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The philosopher, his predecessors, the commentator and his critics: on the criticism of Harold Cherniss's critique of Aristotle as a source for early Greek philosophy

ANAIS DE FILOSOFIA CLÁSSICA

THE PHILOSOPHER, HIS PREDECESSORS, THE COMMENTATOR AND HIS CRITICS: ON THE CRITICISM OF HAROLD CHERNISS'S CRITIQUE OF ARISTOTLE AS A SOURCE FOR EARLY GREEK PHILOSOPHY

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RESUMO: Ao estudar os primeiros filósofos gregos, geralmente não é suficiente recorrer apenas aos fragmentos. Os testemunhos são úteis e às vezes essenciais para reconstituir suas doutrinas. No entanto, lidar com os testemunhos – e nossa principal fonte de testemunhos é Aristóteles e a tradição peripatética – pode ser difícil. A crítica de Aristóteles à filosofia pré-socrática de Harold Cherniss (1935) foi um marco importante no estudo da transmissão de Aristóteles das doutrinas de seus predecessores pré-platônicos. Os críticos de Cherniss, entretanto, foram duros sobre sua leitura de Aristóteles. Se Aristóteles distorce intencionalmente as doutrinas pré-socráticas, como os críticos de Cherniss o acusam de acusar Aristóteles, então seria muito arriscado usar Aristóteles como fonte. Se ele intencionalmente distorce seus antecessores, devemos esperar que ele faça tudo o que puder para esconder todos os vestígios disso. No entanto, se ele é sincero, as chamadas distorções podem parecer assim porque ele não pode evitar ver seus antecessores através de suas próprias lentes. Neste artigo, analiso três tipos paradigmáticos de crítica realizada contra Cherniss: a que visa salvaguardar a confiabilidade de Aristóteles como fonte para a filosofia grega antiga, a que pretende salvaguardar seu direito ao título de historiador e outra que rejeita ambas as discussões como encobrimento da atividade filosófica de Aristóteles. Mesmo que algumas das conclusões de Cherniss sobre as doutrinas dos filósofos gregos antigos possam parecer ultrapassadas, seu método geral continua válido: o testemunho de Aristóteles deve ser abordado de forma cuidadosa e sistemática, a fim de remover interpretações equivocadas e eventuais distorções. Os três tipos de crítica analisados, no entanto, não parecem tocar o cerne desse método. Ao contrário, parecem concordar com as premissas básicas, mas de alguma forma insistem que a crítica de Cherniss é inapropriada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aristóteles; Pré-Socráticos; Doxografia; Harold Cherniss

ABSTRACT: When studying the early Greek philosophers, it is usually not enough to recur solely to fragments. Testimonies are useful and sometimes key in order to reconstitute their doctrines. However, dealing with testimonies — and our major source of testimonies is Aristotle and the peripatetic tradition — may be tricky. Harold Cherniss's Aristotle's criticism of presocratic philosophy (1935) was a major milestone in the study of Aristotle's transmission of the doctrines of his Preplatonic predecessors. Cherniss's critics, however, have been hard over his reading of Aristotle. If Aristotle distorts presocratic doctrines intentionally, as Cherniss's critics charge him of accusing Aristotle, then it would be too risky to use Aristotle as a source. If he intentionally distorts his predecessors, we should expect him to do everything he can to hide all traces of it. However, if he is sincere, the so-

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called distortions may seem so because he cannot avoid seeing his predecessors through his own lenses. In this paper, I analyze three paradigmatic types of criticism raised against Cherniss: the one that aims to safeguard Aristotle's reliability as a source for early Greek philosophy, the one intended to safeguard his right to the title of historian, and another one that rejects both discussions as shadowing Aristotle's philosophical activity. Even if some of Cherniss's conclusions about the doctrines of the early Greek philosophers may seem outdated, his general method stands valid: Aristotle's testimony should be approached in a careful and systematic way in order to remove his misinterpretations and eventual distortions. The three types of criticism analyzed, however, do not seem to touch the kernel of this method. On the contrary, they seem to agree with the basic premises, but somehow insist that Cherniss's criticism is out of place.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle; Presocratic; doxography; Harold Cherniss

It is a well-known warning that in dealing with the so-called Presocratics one should be aware of testimonies. Besides the risk of interference by posterior doctrines, the early transmitters were not exactly careful in their reports (by contemporary standards). In the absence of the full works, the advice is to refer to fragments, direct quotations made by ancient philosophers, commentators and doxographers, posterior, but close enough in time as to have had access to the original texts of those early thinkers. However, this is not as straightforward as it seems. Quotations, as we know, can be cut out of their contexts and be made to fit the discourse of the one who quotes. It is not unusual, even in our own time, that an author is made to say the exact opposite of what he actually said, when quoted.

Regardless, with the early Greek philosophers, common sense holds that it is much safer to refer to fragments rather than testimonies.¹ Such a feature of fragments was definitively established when the Diels-Kranz catalog became the standard reference for the study of Presocratics. It is so useful that with time, it became a source in itself, with its own authority.²

¹ Cf. Gadamer, 2001, p. 33-34. Gadamer uses the argument of the decontextualization of quotations (not, of course, as his main argument) to defend that the only "solid ground" we have for early Greek philosophy is actually Plato and Aristotle. His main reason has to do with the fact that theirs are the only complete works we have available. Without a single work, as whole, our access to the thoughts of these thinkers becomes severely hindered. Without a complete work, he asks, how can we see its internal connections? (2001, p. 23)

² A quotation from an early Greek philosopher presented as a DK type B (for fragment) is instantly recognized as reliable, even authentic. However, as any source (and DK is invaluable for sure), it has its hypotheses, editions, and cuts. Take, for instance, what Jaap Mansfeld says about the mode of presentation of the DK catalog: "Diels' quasi-biographical mode of presentation, though based on a (too) clear hypothesis concerning the transmission, effectively obscures its own foundations and also inhibits access to the original sources themselves. The reign of the individual Presocratic fragment became firmly established, and the relative reliability of an A-fragment was believed to have been securely ascertained by the place assigned to its source in the tradition as reconstructed, that is, its counting as good or less good. The verbatim fragments on the other hand were viewed in the way that works of art found in the course of a premodern excavation were appreciated, and so as having a value not dependent on the ruins that happened to preserve them." (1999, p. 25)

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If the philosophers you study do not have a large number of fragments from different sources that allows you to cross-examine them, you may have to turn to testimonies not merely as the second best alternative, but as your main sources. This is the case with the physics of the ancient atomists, for instance.³ Leucippus has only three fragments, none of them dealing strictly with atoms and void.⁴ Democritus, on the other hand, has the greatest collection of fragments in the catalog (more than 300), but most of them relate to ethics.⁵ This means that most of what we know about Leucippus and Democritus' physics is actually derived from testimonies.⁶ Our major source of testimonies about early atomism is Aristotle and the doxography that stems from his circle, via Theophrastus.⁷

³ My particular research interest is the influence of Aristotle's testimony in our apprehension and comprehension of ancient atomism. Especially what we understand as the core of their physical system: atoms and void, the foundation of a, so to speak, materialistic building of the physical world, as opposed to a formalistic view, deriving from Plato and Aristotle. Yet, to talk of *matter* and *materialism* is already to be somehow influenced by Aristotle. Not that his influence is in itself a problem. On the contrary, Aristotle forged most of our philosophical language and our way of interpreting our own world, which is still full of substances and categories (at least in terms of language).

⁴ DK 67 B 1 and 1a mention the book known as *The Great Cosmology* (ΜΕΓΑΣ ΔΙΑΚΟΣΜΟΣ) and its attribution to Leucippus. They are not actual quotations, unless you suppose that Leucippus himself gave this title to the book. The other fragment (B 2), however, even though related to a work named *On Intelligence* (ΠΕΡΙ ΝΟΥ), contains important insights about the role of necessity and causation, which, of course, have implications for his physics. A note from DK right after B 1a says that terms such as ἄτομοι, βαστά, μέγα κενόν, ἀποτομή, ῥυσμός, διαθιγή, τροπή, περιπάλαξις, δῖνος, etc. can only be found in *doxographic sources*.

⁵ There are no more than 15 fragments that can be considered strictly about physics; some of them appear more than once (DK 68 B 9, 117 and 125, which also appears in testimony A 49). The long B 5 should be considered a testimony (type A). It is what Diels understood as a summary of *The Little Cosmology* (ΜΙΚΡΟΣ ΔΙΑΚΟΣΜΟΣ), but contains only a few isolated words that are indicated (by Diels) to have been used by Democritus himself. B 0a to 28c refer to the works attributed to Democritus. B 35 to B 115 are the *Sentences of Democrates*, mostly ethical *gnōmai*, which some attribute to Democritus (and Diels accept it), but cf. C. C. W. Taylor, who says that "The 'Democrates' sayings . . . contain no sign of Democritean technical vocabulary, with one possible . . . exception, the occurrence of the word *skēnos*" (1999, p. 225). B 120 to B 141 are definitions, a sort of lexicon, mostly dealing with medicine, with a few exceptions (as B 141, which defines *idea*, and makes it refer to the smallest bodies). B 169 to B 298a is a long list of ethical sentences. From B 298b onward, the fragments are considered spurious.

⁶ Thales and Anaximander are other examples of philosophers with zero (in the case of the former) or almost zero (in the case of the latter) actual B-type fragments. What we know about them is almost entirely dependent on Aristotelian or Peripatetic testimonia, even though Aristotle himself, in the case of Thales, let us know that what he reports is mostly hearsay (*Metaph.* A, 984a1).

⁷ Aetius and Simplicius are other important sources, but the number of testimonies extracted from the works of Aristotle surpasses theirs. For a good account of the sources about the atomists, see the introduction of Walter Lezsl's *I Primi Atomisti* (2009). About the role of Aristotle (in contrast with the lack of nominated references in the Platonic corpus) and the peripatetic tradition he says: "Aristotele invece fa numerosi riferimenti espressi (e anche non espressi) a Democrito, talvolta associandolo a Leucippo (raramente si riferisce al solo Leucippo). Sono riferimenti che per quantità sono inferiori solo ai riferimenti da lui fatti ad Empedocle. La sua testimonianza è dunque di grande importanza per la ricostruzione del pensiero dei primi atomisti. Ma è di grande importanza anche in modo indiretto, perché il suo approccio, in particolare per certi schemi da lui usati, influenza fortemente gran parte dell'esposizione successiva del pensiero atomistico e soprattutto la dossografia. Talvolta questa riprende pure i contenuti, cioè riprende certe tesi che egli attribuisce ai primi atomisti . . . Dipendono in modo significativo da Aristotele certi suoi commentatori e particolarmente Simplicio . . . Sesto Empirico, nostro testimone importante per l'epistemologia democritea, deve dipendere da altre fonti, ma le sue testimonianze sui fondamenti dell'atomismo sono tipicamente dossografiche . . . Fra gli autori antichi ci sono gli

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That we should beware of Aristotle's testimony about the early Greek philosophers is not new advice. One of the first who sounded the alarm was Harold Cherniss, back in 1935, with his *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy*, in which he undertook a systematic critique of the use Aristotle makes of the first philosophers. Cherniss's view was that, to Aristotle, the discoveries of his predecessors functioned as a sort of substrate over which he could produce and present his own philosophy. Although by his time it was already "vaguely recognized that Aristotle was capable of setting down something other than the objective truth when he had occasion to write about his predecessors" (Cherniss, 1935, p. ix), Cherniss perceived that many historians of philosophy would still be less than cautious about the use they made of Aristotle's testimonies. If, on the one hand, there is the strong argument that Aristotle is one of the nearest witnesses available to us,⁸ on the other hand, his report is deeply affected by his own theory and his Platonic background⁹ almost to the point of indissociability. Yet, there were many — at least in Cherniss's time, and according to his

Epicurei, il cui rapporto stretto col primo atomismo, per averne ripreso la dottrina seppure con significative modificazioni, è ben noto . . . Va solo tenuto presente che in alcuni casi anche le loro testimonianze possono rientrare nell'alveo delle testimonianze di tipo dossografico o per lo meno risentire dell'interpretazione aristotelica" (p. XII-XIII).

⁸ The relative proximity of Aristotle to early Greek philosophers, not only in time, but especially in mind, is stressed by W. K. C. Guthrie (1957), and it is probably his best argument when defending Aristotle's reliability against what he understands to be Cherniss's and J. B. McDiarmid's (1953) attacks on Aristotle as a witness. I will return to this dispute later. There is good reason to consider Aristotle's reports as better than Plato's, if you consider at least the form of the transmission speech. No matter how philosophically rich, Plato's dialogues are still poetic compositions, with characters, plots and different layers of action and discourse. Preplatonic theories presented in the mouth of different characters might acquire different tones, according to the discussion at hand. These different points of view are not always immediately given nor straightforwardly identifiable. Such features do not in any way compromise Plato's philosophical message, but it certainly complicates the work of reconstitution of the doctrines of the early Greek philosophers.

⁹ This Platonic background is somewhat important, not only because of Plato's — as well as Socrates's— innovations in terms of philosophical terminology and concepts, but especially because of dialectics. Aristotle probably began his philosophical lessons in the Academy by reading dialogues. He must have learned to philosophize by exercising dialectics, and eventually became a writer of dialogues himself. Even though the portion of his corpus to which we have access is composed mainly of treatises and/or class notes, we know by Cicero's testimony that he was a prolific and talented author of dialogues (*cf.*, for instance, *Academica Priora* II.38.119). The dialectical procedure he adopts when dealing with his predecessors is not only an issue of method, but, also, I believe, he has this dialogical verve in him. I would say he thinks in dialogs, even when he writes in the form of treatise. So, that when he puts the theories of one philosopher against another, or against his own, he could be actually thinking in the form of a fictional discussion between characters, as in a play. As in a play, with a plot, those discussions must amount to something in the final composition. Catherine Collobert (2002) has a good description of Aristotle's dialectical method. She even articulates it very well with her view of Aristotle as a historian of philosophy, stressing the teleological approach to history, about which I will say something later. Please, take heed, however, that what I am saying in this note refers exclusively to a possible mode of composition that Aristotle could have had, that is, of how he puts his thoughts into paper, *after* he has come to his conclusions. It is not, therefore, a judgement on his method of research, which I am assuming as being prior to its eventual transcription.

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testimony — that would still take Aristotle's reports for granted.¹⁰ The most common error in the utilization of Aristotle's testimony would be exactly this: to ignore him as Aristotle, the philosopher, and that he had an agenda, and to take his account as historical in a strict sense.¹¹ As Cherniss repeatedly warns, “[t]here are no ‘doxographical’ accounts in the works of Aristotle, because Aristotle was not a doxographer but a philosopher seeking to construct a complete and final philosophy. For him — as for every philosopher — the doctrines of his predecessors were materials to be remoulded for his own purpose” (1935, p. 347).

But what to do when the material you have is so scarce that you have no other way except to recourse to Aristotle's testimony? “[I]n their new form they can be of use to the historian of philosophy only if Aristotle's process of interpretation can be reversed so as to regenerate them in the form they had before Aristotle employed them as his material.” (p. 347) But is that even possible? Probably not. Yet, we might raise different hypotheses and defend them as more or less likely. Either way, it seems very unlikely that Aristotle's report is the one with which we should settle down *as it is presented*, if our intention is to work some sort of reconstitution of early Greek philosophy. This does not mean, however, that Aristotle's account should be disregarded as worthless. On the contrary.

Even if eighty years later some of Cherniss's premises and conclusions about early Greek philosophers may seem outdated or even exaggerated,¹² his method of critique remains valid: not to assume the Aristotelian report as immediately reflecting the very letter or spirit of the Presocratic doctrines, but to approach his testimony in a systematic way, always taking into account its particular and expanded contexts. Moreover, Aristotle's report should only be judged after we are clear enough about the reasons that moved him to mobilize the doctrines

¹⁰ Cherniss mentions scholars of his time who, although recognizing this problem, would still, somehow, neglect it or slip upon it sometimes. There were also those who would simply ignore it. He mentions John Burnet (1920 (Cherniss cites from the 2nd ed., 1908)), who, although recognizing the problem, apparently would ignore it at times, and Paul Natorp (“Aristoteles und die Eleaten” *Philosophische Monatshefte* 26 (1890): 1-16; 147-169) and Otto Gilbert (“Aristoteles' Urteile über die pythagoreische Lehre” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 22 (1909): 28-48, 145-165) who would take Aristotle's account as being close to the consistent account of a professed historian of philosophy (Cherniss, 1935, p. xi).

¹¹ I say “strict sense” because part of the critique against Cherniss has to do with the broad range that the term *history* and its correlates assume, particularly the title *historian* (*cf.*, for instance, Collobert, 2002). Cherniss denied Aristotle the *title* of historian, based on a modern understanding of the profession, as I am calling it. His denial has to do with the criteria for the historiographical research. Against him, some, like Guthrie (1957), Martial Gueroult (*Dianoématique, Philosophie de l'histoire de la philosophie*, Livre II (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1979)), Collobert herself and David E. T. Maqueo (1998) defend the right of Aristotle to the title of historian. But I think this discussion avoids the core of Cherniss's critique, and that is the quality of his historical report in terms of the possibility of a reconstitution of Prearistotelian doctrines, free as much as possible (if that is even possible) from “Aristotelian biases”.

¹² *Cf.* Mansfeld, 1999, p. 41 (n. 23).

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and the thinkers he employs. We could summarize what I am calling “Cherniss’s method” in a few questions that should be raised every time Aristotle calls forth an author or a doctrine:

- What is the reason for the mobilization of this author and this doctrine in this particular context?
- What is the part that this mobilization plays in the overall context of this particular moment in Aristotle’s argumentation?
- Against whom — which authors and which doctrines — this particular one is interposed?
- What is the actual result — its outcome within Aristotle’s argument — of this mobilization?
- What kinds of problems — or “errors” as Cherniss says — can be found in this particular mobilization?¹³
- In what other passages — even and especially in other works and contexts — does Aristotle mobilize the same author referring to the same doctrine? In those passages, is his account consistent with this one? If negative, what are the differences? What can be concluded based on them?¹⁴

¹³ Cherniss furnishes a detailed catalog with at least seven classes of “errors” that Aristotle commits regularly (1935, p. 352-357). (1) The first class he names “wilful misrepresentation”, where Aristotle omits particular portions of a doctrine that do not fit properly into his current argument, e.g. the *Sphere* of Empedocles that sometimes is one fused being, and sometimes is a composition of elements. (2) The second class is the “accommodation and reinterpretation” of doctrines whose texts he presents without misrepresentation, e.g. the interpretation that the formula “like to like” refer to his theory of the actualization of the potential. (3) The third class is “unadorned misunderstanding”, as when he reads the word “contrary” as referring to the *contraries* in his own theory of alteration. (4) The fourth class is the “translation” of earlier theories into his own terminology, which, by the way, is mostly what doxography is about; e.g. the criticism of the process of *separation* (or segregation) in Anaxagoras, which he understands to mean the *separation of qualities*, which is impossible in his own system. (5) The fifth class is the “supposition that current ideas must have been present in earlier times”, or good old *anachronism*, e.g. the supposition that the reconciliation of the notions of generation and alteration (his own problem) was an actual problem for all of his predecessors. (6) The sixth class is the development of “necessary antecedents” or ‘necessary consequences’ of earlier statements.” This is not an error in itself, except for the problem that the *necessary* links between these conclusions are based on Aristotle’s own axioms. He takes, for instance, the principles of the Ionians as referring to his own prime matter. (7) The seventh class has to do with the “historical relationship” between the various thinkers. This appears in the different groupings he makes, relating, for instance, Empedocles and the atomists to the material monists (taking Empedocles *Sphere* as being one, and the atoms as having an underlying common material). The groupings vary according to the context and create relationships that sometimes are historically impossible. This, however, one might say, is an issue to this day, mediated by the doxographical and *successions’* traditions, since there is yet discussion about the relationships between the various early Greek philosophers.

¹⁴ I take most of these questions from Cherniss’s “Introduction”, where he explains the general plan of his method. “Aristotle’s belief that all previous theories were stammering attempts to express his own, , aids him in interpreting those theories out of all resemblance to their original form. He is openly frank about his method of setting down the ‘inner meaning’ of Presocratic doctrines even when such procedure necessitates the ‘articulation’ of implications of which the original author was unaware and results in a system exactly contrary to that which the original text sets forth. Anaxagoras mistook the meaning of his own words, says Aristotle. In

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These checks should actually apply to any source we use. In the case of Aristotle, however, the first three are particularly important since he is not, as Cherniss says, a “doxographer”. What he means by *doxographer* is an author who is expressly interested in giving an account of past doctrines in contemporary language. Even if the so-called ancient doxographers would be subject to interpretation flaws, anachronisms and every other “error” that can be found in Aristotle, the different attitude towards the ancient doctrines is what matters here. While a “mean” doxographer may have a hidden agenda when selecting quotations and composing his report, the “sincere” doxographer would be willing to furnish the best translation he can as materials for others (or even himself) to work on. It is likely that the procedure of Aristotle was to gather “doxographical” material prior to the elaboration of his treatises.¹⁵ The works of the peripatetics: Theophrastus, Eudemus and Meno attest to that.¹⁶ This type of work, however, is not final, but only a means to an end. There is reason to believe that, to Aristotle, mere doxographical accounts would seem of little value as final works. ‘Doxography’, as Mansfeld reminds us, is a neologism introduced by Diels.¹⁷ Aristotle would probably consider them as mere *historia*, which for him, taken by themselves, had little or no philosophical relevance at all. While *historia* deals with reports about the particular, *philosophia* must have something to say about universals.¹⁸ In his philosophical writings,

such a way, he manages to produce interlocutors for his debates who will espouse the opinions necessary for his conclusion. From this it appears that *each ‘debate’ must be treated as a whole and the validity of the reports and interpretations judged separately in each case*. Moreover, the criticism which Aristotle gives in the several passages has an importance equal to the reports themselves, since *it is from this criticism that we may expect to find the motive for the report and for its special form*. Finally, if the criticism is to be understood, *the doctrine to which it is meant to lead must be analyzed briefly*, for this it is which motivates the critique as the critique motivates the report. Then it will be possible to *compare the statements which occur in different places* with some hope of discovering the reason for the variations; and once the reason is so established there is a good chance with the aid of our other criteria of stripping off the Aristotelian form or at least of establishing in what direction the statement is likely to have deviated from the original meaning of the theory reported.” (1935, p. xii-xiii; the italics are mine.)

¹⁵ I do not refer to the doxographical summary that appear in first chapters of many of Aristotle’s treatises, but to an extensive collection and cataloging of doctrines prior to the elaboration of the treatises and its first chapters’ summaries. The result would be a collection of particular doctrines in the form of quotations or brief reports, with an initial actualization of vocabulary, not yet articulated into the dialectic schemes into which they would be presented later. This procedure is detailed by Aristotle himself in *Topics* I, 14 (105a34-b25). See also Mansfeld, 1999, p. 28-30.

¹⁶ The three were from the Lyceum. Theophrastus and his *Physical Opinions* (ΦΙΣΙΚΑΙ ΔΟΞΑΙ) is probably the main source of the doxographical tradition; Eudemus worked on histories of theology, astronomy and mathematics; and Meno had a history of medicine (see G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, 1957, p. 3).

¹⁷ See Mansfeld, 1999, p. 23.

¹⁸ The understanding of the term *historia* (ἱστορία) is crucial for the discussion of the character of Aristotle’s appropriation and use of the doctrines of his predecessors. According to David T. Runia, there is confusion about this term, which is read anachronistically (2009, p. 14). This is decisive when deciding the character not only of Aristotle’s procedure, but also of Theophrastus’. A good account of the meaning of *historia* for Aristotle, and what should be his philosophy of history in face of his view of *historia*, as well as its contrast to the aim of

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then, Aristotle must build something new out of materials previously gathered in the form of *historia*.

The foremost critique of Cherniss's work was made by W. K. C. Guthrie in a rather short article named "Aristotle as a Historian of Philosophy: Some Preliminaries", from 1957. Guthrie's reaction seems to have been triggered by J. B. McDiarmid's "Theophrastus on the Presocratic Causes", from 1953, which contains what we could call an extreme interpretation of Cherniss. McDiarmid's monograph, although focused in Theophrastus,¹⁹ is important here because there is a sort of polemic triangle between the three of them. Even though Guthrie states that, in his opinion, Cherniss might have gone a little too far, he seems to be even more worried with the consequences of a certain reading of his critique, which he identifies in McDiarmid's work. The essentials of this triangular polemic have been accurately presented and analyzed by J. G. Stevenson (1974). Here I just want to emphasize a few things.

The kernel of Guthrie's dispute is the reliability of Aristotle's testimony about early Greek philosophers. While Cherniss's intention seems to have been to warn the modern historian of philosophy about the difficulties and perils he will face when trying to reconstitute the doctrines of those thinkers from Aristotle's reports, McDiarmid seems to advance a lot further and declare Aristotle's testimony and Theophrastus' as being corrupted

philosophia, is given by C. Thomas Powell in "Why Aristotle has no Philosophy of History" (1987). I will return to this later.

¹⁹ McDiarmid's thesis is that Theophrastus' report in the *Physical Opinions* is thoroughly dependent on Aristotle's own account of early Greek philosophy, with minimal — and usually damaging — interference by Theophrastus himself. This implies that Theophrastus shared the same attitude of Aristotle when dealing with his predecessors, and that Theophrastus actually used Aristotle as a source for his work. According to McDiarmid, Theophrastus tries to combine and harmonize testimonies found in different works of Aristotle, which, sometimes are even contradictory, making his own report confused and contradictory. He also finds in Theophrastus the same types of "errors" committed by Aristotle (see n. 12 above), worsened by the fact that these same errors are sometimes committed not only over the early thinkers, but on top of Aristotle's interpretation as well. Besides the rather harsh tone used by McDiarmid (which, in my opinion, exacerbate and extrapolates the tone of Cherniss's critique), one problem I find with his criticism of Theophrastus is that he assumes a certain linearity between his and Aristotle's composition, which recalls the *successions*' biographic schemas. McDiarmid's Theophrastus seems to have started his work after Aristotle had completed his, and used Aristotle's finished books as sources in the same way he could have used other sources such as Hippias or Gorgias. However, it seems to me more likely that Theophrastus work would have been at least initiated while he was a student or a collaborator of Aristotle in his own research. If this was the case then, the reason why his report would resemble Aristotle's might not be because Aristotle was his major source, but because they were actually working together while gathering material from other sources. He sure could have reviewed his *Physical Opinions* many times later after Aristotle's death, and even may have felt the need to reconcile certain passages from the written works of Aristotle. The problem with this account is that McDiarmid implies that Aristotle is a major source of error (and intentional distortion of his predecessors), but he ignores that Aristotle himself might have been influenced by other indirect sources such as Hippias and Gorgias, who may have actually started the doxographical tradition prior to Plato and Aristotle (see Runia, 2009, p. 7-8).

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beyond repair.²⁰ Although Guthrie provides the reader with the means to discern between Cherniss's position and that of McDiarmid,²¹ the way in which he moves from one to the other along the article tends to combine them, as if the "disciple's discourse" was a necessary consequence of the "master's".²² Guthrie's take on the discussion, however, is not restricted to the reliability issue. Together with his defense of the effective quality of Aristotle as a source, he also raises what Stevenson calls a "moral aspect": to defend the honor of the great Aristotle against those who try (willingly or not) to defile it (Stevenson, 1974, p. 139).

Regarding the reliability issue, I share Stevenson's opinion that Guthrie was not very successful in proving his point (1974, p. 138). He presents three arguments. The first being that since Aristotle is one of the major sources for the study of the Presocratics, if his testimony is not reliable, then it is not worthwhile to study the Presocratics at all (Guthrie, 1957, p. 36; Stevenson, 1974, p. 140). But one thing does not follow the other. Even if that was a true outcome of Cherniss's work, it remains the fact that Aristotle is not our only source on the early Greek philosophers. The second argument has to do with Aristotle being so nice as to inform us when he has stopped quoting a Presocratic and has started to give us his own interpretation (Guthrie, 1957, p. 36; Stevenson, 1974, p. 140). That does not mean, however,

²⁰ McDiarmid's choice of words, at least, seems too harsh: "The question of Aristotle's bias has been dealt with exhaustively by H. Cherniss in his *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy*. Cherniss has found that Aristotle's accounts of earlier doctrines are so inextricably bound up with arguments for his own doctrine that history cannot be easily distinguished from interpretation. Aristotle is not interested in historical facts as such at all. He is constructing his own system of philosophy, and his predecessors are of interest to him only insofar as they furnish material to this end. He believes that his system is final and inclusive and that, therefore, all earlier thinkers have been groping toward it and can be stated in its terms. Holding this belief, he does not hesitate to modify or distort not only the detailed views but also the fundamental attitudes of his predecessors or to make articulate the implications that doctrines may have for him but could not have had for their authors . . . Thus, there is no constancy in the historical value of his comments; nor is there even such a thing as the Aristotelian interpretation." (1953, p. 86; underlines are mine).

²¹ In pages 35-36 Guthrie presents two quotations — the first from McDiarmid — in which the attentive reader can discern McDiarmid's harshness (1957, p. 86; see my n. 19 above) versus Cherniss's careful choice of words: "Aristotle as a philosopher is, of course, entirely justified in inquiring what answer any of the Presocratic systems could give to the problem of causality as he had formulated it; but to suppose that such an inquiry is historical, that is, to suppose that any of these systems was elaborated with a view to that problem as formulated by Aristotle, is likely to lead to misinterpretation of those systems themselves and certainly involves the misinterpretation of the motives and intentions of their authors." (1951, p. 320; Guthrie prefers to use Cherniss's 1951 article, where he presents an overall picture of Presocratic philosophy, obviously taking his 1935 conclusions into account). Guthrie, however, does not emphasize the differences. For instance: while for Cherniss, Aristotle's procedure (*i.e.* to ask his own questions of his predecessors, even if some of these questions did not present themselves to them) is "entirely justified" as a philosophical method, with McDiarmid it becomes an utterly unscrupulous distortion of anything Presocratic.

²² It is understandable that Guthrie did so for McDiarmid claims allegiance to Cherniss's project. In fact, he mentions in a note that Cherniss read his manuscript and "urged the undertaking of this study" (1953, p. 85, n. 1). If he did not like his tone, Cherniss could have warned or requested him to change it. However, he could as well have stepped back from doing just that as a sign of scholarly respect. The fact remains that while there is material in Cherniss that may justify some reaction, depending on the reader's take, in McDiarmid there is no room for relativizing his attacks on Aristotle.

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that we can assume he will do this every time, nor does it make him more or less honest, as a rule; it does not even improve his interpretation. The third argument is the only one that has some strength, and I have actually mentioned something similar earlier: Aristotle was much closer to those philosophers than we are. Guthrie says that he was himself an Ionian, implying that for that reason he would probably be far better equipped than we are to understand how their minds functioned (Guthrie, 1957, p. 37; Stevenson, 1974, p. 141).²³ However, once again, this does not imply that his interpretation is a reliable one. It certainly, as Stevenson says, gives him the “*opportunity* to be a better interpreter than we have even the chance to be.” But there is no way to decide “*a priori*”, Stevenson concludes, “whether Aristotle’s interpretations of the Presocratics are on the whole reliable or trustworthy.” (Stevenson 1974, p. 141)

Oddly enough, the “moral aspect” of the polemic — which Stevenson deliberately ignores for it appears to him not scholarly relevant (1974, p. 139) — seems to have been more resilient than expected. The defense of the reliability of Aristotle’s testimony seems to come together with a defense of his sincerity. It is as if the questioning of Aristotle’s effectiveness as a transmitter of his predecessors’ thoughts would cast a shadow over his honesty as a scholar. Guthrie’s identification of Cherniss’s statements with possible extrapolations of these same statements (as the ones found in McDiarmid) seems to have turned Cherniss himself into a sort of enemy of Aristotle.²⁴ Now, if Aristotle distorts his predecessors’ doctrines intentionally, it would be too risky to use him as a source. If he intentionally distorts his predecessors, we should expect him to do everything he can to hide all traces of it. I do not think that Cherniss takes this route. Aristotle (as defended by Guthrie and all of Cherniss’s critics) was a serious researcher with a declared interest in finding what he called “the truth”. He built himself a logic and employed advanced research methods that are clearly his own innovations. What if we now have new criteria, presumably more rigorous than the ones he had, for certain aspects of the historical research? There is a whole discipline we call History of Philosophy, and there is a Philosophy of History as well. Cherniss’s critique of his method is not aimed at questioning his sincerity. Its goal is to allow us to read through his

²³ The part about Aristotle being an Ionian is debatable. The Greek language he used had already undergone about two hundred years of change. Moreover, the social and the political configurations of his time were much different from those of the times of the earlier Ionians. Yet, Guthrie’s argument works if one takes into account that these two hundred years that separate Aristotle from them are much less than the 2,500 years that separate us from them. He was also a native speaker of Greek (which we are not) no matter how different the Greek language would be by his time.

²⁴ Guthrie actually charges McDiarmid of implying Aristotle’s dishonesty (1957, p. 36).

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unavoidable misinterpretations. If Aristotle is sincere, the so-called distortions we may find in his reports on the early Greek philosophers may seem so because he cannot avoid seeing his predecessors through his own lenses. As Aristotle was not a modern historian of philosophy, we cannot expect him to avoid certain anachronisms; which is good. Because since he would not be attempting to hide something he probably does not even notice, we may actually be able to decode something of what he read in his predecessors. In order to do so, we have to understand how Aristotle's dialectical method for mobilizing them functioned. Then, we may try to apply retrospectively the methodological rigor (according to our own standards) that he may have lacked. Instead of criticizing Aristotle to the extent of making him useless for historical purposes, Cherniss was trying to understand the way Aristotle thought. Instead of narrowing the field of Presocratic historical research over Aristotle's testimony, he was actually opening a safer path.

Starting out from Guthrie's title ("Aristotle as a *Historian*") another branch of defenses of Aristotle sprouted, the one intended to safeguard his *title* of historian.²⁵ Catherine Collobert (2002) take the discussion from this stand. She asks herself the question "Is Aristotle finally a historian of philosophy?" This question in its turn demands the definition of 'history of philosophy'. She argues that "neither Cherniss nor Guthrie raises the question of the nature of this history — their discussion dealing mainly with the reliability of Aristotle's testimony." (p. 282) She brings in Martial Gueroult, who defends Aristotle as "the founder of ancient philosophical historiography".²⁶ This thought implies that it is exactly because Aristotle chooses to philosophize using the early Greek philosophers as his material that he is doing history of philosophy. This line of thought opposes the philosophical use of earlier doctrines to mere doxography, the simple transmission of notices from earlier doctrines adapted to the current philosophical language of the time (Collobert, 2002, p. 287).²⁷ Doxography for its own sake would probably appear to Aristotle as a sort of *historia*, in the Greek sense, a type of research that in the *Poetics* he considers inferior to poetry, let alone philosophy.²⁸ The problem with *historia* is that it lacks a *telos*. C. Thomas Powell (1987), in

²⁵ As Stevenson (1974) showed, Guthrie's aim was not exactly to safeguard Aristotle's title of historian, even though he raises this topic in his last paragraph.

²⁶ Martial Gueroult, *Dianoématique, Philosophie de l'histoire de la philosophie*, Livre II (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1979), p. 53 quoted (and translated) in Collobert, 2002, p. 283.

²⁷ Collobert refers this notion to Michael Frede, "Doxographie, historiographie philosophique et historiographie historique de la philosophie," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 3 (1992).

²⁸ "The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse . . . it consists really in . . . that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence

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an article about the apparent lack of a Philosophy of History in Aristotle, explains the difference between what Aristotle would call *historia* and the actual practice of a historian, such as Thucydides. Although dealing with a different context,²⁹ his description of the type of history to which Aristotle would adhere is very enlightening. Is it not curious that Aristotle's critique of history would appear just in his treatise on poetry, and as a counterexample for his eulogy of tragedy?

“The deficiency of history for Aristotle is not that it pertains to what actually happens, rather that it does not deal explicitly and intentionally with what could probably or necessarily happen in a way that yields a philosophically broad understanding of the kinds of things that do happen.” (Powell, 1987, p. 350-351) Powell argues that history, properly speaking, to be of value for Aristotle should be a sort of narrative. Like tragedy, it should have a protagonist and a *telos* — an end — not merely as something opposed to a beginning, but especially as something of the order of “what could probably or necessarily happen”, which, in its turn, is of the order of the universal, hence philosophical. Collobert emphasizes the same thing: “A history of philosophy supposes, even implicitly, a philosophy of history, which is, for Aristotle, a teleological conception of philosophy's development.” (2002, p. 287) In this sense Aristotle sure can be called a historian, as wants Gueroult, but this is not, I would argue, something *contra* Cherniss. There is no doubt that Aristotle can be counted in a tradition of historians of philosophy; and if the history of philosophy is somehow philosophical,³⁰ it is certainly fair to take Aristotle as a sort of patron of the discipline. Notwithstanding, there is no contradiction between this acknowledgement and Cherniss's critique of Aristotle. For Cherniss attributes exactly this proceeding to Aristotle, namely his teleological dealings with the doctrines of his predecessors — and this is exactly what he wants us to be aware of. To assign or not the title of historian to Aristotle does not make his account more or less trustworthy. It is simply a matter of convention, of what one intends to include into the scope of that activity. Also, to say that the doctrines of the philosophers from the past work as materials to construct one's own philosophy (Cherniss, 1935, p. 347) does not mean to reduce this philosophy in any way. On the contrary, it is for many people an intrinsic part of the

poetry is something more philosophic (φιλοσοφώτερον) and of graver import than history, since its statements are rather of the nature of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.” (*Poetics*, 1451a35-b5; this translation is proposed by Powell, 1987, p. 344.)

²⁹ Although he mentions Thales as an example (p. 352), he does not emphasize Aristotle's dealings with the early Greek philosophers, nor mentions Cherniss, Guthrie and their polemic.

³⁰ Cf. Pierre Aubenque, 1992 and Jacques Brunschwig (1992).

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philosophical practice. However, when the historian of philosophy sets himself the task of reconstituting the doctrines of past philosophers he should be aware of this procedure, and take double care not to be eluded into assuming one philosopher's interpretation of another as the actual and authentic doctrine of the latter.

Christopher P. Long (2006) takes the discussion further into the arena of Aristotle's philosophical practice. According to him, Aristotle's dealings with his predecessors are central to his own methodology. Since at least some amount of truth can be found in the works of previous philosophers,³¹ inquiry should start with the things that have already been said before — or *ta legomena*.³² This is why Aristotle *must* turn to the words of his predecessors, even as his materials (if one wants to call it that way). These are *ta legomena*, what is available to him, what constitutes his world with its possibilities of engagement. This approach is somewhat different from the one I have just been discussing. It is not a matter of including Aristotle among the practitioners of a thing called “History of Philosophy” anymore, which Long — and maybe Aristotle himself — would probably reject as mere “historicism without philosophy”.³³ What is at stake now is the very nature of Aristotle's philosophical method, a method that depends deeply of an engagement with the philosophical thought of his time, which is the one of his predecessors. Long, emphasizes the great respect that Aristotle must have had towards them.³⁴ “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.*” (2006, p. 256) This is why it is philosophically legitimate for Aristotle to ask his own questions to his predecessors. For Long, the “‘stammering’ attempts”³⁵ Cherniss reads in the words of Aristotle become valuable — even if faint — anticipations of the answers he seeks.

³¹ See *Metaph. a* 1, 993a30-b3.

³² Literally, *things said*. “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.” (Long, 2006, p. 248)

³³ Along with Gadamer: “[T]he crucial thing in my lectures on the Presocratics is that I begin neither with Thales nor with Homer, nor do I begin with the Greek language in the second century before Christ; I begin instead with Plato and Aristotle. This, in my judgment, is the sole philosophical access to an interpretation of the Presocratics. Everything else is historicism without philosophy.” (Gadamer, 2001, p. 10; translated by Rod Coltman).

³⁴ He quotes Aristotle himself: “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 of thinking.” (*Metaph. a* 1, 993b11-15; the translation is Long's)

³⁵ Cf. Cherniss, 1935, p. 348.

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I do not disagree with what Long says about Aristotle's method and the way he engages in his dialogues with his predecessors. It is clearly about opening possibilities of the future, by asking questions of the present out of the past (2006, p. 256). However, when he places this speech as a defense against the "Cherniss menace", I think he is aiming his blows at the wrong target. He says, for instance, that "[t]his dialogue [of the present with the past] cannot be oriented by an attempt simply to reconstruct the thought of past thinkers." (p. 256) But this is exactly what Cherniss is saying. If someone is engaged not in understanding Aristotle's own philosophy, or in producing his own philosophy from things said (*ta legomena*) by Aristotle, but actually in reconstructing the doctrines of early Greek philosophers, then — and only then — he must be fully conscious that this is the case: that Aristotle's testimony does not correspond verbatim to the philosophy of those thinkers. Long's argument has nothing to do with the reliability of Aristotle's testimony (the polemic of Guthrie), neither with Aristotle as a historian (as in Gueroult and Collobert).³⁶ He rejects both discussions as non-philosophical. Yet, it seems to him that Cherniss's critique somehow demerits Aristotle's method of beginning with *ta legomena*, because Aristotle is not taking his predecessors words literally, but listening to them with contemporary ears. But why should we not engage in this type of reconstruction that Cherniss is worried about?

I see in Long's position a sort of paradox. Yes, *ta legomena* are fundamental to the construction of Aristotle's own philosophy, and they are not mere rhetorical devices — the search for confirmation by the "authority of the ancients". To charge him of manipulating the things said by the ancients to make them converge to his own system may really be going too far. All of Cherniss's critics reinforce this charge and they are right to do so. However, this is McDiarmid's reading; Cherniss tends to be more careful with such a type of accusation. Aristotle is really and carefully listening to *ta legomena* and taking them to be his very *phainomena*.³⁷ The paradox is that, while the past is certainly a bridge to the future, *ta legomena* cannot be frozen into one static past. The dialogue with *ta legomena* from the past

³⁶ In fact, he openly agrees that Aristotle's testimony is not fit for a work of reconstitution: "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." (Long, 2006, p. 256) "Aristotle's object is not the reconstruction of the thoughts of those who came before, but the attempt to articulate 'the undetermined possibilities' of the beings with which he is engaged." (p. 258) "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." (p. 265) "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 violence that makes the things said, say things differently." (p. 266-267)

³⁷ "Aristotle's attention to τὰ λεγόμενα as φαινόμενα determines his engagement with his predecessors." (Long, 2006, p. 265)

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depends on the interlocutors of the present, not as individual subjects, but as the very *listening present* that philosophize from and with them. This means that *ta legomena* change.³⁸ Aristotle provides us with one rendering of *ta legomena* that flows teleologically towards “the truth”,³⁹ which he occasionally thought to be closer to his own philosophy.⁴⁰ However, this does not mean that we should refrain from trying to read beyond Aristotle’s account in the direction of the reconstruction of the philosophies of his predecessors. This sort of effort allows new generations to take possession and to philosophize over new renderings of *ta legomena*, with the possibility of bearing new fruits for philosophy. The works of Cherniss and others with a more philological take do not interfere in any way with philosophizing over Aristotle. They do not make the results of Aristotle’s own philosophy any less valid or interesting, any less impressive or valuable. Long’s defense of Aristotle does not seem to me to have a real opponent in Cherniss. The critique of Cherniss does not — nor do we have to read him as doing so — put under suspicion the quality of Aristotle as a philosopher.⁴¹

³⁸ According to Gadamer, beginnings and ends change in the course of time: “our understanding of the beginning that emanates from the end is never definitive. It is not the last word simply because even the movement of reflection has its place within the context of a beginning less and endless tradition.” (Gadamer, 2001, p. 19)

³⁹ Long modulates the question of Aristotle’s teleology. He does not agree with the insinuations that Aristotle’s dialectics consists in a careful arrangement (and adjustment) of the thoughts of his predecessors in order to make them converge to his own system. Such procedure he would call an *artificial teleology* (2006, p. 256-257), implied in the accounts of Cherniss, Collobert and others, even if in different degrees. In his turn, he defends that Aristotle’s teleology is a *natural* one. His telos is *the truth*, but this is not something previously given. It is a sort of optimistic view that inquiry, in time, will inevitably reach or tend to *the truth*. “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.” (Long, 2006, p. 258) “Collobert’s insistence that Aristotle’s engagement with his predecessors is ultimately originated 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.” (p. 257, n. 40) Cf. this with what Gadamer says about *beginnings*: “something is only ever a beginning in relation to an end or a goal. Between these two, beginning and end, stands an indissoluble connection. The beginning always implies the end. Whenever we fail to mention what the beginning in question refers to, we say something meaningless. The end determines the beginning, and this is why we get into a long series of difficulties. The anticipation of the end is a prerequisite for the concrete meaning of beginning.” (Gadamer, 2001, p. 15)

⁴⁰ It is hard to deny this in front of *Metaphysics* A. We also have Cicero’s testimony in *Tusculan Disputations* III.28.69, where he says that Aristotle thought philosophy at his time was closer to completion. That, willingly or not, must also be counted among *ta legomena* from the past (cf. Andrea Wilson Nightingale, 2004, p. 28).

⁴¹ This would be the same as to suspect the quality of Heidegger as a philosopher because of the use he makes of Aristotle. In fact, there are those who do just that. Long, perhaps, by defending Aristotle against this pseudo-attack may be really trying to defend something else. To disregard Heidegger — or Aristotle — over such type of accusation is reductionism, to say the least.

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From the point of view of the possibility of using the history of philosophy, revealing itself dynamically as *ta legomena*,⁴² the type of warning issued by the work of Cherniss produces a crucial effect. It opens possibilities of interpretations and explanations of the phenomena that may have been hidden or blocked due to a non-critical acceptance of the Aristotelian testimony. It expands the possibilities of *openness* and, consequently, of *unveiling* our own contemporary world, because it enlarges the scope and the amplitude of *ta legomena* from which philosophical investigations may set forth.⁴³

Taking, for example, the atomism of Democritus,⁴⁴ we may say that we now have another, or many other *Democrituses* that are set in opposition — and in tension — with the Democritus of Aristotle. We may never be able to say for sure whether one of them corresponds to the historical Democritus, and thus fix the past, because the past must always be something other. Moreover, Aristotle will always remain fundamental, because the many possible *Democrituses* will always be mediated by Aristotle, even if conceived as anti-Aristotelian. However, to talk about the many possible *Democrituses* is already Democritean somehow, as in talking about many possible worlds coexisting throughout the infinite void.⁴⁵ Yet, this cannot avoid being Aristotelian too, because the anti-Aristotelian *Democrituses* are

⁴² Which was brilliantly exposed by Long in his essay.

⁴³ I admit I have been quoting Gadamer rather ambiguously. Although there are important differences (which I will not list here), it can be said that, in general, Gadamer and Long share the same point of view. Gadamer clearly advocates that our sole coherent means of access to the beginnings of philosophy, *i.e.* the Presocratics, is via the works of Plato and Aristotle. However, he also says “that something like a general history . . . must be written anew by each generation. It seems quite evident to me that along with historical change itself the ways of observing and knowing the past must also change. Nevertheless, this truth cannot be applied so easily to the philosophical tradition; for in this case it means recognizing that this tradition itself has not already come to its conclusion with the great Hegelian synthesis, but that there may be still other expressions of thought that can also open new perspectives for us.” (2001, p. 46). It is hard not to see this as conflicting with the assertion that Plato and Aristotle’s testimony are our only means of access to the sayings of the early Greek philosophers. If each generation should rewrite history, they should be allowed to take whatever tools they can produce to unveil its content. I would not say that is a contradiction, but it is certainly a difficulty for Gadamer and Long. What I am defending here is that the work of reconstitution of past philosophies is not as contradictory with their view of philosophy as they seem to believe. For it aims at achieving some degree of completion that will allow, in the end, philosophers to take these reconstituted thoughts as their own starting point for philosophizing. Even if it is impossible to assert their correspondence to the actual words and thoughts of the first philosophers, once contemporary scholars turn them into a whole (no matter how they have filled the gaps), they will have what is required for the practice of philosophy as advocated by Gadamer and Long. “These texts”, says Gadamer about Plato and Aristotle’s works — but I would include our reviews of the early Greek philosophers as well — “must be continually questioned in such a manner that they answer in a different way each time; for the living dialogue, the communication between people, and the participation in the written tradition are all structured in such a way that they occur as if by themselves. The tradition is not something rigid; it is not fixed once and for all. There are no laws there.” (p. 49)

⁴⁴ But this should work for any early Greek philosopher.

⁴⁵ This does not mean that any one of the many possible reconstructions of Democritus are valid. Contemporary methodology should provide criteria for deciding what is acceptable and what is not. This is, though, subject to change, as are the interpretations.

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nothing more than constructions that depend on the Aristotelian concept of privation. The non-being that is privation is not absolute non-being. It depends on the existence of that of which it is the privation. And here we are again, back at the beginning. The critique of Cherniss's critique of Aristotle — be it from philological, historical or strictly philosophical stances — does nothing more than to emphasize Cherniss's most important warning, that is, that insofar as one cannot avoid resorting to Aristotle when dealing with early Greek philosophy, one should always be aware that Aristotle is — and will always be — Aristotle.

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