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From Chapter 3 of *Retrieving Knowledge: A Socratic Response to Skepticism*

We turn now to a close reading of *Metaphysics IV*. Meyer's explication of *Metaphysics IV* in chapter 2 of his *Reading Nietzsche through the Ancients* is pointed and elegant, and it would be a challenge to provide a better interpretation, yet it is useful for this chapter to directly examine the text of *Metaphysics IV* 3-7 in order to follow Aristotle's reasoning regarding the ontological aspect of the laws of thought.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle begins section 3 with a discussion of the philosopher as the person most suited to the study of being: "The philosopher, who is studying the nature of all substance, must inquire also into the principles of deduction."<sup>2</sup> Principles of deduction (reason) apply to the nature of all substance (being). He goes on to say that "he whose subject is being *qua* being must be able to state the most certain principles of all things ... this is the philosopher, and the most certain principle of all is that regarding which it is impossible to be mistaken."<sup>3</sup> The philosopher's subject matter is being as such, and his tools are those principles (of all that is/being) that are indubitable. It seems as though Aristotle is saying that the tools of reasoning, in the area of epistemology, are before the study of being, the area of metaphysics. In the laws of thought, we will see a connection between these laws and being such that to separate the two would be a mistake in both epistemology (empiricism) and metaphysics (ontological naturalism). Aristotle proceeds to say that "for a principle which every one must have who knows anything about being, is not a hypothesis; and that which every one must know who

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<sup>1</sup> This section is an independent reading of Aristotle, but it is inspired by Meyer's chapter "Aristotle's Defense of the Principle of Non-Contradiction in *Metaphysics IV*." Anyone interested in this topic should consult Meyer's work.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1005b6-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1005b10-12.

knows anything, he must already have when he comes to a special study.”<sup>4</sup> It seems that Aristotle is saying that for us to know anything about being we must already have prior knowledge of principles by which we know being. These principles are not hypothetical, so they must be indubitable. They are not derived from being since they are before knowing being. We can infer that these are *a priori*, self-evident, first principles. As *a priori*, our knowledge of these principles is before our knowledge of being, and as self-evident,<sup>5</sup> they cannot be doubted without losing meaning.

Aristotle goes on to state these *a priori*, self-evident, first principles, beginning with the law of non-contradiction (LNC):

Evidently then such a principle is the most certain of all; which principle this is, we proceed to say. It is, that the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect; we must presuppose, in fact of dialectical objections, any further qualifications which might be added. This, then, is the most certain of all principles, since it answers to the definitions given above. For it is impossible for any one to believe the same thing to be and not to be, as some think Heraclitus says; for what a man says he does not necessarily believe.<sup>6</sup>

Meyer says Aristotle’s statement “that the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect” is the PNC-ontological.<sup>7</sup> What Meyer terms PNC-ontological will be extended to include all three laws of thought and be termed ‘reason is ontological,’ though in this section of the argument Aristotle is focused primarily on LNC/PNC. PNC-ontological means that the book cannot be both red and non-red in the same respect and at the same time. The same attribute cannot both be affirmed and denied of a subject in the same respect and at the same time. Aristotle claims that this is “the most certain of all principles.”

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1005b14-17.

<sup>5</sup> "Self-evident" here is used in its logical sense, not in its psychological sense. Psychological self-evidence is the condition in which something seems self-evident to me (i.e., it seems self-evident that I had eggs for breakfast this morning). What is logically self-evident cannot be doubted without losing significant meaning.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1005b17-25.

<sup>7</sup> Meyer, 86.

PNC-ontological is the most logically and objectively certain, but not necessarily psychologically and subjectively certain, as it is possible for a person to fail to grasp and understand the principle. In the above passage, we also see that Aristotle affirms that it is “impossible for anyone to believe the same thing to be and not be” in the same respect and at the same time. From PNC-ontological, that the laws of reason are the laws of being, we can derive PNC-logical, that the laws of reason are the laws of thought. PNC-logical says that it cannot be *true* that the same predicate at the same time belongs and does not belong to the same subject in the same respect.<sup>8</sup> Put another way; the proposition is necessarily false that ‘the book is both red and non-red in the same respect and at the same time.’ PNC-ontological is an application of reason to being, and PNC-logical is an application of reason to thinking. PNC-logical assumes PNC-ontological.<sup>9</sup>

Aristotle points out that some may demand proof for LNC, the most certain of all principles. He responds by saying: "For it is impossible that there should be demonstration of absolutely everything; there would be an infinite regress so that there would still be no demonstration. But if there are things of which one should not demand demonstration, these persons cannot say what principles they regard as more indemonstrable than the present one."<sup>10</sup> LNC is *a priori*, self-evident, and the necessary starting point of all demonstration. It is a first principle of being and thinking. In this respect, the laws of thought are foundational to all other thinking. Aristotle does not think positive demonstration may prove LNC without begging the

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<sup>8</sup> Meyer, 86.

<sup>9</sup> That PNC-logical assumes PNC-ontological is essential because Nietzsche and subsequent post-Nietzschean thinkers attempt to uphold PNC-logical (ordinary rules of thinking) while denying PNC-ontological. This move to retain the ordinary rules of thinking, while denying that reason applies to being underwrites much of contemporary practical reason and pragmatism and will be explored in Chapter 4.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1006a8-10.

question, but he does provide a negative demonstration for LNC, and for reason as ontological in *Metaphysics* 1006a12-1009a3.

Aristotle's negative demonstration is to show that the person who objects to LNC either begins with silence or that he ends up in meaninglessness and should be silent. Either way, his demonstration aims to show that the one who denies LNC should remain silent because without LNC words lack significant meaning. Meyer says that PNC-ontological is assumed in all significant speech. Aristotle begins, "We can, however, demonstrate negatively even that this view is impossible if our opponent will only say something; and if he says nothing, it is absurd to attempt to reason with one who will not reason about anything, in so far as he refuses to reason."<sup>11</sup> For the person who is not silent and demands demonstration, Aristotle says that the starting point for discussion is:

That he shall say something which is significant both for himself and for another; for this is necessary, if he really is to say anything. For, if he means nothing, such a man will not be capable of reasoning, either with himself or with another. But if he grants this, demonstration will be possible; for we shall already have something definite. The person responsible for the proof, however, is not he who demonstrates but he who listens; for while disowning reason he listens to reason.<sup>12</sup>

In this passage, we see that a person who wants to dispute LNC either says something significant (meaningful) or he does not. If he does not, then there is no dispute (silence). If the person who disputes LNC says something significant (meaningful) then they are the person whom both denies reason (in demanding proof for LNC) and affirms reason by affirming significant speech and the process of argumentation. In asking for demonstration, this person has already affirmed reason: "And again he who admits this has admitted that something is true apart from

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 1006a13-15.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 1006a19-27.

demonstration [so that not everything will be ‘so and not so’].”<sup>13</sup> This person has assumed the thing they are asking to be proven in affirming significant speech.

Aristotle next goes into an intricate discussion regarding significant speech and its application for reason as ontological. He says, “...this at least is obviously true, that the word ‘be’ or ‘not be’ has a definite meaning, so that not everything will be so and not so.”<sup>14</sup> If words have a definite meaning, then words correspond to some being. For he says, “if such and such is a man, then if anything is a man, that will be what *being* a man is.”<sup>15</sup> The meaning of words is limited; for example, “man” may be a “two footed animal,”<sup>16</sup> or he may be a featherless biped or a rational animal. Though there be several meanings for the term "man" there are still a limited number of meanings. He goes on to argue:

If, however, they were not limited, but one was to say that the word has an infinite number of meanings, obviously reasoning would be impossible; for not to have one meaning is to have no meaning, and if words have no meaning reasoning with other people, and indeed with oneself has been annihilated; for it is impossible to think of anything if we do not think of one thing; but if this *is* possible, one name might be assigned to this thing.<sup>17</sup>

If words had an infinite number of meanings, then we never get to what a thing is; we never *identify* a thing. Words would have no meaning, and if there is no meaning, then there is no thought and no communication. But if we do “think of one thing” then we can name this one thing. Naming is identifying. It is saying “man” is “two legged,” or the being that we use the word “man” to describe is identical to the being that is “two legged.” This is an application of the law of identity (LI), *a is a*. Words are about thoughts, and thoughts are about being. To deny LI is to deny that words have meaning. Aristotle notes that “in general those who use this argument

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 1006a27-28.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1006a29.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1006a32-33, emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1006a33.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1006b5-14.

do away with substance and essence. For they must say that all attributes are accidents, and that there is no such thing as being essentially man or animal.”<sup>18</sup> Thus Aristotle seems to have in mind in this passage, those who deny substance and essence, are those who hold to the "flux doctrine." The denial of "substance and essence" also applies to Nietzsche. If there are no substance or essences, then words do not apply to being (at least not to essential properties), which means all words apply to accidental properties (if they apply to properties at all).

If all statements are accidental, there will be nothing primary about which they are made, if the accidental always implies predication about a subject. The predication, then, must go on *ad infinitum*. But this is impossible; for not even more than two terms can be combined. For an accident is not an accident of an accident, unless it be because both are accidents of the same subject.<sup>19</sup>

Accidental qualities require a subject. A subject has essential qualities. Without a subject (being), there are qualities of qualities *ad infinitum*<sup>20</sup>

Meyer observes that: “what Aristotle has provided here is a negative demonstration of [the impossibility of affirming and denying the same thing of a subject] by arguing that this ontological fact is a necessary condition for significant speech, dialectics, demonstration, and even the attempt to deny PNC-ontological.”<sup>21</sup> Aristotle provides a self-referentially absurd argument to show that if one denies that reason is ontological, then that person should remain silent. To assert anything, one must assume the very laws of thought that they aim to deny; doing so ends up in self-contradiction and the lack of significant speech. Aristotle argues that "not all terms will be accidental" or everything would be everything, or all being is one thing without distinction. Thus, there must "be something which denotes substance. And it has been shown

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 1007a21-23.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1007a35-1007b4.

<sup>20</sup> This seems to be something like the post-Nietzschean position that there are only signs, and nothing signified. Words are about other words. These words have no intrinsic meaning outside the meaning that we assign to them. Yet, are we beings that have the essential feature of assigning meaning to words?

<sup>21</sup> Meyer, 94.

that, if this is so, contradictories cannot be predicated at the same time.”<sup>22</sup> If everything is everything, then our discussion with the person who denies that reason applies to being "is evidently about nothing at all."<sup>23</sup> To affirm anything is to say something definite about it. It is to identify and distinguish. It is to affirm one thing and to deny its opposite. The one who denies the laws of thought as ontological cannot identify or distinguish anything. They can neither affirm nor deny anything. To be consistent with the denial of reason as ontological, they should remain silent. This ends Aristotle's negative demonstration of the ontological status of reason (as the laws of thought and being).

The next section of *Metaphysics IV* is an argument, based on the premise that reason is ontological, against empiricism and related perspectivism and skepticism. The purpose of this lengthy examination of Aristotle's defense of reason as ontological is to show that the laws of thought apply to being as well as to thought, and that to deny such is to relinquish significant speech. Denying that reason is ontological is associated with Heraclitus' "flux doctrine," as well as empiricism that leads to perspectivism and deep skepticism. In short, the Heraclitan-Protagorean worldview is in direct opposition to the Platonic-Aristotelian worldview, which affirms reason is ontological, the primacy of reason in knowing, that there is a human nature that is rational (the *logos* in us), and there is a non-physical substance in which the *logoi* are grounded (the Forms). Plato and Aristotle contribute significantly to the Western philosophical tradition of *Logos* and being, and the isomorphism between thinking and being prevails until the postmodern period, spearheaded by Friedrich Nietzsche. Friedrich Nietzsche calls into question the Platonic-Aristotelian conjunction of *logos*-being as well as the consequent history of

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<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1007a16-18.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 1008a31.

philosophy and its contribution to the West. It is to Nietzsche's critique, and ultimate rejection of reason, that we now turn.