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A New Fragment from a Dialogue of Aristotle?

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Abstract: Eine äthiopische Sammlung von Sprüchen antiker Philosophen enthält ein bisher unbekanntes Fragment eines verlorenen aristotelischen Dialogs, in dem Aristoteles einen Studenten dafür kritisiert, dass er sich nicht über eine neu gewonnene Erkenntnis freut.

Keywords: Aristoteles, Dialog, ein neues Fragment, orientalische Manuskripte.

Although ancient testimonia make it clear that Aristotle took part as a character in his own philosophical dialogues,¹ so far only one fragment of this type has been discovered – the famous fragment of the dialogue Ἐρωτικός, attested in an Arabic treatise on mystic love by al-Dailamī, in which Aristotle defined the nature of love for a student named Isos.²

When the Ἐρωτικός text was published, the eminent authority on the subject, Richard Walzer, observed that “[n]o other fragment hitherto discovered acquainted us of a real dialogue of Aristotle with some other interlocutor”.³ Walzer was always of the belief that another such a fragment, if it were to be discovered, would doubtless emerge from a systematic examination of the published and unpublished literature of the Orient.⁴ The object of the following paper is to seek to fulfil Walzer’s hope, by bringing attention to another dialogue fragment, this time attested in a neglected Ethiopian source.

A. Dillmann, *Chrestomathia Aethiopica* (Leipzig, 1866) 40–45, published an Ethiopian work, written in Ge‘ez, called *Maṣḥafa falāsfā ṭabibān* (“The Book of the Wise Philosophers”). The Ethiopic text was taken from a manuscript dated to the

* This paper is dedicated to my mother, Margaret – *Freude, schöner Götterfunken!*

1 Cic. *Att.* 326 S-B: *quae autem his temporibus scripsi, Aristotelium morem habent, in quo sermo ita inducitur ceterorum, ut penes ipsum sit principatus.* See also Cic. *QFr.* 25 S-B: *Aristotelem denique quae de re publica et praestanti uiro scribat ipsum loqui.*

2 R. Walzer, “Fragmenta Graeca in Litteris Arabicis I: Palladios and Aristotle”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1939) 407–422. All of Walzer’s papers referred to in this article are reprinted in R. Walzer, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge MA, 1962). On the Ἐρωτικός fragment, see further F.E. Peters, *Aristoteles Arabus: The Oriental Translations and Commentaries on the Aristotelian Corpus* (Leiden, 1968), 5–6. The fragment is omitted from the collection of O. Gigon (ed.), *Aristotelis Opera. Librorum deperditorum fragmenta* (Berlin and New York, 1987), but is included in the collections of W.D. Ross (ed.), *The Works of Aristotle XII. Selected Fragments* (Oxford, 1952) 26, and J. Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, 1984) 2.2424.

3 Walzer, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 415.

4 R. Walzer, “Klassische Altertumswissenschaft und Orientalistik”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 86 (1933) 153–69; id., “Un frammento nuovo di Aristotele”, *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* 14 (1937) 125–137, at 125.

middle of the eighteenth century, Frankfurt am Main, Stadtbibl. Äthiop. 12.⁵ This was a set of excerpts from earlier Arabic material,⁶ originally derived from a compilation and translation from Greek sources, sometimes titled the *Kitāb ādāb al-falāsifa* (“Book of the Maxims of the Philosophers”),⁷ by the Nestorian Christian scholar Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (d. December 1st, 873 AD, in Baghdad), who has been called the “prince of translators”, because he was “a man with a good knowledge of Greek and a scholarly conscience”.⁸ A German translation of the Ethiopian text was published in S. Euringer, “Übersetzung der philosophischen Lehrsprüche in Dillmanns *Chrestomathia Aethiopica*”, *Orientalia* 10 (1941) 361–371.

In part of this work (section §237; p. 45 Dillmann, p. 370 Euringer), one finds what appears to be none other than a report of a dialogue between Aristotle and a student:

When Aristotle was teaching [the student], he [Aristotle] said to him: “Do you understand it?”. Answer: “Yes”. He [Aristotle] said to him: “You are not telling the truth”. Answer: “How so?”. He [Aristotle] said to him: “Because the sign of understanding is joy and delight, but I do not see the sparkle of delight in your face”.⁹

Just as in the Ἐρωτικός fragment, here the interchange between Aristotle and a student is filled out by narrative, so that the words of Aristotle and his student are in turn introduced with “his pupil said” or “Aristotle replied”; the inclusion of the word “answer” before some of the dialogue indicates that this text is nothing more than a compiler’s filling around dialogue which was otherwise free from this sort of narration. The original form of the dialogue becomes clearer when arranged differently:

⁵ L. Goldschmidt, *Die abessinischen Handschriften der Stadtbibliothek zu Frankfurt am Main* (Berlin, 1897) 54–55.

⁶ On the Ethiopian text and its Arabic sources, see C.H. Cornill, *Das Buch der weisen Philosophen. Nach dem Aethiopischen untersucht* (Leipzig, 1875); K. Merkle, *Die Sittensprüche der Philosophen* (Leipzig, 1921) 20; F. Altheim, *Geschichte der Hunnen* V (Berlin, 1962) 215–224.

⁷ On this work, see: A. Müller, “Über einige arabische Sentenzensammlungen”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 31 (1877) 506–528; A. Loewenthal, *Honein Ibn Ishāk, Sinn-sprüche der Philosophen. Nach der hebräischen Übersetzung Charisi’s ins Deutsche übertragen und erläutert* (Berlin, 1896), O. Overwien, “Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, *A|_dāb al-falāsifa*: Griechische Inhalte in einer arabischen Spruchsammlung”, in R.M. Piccione/M. Perkams (eds.), *Selecta Colligere, I. Akten des Kolloquiums Sammeln, Neuordnen, neues Schaffen: Methoden der Überlieferung von Texten in der Spätantike und in Byzanz* (Alessandria 2003) 95–115.

⁸ For biographical information, see the authoritative recent overview of D. Gutas, “Ḥunayn b. Ishāq”, in U. Rudolph/R. Hansberger/P. Adamson (eds.), *Philosophy in the Islamic World. Volume I: 8th–10th Centuries* (Leiden, 2017), 680–704.

⁹ Euringer’s German translation of the Ethiopic runs as follows: “als er ihn unterrichtete, sagte er zu ihm: ‘Hast du es verstanden?’ Antwort: ‘Ja’. Er sagte zu ihm: ‘Du lügst’. Antwort: ‘Wieso?’ Er sagte zu ihm: ‘Weil das Anzeichen des Verständnisses Freude und Wonne ist, ich aber den Glanz der Wonne nicht in deinem Angesichte sehe’”. The English translation given above is heavily reliant on Euringer’s version of the Ethiopic.

Aristotle: Do you understand it?

Student: Yes.

Aristotle: You are not telling the truth.

Student: How so?

Aristotle: Because the sign of understanding is joy and delight, but I do not see the sparkle of delight in your face.

Stripped of the textual accretions of later excerptors and compilers, it is attractive to view this as an exchange which might plausibly have occurred in one of Aristotle's dialogues.

The language is reminiscent of the dialogue form. Aristotle's first line probably represents a phrase such as (σὺ δὲ) μανθάνεις; or the like. Then there are the words "you are not telling the truth", which Euringer translates as "du lügst". This is probably an approximation of Greek ψεύδῃ, which one finds in Platonic dialogues as a word used to describe characters who misunderstand something or fail to tell the truth, and which translators sometimes render as "you lie" or as "you are wrong", "you are mistaken" (see e.g. Plat. *Resp.* 338b6; *Apol.* 26a1). Other similarities are the student's brief remarks "yes" and "how so?". The former corresponds to ναί (common as a one-word response in Platonic dialogues), while the latter could represent simply πῶς; (*Cratyl.* 436b4) or more expanded elaborations (e.g. πῶς δῆ; *Phaed.* 89a8, πῶς γὰρ οὐ; *Euthyphr.* 10d11). Aristotle's remark in the final line is not attested elsewhere.

If the fragment is genuine, its significance lies in the fact that it is extremely rare evidence – only the second example of real Aristotelian dialogue. Unfortunately, the subject matter of this excerpt is too vague to allow for an attribution. What there is seems to involve the nature of understanding and learning, but it is unclear if this is a side-comment on a character's understanding of some other topic, or part of a larger discussion of the experience of learning. Realistically this type of remark could occur in discussions of many matters, but perhaps (if the nature and experience of learning was indeed a focus) Aristotle's lost dialogue *Περὶ παιδείας* (*On Education*), whose contents are almost entirely unknown,¹⁰ is one possibility out of many. In cases like this, no attributions can be pressed with any conviction. That learning is a source of joy and delight (χαρά, ἡδονή, τέρψις, εὐφροσύνη) is an idea found elsewhere in Aristotle's works, so the fragment is certainly consistent with his philosophy.¹¹

¹⁰ This work is mentioned at D.L. 9.53; see Gigon, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 302, where it is fr. 72.

¹¹ See in particular Arist. *NE* 10.7.1177a22–27 οἰόμεθ' ὅτι τε δεῖν ἡδονὴν παραμειχθῆναι τῇ εὐδαιμονίᾳ, ἡδίστη δὲ τῶν κατ' ἀρετὴν ἐνεργειῶν ἢ κατὰ τὴν σοφίαν ὁμολογουμένως ἐστίν· δοκεῖ γοῦν ἢ φιλοσοφία θαύμαστος ἡδονὰς ἔχειν καθαριότητι καὶ τῷ βεβαίῳ, εὐλογον δὲ τοῖς εἰδόσι τῶν ζητούντων ἡδίω τὴν διαγωγὴν εἶναι, "and we think happiness has pleasure mingled with it, but the activity of philosophic wisdom is admittedly the pleasantest of excellent activities; at all events the pursuit of it is thought to offer pleasures marvellous for their purity and enduringness, and it is to be expected that those who know will pass their time more pleasantly than those who inquire" (trans.

This question of authenticity cannot be resolved without further discoveries. At worst, it deserves a place in the spuria; at best, elevation to the status of genuine fragment. One hardly needs to be reminded that the Ἐρωτικός fragment itself contains spurious features, but despite this is still considered genuine.¹² Our fragment does, however, create a lovely picture: Aristotle, seeking to remind a student that learning ought to be a joyful experience, that the excitement of intellectual discovery should and must bring about a physical reaction.

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in Barnes, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 2.1861). One might compare also the famous saying in Isocrates fr. 19, ὁ Ἰσοκράτης ἐφησε τῆς παιδείας τὴν μὲν ῥίζαν εἶναι πικράν, τὸν δὲ καρπὸν γλυκύν.

¹² Walzer, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 417; Peters, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 5–6.