

WILLIAM WIANS

**NOTE ON *PHYSICS* VIII 1.250B13:
CATEGORICAL OR HYPOTHETICAL?**

Abstract

P. Hasper and R. Arnzen have mounted a spirited defense of what they call the categorical reading of *Physics* VIII 1.250b13 against a hypothetical reading of the text put forward by Silvia Fazzo in *Aristotelica* 3. The crucial phrase in Ross's text reads ἀλλ' ἀεὶ ἦν καὶ ἀεὶ ἔσται. Fazzo has argued in favor of ἀλλ' εἰ ἦν καὶ ἀεὶ ἔσται, a variant derived from a manuscript designated as J (Vind. Phil. gr. 100), the oldest manuscript of the *Physica*. On Fazzo's reading, with ἀλλ' εἰ, Aristotle is completing a hypothetical pair of options rather than making a categorical assertion that motion is eternal. My question in this note is a methodological one. When interpretive stakes are considerable, when should a more plausible interpretation of a text's larger argumentative context lead us to endorse a variant reading, even when the variant is at odds with a larger extant textual tradition? Having argued that *Physics* VIII 1 displays a thoroughgoing dialectical structure, I conclude that emendation of 250b13 has in its favor that it makes clearer that Aristotle is framing a dichotomy between two mutually exclusive options, just as his theory of dialectical reasoning toward principles would dictate. In this case at least, interpretive considerations of the larger argumentative structure should be given special weight in evaluating textual variants.

Keywords

Eternal Motion, Dialectic, Principles, *Physics* VIII, Methodology

Author

William Wians
Merrimack College and Boston College
wiansw@merrimack.edu

P. Hasper and R. Arnzen (hereafter H&A) have mounted a spirited defense of what they call the categorical reading of *Physics* VIII 1.250b13 against a hypothetical reading of the text put forward by Silvia Fazzo in *Aristotelica* 3 (2023). The text in question is that of E as favored by Ross, a text which as they point out has been universally adopted.¹ The crucial phrase in Ross's text reads ἀλλ' ἀεὶ ἦν καὶ ἀεὶ ἔσται. Fazzo has argued against this reading, in favor of ἀλλ' εἰ ἦν καὶ ἀεὶ ἔσται, a variant derived from a manuscript designated as J (Vind. Phil. gr. 100), the oldest manuscript of the *Physica*. The crucial difference, as H&A highlight, comes in her separating the letter string ἀλλ'αεὶ into ἀλλὰ εἰ (or ἀλλ' εἰ). On Fazzo's reading, with the presence of the εἰ, 'if', Aristotle is making – or rather more precisely, completing – a hypothetical pair of options. The position defended by H&A, by contrast, renders the line as a categorical assertion: in contrast to the possibility of motion coming into being and passing away as posited in the preceding clause, Aristotle is here asserting categorically that motion always was and always will be. There is no hypothetical 'if' on the basis of the manuscripts and textual traditions they cite. The categorical reading is, of course, consistent with Aristotle's own position regarding the eternity of motion announced at VIII 1's conclusion.

My interpretation of VIII 1 as a whole was published in the same *Aristotelica* volume containing Fazzo's proposal.² In the interest of full disclosure, I must note that her paper generously references mine, and my paper concludes with an appendix evaluating her reading on interpretive grounds. In that appendix I welcomed her proposal, saying I found it persuasive. I still find it so. This note will not, however, be a critical response to H&A's carefully documented position, a task that rests with Fazzo herself and for which I haven't the philological expertise in any case. My main purpose is to continue an important dialogue about how to read ancient texts when (as is often the case) texts and textual histories are controversial. Thus, in the spirit of dialogue, my question in this note is a methodological one. I intend it be a variation of a question H&A implied in their introductory paragraph,

¹ Ross (1936).

² See Wians (2023) for my full reading and for further references to passages and secondary sources.

“how [should one] evaluate manuscriptal evidence for or against a certain reading [...] if the interpretative interests at stake are considerable[?]” Their answer appeals to a larger context: “one cannot cite individual variants from individual sources for or against a certain reading to be adopted, without situating these sources stemmatically within the whole of the extant tradition.” While the caution of such a conclusion is certainly important, I would ask a somewhat different question: When interpretive stakes are considerable, when should a more plausible interpretation of a text’s larger argumentative context lead us to endorse a variant reading, even when the variant is at odds with a larger extant textual tradition?

To answer the question as I have framed it, I will return to the interpretive level. This will involve a further look at what I take Aristotle to have been trying to accomplish in VIII 1 as a whole. My position, as stated in my earlier paper, is that VIII 1 presents a dialectical survey of key predecessors, commencing with its opening lines, and relies throughout on the use of dialectical techniques in the pursuit of principles as described in the *Organon*. While I believe my overall reading of VIII 1 stands independently of the disputed text of 250b13, Fazzo’s proposal is consistent with and would seem to strengthen my position by making the opening lines clearly hypothetical, just as I showed a dialectical investigation ought to begin. Based on interpretive grounds, therefore, I will continue to support Fazzo’s revision of the text.

Let me begin with a passage in VIII 1 already alluded to in which Aristotle seems fully and unambiguously categorical in rejecting the idea that motion came into being and that it might or must go out of being in the future. This comes at the end of the chapter, the final line of which reads: “That there was not, nor ever will be, a time when there was not nor will not be motion, let this much be said” (*Phys.* VIII 1.252b5-6; my translation).³

The verbal parallel between ἦν [...] οὐδ’ ἔσται here and the opening lines of the chapter are, I think, consistent with the either version of the disputed passage at 250b13. At a textual level, in other words, the chapter’s final line do not seem to me to be conclusive for one textual variant over the other – though one’s awareness that this is Aristotle’s conclusion might certainly

³ ὅτι μὲν οὖν οὐδεὶς ἦν χρόνος οὐδ’ ἔσται ὅτε κίνησις οὐκ ἦν ἢ οὐκ ἔσται, εἰρήσθω τοσαῦτα.

incline a reader toward the categorical reading. I shall return to this point at the end of this note.

Here I want to ask how the statement at 252b5-6 fits into the overall argument of VIII 1. One thing is clear: the sentence marks the conclusion of the entire chapter.⁴ *Physics* VIII 1 is a long chapter, extending over two full Bekker pages (250b11-252b6). Importantly, up to and including its concluding line (setting aside the categorical reading of 250b13 to avoid begging the question), Aristotle's own position regarding the eternity of motion remains conditional. Whether motion is eternal or not is precisely what is in question.

Physics VIII 1 begins by positing a dichotomy: Is motion in the cosmos eternal, without beginning and without end? Or did it begin at some point, implying that it will also end? Aristotle develops these two options in the first portion of the VIII 1 (250b11-251a8). The major portion of VIII 1 is taken up with examining and ultimately rejecting the position that motion comes into being and passes away (251a8-252a5). Aristotle then accepts the other option, that motion is eternal (251b28-252a5). But the acceptance is conditional, not categorical. For while Aristotle accepts that motion must be eternal, he immediately faults previous adherents of this position for a failure to provide an explanation for eternal motion. As I argued in my *Aristotelica* paper, the fact (*hoti*) of such motion has been established, but the reason why (*dioti*) has yet to be set forth. In other words, the conclusion of VIII 1 should itself be seen as conditional in the larger context of the chapter. It serves as a starting point for the further investigations of Book VIII, a *telos* of the argument to this point, but an *arché* for the investigation to come.

Once again, I do not claim that the interpretive context is decisive with regard to the variant texts. Interpretation of an author's meaning and intentions is just one tool, and a subjective one at that, in that it relies ultimately on the interpreter's sense of what constitutes a philosopher's outlook and methods.⁵ Almost by definition, interpretations may be persuasive, but cannot be decisive. That being said, I believe H&A's categorical reading of

⁴ Here and in my original paper I rely on the insights in Netz (2001).

⁵ Subjective and potentially dangerous: the Stoic philosopher Panaetius, for example, rejected the authenticity of Plato's *Phaedo* on the grounds that a defense of the immortality of the soul was unworthy of so great a thinker.

250b13 is less consistent than Fazzo's hypothetical proposal with the dialectical structure of *Physics* VIII 1 as a whole.

Let me be clear that from a methodological standpoint, I am not reducing the issue to a subjective interpretation on the one hand vs. an objective reliance on received texts. What must be recognized is that a commitment to textual, i.e., stemmatic, fidelity does not eliminate the possibility of interpretive bias.

Consider what I think is a relevant parallel problem in translation. In my opinion, many translations of Aristotle exhibit an interpretive bias that runs against the evidence of the text itself. I will give just one example to make my point. The text of the first line of *Metaphysics* Lambda 9 reads as follows: τὰ δὲ περὶ τὸν νοῦν ἔχει τινὰς ἀπορίας (1074b15, Ross).⁶ When Ross translates this line in the Complete Oxford Aristotle – the translation retained in the Revised Complete Aristotle⁷ – he renders it as follows: “The nature of the divine thought involves certain problems.” What Ross has done, in my opinion (and not just my opinion),⁸ is to allow his knowledge of Aristotle's conclusion in the chapter to shape his translation of 1074b15 by importing the word ‘divine’, which does not appear in his text.⁹ Perhaps the motive was to ‘help’ the reader. Perhaps it was to ‘make clear’ Aristotle's intentions. Such motives need to be questioned. Aristotle is seldom an elegant writer, but he is a careful one – often more so than is typically appreciated.¹⁰

Translation is not textual transmission. But the same sort of interpretive bias could explain how the categorical version of 250b13 came about. At some point in the transmission of the source text of E, a scribe saw the character string ἀλλὰ εἰ. The corrector,¹¹ influenced by his knowledge of the conclusion of VIII 1 and of Aristotle's consistent position on the eternity of motion, recorded ἀλλ' εἰ. Like Ross's translation of Λ 9.1074b15, the text of 250b13 could have come about through the importation of an interpretive bias.

⁶ Ross (1924).

⁷ Barnes (1984).

⁸ Ross's translation, and the misunderstanding it engenders of Aristotle's larger position, is powerfully challenged in Lang (1993).

⁹ See his commentary on 1074b15 in Ross (1924) p. 396.

¹⁰ See the introduction to Wians & Polansky (2017).

¹¹ I borrow the term from Fazzo, who offers a plausible hypothesis of the stages by which the E text came to show the letter division of the categorical reading rather than the hypothetical reading of J.

Conclusion

A failure to appreciate the comprehensive dialectical structure of the argument of *Physics* VIII 1 mars all interpretations of the chapter I know. Even in the chapter's concluding lines, Aristotle's position is conditional, a statement of the fact but not the explanation of eternal motion, thus setting the stage for the rest of the *Physics*'s final book. Though recognizing the chapter's dialectical structure does not depend on Fazzo's proposal – I freely admit that I arrived at my interpretation while relying on Ross's text – her emendation of 250b13 has in its favor that it makes clearer that Aristotle is not stating his own position in opposition to those who generate motion. He is framing a dichotomy between two mutually exclusive options, just as his theory of dialectical reasoning toward principles would dictate. In this case at least, interpretive considerations of the larger argumentative structure should be given special weight in evaluating textual variant.

Bibliography

- Barnes, J. (ed.) (1984) *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fazzo, S. (2023) 'A Hypothetical Premise about Eternal Cosmic Motion in the Critical Text of *Physics* VIII 1.250b13', *Aristotelica*, 3, pp. 45-60.
- Lang, H. (1993) 'The Structure of *Metaphysics* Lambda', *Phronesis*, 38, pp. 257-80.
- Netz, R. (2001) 'The Aristotelian Paragraph', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 47, pp. 211-32.
- Ross, W.D. (1924) *Aristotle's Metaphysics: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ross, W.D. (1936) *Aristotle's Physics. A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wians, W. (2023) 'Argument and Dialectical Structure in *Physics* VIII 1', *Aristotelica*, 3, pp. 19-43.
- Wians, W. and R. Polansky (eds.) (2017) *Reading Aristotle. Argument and Exposition*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.