

Aristotle on Nous of Simples

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In so many of his epistemological writings, Aristotle defends a sensible flavor of gradualism about our cognitive capacities: we start with the partial grasps afforded by what is better known to us, and if things go well, we end up with understandings of those objects better known by nature.¹ The picture is of a step-wise process, rather than a transforming moment of illumination.

In a difficult passage in *Metaphysics IX*, however, Aristotle introduces a kind of cognition which admits of no more or less, no better or worse. With respect to simples (*ta asuntheta*), Aristotle claims, knowing is like touching — there is contact, or there isn't. Put differently, for simple objects, what is necessary for thinking of them at all is sufficient for grasping them completely. For this reason, Aristotle sees error about simples as impossible: any successful thinking about them will be such as to preclude error. The only possible mistakes are failures even to have them in mind.

Although this corner of Aristotle's epistemology has been seen as obscure and even mysterious, we think that if anything, its difficulties are more and deeper than have yet been appreciated.² Specifically, we

1 See, for example, *Posterior Analytics* II.19, *Physics* I.1.

2 As we'll see, Ross thinks Aristotle himself is unsure of the meaning of 'incomposite'; for the description of the view as 'mystifying,' see David Bostock, *Aristotle Metaphysics Books Z and H* (New York: Oxford University Press 1994), 244.

think that Aristotle has no notion of simplicity available to him strong enough to underwrite the claim that thinking of them is infallible, in the special sense above. Aristotle should retain his sensible gradualism, for simples and complexes alike.

I Metaphysics IX.10

Let's begin with a lengthy bit of text. We've added bold letters for ease of reference:

(A) With regard to simples (*ta asuntheta*), what is being or not being, and truth or falsity? A thing of this sort is not composite, so as to be when it is compounded, and not to be if it is separated, like the white wood or the incommensurability of the diagonal; nor will truth and falsity still be present in the same way as in the previous cases. In fact, as truth is not the same in these cases, so also being is not the same; but truth or falsity is as follows — (B1) contact (*thigein*) and assertion are truth (assertion not being the same as affirmation), and ignorance is non-contact. For it is not possible to be in error regarding the question what a thing is, save in an accidental sense; and the same holds good regarding non-composite substances (for it is not possible to be in error about them). And they all exist actually, not potentially; for otherwise they would come to be and cease to be; but as it is, being itself does not come to be (nor cease to be); for if it did it would have to come out of something. (B2) About the things, then, which are what something is (*hoper einai ti*) and exist in actuality, it is not possible to be in error, but only to think them or not to think them. Inquiry about their 'what' takes the form of asking whether they are of such and such a nature or not.

As regards being in the sense of truth and not being in the sense of falsity, in one case there is truth if the subject and the attribute are really combined, and falsity if they are not combined; in the other case, if the object is existent it exists in a particular way, and if it does not exist in this way it does not exist at all; (B2) and truth means thinking these objects, and falsity does not exist, nor error, but only ignorance — and not an ignorance which is like blindness; for blindness is akin to a total absence of the faculty of thinking (1051b17-1052a4).³

In claim (A), Aristotle implies that some objects we speak and think about are simple. We'll ask below how best to understand this claim — whether simplicity is here a semantical or metaphysical notion. What is clear is that the epistemological doctrines in (B1) and (B2) apply to the simples because of their simplicity.

As for the epistemological doctrines, (B1) states that success and failure with respect to simples are contact and non-contact, while (B2) draws the implication that there can be no error *about* them, but only ignorance, or failure to think them at all.

³ The translation is Ross's, from the Revised Oxford Translation.

Before discussing simplicity more systematically, it will be useful to begin considering somewhat intuitively the connections Aristotle might see among the notions of simplicity, contact, and inerrancy. It seems *prima facie* plausible to suppose that the more composite or complex an object is, the more room there is for partially understanding it. To put the point very crudely, if we stipulate that a given object has fifty properties, we may grasp 35 of them, but still have plenty of room for mistaken judgment about it.

On the other hand, if an object lacks complexity, it may not be possible to grasp it well enough to succeed in having it in mind, without grasping it fully, in a way that precludes error. Some objects may be so simple that what it takes to have them in mind is all it takes to understand them completely. In such cases, there will be no mistaken judgment, but only failure to touch the object at all.⁴

Some of these intuitive connections are pursued by Plato at the end of the *Theaetetus*, and it seems plausible to suppose that Plato's treatment is at least at the back of Aristotle's mind in *Metaphysics* IX. Specifically, Plato considers the possibility that simples (*ta asuntheta*, 205C) would only be nameable and not knowable, precisely because their metaphysical simplicity renders impossible the kind of accounting of them taken (at that point) to be necessary for knowledge.

These ideas are perhaps the ancestors of Aristotle's claims that thinking of simples is like saying (*phasis*) rather than affirming (*kataphasis*), and that truth, knowledge, and ignorance are different in the case of simples — that is, simples are unknowable, in the familiar way of knowing.

Moreover, although Plato considers the possibility that simples would turn out unknowable, he later dismisses this view as unserious, in favor of the idea that simple elements admit of clearer knowledge (*enargesteran gnosis* 206B), than the compounds. Aristotle seems to end up in a similar place, insofar as he thinks of *nous* of simples as without falsity, and more

4 We don't believe Aristotle's intended distinction between the cognition appropriate to simples and that appropriate to composites can be upheld if we read his claim about contact with simples as amounting only to the claim that while we know these entities without error, we might not know all there is to know about them. Thus to the suggestion that cognition of simples is like touching in precluding error, but not in knowing all there is to know, we reply that this would be to destroy Aristotle's intended distinction. For if an episode of thought-as-contact leaves more of the object still to know, the nature of the object as a simple is threatened, and there seems no way of precluding error about the remaining unknown feature(s). Put differently, if contact only means 'correct but partial grasp,' why is the only contrast with contact complete ignorance (*agnoia*), as Aristotle claims at 1052a1?

accurate or exact (*akribesteron*, *Posterior Analytics* 100b8) than demonstrative knowledge.

While these Platonic discussions may provide a context for Aristotle's own epistemology of simples, they do not by themselves bring Aristotle's view into sharp relief, nor do they put it to the test. To these tasks we now turn.

II Two Interpretations of Simplicity

As we have seen, simplicity is the notion from which the striking doctrines (B1) and (B2) follow. We discern two different accounts of this notion in the literature. Defenders of the Metaphysical Interpretation (MI) take Aristotle's claim to be that it is the metaphysical nature of the simple objects of thought that explains why thinking of them is like touching — an all or nothing affair. We'll explain and consider MI in detail below. For now, it will do simply to underscore the point that MI explains the all or nothing character of thought about simples by reference to the nature of the objects.

By contrast, defenders of the Semantical Interpretation (SI) hold that in talking of simples, Aristotle has in mind constituents of judgments formed by combination.⁵ In the judgment, 'Thunder is a noise,' for example, 'thunder' is a simple, relative to the composite of which it's a part. Whatever the metaphysical nature of thunder may be, *qua* element of a judgment involving combination, it is a simple. In this way, SI sees simplicity as a metaphysically innocent notion.⁶

5 There is strong evidence in *De Anima* that Aristotle does connect the issue of the possibility of falsehood with the issue of combination: 'for falsehood always involves combination (*to gar pseudos en sunthesi aei*),' 430b1-2. But here the point seems to be that when a thought is a compound formed by synthesis (i.e. when it's the mental correlate of an affirmation which says one thing of one thing), then there can be falsehood. The contrast is not between these thoughts and thought-constituents, but these thoughts and thoughts that are compound, but not as the result of synthesis. The thoughts that signify essences, for example, will be compound in the sense of including different elements, but these elements won't be put together in the way that involves synthesis (predicating one thing of another).

6 In discussing SI and MI separately, we do not mean to rule out the possibility of seeing both SI and MI elements at work in these passages. Indeed, Philoponus interprets the *De Anima* passage this way. If we are correct that neither strategy successfully secures the epistemological doctrines, however, it's not clear how combining them will help matters.

The reason we discuss the version of SI defended by Wedin is that it explains why the epistemological doctrines are supposed to follow completely independently from MI, so that it counts as a genuine alternative to it.

SI can be traced back at least as far as Philoponus's commentary on *De Anima*. Philoponus argues that the simples Aristotle has in mind are simple terms, and that these are in the first instance words:

For when intellect with a simple intuition intuits each simple spoken sound, that is to say, each term, and thinks it on its own and of itself, adding nothing else, it thinks truly. For instance in saying "walks" forthwith intellect thinks walking, itself alone, not adding anything else (544, 30-35).⁷

One strength of this account is that Aristotle is clearly concerned with synthesis in *De Anima* (430b1-2), as he is in *De Interpretatione* when he clearly has words at issue. But the pressing questions for Philoponus's version of SI are why *nous* of this kind of simple should be contact, and why it should be inerrant. It's not clear why *nous* of simple words should have these special features.

In *Mind and Imagination in Aristotle*, Michael Wedin supplies answers to these questions, and thus a fuller accounting of SI.⁸ Wedin sees simplicity not as a matter of an object's nature, but as a matter of a thought-constituent's simplicity when compared to a thought composed of multiple constituents. The question left for Wedin is why thoughts of things simple *in this way* should be all or nothing. Why is thinking about these simples like touching?

Wedin answers this question by appealing to the idea that in having a thought composed of elements, one exploits a logically prior cognition of those elements:

In order to combine the thoughts in [The flower in the vase is a daffodil] one must already be acquainted with the thoughts themselves. And acquaintance is an all or nothing affair.⁹

7 Philoponus, *On Aristotle 'On the Soul 3.1-8'*, William Charlton, trans. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000), 124.

8 Michael Wedin. *Mind and Imagination in Aristotle* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1988). SI is also suggested by W.D. Ross, in his commentary on the *Metaphysics*, although he takes Aristotle himself to be somewhat unclear about what he means by 'incomposite.' See W.D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press 1953), 276.

9 Wedin, *Mind and Imagination*, 131. Perhaps the motivation for this idea is along the lines suggested by G. E. Moore in 'The Nature of Judgment.' Moore there argues that unless we grasp the constituents of judgments in a way that doesn't involve judgment, we will be off on a vicious regress that will render judgment itself impossible. See G.E. Moore, 'The Nature of Judgment,' *Mind* 8 (1899), 178.

On Wedin's view, then, thoughts that are truth-evaluable in the standard way (e.g. the flower in the vase is a daffodil) presuppose an all or nothing cognitive relation with the thoughts that compose it. This is evidenced by the fact that some errors involving that composite thought are not errors in judgment, but rather are failings to get on to the objects at all (e.g. continuing to assert that the flower is a daffodil in the face of conclusive evidence that it's a tulip).

Wedin's interpretation thus crucially involves two claims:

- (i) The simplicity at play in *Metaphysics* IX.10 is the relative simplicity of thought-constituents.
- (ii) As thought-constituents, we are acquainted with them; failure to be acquainted with them is not error *about* them.

As mentioned briefly above, Wedin defends the idea that acquaintance with thought-components is necessary by appeal to the difference between two kinds of errors: there are errors in judgment, in which correctly grasped thought-components are asserted falsely of the world, and failure of acquaintance, in which one or more thought-component is simply not grasped. Cases of the latter sort, although failures, are not errors or falsehoods, because the thinker hasn't even succeeded in 'touching' the relevant objects (thus Wedin secures the immunity to error of acquaintance with simples).

Now, some may complain of anachronism here, both in Wedin's appeal to acquaintance, and in his use of something akin to reference failure in his account of the second kind of error. Others may find any attempt to make interpretative progress by using the notion of acquaintance a case of explaining the obscure in terms of the more obscure.

We are prepared to see these objections to Wedin as misguided, not least because Aristotle does seem to recognize the difference between errors of judgment and failures of contact. However, we want to raise two problems for SI that not only call it into question, but point in the direction of MI as the better interpretation of these texts.

The first objection centers on the fact that in both *De Anima* and the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle uses metaphysically loaded language in explaining why it's *nous* of simples to which the epistemological doctrines apply. In *De Anima*, he draws an analogy between the inerrancy of proper perception and *nous* of objects without matter (429b29-30).¹⁰ Thus

¹⁰ See also *Metaphysics* XII, 1075a6-7.

it seems that it is the metaphysical fact that the simples in question are without matter that is at least partially explaining why the special epistemological doctrines hold.¹¹

Moreover, in *Metaphysics* IX.10, Aristotle employs three different essence-signifying expressions in explaining why the doctrines hold. First, at 1051b23-26, Aristotle explains why truth in these cases is contact by appeal to the claim that it's impossible (except accidentally) to be in error about what a thing is (*to ti esti*). He then makes the same claim about incomposite substances (*ousiai*, 1051b27). Finally, he claims that error is impossible in the case of an actuality that is just what something is (*hoper einai ti*, 1051b30-32). There is just thinking it, or not.

In both *De Anima* and the *Metaphysics*, then, Aristotle seems to connect the epistemological doctrines with something about the metaphysical nature of the objects of *nous*, rather than with the relative simplicity of a judgment-term to the composite judgment of which it's a part. That is, he seems not to explain the epistemological doctrines in the SI way.

The second source of questions about the Semantical Interpretation is the sustained analogy between thinking and perceiving that Aristotle pursues in *De Anima* (see e.g. 429a13-14). Aristotle's discussion in IX.10 of a kind of thinking that is immune to error calls to mind the discussion in *De Anima* of a kind of perceiving that is immune to error.

In a number of passages, Aristotle states that the senses are inerrant with respect to their proper objects:

I call by the name of proper object of this or that sense that which cannot be perceived by any other sense than that one and in respect of which no error is possible. (418a12-14)

There is precious little consensus about both the meaning and the motivation of the perceptual inerrancy doctrine, but in one of the passages, Aristotle endorses what we have called the 'Metaphysical Interpretation' of perceptual inerrancy. Aristotle does so, at the end of *De Anima* III.6, by contrasting two cases of seeing:

But, just as while the seeing of the proper object of sight can never be in error, seeing whether the white object is a man or not may be mistaken, so too in the case of objects without matter (430b29-30).

11 In the *De Anima* discussions, the word for simple is '*adiaireton*,' rather than '*asuntheton*.' Aristotle seems to go back and forth between these locutions. See (e.g.) *Metaphysics* 1075a5-7.

Aristotle here contrasts a case of sight seeing its proper object with a case of seeing that the white thing is a man. The former is always true; the latter may or may not be mistaken. Notice that the Semantical Interpretation of this passage is highly implausible, because Aristotle is highlighting the differences between two cases of seeing (one proper, one accidental), rather than the differences between the necessary conditions of perception or perceptual judgment and perceptions or judgments themselves.

If Aristotle were meaning to discuss inerrancy with respect to acquaintance with the components of perceptual judgments (as on SI), this inerrancy would hold just as well for 'The white thing is a man' as for 'White here now' or 'The object is white.' On the SI account of this passage, Aristotle's appeal to a second and contrasting example is at best otiose, and at worst positively misleading.

It is much more plausible to see the difference Aristotle highlights in this passage as a difference in the objects of perception themselves. With respect to the faculty of sight, a white man is a composite object — and it's composite beyond the proper scope of that faculty; as Aristotle says, it is an object of sight only accidentally. A perceiving of white, on the other hand, does not involve the composition of a proper object and an object accidental with respect to sight.

Our primary interest, of course, is not the perceptual case, but the case of thought as discussed in IX.10. The perceptual case is relevant because Aristotle sees perception and thought as deeply analogous. So, if the Metaphysical Interpretation is better in the case of perception, this is *prima facie* reason for preferring it in the case of thought as well. This argument based on analogy cannot be decisive, but together with the strong textual intimations of metaphysics, we find there to be good reason to set aside SI and consider the prospects afforded by the MI strategy.

Before moving on to MI, it will be useful now to specify further the kinds of entities we take to be at issue in Aristotle's discussions of simples, drawing on material from our first objection to SI above.

Recall that this objection emphasizes the fact that Aristotle thinks of the entities as without matter, and as essences. Let us call entities that meet these conditions Basic Essences (BE). We think Aristotle's generous use of the language of essence counts against the view of those who hold that at least in *Metaphysics* IX.10, Aristotle restricts the class of the simples to divine entities.¹² As we've seen, when Aristotle explains why the

12 For fuller discussion, see Enrico Berti, 'The Intellection of "Indivisibles" According to Aristotle, *De Anima* III 6,' *Aristotle on Mind and the Senses*, G.E.R. Lloyd and G.E.L. Owen, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1978) 141-63.

inerrancy doctrine holds of simples, he makes no special reference to divine entities. Rather, he appeals to the notion of what a thing is:

But truth or falsity is as follows — contact and assertion are truth (assertion not being the same as affirmation), and ignorance is noncontact. For it is not possible to be in error regarding the question what a thing is, except accidentally. (1051b23-26)

In this passage, the inferential ‘*gar*’ at b25 indicates that the claim about contact and noncontact is being explained by what follows. The claim about essence is supposed to explain why simples admit of only contact or failure altogether. This provides one reason, then, to take ‘the simples’ to refer to essences more generally.

The second reason comes from this fairly straightforward assertion:

About the things, then, which are what something is (*hoper einai ti*) and actualities (*energeia*), it is not possible to be in error, but only to think them or not to think them. (1051b30-32)

Here again we are given no reason to see Aristotle’s claim as restricted to essences and actualities of the divine sort.

On our view, then, when Aristotle speaks of simples, he has in mind at least some subset of the essences he recognizes, not restricted to divine beings. Because it will be important below, though, we need now to argue further that among the BE are the essences of natural kinds, such as human being. More precisely, we need to argue that the human soul is a BE in the sense at work in our crucial passages. We have two interests in this conclusion. First, it will underscore the significance of the epistemological claims Aristotle makes in *Metaphysics* IX: they are claims that are supposed to apply to some of the most fundamental entities he recognizes. Second, we are going to show that Aristotle himself is committed to rejecting the all-or-nothing epistemology of *Metaphysics* IX for entities such as the human soul. Thus we are going to reveal a deep tension in this important area of Aristotelian epistemology. To wit, his all-or-nothing theory is in conflict with his practice of attributing partial successes and failures to his fellow psychologists.

Our argument about the scope of the epistemological doctrines requires two steps: first, we need to connect the soul with form, substance, and essence; then we need to show that the soul is not the kind of essence that’s a form/matter compound. Recall that in *Metaphysics* IX, Aristotle explicitly mentions incomposite *ousiai* as among the entities to which the doctrines of contact and inerrancy apply (1051b26-7).

Two texts are crucial for this two-step argument:

(T1) Now an animal’s soul — the substance of what is ensouled — is the substance corresponding to the account (*logos*); it is the form and essence of the right sort of body. (1035b14-16)

(T2) We have said generally, then, about all cases, what the essence is; in what way it is itself in its own right; why in some cases the account of essence includes the parts of the thing defined and in some cases it does not; and that in the account of substance the parts that are matter will not be present, because they are parts of the compound substance (*sunholon*), not of the substance corresponding to the account (*logos*). (1037a21-7)¹³

In these two texts, we seem to find the two desired connections. That is, Aristotle associates the soul with *logos*, form and essence. Moreover, he claims that the soul is substance corresponding to the account, and that the account of this sort of substance makes no reference to material parts.

Put differently, these texts embody the following argument:

(P1) The soul is the substance corresponding to the account.

(P2) The account of the substance corresponding to the account makes no reference to material parts.

(C) So, the account of the soul makes no reference to material parts.

We are convinced that Aristotle is committed to this tidy argument, but our treatment of these passages faces one major obstacle — an obstacle that arises within the very same stretch of texts. At 1036b21-32, Aristotle seems to reverse field and require that the definition of human being include reference to material parts:

(T3) We have said, then, that questions about definitions raise a puzzle, and why they raise it. That is why this reduction of everything goes too far; for presumably some things are this form in this matter, or this in this or these in this condition. And Socrates the Younger was wrong in his habitual comparison of an animal. For his comparison leads us away from the truth; it makes us suppose that a man can exist without his parts, as a circle can exist without bronze. But in fact the two cases are not similar; for an animal is a perceiver,¹⁴ and cannot be defined without motion, and therefore to parts in the right condition. For a hand is not a part of

13 The remaining translations from the *Metaphysics* largely follow Terence Irwin and Gail Fine, *Aristotle Selections* (Indianapolis: Hackett 1995).

14 Here we accept (with Frede, Irwin et al.) the suggestion of *aisthêtikon*, rather than *aisthêton*, but our view of the passage can be defended without it. See Michael Wedin, *Aristotle's Theory of Substance* (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), 330-1.

a man in just any condition, but only when it is capable of fulfilling its function, and hence only when it is ensouled — when it is not ensouled, it is not a part. (1036b21-32)

The troubling parts of T3, of course, are the apparent claims that matter must not be left out, and that an animal cannot be defined without motion, and thus without parts conditioned in a certain way. If these are the claims Aristotle is making, there is a serious question about the coherence of VII.10-11 (given T2), and a serious question about the status of the human soul as a Basic Essence.

Fortunately, an alternative interpretation of T3 is available that doesn't commit Aristotle to the denial of his claims in T1-T2. We can begin to see the alternative by noticing that T3 is concerned to reveal the problem with a specific view about definition, and to suggest a way of avoiding it. The view about definition is a reductive view that's problematic (*ou kalôs*) because it leads one to suppose that there could be a human being without the parts. From the context, it's likely that the reductive view in question is the Pythagorean view that everything can be reduced to immaterial numbers (see 1036b7-20).¹⁵ If man could be reduced to number and not thereby eliminated, it certainly would be possible for there to be a man without the parts.

Given that it's a fairly radical reductionism Aristotle wants to avoid, he can evidently do so without going back on the T1-T2 view that accounts of essence don't include material parts. Aristotle's recommendation is that we remember that an animal cannot be defined without motion, and thus without the parts in a certain condition. As Frede has pointed out, these claims do not get us all the way to the claim that motion and material parts themselves must be mentioned in the definition.¹⁶ If the definition mentions functional parts, for example, this may be sufficient to rule out the possibility that there could be an animal of the relevant sort without matter at all.¹⁷ If the human essence includes

15 Here we have been helped by Wedin, *Substance*, 327-330.

16 Michael Frede, 'The Definition of Sensible Substances in *Met. Z.*' *Biologie, Logique Et Metaphysique chez Aristote*, D. Devereux and P. Pellegrin, eds. (Paris: Editions du CNRS 1990), 121

17 For the suggestion of functional parts, see Wedin, *Substance*, 338 n. 76. Irwin worries that if the definition of the form doesn't include material parts, the response will be 'irrelevant' to the opposing view. But if Aristotle secures the conclusion that there cannot be a man without the material parts, either by an entailment relation between functional and material parts, or by his account of the relation between the enmattered kind and individuals falling under it (or both), then Aristotle's response need

perception, for example, it will be clear that an immaterial number won't fit the bill.

Michael Wedin worries that Frede's view still makes the connection between the soul and material parts too intimate, insofar as one might think that the ability to infer material parts from the account of the soul makes it the case that the parts are in a way contained in the account.¹⁸ But in *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle seems to think of the relation as an inferential one, just as Frede's view would have it:

Hence we should if possible say that because (*epeidē*) this is what it is to be a human, therefore (*dia touto*) he has these parts; for he cannot be without them. (640a33-5)

In addition to the inferential language, notice that in the last clause, Aristotle asserts the negation of the reductionist position: the relation between the essence and the material parts rules out the possibility that there could be a man without them.¹⁹

To see the point another way, recall the distinction in T2 between the form and the form/matter compound. If we think of the compound as the species, or what David Charles calls 'the enmattered kind,'²⁰ its relation to individuals falling under it will be sufficient to ensure that there can't be such an individual without material parts.²¹ Because Aristotle's view of species sees them as compounds of form and matter, his view will never mislead one into thinking that an individual human (for example) could exist wholly immaterially, as on the reductionist views he rejects.

But the crucial point is that the kind's being enmattered does not by itself show that the account of the form or soul will make reference to

not be seen as an ignoratio, even though material parts remain outside of the definition of the form. See T.H. Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles* (New York: Oxford University Press 1988) 246.

18 Wedin, *Substance*, 337.

19 For the inferential view, see also Edwin Hartman, *Substance, Body and Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977), 65.

20 David Charles, *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence* (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), 279 n. 11

21 The distinction between form and kind is also deployed in this way by Michael Loux in *Primary Ousia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1991), 175-8. See also Deborah K.W. Modrak, *Aristotle's Theory of Language and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), 188.

material parts. Aristotle makes a similar point in a text that precedes the summary text T2²²:

(T4) Now the form of human being, for instance, always appears in flesh and bones, and in parts of this sort. Does it follow that these are also parts of the form and the account? Perhaps not; perhaps they are only matter, and we are incapable of separating them from the form because it does not occur in other [sorts of material parts]. (1036b5-7)

When we're thinking of the soul as the *definiendum*, Aristotle can insist, as in T2, that material parts do not belong to its account.²³ This idea is also supported by the general methodological reflections about psychology at the beginnings of *De Anima* and *Parts of Animals*. In the former text, Aristotle distinguishes between the soul's affections as objects of natural philosophy and as objects of first philosophy. The student of nature describes the matter, the dialectician describes the form (*eidos*) and the account (*logos*) (403b1-2). In *Parts of Animals* I, Aristotle claims that his predecessors were mistaken largely because they focused on material causes, while lacking the notion of the what-it-is and the definition of being (642a24-6).²⁴ We've seen that Aristotle views the soul as the substance corresponding to the definition or *logos*. These passages again suggest that while the kind is a form/matter compound, the soul is to be defined independently of material parts. If Aristotle deploys the

22 For a similar treatment of this passage, see Mary Louise Gill, *Aristotle on Substance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989), 131-3.

23 Thus Frede: 'What gets defined, on the view in Z 10-11, are no longer composite sensible substances, but their forms or essences, man not in the sense of a composite sensible substance, but in the sense of the form of man. Given this it is no surprise that Aristotle should claim that there is no place in the definition of man for a reference to matter or the material parts' (Michael Frede, 'Definition,' 122). The view that definitions of forms are free of matter is also defended by Gill, *Aristotle on Substance*, 127; Frank Lewis, *Substance and Predication in Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991), 303; Charlotte Witt, *Substance and Essence in Aristotle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1989) 191-3. For the opposing view, see T.H. Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles*, 245-7. The differences between the view we defend and Irwin's view should not be overstated. Irwin argues that definitions of these forms include matter, in a way: 'Still, the definition includes [material] parts only in a certain way, as defined by their capacities and functions, so that the essence is a formal compound (or materiate form) rather than a material compound.' But Irwin would reject our claim that the souls of natural substances are incomposites.

24 James Lennox writes: 'To give a definition of a thing's being is to state "what it is to be" for that thing. Such a definition refers primarily or exclusively to form viewed in abstraction from matter' (James Lennox, *Aristotle: Parts of Animals* [New York: Oxford University Press 2000], 151).

distinction between soul and kind in this way, T1-T3 can be interpreted consistently, and the status of the human soul as a Basic Essence is secured.

It will be useful here briefly to reiterate the connections we see between Aristotle's understanding of essences such as the soul and the epistemology of simples in *De Anima* III.6 and *Metaphysics* IX.10. We've argued that the soul, as form and essence, answers the 'What is it?' question, and thus is just what something is. Aristotle describes simples in both of these ways in *Metaphysics* IX (1051b23-6, 1051b30-2). Moreover, T1 and T2 show that the soul is an incomposite *ousia*, a substance that isn't a form/matter compound. These points connect directly to 1051b27 and *De Anima* 429b29-30. If, then, the doctrines of contact and inerrancy apply at all, they should apply to entities such as the soul.

Notice that if we're correct that what we're calling Basic Essences, such as the human soul, fall within the scope of the claims in *Metaphysics* IX.10, the problems we're raising strike at the heart of Aristotle's epistemology, given the centrality of the Basic Essences to his theory of knowledge in general. They are, after all, better known by nature, and the accounts of them constitute the inferential basis for the other objects of knowledge in the sciences (1028a31-b2, 1028a36-b2). If we show his account of *nous* of these simples to be untenable, we reveal more than a regrettable quirk, we reveal a fundamental problem.

Before finally moving on to MI, we should say a bit more about the point of this lengthy digression about soul and essence. We've been concerned to argue that the soul is the kind of essence that is an actuality and just what something is, because this is the kind of essence to which the epistemological doctrines of contact and inerrancy apply. This is our concern because we're going to argue below that Aristotle's own dialectical discussions of the views of rival psychologists suggest that he doesn't see *nous* of the human soul as a matter of inerrant, all-or-nothing contact. Thus, there turns out to be a significant tension between his official epistemology of simples and his understandings of the thoughts of others. Before showing this, though, we need to discuss MI in much more detail.

III The Metaphysical Interpretation

In the previous section, we argued that the Semantical Interpretation of simplicity fails to capture the link Aristotle sees between simplicity and immunity to error. The alternative to SI is MI, according to which the metaphysical nature of simplicity explains why the inerrancy doctrine holds. But, as we shall see, MI itself faces severe problems as well.

Before considering its prospects, it will be useful to say a bit more about MI. The idea at the heart of MI is that because simples are in a strong sense *one*, there is no room for any kind of partial grasp of them. A simple unity of this sort affords only one 'way onto' it.²⁵ Edward Halper puts it this way:

According to this account, the truth pertinent to incomposites lies in their character. It is because they are one that the mere grasp of them constitutes having the truth about them. Without parts, they cannot be known partially.²⁶

As we see it, Aristotle is not alone in believing that there is a kind of cognition for simples that differs in kind from the cognition appropriate for composites. In a previous paper we have suggested that Plato, in particular, is sensitive to this point.²⁷ We have argued in turn that this provides a constraint on any account of the Forms: any account of the supposed simplicity of the Forms must respect Plato's view that partial knowledge of an item is incompatible with that item's true and absolute simplicity.

To make these points we introduced what we call Thesis K, the view that should one be able to make cognitive contact with a thing, one is thereby precluded from being in error about that thing. K is plausible, we suggest, only with a metaphysics of simples. Here again is the emergence of MI: because of their nature, thinking of simples is all-or-nothing. Presented with such a simple one comes to grasp all there is to grasp about that simple. One has 'full, adequate, and complete understanding' for there is simply no room for anything less within the encountered item.²⁸ Having a false belief about a thing, on the other hand, presupposes that one has already made cognitive contact with that thing, yet in a way that leaves room for error. This in turn seems to require objects of judgment of which many things are true.

In other words, starkly put, a metaphysics of simples makes knowing like touching — an all or nothing affair. Without complexity in the object there are not multiple respects in which one might succeed or fail to

25 We borrow this phrase from *Plato: Theaetetus*, John McDowell, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press 1973), 197.

26 Edward Halper, *One and Many in Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press 1989), 222

27 'How Simple are Plato's Forms?' *Ancient Philosophy* 22 (2002) 277-88.

28 This is Russell's language in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (Chicago: Open Court 1985), 63.

know a simple. There is just one epistemic threshold, and one either meets it or fails to have the object in mind.

As for Aristotle, it is clear that if IX.10 is to be made coherent, not to say plausible, we need to be clearer on the nature of the simples in question, as well as the manner in which they are simple. A crucial distinction, however, must now be introduced, for to speak of incomposites *simpliciter* is to fail to notice that there are at least two ways in which something may be incomposite or simple.

On the first way, simple entities lack parts in all senses of the term, lacking even internal complexity. They are 'unit-entities.' The question of unifying a 'many-in-one' doesn't even arise for them. Call this 'Strong Partlessness' (SP). On the second way, simple entities are partless, but they are internally complex. They're complex, but not by having parts. Call this 'Weak Partlessness' (WP). More precisely, we may define SP as the having of no more than one intrinsic property; objects which are characterized by WP have more than one intrinsic property. For SP we say 'no more than one,' for we believe bare particulars, in being without any properties and thus without any internal complexity, also are captured by SP.²⁹

A brief look at some historical figures might help establish the distinction. Taking the second alternative first, a paradigm of WP is found in Leibniz. According to Leibniz, while monads are simple in not having parts, they have a multiplicity of qualities, where the manifold of qualities are essential to making the monads the individuals they are.

The monad which we shall discuss here is nothing other than a simple substance that enters into composites. Simple means without parts.³⁰

29 One may worry that by admitting that an entity may have one property, as in SP, we are unable to stop that entity from having an infinite number of properties. For any property F, that *a* has, it may be thought also to have the property (F ∨ G), and (F ∨ H), and (F ∨ G ∨ H) and so on. Thus SP is an unstable position, entailing as it does that any entity that has one property has an infinite number.

The quick way to rebut this, of course, is to deny disjunctive properties by initially shifting the burden onto those who wish to introduce them. The way to do this is to show how strange and unpalatable such properties are: if one is prepared to accept (F ∨ G) as a property, then what about the equivalent property $\sim(\sim F \ \& \ \sim G)$? Should one take disjunctive properties seriously, one would presumably have to take negative properties seriously as well. For further discussion, see D.H. Mellor, 'Predicates and Properties,' in *Properties*, Mellor and Oliver, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), 264-5, and Lenny Clapp, 'Disjunctive Properties: Multiple Realizations,' *Journal of Philosophy* 98 (2001), 124-32.

30 *Monadology*, in *Philosophical Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 1989), §1

However, monads must have some qualities (and some changes), otherwise they would not even be beings (and if simple substances were nonentities, compounds would also be reduced to nothing).³¹

Perhaps a less clear endorsement of WP is found in Plato.

Would you not expect a composite object or a natural compound to be liable to break up where it was put together? And ought not anything which is really incomposite to be the one thing of all others which is not affected in this way? ... Is it not extremely probable that what is always constant and invariable is incomposite, and what is inconstant and variable is composite? ... [Does] each one of these uniform and independent entities [absolute equality or beauty] remain constant and invariable, never admitting any alteration in any respect or in any sense?

They must be constant and invariable, Socrates, said Cebes. (*Phaedo*, 78c-d)

As we read that passage, Plato claims that Forms are simple in not having parts. But Plato also leaves open the possibility that Forms have an internal complexity of some sort. Forms, like souls, are intrinsically eternal and immutable.

As for SP, it is apparently maintained by Descartes. In this passage, he notes also the epistemic implications of SP:

Whence it is evident that we are in error if we judge that any one of these simple natures is not known completely by us. For if we have even the slightest grasp of it in our mind — which we surely must have, on the assumption we are making a judgment (*judicare*) about it — it must follow that we have complete knowledge of it (*nos illam totam cognoscere*). For otherwise it could not be said to be simple, but must be complex — a compound of that which is present in our perceptions of it, and that of which we think we are ignorant.³²

As we've suggested above, the SP/WP distinction is relevant because the strong epistemological doctrines of contact and inerrancy are most plausible in application to SP entities. This is the germ of Aristotle's problem: he rejects SP, even for Basic Essences. One way to see this is by noting that Aristotle thinks of essences as complex unities; they are cases of many-in-one, even though their unity is crucial to them:

Just as the removal or addition of a component, however small, from the number makes it no longer the same number but a different one, so also such removal or addition does away with definition and essence. For indeed the number must be what makes something one number, but these people cannot state what makes it

31 *Monadology*, §8

32 Rene Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Haldane and Ross, trans. (New York: Dover Publications 1931), 42

one. For either it is not [one] but a sort of heap, or else it is indeed [one], and they should say what makes one from many. The definition is also one, but for the same reasons, they cannot state [what makes it one]. And this result is no surprise. For by the same argument substance (*ousia*) is one in this way, not, as some say, by being a sort of unit or point; rather, each substance is a sort of actuality and nature. (1043b36-1044a9)

Here Aristotle claims that definition, essence, and substance are cases of unity, but neither as heaps nor as points or units. They are ones out of many. But it seems likely that if the strong epistemological doctrines were to apply at all, they would apply to the point/unit view. This text thus counts powerfully against SP.

A second way of seeing Aristotle's rejection of SP is by considering the functional and explanatory complexity of essences. The soul of an animal, for example, is responsible for its nutritive, locomotive, and perceptual capacities. The complexity of an animal's activities requires some degree of complexity in the animal's form. As Wedin puts it, 'functional complexity in the [compound] must be matched by like complexity in the form.'³³

Finally, given the strength of SP, it's possible to mount an intuitive case for Aristotle's rejection of it. Although essences are metaphysically fundamental, they will nevertheless be the seats of a multiplicity of intrinsic properties: the essence of horse, for example, is eternal, imperceptible and an actuality.³⁴ It is not a unit-entity.

For these reasons, it is very unlikely that Aristotle holds SP for essences. But if he accepts WP, then there is little hope of securing the doctrines of contact and inerrancy. Since SP is not textually supportable as a reading of Aristotle, it seems fair to conclude that for MI to succeed the simples of IX.10 must be only 'weakly partless.' They must be simple in a sense consistent with their internal complexity. On Aristotle's view of these simples, thinking of them is like touching — an all or nothing affair. The only errors possible are failure of contact, failure even to have them in mind.

Our worry about WP, however, is that the internal complexity of essences it posits, while faithful to the text and philosophically plausible, undermines Aristotle's epistemological claims about simples. That is, by allowing essences to be internally complex, Aristotle makes room for

33 Wedin, *Substance*, 341

34 For defense of the view that forms are immaterial and changeless, see Robert Heinaman, 'Aristotle and the Mind-Body Problem,' *Phronesis* 35 (1990) 83-102.

errors in judgment about them. About internally complex simples, thinking is not all or nothing.

Let us begin by presenting our argument schematically. As we have seen, Aristotle understands his basic entities as partless, but internally complex. So a simple entity, *s*, for example, although partless, has intrinsic properties or features *F*, *G*, and *H*. (It is by having these multiple features that it can play its explanatory role). The internal complexity of *s* provides a multiplicity of 'ways onto' *s*; that is, it provides a number of different ways of successfully thinking of *s* (as *F*, *G*, or *H*). But, grasping *s* in one of these ways does not guarantee either (a) that all of its features will be grasped, or (b) that one will refrain from ascribing to it further features it lacks. In these ways, the complexity of *s* drives a wedge between the necessary conditions for grasping *s* and the sufficient conditions for a complete, inerrant understanding of it. Thus the internal complexity of *s* makes it an entity to which Thesis K simply does not apply.

One way of trying to navigate the SP/WP dilemma so as to allow the desired epistemological results has been offered independently by Frede and Halper.³⁵ On their view, Aristotle thinks of Basic Essences as, in a way, partly satisfying SP and WP both. They are Strongly Partless because they are just the ultimate differentiae, but they are Weakly Partless, because they 'implicitly contain' the other essential elements. The implicit containment makes the Basic Essences complex enough to be explanatorily powerful, but simple enough to be subject to all-or-nothing contact — or so the suggestion goes.

To be fair, while Halper is clearly concerned to establish both metaphysical and epistemological conclusions about Basic Essences, Frede's primary concern in the paper at issue is to establish only the unity of Basic Essences, not to ensure their error-free cognition. In particular, Frede's goal, as seen, is to argue that the complexity of a definition of the human soul does not include reference to matter as part of the definition. Halper, on the other hand, intends to show not only the unity of Basic Essences, but also that their unity allows for cognition in error-free ways. We will contend, however, that Halper's (and by implication, Frede's) concession to WP puts pressure on the possibility of knowledge of Basic Essences being all or nothing.

On Halper's view, the arguments of IX.10 are an extension of a thesis Aristotle is at pains to defend at length in Books 7-8, namely that (despite appearances) essence is incomposite because essence or form is one. The

35 Frede, 'Definition,' 128; Halper, *One and Many* 222

simples of IX.10, then, according to Halper, are the forms of any *ousia* (221-2). Now Halper argues that it is essential for Aristotle to argue that form is one, and thus simple, because form is supposed to be identical to *ousia*, and because *ousia* itself is to be one. And to be one, according to Halper, requires that form have no parts: 'Incomposites have no parts' (221). But to this position comes the objection that since there is an isomorphism between the formula of a thing and the thing itself, and since the formula of *ousia* always has parts, it appears that we must conclude as well that form (and *ousia*) itself has parts, is therefore composite not one.

Frede puts the points this way:

Obviously Aristotle in *Met. Z* also is concerned with the unity of definition which he takes to have its foundation in the unity of the thing defined. But if we have a definition it necessarily mentions a plurality of things... And thus the question arises how a definition in terms of these apparent many items manages to be a definition of some one kind of thing. (127)

Halper answers that a proper inspection of 7.12 reveals that the formula of a substance is itself one, as the definition or essential formula of a substance 'contains only a single constituent, the ultimate differentia' (113). There is thereby no threat to the unity/oneness of form from the existence of a multitude of parts in the formula because, 'the ultimate differentia implicitly includes everything in the whole series of differentia and also the genus' (114). The form of man is two-footed, for instance, but being an animal is not a separate part of the form, but is rather implied if we are speaking of something that has two feet.

Frede answers in kind:

[The] last differentia already by itself implicitly contains all prior differentia in the series, in the way in which "two-footed" contains "footed".... Thus all the parts of the definition reduce to one, namely the last differentia. (128)

On the epistemic side, Halper tells us that since form is both one in number and in species, there cannot be error about it.

Because form or essence is numerically one, it is not subject to the same type of mistakes as the universal. Because it is one in species, it is not subject to the mistakes we could make about a particular individual (such as thinking the individual is alive when she is not.) Thus insofar as essence is one in both ways, we cannot be mistaken about it. (224)

Since form has no parts, it is one in number. As one in number it has no complexity and is thus not subject to error. Form is knowable in an all or nothing manner, claims Halper.

Because some equilateral triangles are wooden, someone might mistakenly say that equilateral triangles are wooden, for the species is a predicate... In contrast, someone who thinks the essence of the triangle is or includes wood has simply failed to grasp the essence. He can only have in mind some other nature. (225)

Return now to Halper's (and Frede's) suggestion that though form is one, there are other 'ingredients' in a form. This is to grant what we've called WP for Basic Essences. Importantly, for both Frede and Halper, though a form is somehow a many-in-one, the many are merely *implicitly present* in the ultimate differentia; e.g. having two feet implies being an animal. Neither Frede nor Halper want to see the elements of a form amount to genuine *parts* of that form, and thus both seek shelter in the elements being mere *implicitly contained*.

The difficulty for Halper, however, is that the strong epistemic points he wants to make about form — that it is knowable in an all or nothing matter — are in tension with an acknowledgement that Basic Essences are captured merely by WP, not SP. Halper's epistemology of form requires SP, but cannot be maintained, given that only WP applies to form. Why?

Halper seems to argue that since the formula of *ousia* has no parts that *ousia* itself is simple in the strong sense (our SP). And it is because of the strong sense of 'simple' that error isn't possible — for there is no complexity in form to leave us vulnerable to partial knowledge. In other words, Halper's reading of the epistemology of IX.10 requires that he attribute to Aristotle the claim that essence has no parts and is therefore simple in the strong sense of SP. But as we have seen, having no parts is perfectly compatible with having internal complexity. Indeed, when pressed, Halper reverts to WP, acknowledging that forms are in some sense a many-in-one.

Halper is presumably correct that immunity to error requires *at least* that that known item be one in number (and presumably one in species). But this does still not seem strong enough to guarantee knowledge free from error. And as we will show below, there is reason to suspect that some forms are not thus knowable.

To be sure, in the example discussed by Halper, having two feet does seem to entail being an animal. And it does seem plausible to claim that even if being animal is a distinct aspect from having two feet, knowing the latter would entail knowing the former. In this case the multiple aspects of the form stand in a tight, logical relation. But need all aspects be so ordered?

We suspect that Halper's (and Frede's) heavy reliance on talk of 'ultimate differentia' might be misleading here, for it suggests that the nature of essence always comes structured such that the more complex (the ultimate differentia) entails the more general (the genus). The exam-

ple of two footed and being an animal fits this pattern. But it isn't clear that all forms will be structured in a way that respects this tight logical order among its aspects. And in a case where there is not such a tight order, knowledge of one aspect of a form perhaps need not entail knowledge of another aspect or of the whole essence. In this way, the complexity of form would bar the application of Thesis K.

What is crucial to see here is that this failure of entailment is not a mere possibility. Aristotle clearly recognizes cases in which grasping a differentia does not guarantee knowledge of the rest of the essence. In *History of Animals* and *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle lists several cases in which one's grasp of a differentiating feature still leaves room for 'epistemic hesitancy,' in Geoffrey Lloyd's apt phrase, about the higher level generic elements of the essence³⁶:

Nature proceeds little by little from things lifeless to animal life in such a way that it is impossible to determine the exact line of demarcation, nor on which side thereof an intermediate form should lie.... So, in the sea, there are certain objects concerning which one would be at a loss (*diaporéseien*) to determine whether they be animal or plant. (588b5-7, 12-13)

Sometimes ascidians and the like so far resemble plants as that they never live free and unattached, but, on the other hand, inasmuch as they have a certain flesh-like substance, they must be supposed to possess some degree of perception — and it is unclear (*adêlon*) whether they are to be classed as plants or as animals. (681a25-8).

These texts show that even if the essence as a whole is implicitly contained in the differentia, this metaphysical fact does not entail the epistemological claim that grasping the container is sufficient for grasping inerrantly all of the elements it contains.

Moreover, it seems likely that Aristotle will have to allow that one's grasp of a differentiating feature itself will not always involve inerrant contact. In *History of Animals*, Aristotle claims that the differentiae of animals are to be found in their parts, but also in their lives, activities and characters or habits (487a11ff.).³⁷ Some of these latter three will almost certainly be complex unities of the sort that allow for partial understanding.

36 G.E.R. Lloyd, *Aristotelian Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 67-82

37 See D.M. Balme, 'Aristotle's use of division and differentiae,' in *Philosophical Issues in Aristotle's Biology*, A. Gotthelf and J. Lennox, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987), 79; see also Lloyd, *Explorations*, 49.

In *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle says as much about the perceptual activities of some animals:

In regard to perception, some animals give no indication whatsoever of it, while others indicate (*sêmainetai*) it but indistinctly. (588b18-19)

On our reading of this passage, Aristotle is not claiming about the second group of animals that they only indistinctly have a perceptual capacity. He is claiming that the evidence we have is equivocal. This reading is supported by Aristotle's use of '*sêmainein*.' As Lloyd puts it, '[there are] difficulties that could be settled, one way or another, if more or clearer evidence were available.'³⁸ It may be, then, that in such cases, we grasp the differentiating capacity, but whether or not it is indeed perceptual is unclear to us. If this is Aristotle's view of these cases, then even our grasp of a single differentia need not be all-or-nothing contact.

These passages from the biological works show that even on the ingenious account of unity defended by Frede and Halper, the metaphysics of essence to which Aristotle is committed does not secure the epistemological doctrines of contact and inerrancy.

Our examination of MI has pointed to the following conclusions: (i) Aristotle rejects SP for essences; (ii) WP is plausible, but incapable of securing the epistemological doctrines; and (iii) the Frede/Halper way of combining the strengths of SP and WP still leaves Basic Essences susceptible to partial contact and error.

IV Contact and Error in *De Anima*

At the outset, we claimed that the puzzles surrounding Aristotle's epistemology of simples have generally been understated, despite the mixture of silence and chagrin with which his views in this connection have been greeted. In this section, we're going to raise a final puzzle concerning the match or mismatch between the epistemology of simples explicit in the texts we've considered, and that implicit in Aristotle's dialectical discussions of the thoughts of others. Although it is a puzzle, it does not solely represent more bad news for Aristotle's position. On the contrary, it reveals a different strain in Aristotle's epistemology which is both consonant with his WP metaphysics of simples, and is on its own more attractive than the all-or-nothing doctrine of contact. After bringing this strain to light, we'll conclude by considering objections.

38 Lloyd, *Explorations*, 74

In section II, we argued that entities such as the soul fall within the scope of the epistemology of simples in *De Anima* III.6 and *Metaphysics* IX.10. If this is correct, then Aristotle is committed to the claim that *nous* with respect to the soul is a matter of all-or-nothing contact. But Aristotle's dialectical discussions of the views of his rival psychologists seem to require the soul to be an entity that allows for contact and error together — for successful contact with the soul in speech and thought, but false belief rather than inerrant understanding.

One clear example is the discussion of the *Timaeus* view of the soul. On Aristotle's account of that view, it includes the following three doctrines:

- (D1) The soul is a cause of motion (406b26-28).
- (D2) The soul is a magnitude (407a1-2)
- (D3) The soul includes *nous*, but not perception and desire. (407a3-6)

Now by Aristotle's lights, Plato is right in holding D1, but wrong in holding D2 and D3. The soul is a cause of motion, but it is not a magnitude, and it is not the intellectual faculty alone. So, Plato has made some correct, and some incorrect judgments about the soul. Notice also that D2 and D3 represent two different kinds of errors: wrongly affirming a property that the soul lacks, and wrongly denying properties it has. Neither kind of error is a failure to have the soul in mind, a failure of 'contact'; they are, rather, false beliefs that presuppose successful contact with the soul.

The puzzle we see, of course, is that the soul's nature as an incomposite essence should preclude the possibility of false belief about it. Because it is a simple, the conditions necessary for thinking it at all should be sufficient for grasping it without falsity. The *Timaeus* view should be a case of failing to think the soul at all.

Here it is crucial that Aristotle does not say about the rival psychologists what he says about the early aetiologists in *Metaphysics* I. The latter, he claims, were like dreamers, barely able even to fix on their targets. They seemed not to know what they were saying (985a10-18; see also *On Generation and Corruption*, 335b8-9). The psychologists, by contrast, are clearly understood by Aristotle as having made contact with the soul, but not in the way that precludes false belief about it. But Aristotle is not entitled to this position, given his explicit epistemology of simples. The final puzzle, then, is that Aristotle himself fails to maintain the doctrines of contact and inerrancy in his treatments of the simples-directed thoughts of others.

The silver lining here is that while there is conflict between the noetic strain of Aristotle's epistemology of simples and his dialectical discussions of others, the latter are just as they should be, given the metaphysics

of simples Aristotle explicitly adopts. Recall now that when Aristotle explicitly lays out his metaphysics of form and soul, he clearly opts for the Weakly Partless option. The soul, while not a form/matter composite, is internally complex. What makes it possible for Plato's *Timaeus* view to combine contact with falsity is the fact that although the soul is an incomposite *ousia*, it is only Weakly Partless. Its nature as an internally complex entity makes possible cases of thinking the object that don't preclude errors of both the sorts expressed by the *Timaeus* view. There is thus a nice coherence between Aristotle's metaphysics and the epistemology of simples implicit in his dialectical discussions of others. It is the theory of *nous* as contact that is the odd-view-out.

A different way to couch our argument is in terms of epistemic progress. It is possible to think of Aristotle's dialectical discussions in *De Anima I* as a record of philosophy's progress in understanding the soul. As such, it need not be seen as locating all of the rival views at the same point of understanding or ignorance. For example, Aristotle seems to see some of the rival views as better off than the view that takes the soul to be a number (this view is 'most absurd,' 408b32). They embody better grasps than the numerical view, but a much worse grasp than Aristotle's own view.

Our point is that this attractive way of seeing the history of psychology is only available once the all-or-nothing view of IX.10 is rejected. All of the rival views make semantic contact with the human essence, but the positions they embody are not only incomplete, they are positively mistaken. They are cases of success in contact, but failure of theory. The good news for Aristotle is that he embraces the metaphysics of essence that makes these partial success stories possible.

V Objections and Replies

In this section, we need to respond to two ways of objecting to our argument. The first way seeks to accommodate error by latching onto Aristotle's brief mention of his favorite qualifier: error is not possible, except accidentally (1051b26). The second way seeks to avoid our problem altogether by simply defining *nous* as inerrant.

As mentioned, Aristotle seems to allow that 'accidental' errors about simples are possible. It may be, then, that Aristotle sees rival views such as the *Timaeus* view as being guilty of errors about the soul, only accidentally. If so, there need be no conflict between the dialectical discussions of *De Anima I*.3 and the epistemology of IX.10.

It is difficult to know just what Aristotle has in mind by allowing for accidental error, but in other cases of accidental cognition that he recognizes, the following schema applies: S cognizes X accidentally by

cognizing Y per se, where X and Y are different in being. So, for example, it is possible to perceive the son of Diares accidentally, by having a per se perception of the pale thing (which ‘happens to be’ the son of Diares, 418a20-23). By virtue of a per se cognition of something, then, one can be said to cognize something else accidentally.

We should expect, then, that the kind of error Aristotle allows in IX.10 fits into the above schema: we can be said to be in error accidentally about a simple, by virtue of a per se cognition of something else. It seems clear, however, that the rival views of the soul are not accidental errors of this sort.

Recall that the *Timaeus* view of the soul grasps correctly some of the soul’s necessary properties. Thus, Aristotle sees that theory as expressing a per se grasp of the soul, the human essence. But it’s an incomplete grasp that leaves room for erroneously believing that souls are magnitudes.

To put the point differently, there should be parity between Aristotle’s understandings of his rivals’ successes and their failures. If he sees their true views about the soul as involving per se grasps of it, he should see their errors as about the soul per se as well. Given that by his own lights, many of the rival views grasp correctly some of the soul’s necessary properties, he sees their theories as presupposing per se cognitive grasps of the soul itself.

The second objection we need to consider aims not to find a kind of error for *nous* to be (in a way) subject to, but rather to cut our argument off at the knees, by urging that the epistemological doctrines of touching and inerrancy are not explained by the simplicity of objects, but simply by the nature of *nous* itself. On this view, *nous* with respect to any kind of object will be an inerrant cognition, analogous to touching; it may be true that (at least some of) *nous*’s objects are simple, but this is irrelevant to inerrancy. *Nous* is, ‘by definition’ inerrant.

It should be clear that if the view just sketched is correct, then our argument is seriously misguided, given that it takes Aristotle to be linking explanatorily simplicity and inerrancy. We think, however, that this view of *nous* faces grave difficulties, both textual and philosophical.

The central textual problem is that in every passage that mentions the epistemological doctrines of touching and inerrancy, reference is made to the simple nature of the objects, in ways that strongly suggest the explanatory role for simplicity. Consider again these two texts, labeled B1 and B2 above:

But truth or falsity is as follows — contact and assertion are truth (assertion not being the same as affirmation), and ignorance is noncontact. For it is not possible to be in error regarding the question what a thing is, except accidentally. (1051b23-6)

About the things, then, which are what something is and actualities, it is not possible to be in error, but only to think them or not think them. (1051b30-2)

The view that emerges from each of these passages is that it is the character of the objects as simple essences that explains why the epistemological doctrines obtain. If Aristotle simply defines *nous* as inerrant, there would be no need for him ever to mention the metaphysical character of the objects, let alone mention it each time.

Moreover, consideration of the analogy to perception again counts in favor of our claiming that simplicity and inerrancy are linked. In the perceptual case, Aristotle does not simply define perception as inerrant, he claims only that perception of the special objects does not go wrong. As the object of perception becomes more complex (e.g. the white man), the susceptibility to error increases. If the analogy holds, then, we should expect the linkage between simplicity and inerrancy in the case of *nous* as well.

Finally, it must be emphasized that Aristotle does not speak of inerrancy only; he combines the doctrine of inerrancy with the idea that *nous* is like touching, and the point of this seems clearly to be that there is no partial or gradual grasping of the simples — so, it's not just that one cannot be positively in error about them, one cannot commit 'errors of omission' either: one cannot grasp part without grasping all. We fail to see how this is at all plausible without strong restrictions on the metaphysical nature of the objects. To insist that *nous* has an all-or-nothing character without any explanation beyond its definition seems suspiciously ad hoc. Why should the nature of *nous* as a successful cognition rule out cases of partial success, unless the objects afford no possibility of it?

Our conclusion is, therefore, to some extent, an unhappy one for Aristotle. There is a theme in his epistemology, albeit a relatively minor theme, for which he lacks the requisite companion metaphysics. His simples are still sufficiently complex to allow the possibility of error. When faced with our conclusion, Aristotle's choices are to adopt the metaphysics of simplicity that underwrites the claim of inerrancy, or to reject the latter. Given the dubious coherence of the requisite metaphysics, and his evident attraction to gradualist epistemology, we recommend the second course of action: the doctrine of inerrancy is one Aristotle can well do without.³⁹

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