

ARISTOTLE, FIRST BOOK OF NATURAL HEARING (PHYSICS), READING ELEVEN

The next to be said is whether there are two or three or more beginnings.

For one is not possible because contraries are not one.

Unlimited is not possible because what-is would not be knowable.

And there is one contrariety in every one genus, and substance is one genus.

And because it possible from the limited, it is better from the limited, as Empedocles. For he is thought to explain all things as much as Anaxagoras from the unlimited.

Further, some contraries are before others and others come to be from each other, as sweet and bitter, white and black, while the beginnings ought always to remain.

Hence, it is clear from these things that they are neither one nor unlimited.

Seeing that they are limited, there is some reason for making them not only two. For someone might ask how either density is apt by its nature to make rareness something, or this, density. Likewise in any other contrariety. For love does not bring together hate and make something from the same, nor hate from that; but both, some third thing. Some however take many from which they build the nature of what is.

In addition to these things, someone might have doubts if no one placed another nature under the contraries. For we see that no substance is contrary. But the beginning ought not to be said of any subject for there would be a beginning of the beginning. For the subject is a beginning and seems to be before that which is said of it.

Further, we do not say that substance is contrary to substance. How then would substance be from what is not substance? Or how could non-substance be before substance?

Whence if someone should hold the former reason and this to be true, it is necessary, if both of them are to be saved, that some third thing underlie; as water or fire or something inbetween these. It seems more the inbetween. For fire and earth and air and water are twined together with contrarities. Hence, those making the underlying other than these, do not act unreasonably; of the others, those saying air - for air has the least sensible differences of the others; next, water.

But all shape this one thing by contraries, by density and rareness, and by the more and the less. These however are, in general, excess and defect, as has been said before. And the same opinion that the one and excess and defect are beginnings of existing things seems to be ancient, except not in the same way. For the ancients say the two act upon and the one undergoes while some of the latter say rather the contrary - the one acts upon and the two undergo.

To say then that the elements are three would seem to have some reason for those considering from these and other such things, as we have said.

But to say more than three would seem no longer to have a reason. For one is enough to undergo. If however four things exist, there will be two contrarities. and it will be necessary that another inbetween nature will exist separately for each. If, however, being two, they are able to generate from each other, the other one of the contrarities would be superfluous.

At the same time, it is impossible for there to be many first contrarities. For substance is one genus of being, so that the beginnings differ from each other only in being before and after, but not in genus. As there is always one contrariety in one genus, all the contraries seem to be led back to one.

It is clear then that the element is neither one nor more than two or three. But which of these, as we have said, has great difficulty.