere.

These fragments of Heraclitus suggest another way of going forward with the help of those who disagree. This is to find something common to them despite their disagreement and become strong in it so that one can judge what is or is not in harmony with the common and what does or does not follow from it.

Thus, Empedocles and Heraclitus suggest two ways of going forward with the help of those who disagree, both of which avoid the despair of giving up and the boldness of trying to do it all by oneself.

Both ways are good, but which should be done first? Should one first try to gather the parts of truth that are divided among them or should one try to see if they have something in common and try to become strong in that?

If one should begin with what is more known to us, what is common to all would seem to be the place to begin. For what everyone sees in some way would seem to be more known to us than what one man sees and another does not.

And this is what Aristotle does especially in the Eighth Reading and in Readings Ten through Thirteen. In the Eighth Reading, he finds a common thought about change among those who said there was one beginning and a common thought about change among those who said there were many beginnings. And in the beginning of the Tenth Reading, he finds a common basis among *all* the natural philosophers. And through the rest of that Reading and the Eleventh Reading, he becomes strong in that common basis or common understanding by going through a number of steps. And in the Twelfth Reading, he finds a common understanding of all men about change or becoming and in the rest of that Reading and in the Thirteenth Reading, he becomes strong in this common basis. And in the Fifteenth Reading, after pointing out the difference in thinking between himself and Plato, he reasons from a common understanding they share to his position being the correct one.

Thus we see that in the First Book of *Natural Hearing*, Aristotle is very much following the advice of Heraclitus who urges us to find what is common and to become strong in it.

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