

the review of  
**metaphysics**

a philosophical quarterly

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Dec., 2006), pp. 247-267

Published by: [Philosophy Education Society Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20130776>

Accessed: 18/05/2012 01:36

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SAVING TA LEGOMENA:  
ARISTOTLE AND THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

CHRISTOPHER P. LONG

*And it is just to feel gratitude not only to those whose opinions one shares, but even to those whose pronouncements were more superficial, for they too contributed something, since before us they exercised the active condition [ἔξις] of thinking.*  
—*Metaphysics* 1.2.993b11–15

**L**ET US BEGIN WITH ARISTOTLE as Aristotle so often begins with us: by attending carefully to the words of the ancients. Xenophanes, who Aristotle so generously claims “made nothing clear,”<sup>1</sup> nevertheless gives voice to the hope and tragedy of the human condition: “But from the beginning the gods did not reveal all things to mortals; but by seeking they discover better in time.”<sup>2</sup> Ours is not a world of superlatives but of comparatives—the best, the purest revelation of truth remains concealed to us, and yet, in time, indeed, by searching, we discover better. Xenophanes emphasizes the temporality of human striving, and one might imagine that this points not merely to the progressive attainment of ever more effective articulations of the truth, but also to the cumulative effect past articulations always already have on present attempts to give voice to the nature of things.

Despite his rather harsh judgment of Xenophanes, Aristotle’s own words resonate with his:

The investigation [Θεωρία] concerning the truth is in one sense difficult, in another sense easy. A sign of this is that no one can obtain it adequately [τὸ μῆτ’ ἀξίως μηδένα δύνασθαι], nor do all fail; but each

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotelis Metaphysica* 1.5.986b23–4, ed. Werner Jaeger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Greek are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 1 (Zürich: Weidmann, 1996), frag. 18, 133.

*The Review of Metaphysics* 60 (December 2006): 247–267. Copyright © 2006 by *The Review of Metaphysics*

says something concerning nature [λέγειν τι περὶ τῆς φύσεως], and although one by one each adds little or nothing to it, from all of them being gathered together something great comes into being.<sup>3</sup>

Like Xenophanes, Aristotle begins with human finitude: the capacity (τὸ δύνασθαι) adequately to obtain the truth has not been granted to human beings. And yet, like Xenophanes, Aristotle does not recoil from this, but insists that something great comes into being when the polyphony of articulations concerning nature is assembled.

Theoretical inquiry into the truth here involves not a detached *seeing*, but an engaged *saying*. Indeed, truth does not find expression in the isolated articulation of a single voice, but rather resonates in a polyphony of voices that emerges out of the various ways each engages the world by articulating “something concerning φύσις.” Thus, Aristotle’s own investigations into φύσις begin by attending to the voices of his predecessors. This methodological orientation toward τὰ λεγόμενα, the things said, is no idiosyncratic accident. Rather, as Wolfgang Wieland has suggested, it is “an integrated moment of the objective investigation itself.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this orientation toward the things said by those who came before runs throughout Aristotle’s work, from his investigation into nature, to his treatment of the soul, to his inquiry into ethics; for in each case, the investigation into the truth begins where we find ourselves, always already addressed by the things said by our predecessors.

In order to apprehend the central methodological role that Aristotle’s engagement with the things said has for his own attempts to articulate the truth, it will be necessary to sketch the basic contours of Aristotle’s phenomenological approach to τὰ λεγόμενα. This will allow us first to offer a corrective to what seems to have emerged as a kind of received orthodoxy concerning Aristotle’s engagement with the history of philosophy in which, it is alleged, Aristotle manipulates the thinking of his predecessors such that they turn out to be nothing other than, as Harold Cherniss so colorfully put it, “‘stammering’ attempts to express [Aristotle’s] own system.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, in his writings on φύσις and specifically in the lectures on *Physics* and the *Parts of Animals*, something different is at work. These writings, because they as-

<sup>3</sup> *Metaphysics* 2.1.993a30–993b3.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Wieland, *Die Aristotelische Physik* (Goetingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 101.

<sup>5</sup> Harold F. Cherniss, *Aristotle’s Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1935), 348.

siduously remain loyal to the phenomena with which they are concerned, are able to show the extent to which Aristotle attends to the things said by his predecessors, not to legitimize a fully worked out position, but rather to locate articulations that open new possibilities for thinking and express something of the truth.

## I

*Ta legomena as phainomena.* Recent predecessors of our own have highlighted the important role saving the φαινόμενα plays in Aristotle's method. In his famous essay, *Tithenai ta phainomena*, G.E.L. Owen identifies what he considers to be an ambiguity in Aristotle's use of the term "φαινόμενα."<sup>6</sup> In one sense, φαινόμενα point to empirical observations, in another, to common opinions or ἔνδοξα on a subject. The first sense seems to operate in the biological works when, for example, Aristotle asks in *Parts of Animals* whether the natural philosopher "having first studied the phenomena regarding the animals and the parts of each, should then state the reason why and the causes."<sup>7</sup> The second sense is at work, for example, in Aristotle's discussion of ἀκρασία, or incontinence, in *Nicomachean Ethics* 7, where he says:

It is necessary, as with other things, when setting forth the φαινόμενα and having gone through the impasses a first time, to exhibit especially all the opinions [ἔνδοξα] concerning these experiences, or if not [all], then most or the most authoritative. For when the difficulties are resolved and [certain] opinions remain, it would have been made sufficiently evident.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> G. E. L. Owen, "Tithenai Ta Phainomena," in *Aristotle: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. M. E. Moravcsik (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1967), 168–76.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals* 1.1.639b8–10, trans. James G. Lennox, *Clarendon Aristotle Series* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). For some other references to the empirical meaning of *phainomena*, see *On the Parts of Animals* 1.1.640a13–15; *De Caelo* 2.13.293a23–30; 2.14.297a2–6; 3.7.306a5–17; *Posterior Analytics* 1.13.78b39–79a5; and *Metaphysics* 12.8.1073b32–38.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea* 7.1.1145b3–7, ed. I. Bywater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1894). The above translation attempts to capture the force of two participles, one present (τιθέντας), the other aorist (διαπορήσαντας), in the first sentence. It seems important to highlight the notion that setting forth the phenomena is an ongoing process that includes exhibiting the ἔνδοξα and perhaps even going through the difficulties a first time.

Here the ἔνδοξα, which at the end of the chapter are simply called ‘τὰ λεγόμενα,’ themselves function as the φαινόμενα orienting the investigation into incontinence. Drawing on Owen’s delineation of the different senses of φαινόμενα in Aristotle, Terence Irwin suggests a distinction between two different methods of inquiry. The one, corresponding to the first sense of φαινόμενα, is empirical; the other, corresponding to the second sense, is properly dialectical.<sup>9</sup>

John Cleary, however, has taken issue with this bifurcation of Aristotle’s method, suggesting that “there is a single common method, but that the meaning of ‘phenomena’ is always relative to the subject matter.”<sup>10</sup> For Cleary, the phenomena play two roles in Aristotle’s common procedure: they serve as a starting point of the investigation and they provide a test for the first principles.<sup>11</sup> Cleary rightly traces this method back to an ancient practice in astronomy—and if Simplicius is to be believed, it was a practice initiated by Plato<sup>12</sup>—which involved “saving the φαινόμενα” by developing a mathematical account capable of doing justice to the observed movements of the heavenly bodies. Although this original meaning of φαινόμενα remains identifiable in Aristotle’s work, particularly in the *De Caelo* and *Metaphysics* 12.8, where an attempt to save the phenomena led Aristotle to entertain the possibility that there were, in fact, forty-seven unmoved movers,<sup>13</sup> Aristotle’s own use of the term points to an even broader meaning than has been suggested to this point.

Cleary points to this broader understanding of φαινόμενα when he recognizes that Aristotle not only uses the term to refer to empirical observations and received ἔνδοξα, but more generally, and to modern ears, more strangely, takes linguistic evidence itself as a kind of φαινόμενα. Cleary notes a passage from the *De Caelo* that draws our attention to the intimate relationship between λόγος and the

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<sup>9</sup> Terence Irwin, *Aristotle’s First Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 29–30. Irwin admits, however, that the “distinction between dialectical and empirical argument is admittedly rough, and does not imply that the same work cannot include both types of argument” (30).

<sup>10</sup> John J. Cleary, “Phainomena in Aristotle’s Methodology,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 2, no. 1 (1994): 90, n. 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>12</sup> Simplicius, *In De cael.* 488.18–24, 493. For a discussion of the problems with this, see Jürgen Mittelstrass, *Die Rettung Der Phänomene: Ursprung Und Geschichte Eines Antiken Forschungsprinzips* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1962).

<sup>13</sup> *Meta.* 12.8.1074a1–17. For an indication of the relevant passages from *De Caelo*, see note 7 above.

φαινόμενα as Aristotle considers the nature of a fifth element that had long been posited as the material of the heavenly bodies. Aristotle claims:

It seems that our λόγος bears witness to the φαινόμενα and that the φαινόμενα bear witness to our λόγος. . . . It seems that the name [for the primary heavenly body] too has been handed down right to our own day from the ancients who have taken it up in the way that we too are expressing. . . . And so, saying that the primary body is something other beyond earth, fire, air and water, they gave the highest place the name of *aether* [αἰθήρ], positing the name for it from [the fact that] it ‘runs always’ [θεῖν ἄει] for an eternity of time.<sup>14</sup>

Leaving the question of the validity of the etymology to one side, Cleary claims that this passage “shows that language is one of the relevant phenomena for Aristotle because he sees it as a repository of truth that can be drawn on by each generation.”<sup>15</sup> Although the passage does suggest that language can be viewed as a sort of φαινόμενα pointing in the direction of the truth for Aristotle, Cleary’s statement does not do justice to the extent to which λόγος itself serves as a φαινόμενον for Aristotle.

It is not just that λόγος serves as a “repository of truth” for Aristotle, but more fundamentally, the truth of beings is only accessible for human beings as mediated by λόγος. Owen seems to begin to express something like this when he writes: “[T]he λεγόμενα turn out as so often to be partly matters of linguistic usage or, if you prefer, of the conceptual structure revealed by language.”<sup>16</sup> Martha Nussbaum comes closer when she claims: “We can have truth only *inside* the circle of appearances, because only there can we communicate, even refer, at all.”<sup>17</sup> Yet even these statements fail to do justice to the extent to which in Aristotle λόγος itself serves as a φαινόμενον.

Aristotle operates with a naturalistic conception of the relationship between being and language that allows him to recognize that our

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<sup>14</sup> *De Cael.* 1.3.270b1–24. See Aristotle, *Du Ciel.*, ed. and trans. Paul Moraux (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1965). Translation is mine, from the Greek. See *Meteor.* 1.3.339b20: “It appears to be an old belief and one which men have held in the past, for the word ‘aether’ has long been used to denote that element.” This translation from the *Meteorology* is from Jonathan Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 1, *Bollingen Series* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 556.

<sup>15</sup> Cleary, “*Phainomena* in Aristotle’s Methodology,” 71.

<sup>16</sup> Owen, “*Tithenai Ta Phainomena*,” 170.

<sup>17</sup> Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 257.

very speaking about beings reveals something of the nature of these beings themselves.<sup>18</sup> Here there is no unbridgeable chasm between language and being to traverse. Wieland puts it this way: “The language-thing [*Sprache-Sache*] distinction is an opposition of reflection; phenomenologically it does not exist in the natural attitude: in speaking we always already have to do with the things of which we speak without ourselves being conscious of the opposition between language and things.”<sup>19</sup> Expressing the point more boldly, Wieland writes: “every ὄν is an ὄν λεγόμενον.”<sup>20</sup> Or, to put it in John Herman Randall’s language: “Things are what they can be said to be.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, these formulations must not be misunderstood as collapsing being into being-said; rather, they express the belonging-together of being and articulation—they say, to use John Smith’s vocabulary, that “articulation is not alien to being.”<sup>22</sup>

For Aristotle, each attempt to *express* something of the truth about beings is always already involved with the very beings it encounters. To presume a fundamental disjunction between articulation and being is to impose a distinction of reflection upon a natural relationship and so already to pervert it. This is, it seems, a symptom of the lasting hegemony of the modern segregation of the object from the subject.<sup>23</sup> Aristotle’s thoroughgoing naturalism undermines the assumption of a separation between being and articulation. For Aris-

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<sup>18</sup> For Aristotle, the being of nature and the human capacity for articulation belong together; human-being, as the being with λόγος, is itself a natural being whose capacity for articulation is one of the ways nature expresses itself. This *naturalistic* conception of language is beautifully expressed by Frederick Woodbridge: “But [Aristotle] will not let the naturalness of language be natural in admission only. He makes it natural in nature. It becomes one of nature’s supreme products, the product in which all other products find articulated linkage. For things to go into language is a going, just as much of a going on their part, and just as natural, as their going into air or water, up or down, or from seed to flower.” Frederick Woodbridge, *Aristotle’s Vision of Nature*, ed. John Herman Randall (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 24.

<sup>19</sup> Wieland, *Die Aristotelische Physik*, 145. See p. 141: “One has with speaking, phenomenologically understood, not to do with the linguistic, but rather indeed, with the things of which one speaks, without oneself knowing that it thereby concerns itself with things of which one speaks.”

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>21</sup> John Herman Randall, *Aristotle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 118.

<sup>22</sup> John E. Smith, “Being, Immediacy, and Articulation,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 24 (1971): 594.

tote, although there remains a discernible difference between being and appearing, there is no sphere of pure being independent of the world of appearance and articulation.<sup>24</sup> Access to being is gained by attending to τὰ φαινόμενα. Thus, when Aristotle characterizes the proper method of his investigation into nature, he speaks not of the direct intuitive grasp of separately existing realities, but of a “natural road” from what is more known to us to what is more known by nature.<sup>25</sup> This road begins with the natural ways in which we and our predecessors speak about beings, because these expressions articulate something of the truth of the beings themselves. The intuition underlying this phenomenological approach to τὰ λεγόμενα is not merely that an orientation toward language can give us insight into the nature of beings, but that the being of beings naturally expresses itself through and in λόγος. From this perspective, Aristotle’s collection and criticism of the things said by his predecessors must be heard not as a prolegomenon to the investigation into nature, but as an integral moment of the investigation itself.

## II

*The path of inquiry.* Although the tendency to begin with the things said by his predecessors runs throughout Aristotle’s work, the

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<sup>23</sup> Heidegger has recognized how inappropriate it is to import the subject/object distinction back into ancient Greek thinking. See Martin Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe Der Aristotelischen Philosophie*, ed. Mark Michalski, vol. 18, *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klosterman, 2002), 56.

<sup>24</sup> Randall gets at something of the Aristotelian conception of naturalism when he writes of the position of the so-called “new naturalism”: “The world is not really ‘nothing but’ something other than it appears to be: it is what it is, in all its manifold variety, with all its distinctive activity.” See John Herman Randall, “Epilogue: The Nature of Naturalism,” in *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, ed. Yervant Hovhannes Krikorian (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 361. The distinctive activities of the world are accessible to human λόγος, but neither reducible to it nor violated by it. Vincent Colapietro puts it this way: “The crucial point is that articulation is neither something to which being is subjected by forces utterly alien to it nor a process in which being plays the role of a ventriloquist and we that of dummies.” See Vincent Colapietro, “Striving to Speak in a Human Voice: A Peircean Contribution to Metaphysical Discourse,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 58 (2004): 367, n. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotelis Physica* 1.1.184a16–18, ed. David Ross (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1992).



first chapter of the *Physics* eloquently expresses the methodological intuition that animates the practice. It starts by insisting that that “τό εἰδέναι” and “τό ἐπίστασθαι” begin with a kind of “γνωρίζειν”—a familiar acquaintance with the first principles and causes of the beings of nature. Here, two of the highest forms of knowledge in Aristotle, εἰδέναι—knowing in the sense of directly seeing the look or εἶδος of something—and ἐπίστασθαι—demonstrative, scientific knowledge—are said to be themselves somehow dependent on, indeed to grow out of, the familiarity with beings that orients us toward the world in which we find ourselves. The beings of nature are prereflectively there for us—we have a kind of pre-understanding of them that serves as a condition for the possibility of both τό εἰδέναι and τό ἐπίστασθαι.<sup>26</sup>

Aristotle emphasizes the importance of the sort of recognition associated with γνωρίζειν when he asserts: “[I]t is necessary to lead forward in this way: from what is less clear by nature but more clear to us to what is clearer and better known [γνωριμώτερα] by nature.”<sup>27</sup> The beings with which we are familiar, however, are at first somehow jumbled together [συγκεχυμένα]; we perceive them as undifferentiated wholes, while the rich contours of their natural being remains hidden. “Thus,” Aristotle tells us, “it is necessary to proceed from the universal [ἐκ τῶν καθόλου] to the particulars [τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστα]; for the whole is better known [γνωριμώτερα] according to perception, and what is universal is some kind of whole.”<sup>28</sup> Strangely enough, this passage seems at odds with Aristotle’s general tendency to associate particulars with perception and to identify the proper path of investigation as proceeding from particulars to universals, rather than the other way around.<sup>29</sup> Here, however, the καθόλου does not name the universal so much as the sort of undifferentiated whole we encounter in our everyday engagements with the world. From this perspective, τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστα does not designate “the particulars” so much as, to use Heidegger’s poignant formulation, “those moments that bring what is at first superficially meant into a compelling distance so that I actually see it in its articulateness.”<sup>30</sup> For Heidegger, as for Aristotle, the movement from that which is more familiar to us, though less

<sup>26</sup> Wieland uses the vocabulary of “*Vorverständnis*” in this context. See Wieland, *Die Aristotelische Physik*, 72.

<sup>27</sup> *Phys.* 1.1.184a18–21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 1.1.184a23–4.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, *De An.* 2.5.417b20–25; *Meta.* 13.10.1087a12 and *Post. Anal.* 1.2.72a4–6.

known by nature, to that which is more known by nature, is a matter of articulation.

This can be heard in the two examples to which Aristotle appeals at the end of the first chapter of the *Physics*. The first example, taken from the sphere of geometry, points to the relationship between a name and its λόγος, or meaning. “A name,” says Aristotle, “signifies some whole indistinctly, such as a circle, but the definition [ ρισμός] takes it apart into particulars [διαίρει τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστα].”<sup>31</sup> Here the definition is a matter of a sort of διαίρεσις; not, to be sure, the διαίρεσις that divides something according to a hierarchy of genera and species, but rather, a διαίρεσις that literally articulates the undifferentiated beings of natural experience.<sup>32</sup> The nature of this sort of articulation is reinforced by Aristotle’s second example: “And children too at first address all men as father and all women as mother, but later distinguish [διορίζει] each of them.”<sup>33</sup> The investigation into nature is oriented at first by the beings that are closest to us; from out of this orientation toward the familiar, we somehow grow into an understanding of the world by learning how to articulate the proper boundaries and limits of the beings we encounter. The child at first speaks poorly, because she has not taken hold of the proper limits of beings; yet she also speaks beautifully, because in attempting to articulate something about the beings she encounters, she speaks the truth—all men are in a certain way father, and all women, mother.

If the path from what is more known to us to what is more known by nature takes its orientation from the manner in which the beings of nature are themselves articulated, and, indeed, if each attempt to articulate something true about the beings with which we are concerned itself contributes something to the truth, it is no surprise that Aristotle’s own investigation into φύσις begins, not with empirical observations, but with an engagement with the things said by his

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<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe Der Aristotelischen Philosophie*, 38. Heidegger defends this understanding of τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστα by suggesting that the “ἕκαστος” refers to a certain “distance” (ibid., 32). The conceptual origins of the movement from *durchschnittliche Alltäglichkeit*, average everydayness, to *Eigentlichkeit*, authenticity, that plays such an important role in *Sein und Zeit* may be traced back to Heidegger’s early engagement with the first chapter of the *Physics* presented in these 1924 lectures.

<sup>31</sup> *Phys.* 1.1.184b1–3.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the difference between this notion of διαίρεσις and that found in Plato’s *Sophist* and *Statesman*, see Wieland, *Die Aristotelische Physik*, 87.

<sup>33</sup> *Phys.* 1.1.184b3–5.

predecessors. Yet for Aristotle, and to the chagrin of many presocratic philologists, this turn to the past is never undertaken with the intention of loyally reconstructing the thought of the past. Rather, Aristotle's own philosophical questions lead him to the things said by his predecessors. The articulations of the past are neither convenient places to begin, nor preliminary introductions to the general nature of the problem, but rather the very site from which philosophy must begin. Aristotle pauses to listen to his predecessors because he recognizes *that we are always already determined by the history in which we are embedded, that our thinking is inherently an inherited thinking and that our questions find faint responses, barely discernable echoes, that resonate in the voices of the past.*

Aristotle's own thinking emerges out of a dynamic dialogue with the past, the structure of which is eloquently expressed by Randall when he writes of "a 'dialogue' in which the future asks questions of the past embodied in the present, and the present replies—by generating a new philosophy."<sup>34</sup> Our inquisitive engagement with the beings that address us at once inherits a determinate past and opens a possible future. The future itself addresses us in our encounters with beings, demands an account, indeed, accountability: a dialogical articulation that attempts to put beings into words, recognizing both their ineffability and their yearning for articulation. We exist precisely as such a dialogue with beings, always already determined by past articulations, never yet capable of fully adequate expressions, held accountable by the beings that address us, demanding an account.

This dialogue cannot be oriented by an attempt simply to reconstruct the thought of past thinkers. Rather it emerges from a genuine philosophical engagement with the world, indeed, from a primordial kind of questioning. It is not, as Harold Cherniss has suggested, that Aristotle simply uses these theories to establish "artificial debates which he sets up to lead 'inevitably' to his own solutions."<sup>35</sup> Such a position presumes that Aristotle's μεθόδοι express an already worked out system, indeed, that Aristotle loads the dice as he plays with the thinking of his predecessors such that "one theory is set against another in such a manner that each may bring to light the other's difficulties which are then resolved by a reconciliation: this reconciliation

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<sup>34</sup> John Herman Randall, *How Philosophy Uses Its Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 27.

<sup>35</sup> Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy*, xii.

is the Aristotelian system.”<sup>36</sup> Andrea Nightingale seems to agree that Aristotle “constructs” his history of philosophy to reinforce and legitimize his own philosophical position.<sup>37</sup> Focusing primarily on Aristotle’s treatment of his predecessors in *Metaphysics* 1, she insists that his engagement with the history of philosophy is teleologically oriented such that Aristotle’s own philosophical system always emerges as the clearest, most mature expression of the truth.<sup>38</sup> J. Mansfeld even goes so far as to suggest that Aristotle must have believed his system approximated the final goal closely.<sup>39</sup> Catherine Collobert too emphasizes the importance of Aristotle’s teleology: “A history of philosophy supposes, even implicitly, a philosophy of history, which is, for Aristotle, a teleological conception of philosophy’s development.”<sup>40</sup> While it is perhaps true that Aristotle’s engagement with his predecessors is determined by a kind of teleological conception of history, it is a natural teleology that is oriented by the φαινόμενα

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in Its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 26–9. She writes: “The ancients therefore give Aristotle’s own theoretical activities a venerable pedigree even as they point up his vast superiority to the entire tradition” (28).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>39</sup> Jaap Mansfeld, *Studies in the Historiography of Greek Philosophy* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990), 48.

<sup>40</sup> Catherine Collobert, “Aristotle’s Review of the Presocratics: Is Aristotle Finally a Historian of Philosophy?” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40 (2002): 287. Collobert’s own orientation to the practice of Aristotle’s history of philosophy allows her to distinguish between Aristotle’s “synchronic” ordering of the positions of the past in which he puts into perspective conflicting points of view in order to find a solution, and a “diachronic” ordering in which Aristotle reviews the general movement of a philosophical question ending with a solution—confirming a theory (289). This distinction brings into focus the difference between Aristotle’s approach to his predecessors at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* and his engagement with their thinking in the *Physics*. In the *Metaphysics*, the things said by his predecessors serve as “witnesses” confirming Aristotle’s own worked out conception of the four causes (see, *Meta.*1.7.988b17). In the *Physics*, however, past articulations emerge as part of a dialogical investigation into the truth of φύσις itself. Collobert’s distinction between “synchronic” and “diachronic” ordering covers over the extent to which even the synchronic gathering of positions is part of a diachronic engagement with genuine philosophical questions. Collobert’s insistence that Aristotle’s engagement with his predecessors is ultimately oriented by the solutions expressed by Aristotle himself eclipses the degree to which Aristotle’s own positions emerge from, and as a result of, a deep engagement with the thinking of his predecessors.

themselves.<sup>41</sup> Such a teleological conception of history resonates with Xenophanes's insistence that *in time*, by searching, we discover better. If, however, the teleological structure of history is understood to be constructed with an eye toward a *telos* that stands outside of the order itself, it ceases to be natural and becomes artificial. If history manifests a natural teleological structure, this can only be discerned from within the movement of a history that is itself taken as a phenomenon. The tendency, heard in the things said particularly by Cherniss and Mansfeld, to identify Aristotle's approach to his predecessors with an artificial teleology eclipses the extent to which Aristotle turns to the things said out of an intuitive awareness of his own historicity.

Aristotle's engagement with the past is not determined by a previously worked out system, nor is it concerned with a kind of dialectical reconciliation of the positions of his predecessors. Rather, Aristotle begins with them because he recognizes that they have always already begun with him. The past, as Randall suggests, funds the present in such a way that whenever it enters into a genuine questioning of beings, it must begin with the sayings of the past; for the future is born in and through such sayings. Aristotle's engagement with the past is oriented toward the future—it is guided by an inquisitive engagement with the world. "Questions," Gadamer says, "always bring out the undetermined possibilities of a thing."<sup>42</sup> Aristotle's object is not the reconstruction of the thought of those who came before, but the attempt to articulate "the undetermined possibilities" of the beings with which he is engaged. Gadamer expresses it this way: "[U]nderstanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one's own thinking on the subject."<sup>43</sup> This is pre-

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<sup>41</sup> Nightingale rightly points out the biological vocabulary deployed in Aristotle's account of his predecessors in *Metaphysics* 1. This reinforces the notion that the teleology that determines Aristotle's understanding of history is itself a natural teleology and not a mere construct. However, the impression that Aristotle *constructs* the views of his predecessors to legitimize his own philosophical position seems largely determined by a limited focus on the approach of the first book of the *Metaphysics*. Yet, there is more to Aristotle's engagement of his predecessors than this attempt to legitimize a previously established position. In the *Physics* and *Parts of Animals*, to cite just two examples, Aristotle turns to the things said by his predecessors as phenomena that uncover the nature of natural beings.

<sup>42</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>d</sup> ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994), 375.

cisely how the most fecund possibilities of Aristotle's thinking emerge—in an inquisitive dialogue with the voices of the past.

### III

*Saving the things said.* Let us listen then, to how Aristotle's own engagement with the things said by his predecessors opens up new possibilities of thinking in two texts—the *Physics* and the *Parts of Animals*.<sup>44</sup> These two texts in particular articulate the phenomenological orientation toward τὰ λεγόμενα at work in so many of Aristotle's inquiries, because they remain guided by an insistent and sustained philosophical interrogation of the being of natural beings.

The question that orients Aristotle's first approach to the being of τὰ φύσιχα concerns the number of their principles. Ironically, Aristotle begins with Parmenides and Melissus who, he claims, cannot have spoken at all about nature and its principles, for in asserting that being is one, they fail to grasp the meaning of an ἀρχή: "For it is not any longer an ἀρχή if it is one only and there is therefore only one thing, for an ἀρχή is of something or some things."<sup>45</sup> This failure Aristotle ascribes to their tendency to speak for the sake of speaking [λόγου ἔνεκα λεγομένον]—that is, they are not able to say something concerning nature precisely because their words *do not address the beings of nature*. This refusal to direct λόγος to beings undermines the investigation into nature; indeed, it threatens the very possibility of speaking at all. Yet Aristotle calls this limit case the "most appropriate beginning" because it allows us to recognize that being is "said in more than one way."<sup>46</sup> The plurivocity of being is a condition for the possibility of the investigation into the principles of nature, for a principle is itself always a matter of a certain predication: to function as a source of intelligibility, an ἀρχή must be capable of being said of that of which it is the principle. Thus, when Parmenides and Melissus

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Our orientation toward these two texts is designed to uncover a methodological approach that is heard throughout Aristotle's work. Thus, these two texts are in some sense paradigmatic of Aristotle's overall phenomenological approach to the things said. The same points could have been made by attending carefully to almost any of Aristotle's writings.

<sup>45</sup> *Phys.* 1.2.185a3–5.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 1.2.185a23–4.

assert the univocity of being, they deny themselves the possibility of making the sorts of distinctions that allow the being of nature to come to expression.<sup>47</sup> For Aristotle, to assert the absolute oneness of being is to assert nothing at all, or perhaps better, it is to show its own impossibility because the assertion itself requires the saying of something as something and therefore already involves a kind of multiplicity. Some particularly zealous followers of Parmenides—worried that the same thing might be both one and many—seem to have attempted to abolish the ‘is’ from human language. Others, Aristotle tells us, “re-fashioned the language so that a human-being ‘has whitened’ rather than ‘is white’ and ‘walks’ rather than ‘is walking’ in order not to make the one be many by attaching ‘is’, as though *one* or *being* were said in only one way.”<sup>48</sup> This attempt to reconstruct the language to fit a theory stands for Aristotle as the most appropriate starting point for the inquiry into the principles of natural beings, precisely because it marks the limit of the possibility of the investigation itself.

Yet even here at the limit, Aristotle does not abstractly reject the things said by his predecessors. Indeed, he begins *Physics* 1, chapter 5 by saying: “Everyone makes contraries the ἀρχαί.”<sup>49</sup> Initially, this sounds strange, for surely Parmenides and Melissus do not make contraries the original beings. However, Aristotle is quick to point out that even Parmenides says that the cold and the hot are ἀρχαί, though he calls them “fire and earth.”<sup>50</sup> In a passage from the *Metaphysics* explicitly linked to this discussion in the *Physics*, Aristotle claims that Parmenides speaks of the principles as two because he is “forced to follow the *phainomena* [ἀκολουθεῖν τοῖς φαινόμενοις].”<sup>51</sup> The attempt to say something about the beings of nature forces Parmenides

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<sup>47</sup> Aristotle puts it this way: “But if all beings are one in λόγος as a robe and a cloak, [Parmenides and Melissus] turn out to assert the Heracleitean λόγος; for being-good and being-bad would be the same, and being-good and being-not-good—so that what is good and what is not good would be the same, as would a human being and a horse, and their λόγος would not be about the being-one of beings but about the being-nothing [of beings]” (Ibid. 1.2.185b21–27).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 1.2.185b28–33

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 1.5.188a19.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 1.5.188a20–21. Aristotle leaves Melissus out here presumably because the “crudeness” of his thinking precluded him from giving expression to the impassés that lead to a genuine encounter with the beings of nature, see *Phys.* 1.2.185a12–15.

<sup>51</sup> *Meta.* 1.5.986b26–987a2.

to articulate something of the truth of natural beings, namely, that their principles are not simply one, but at least two. That something like this must be the case, Aristotle claims, is evident from the things said by his predecessors. This *consensus omnium* serves as a sign of the truth of what has been said. Aristotle arrives at the threshold of his own philosophical engagement with the beings of nature through the things said; for the recognition that contraries somehow serve as ἀρχαί provides not only the impetus for, but also the context in which Aristotle's own rich analysis of the being and becoming of τὰ φύσιχα develops. Hearing the harmony of voices claiming the central importance of contraries, Aristotle proceeds to offer an articulation of his own in which he translates the vocabulary of contrariety into that of opposition and suggests that the becoming of natural beings involves the transition from a certain shapelessness to being-shaped. Out of this discussion grows the philosophically fecund distinction between form and its privation that plays a central role in Aristotle's own articulation of the being of natural beings. Yet this distinction, along with that of the ὑποκείμενον [that which underlies], which itself emerges not only from Aristotle's engagement with his predecessors, but also from his attention to our common ways of speaking, must themselves be heard to grow out of Aristotle's inquisitive dialogue with the things said by those who came before.<sup>52</sup>

This dialogue is heard as well in the first book of the *Parts of Animals*, in which we find a powerful expression of the central methodological importance of τὰ λεγόμενα. The text begins by insisting that "it is the manner of an educated person to be able to judge

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<sup>52</sup> Aristotle's method of "saving τὰ λεγόμενα" has two interrelated but distinct dimensions. The first, outlined in this essay, involves an orientation toward the things said by his predecessors. The second, which goes beyond the scope of the present essay, but which will be addressed in a forthcoming study of Aristotle's phenomenology, orients itself toward the things commonly said, toward our common ways of speaking. For Aristotle, such articulations also express something of the truth of being. See, for example, *Physics* 1.7, where the fundamental ontological distinction between form and matter is developed from a consideration of how people speak about becoming (1.7.190a21–190b1). The same methodological orientation toward the things commonly said is at work in *Metaphysics* 7.7 and 9.7, where Aristotle points to the alteration of the way we commonly refer to the material element of a composite once it has taken on its form—a statue is not bronze, but brazen—to suggest that matter continues to play an ontological role in determining the being of the composite (see 7.7.1032b32–1033a23 and 9.7.1049a18–1049b4).



successfully what is beautifully said and what is not.”<sup>53</sup> The question concerning the ability to judge what is and is not said beautifully leads Aristotle to the one of the most explicit statements of his phenomenological approach: “[F]irst one should get hold of the phenomena concerning each kind, then state the causes.”<sup>54</sup> While this statement has important implications for how the *History of Animals*, which phenomenologically gathers the similarities and differences among animals, relates to the *Parts of Animals*, which is concerned with expressing causes based on this collection, it also opens up the question concerning the proper response to the “what is it” question.

For Aristotle, this involves an account of the what-it-was-for-something-to-be, its τί ἦν εἶναι.<sup>55</sup> This, of course, is a technical term in Aristotle, and it seems to be deployed here having already been fully worked out conceptually. Aristotle himself says later in book 1 of the *Parts of Animals* that his predecessors did not have an understanding of “τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι” and “the capacity to delimit the being of beings [τὸ ὀρίσασθαι τὴν οὐσίαν].”<sup>56</sup> Yet immediately upon opening the question concerning τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, Aristotle turns to the words of his predecessors. At first the move is decidedly critical: for the most part, when responding to the question concerning what each being is, the ancient φύσικοι appealed to the material origin and failed to consider the “that for the sake of which” or the form. For Aristotle, however, this is not well said, for when we ask what a desk is, for example, it is not enough simply to say “wood.” Rather, as Aristotle suggests, we must articulate the form [εἶδος]; for the desk is a “this in that,” (τόδε ἐν τῷδε), or a “this-such” (τόδε τοιόνδε).<sup>57</sup> The demonstratives here seek to articulate the enigmatic nature of composite beings. The linguistic gestures—τόδε ἐν τῷδε, τόδε τοιόνδε—express the distinction between form and matter that shows itself in the beings we encounter. The very attempt to put the beings we address into words forces

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<sup>53</sup> Aristotle, *Les Parties des Animaux* [PA] 1.1.639a4–5, ed. Paul Louis (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1956). Translation is mine, from the Greek.

<sup>54</sup> PA 1.1.640a13.

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of this translation for τί ἦν εἶναι which emphasizes the appearance of the imperfect ‘ἦν’, see Christopher P. Long, *The Ethics of Ontology: Rethinking an Aristotelian Legacy*, *Suny Series in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 65, 81 and 158.

<sup>56</sup> PA 1.1.642a25.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 1.1, 640b25.

us to recognize that an appeal to matter does not say enough about them.<sup>58</sup> By addressing them, they speak to us, drawing our attention beyond their matter, to their very look—εἶδος.

Yet the precise manner in which the εἶδος is articulated in this text itself says something about the path of Aristotle's thinking. He says that in speaking about a bed "it would be necessary to speak about the configuration [σχήματος] and what sort of visible appearance [ιδέα] it has."<sup>59</sup> These words trace a genealogy. Whatever else it might suggest, the term "ιδέα" evokes the thinking of Plato and so, for Aristotle, a conception of form as somehow separate from the matter from which it has been abstracted. Yet this Platonic "ιδέα" is said together with "σχήματος," a λόγος that pulls in the opposite direction; for Aristotle explicitly associates "σχήματος" with the thinking of Democritus, an atomist and materialist, and so draws the "ιδέα" back into relation with its matter. Aristotle's name for this conception of form as intimately bound to matter is μορφή. Thus he says: "The nature in respect to shape (μορφή) is more important than the material nature."<sup>60</sup> To hear this statement properly, it is necessary to recall that it is made within the context of a corrective of the φύσικοι who tried to articulate the being of nature exclusively in terms of matter.

Yet, when Aristotle insists on the importance of μορφή, he is not simply thinking against his predecessors, but with them as well. For Aristotle develops his own more robust conception of form as μορφή by attending carefully to *the way Democritus speaks*: "Now if it is by virtue of its configuration [σχήματος] and color that each of the animals and their parts is what it is, Democritus might be speaking correctly; for he appears to assume this."<sup>61</sup> Even if his overall theory of atomism is misguided, still Democritus speaks well, for he appears to assume (φαίνεται . . . πολλαβεῖν) that it is by virtue of configuration

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<sup>58</sup> What Heidegger delineates as the two dimensions of λόγος are at work here: "1. λόγος, λέγειν in the sense of to approach and point to something, λόγος in the sense of access; 2. λόγος says also that which is expressed as such, it lies in the being that is addressed." See Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe Der Aristotelischen Philosophie*, 212.

<sup>59</sup> PA 1.1.640b27–8.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 1.1.640b28–9.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 1.1.640b29–31. Commenting on this passage, Lennox recognizes that "[t]he wording suggests that Aristotle infers Democritus's beliefs from what he actually says. He *says* that it is clear what sort of thing a human is because this is known by way of configuration and colour." See Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, 138.

that each animal and their parts are what they are. Attending to the assumptions in what has been said, to the very manner in which the speaking appears, Aristotle hears a way of thinking form as ontologically efficacious.

However, Democritus spoke in too unqualified a way [λίαν οὖν ἀπλῶς εἰρηται], for appealing to mere shape [σχήματος] is not enough. To make this clear, Aristotle appeals to the example of a corpse which, although it maintains the shape of a human-being, no longer is what it was precisely because it has ceased to be able to do its work. Thus, its being is not merely its σχήματος, the configuration of its outward appearance, or even its εἶδος, if by this we hear an ἰδέα separated from its matter; rather, it is μόρφη in its deeper sense as the being-at-work of matter. By attending to the way things are said, our attention is directed to the very manner in which the being of the being under consideration *is* in the world, to its very being-at-work, ἐνεργεία. This more robust conception of form, which now must be heard together with matter as expressed in the various ways in which beings *are* in their world, leads Aristotle's thinking to the very phenomenality of the phenomena, that is, to their ways of appearing. For it is only here, by living and speaking in intimate association with the phenomena, that the truth of beings is articulated.<sup>62</sup>

#### IV

*The compulsion of truth.* The two texts we have been considering, the opening passages of the *Physics* and the *Parts of Animals*, find an echo in one another, for not only do they articulate how τὰ λεγόμενα offer access to the truth of beings, but both texts vividly express the manner in which the truth compels its own articulation. In the *Physics*, after identifying the common agreement that the ἀρχαί are contraries and considering the meaning of contrariety in this context, Aristotle again returns to the things said by his predecessors:

For all of them say that the elements and the things they call original beings are contraries, and even though they lay it down without argument [ἀνευ λόγου], they say [λέγουσιν] it nonetheless, as though compelled by the truth itself.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> See *De Gen. et Cor.* 1.2.316a6–7.

<sup>63</sup> *Phys.* 1.5.188b29–32.

Aristotle's dialogue with his predecessors is oriented by and attends to a certain kind of λόγος, not, indeed, the λόγος of fully worked out, intentional arguments—although there is truth here too—but the λόγος that emerges from the direct, intimate engagement with beings themselves. The things having been said, τὰ λεγόμενα, are φαινόμενα that, when carefully assembled and critically questioned, speak something of the truth.

Aristotle's attention to τὰ λεγόμενα as φαινόμενα determines his engagement with his predecessors. Remarkably, however, Aristotle shows little interest in the actual arguments they put forth, nor is he much concerned with the content their thinking expresses. Indeed, his accounts of their various positions are surprisingly formal. He is content to show, for example, that a wide diversity of thinkers—from the monist Parmenides to the atomist Democritus, from Empedocles to Anaxagoras—have said things that can in a certain sense be heard as harmonious. This harmony does not mute dissonance. Aristotle insists: "So they say things that are in a certain way the same as one another, but also different: different in just the way they seem to be to most people, but the same to the extent that they are analogous."<sup>64</sup> What appears on the surface as dissonant, reveals a deeper resonance. To hear the resonance of truth under the cacophony of voices, Aristotle reflects not so much on the content of the philosophical positions of his predecessors as on the form of what they say. This allows Aristotle, as Wieland suggests, both to take his predecessors seriously and to move beyond them. He can move beyond them because he is less concerned with *what* they say—that is, with the objective content of their thought—than with *how* they say it—that is, with what they mean by speaking the way they do. He must take them seriously because their ways of speaking reveal what is implicitly presupposed about the things under consideration.<sup>65</sup> For Aristotle, every λόγος that genuinely seeks to say something concerning beings somehow resonates with the truth.

This is the force of Aristotle's insistence that the truth compels his predecessors to speak in certain ways. Yet truth only speaks in the things said as the things said speak about things. Two passages at the end of the first chapter of the *Parts of Animals* suggest the link

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 1.5.188b34–189a1.

<sup>65</sup> Wieland, *Die Aristotelische Physik*, 143–4.

between truth and things. “For nature is an origin more than matter. Even Empedocles occasionally stumbles upon this, led by the truth itself [ π’ ἀντῆς τῆς ἀληθείας], and is forced to say that the οὐσία and the nature is the λόγος, for example when he says what bone is.”<sup>66</sup> Empedocles speaks the truth when he attempts to articulate what bone is. If truth compels us, it is only when our λόγοι are directed toward beings. This is further reinforced a few lines later when Aristotle says that Democritus was the first to touch on the τί ἦν εἶναι “because he was carried away by the thing itself [ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ τοῦ πράγματος].”<sup>67</sup> In commenting on these two passages, Heidegger writes: “Ἀλήθεια and πράγμα [things or beings] are here used in the same sense, that is, ἀλήθεια is not ‘validity’ that clings to the sentence or some such thing (as a logic gone astray thinks), but rather [ἀλήθεια is] nothing other than the being in its uncovering, it is πράγμα, insofar as the being with which I have to do is there in a certain uncoveredness [*in einer gewisser Entdecktheit*].”<sup>68</sup> This intimate connection between truth and thing emerges from a λόγος striving to articulate something of the truth of things. As with Aristotle, so with Heidegger, much depends on little words. Here, Heidegger’s “einer gewisser”—in a certain . . . uncoveredness—echoes Aristotle’s frequent use of “τις,” a certain . . . , to temper the force of a statement when the danger of hyperbole looms. The danger here is that of hybris; for “a certain uncoveredness” is precisely not pure revelation. Truth is revealed *through* λόγος. This claim is no renunciation of the limits of λόγος. Rather, it points to those limits and, by extension, to human finitude itself. If, as Santayana has a fictional Avicenna remind us, “[n]aturalists are often betrayed by their understanding of origins into a sort of inhumanity,”<sup>69</sup> we would do well to listen for this tendency in Aristotle, the “greatest naturalist” of all.

And indeed, such an inhumanity is discernible even in the way Aristotle himself appropriates the things said by his predecessors. The irony is that the very formalism that allows Aristotle both to take his predecessors seriously and to move beyond them involves a sort of appropriation, an abstraction from their original context, indeed a

<sup>66</sup> PA 1.1.642a16–20.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 1.1.642a28

<sup>68</sup> Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe Der Aristotelischen Philosophie*, 240.

<sup>69</sup> George Santayana, *Dialogues in Limbo: With Three New Dialogues* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1957), 243.

violence that makes the things said, say things differently. Yet this too is a very human inhumanity; for it is an inescapable consequence of human historicity. It is a reminder of the finitude of which Aristotle, echoing Xenophanes, speaks when he calls the investigation concerning truth difficult. Yet this very recognition humanizes the investigation; for let us not forget, it is easy to speak the truth. We are natural beings and our attempts to articulate the truth about beings will ineluctably say something true, but only to the extent that our λόγοι remain open to beings themselves. We have, in fact, inherited from Aristotle this openness to beings and the ἔξις of thinking that makes it possible, and he inherited it from his predecessors. For it is a human ἔξις, an active condition, a way of being in the world that refuses to remain content with the surface of things, but seeks to articulate the deeper truth of the beings that are at once familiar and elusive.<sup>70</sup>

Access to the truth, then, does not require immediate insight into the realm of pure Being separate from the world in which we find ourselves. Yet it does involve a sort of transcendence, not the transcendence of which philosophers have often dreamed, confusing themselves with the gods, but finite, human transcendence—the ability to step outside oneself by attending to the things said before; for in these articulations, the truth resonates. Yet this transcendence is finite, for we are limited even as we step outside ourselves, held accountable from two directions. On one side are the things said, the very history in which we are embedded and from which we speak. On the other side stand the things themselves, demanding to be put into words; for Aristotle's naturalism tells us at once that beings go into words willingly, and that as an expression of a finite being, each attempted articulation always leaves more to be said. To take up here at the end what was said at the beginning: if we learn how to listen more attentively, we too in time might begin to speak more beautifully. And in so speaking, "something great comes into being."

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<sup>70</sup> I owe this formulation to Vincent Colapietro who eloquently writes: the best metaphysics is "a continuous striving to speak in a human voice about what is most intimately yet elusively familiar, everyday experience in its broadest reach and deepest import." Colapietro, "Striving to Speak in a Human Voice," 396–7.