A Hermeneutic Paradigm for the History of Ancient Philosophy: the Multifocal Approach

The Greeks discovered that the world we have in common is usually regarded from an infinite number of different standpoints, to which correspond the most diverse points of view.

1. A peculiar situation

Let us set out from the following fact: the studies published last century have identified a range of contrasting statements in the works of both Plato and Aristotle. In order to make sense of this, the same hermeneutic key has been suggested in both cases: the evolutionary paradigm. The situation is a paradoxical one for a number of reasons:
1. coincidences of such an extent are unlikely;
2. the texts of the two authors
   2.1. differ in nature: Plato’s texts are dialogues written for publication and often addressed to a broad public, whereas Aristotle’s may roughly be described as “school” texts, which were intended to have an internal circulation and which pay little attention to the stylistic elegance;
   2.2. display a different approach to philosophical problems: whereas for Aristotle we have a Physics, a Metaphysics, a Rhetoric, etc., no Platonic dialogue may be confined to a single philosophical area, since they always present a range of different themes that are brilliantly intertwined.

It seems odd, therefore, that the same evolutionary paradigm has been adopted for both philosophers, a paradigm that today appears to no longer hold true for either of them.

The underlying theme for Plato is that of the succession of the dialogues. The problem of the order in which these texts ought to be read has been the object of the most arbitrary and varied interpretations since
antiquity. To avoid this outcome, modern hermeneutics has identified an *objective* tool to determine the sequence of the dialogues: the “stylometric” method.\(^1\) The result is then used to arrange the texts into groups. This method has been easily associated with Hermann’s hypothesis of an evolution in Plato’s thought; this scholar posits a distinction between early Socratic works, dialectic or megaric texts and structural and mature ones. The 20\(^{th}\) century thus witnessed the predominance of evolutionary interpretations over unitary ones.

This evolutionary interpretation would appear to have entered in crisis today for a number of reasons: 1) the attempt to explain the “contradictions” between the dialogues in such terms clashes with the fact that the same contrasting positions may also be found within the same text;\(^2\) 2) what we would have is a sort of miracle: a philosopher who was busy embarking on challenging enterprises such as his mission to Syracuse found the time to leave us a perfect “diary of his philosophical journey”; 3) increasing evidence is being adduced in support of the unitary character of Platonic thought.

For Aristotle too we must acknowledge the crisis of the historical-genetic paradigm, which has been the dominant one for many decades. The starting point is the crucial study by Jaeger,\(^3\) which «has marked an epoch as few other studies have, insofar as it has created a genuine paradigm, alternative to the dominant one».\(^4\) Jaeger’s suggestion is rather complex,\(^5\) but his “evolutionary” interpretation has shaped the research for decades: he interprets the differences to be found in the Aristotelian texts as traces of a development from a Platonic stage to one marked by empirical interests, with the forsaking of the previous perspective. This

1 Cf. for a more in-depth discussion here, in *Are there any “youthful” and/or Socratic dialogues*? *Some reflections on the* Apology of Socrates, pp. 50-69; Migliori 2013 pp. 142–163.
2 For example, in the *Phaedrus* the soul is presented according to a unitary, binary and ternary model; for an investigation of the topic, see below and Migliori 2013, pp. 725–858, esp. pp. 747–754.
3 Jaeger 1964.
4 Reale 2006, pp. XIX-XX.
5 In opposition to the dominant paradigm of his day, which sought to provide a “strong” reconstruction of Aristotle’s system, by underplaying or ignoring the many variations presented by his oeuvre, Jaeger offers the model of an “open” system, which marks a break with the rigid models of the past.
suggestion has a range of negative consequences. First of all, in the absence of any objective data, the only possible criterion is the theoretical one; hence, it is always possible to formulate new hypotheses – as has de facto been the case. Moreover, the method runs up an endless range of difficulties when it comes to the physical and ethical works; in particular, by breaking the texts, it makes it impossible to develop a coherent discourse on Aristotle’s thought. Finally, it is difficult to understand how these texts, which were certainly put together in different ways, may have preserved a stratification of conceptually contrasting approaches without the author (or editor) doing anything to eliminate them. Against this practice of “segmenting” a text into anterior and posterior parts, one may invoke Aubenque’s methodological suggestion: unless an author disowns a work, its content must be attributed to him or her; «this is all the more the case with Aristotle’s esoteric works, which never left his hands, and which he was therefore free to touch up and rearrange as he deemed fit. Had the philosopher regarded those courses, or parts of them, obsolete, he would certainly have removed or altered them».

In conclusion, the outcome of this approach has been so disappointing on the hermeneutic level, and the objections raised against it have been

6 These have been analysed in an exemplary fashion by Reale 1961.
7 Not even Aristotle’s relationship with Plato provides any chronologically certain elements: on the basis of the «researches that have been done on the certainly youthful works of Aristotle, especially on the Protretticus,... it has been shown that these... already reveal a critical attitude towards some doctrines of Plato and the awareness from Aristotle of his autonomous philosophical position» (Berti 2004, pp. 170–171).
8 Jaeger «believed that Aristotle’s thought had evolved from an initial adhesion to Platonism to a final landingplace for empiricism. Consequently he was inclined to consider youthful the works that in his opinion appeared closer to Platonism and old the works that instead appeared more distant. On the contrary von Arnim and Gohlke attributed to Aristotle an completely opposite evolution, that is, from a youthful empiricism to a return to Platonism in old age. Consequently they assigned to the various texts collocations opposite to those established by Jaeger» (Berti 2004, p. 169).
9 Aubenque 1962, pp. 9 ff.
10 Reale 1974, p. 4.
so strong, that the model would appear to have been largely abandoned today,\textsuperscript{11} yet \textit{in a way that is neither linear nor coherent}.\textsuperscript{12}

2. \textit{A different choice and its implications}

This is how things stand: we have two authors offering a range of different approaches to the same problems. We must therefore adopt an interpretative key suited to the situation: the evolutionary paradigm has constituted an earnest attempt and its failure forces us to develop a different hypothesis. It is necessary to see whether the differences we find in the texts represent an alteration of the author’s \textit{Weltanschauung} or whether it is possible to come up with an explanation for such “contrasts” internal to the philosopher’s specific “system of thought”. For years this topic has been a focus of research for the ancient philosophy work group at the University of Macerata: Prof. Arianna Fermani, Dr Lucia Palpacelli and the present writer; recently, Dr Francesca Eustacchi has also joined our team (not to mention the contribution of many post-graduate students, whom I cannot list here). The work we have been conducting is based on analytical studies, on account of the need both to have a

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\item \textsuperscript{11} “After half a century of studies conducted with the genetic method, it was very clear that esoteric works cannot be considered as collections of different texts and that, if we insist on reading them as such, they become completely devoid of philosophical meaning” (Reale 1974, pp. 42–43).
\item \textsuperscript{12} I emphasise this because at times we find eminent scholars surreptitiously resorting to such an approach when faced with this difficulty, or devoting many pages to establishing the priority or posteriority of individual passages for no plausible hermeneutic reason. This is quite evident in the case of those scholars who avoid a strict interpretation of Jaeger’s paradigm, such as for instance Düring 1966: in the “Relative chronology of the works” (pp. 60–65) we find a marked segmentation of Aristotle’s texts, with suggested dates for possible revisions and a series of psychological observations that lead to very questionable claims: consider, for instance, the author’s verdict regarding the works from the Academic period – dated to the years between 355 BC and Plato’s death – which are “overflow with vitality and self-confidence; we may consider this period as the high point of his life” (p. 63). Understandably, the author himself repeatedly stresses the hypothetical nature of many of his claims.
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methodological rigour, and to discover some basic distinctions. For instance, the approach can vary depending on one’s point of view, or the different meanings that the same concept can acquire, or the areas investigated. Only an analytical study can allow us to address the questions we are faced with: why do the authors under investigation offer one solution in one context and a different solution in another context? Why do they not regard this practice – in our eyes, an unacceptable practice – as a problem, but rather proceed as though they were unaware of what they were doing? We are led to wonder here whether we may not be dealing with one of those “apparent absurdities” that – as Kuhn teaches us – enable a real understanding of ancient thought.

One first result of our investigation has been summed up in a small collected volume which highlights an element already noted in many analytical studies: “this is... a crucial difference, which makes it so difficult, at times, to understand the thought of Plato (and Aristotle). I express this difficulty through a formula: whereas modern thought, sprung

13 One must resist the widespread habit of adopting brilliant explicative models that rest on many supporting elements but also clash with many opposite data (that scholars seldom choose to ignore).
14 Aristotle thus defines metaphysics as the science of causes and first principles, as the science of being qua being, as the theory of substance, and as the theological science: see Reale 1993, v. I, pp. 53–152.
15 If the area of investigation changes, so do the questions and consequently the answers. The issue of the origin of cosmic motion differs depending on whether it is addressed on the physical level or on the metaphysical one: for it is one thing to ask what principle accounts for movements within the cosmos, and quite another to ask why movement exists. For textual evidence illustrating this example, namely the reference to ether in De Caelo and the notion of Prime Mover in the Metaphysics, see Palpacelli 2013, pp. 287–307.
from “clear and distinct ideas” (to quote Descartes), tends to think in terms of “aut... aut”, which is to say of the opposition between irreconcilable positions available as alternatives, Classical thought, and particularly Platonic-Aristotelian thought, thinks in terms of “et... et” (which obviously also includes the – rare – possibility of “aut... aut”); in other words, it tends to broaden the framework and structure of its analysis so as to include the highest possible number of elements. Classical philosophers do not seem interested in producing an intellectual system, a vision, a definition; instead they want to develop – within a well-defined conceptual horizon that is so strong at times as to constitute a paradigm – a range of schemes and models that cannot be juxtaposed and indeed often stand in contrast to one another, and yet are capable of explaining aspects of reality that would otherwise escape us. Ultimately, Classical thought is designed to understand the world, which is so complex as to require a range of different tools. From this perspective, some apparently contradictory positions may be found to actually be mutually consistent or at any rate compatible».

This outlook, which is so aware of the complexity of a reality that resists any human attempt to identify a perfect order, rests on a range of factors. The first is the very experience of that strange thing we refer to as the «Hellenic people»: a sum of often very different realities, further divided into poleis that at most chose to unite into “leagues”. What we have are many contrasting elements, but also a kinship identity that is constantly reaffirmed by tracing all these realities back to a single mythical father, Hellen. Unity and multiplicity, union and division: it would be a mistake to stress only one of the two aspects, even when dealing with an extreme case such as that of the Dorians, who were as hated as they were esteemed.

18 Migliori 2013, pp. 163–164.
19 The dramatic Doric invasion left a lasting mark, as is shown by a 5th-century inscription from a temple at Paros: “The Doric stranger and the slave may not enter”. We then have the episode involving one of the great Spartan Kings, Cleomenes I. When he was visiting Athens around 500 BC, he was stopped on the Acropolis by the priestess of Athens, on the grounds that no Dorian could enter the temple. Even more significantly, the impasse was solved when the king stated that he was not a Dorian but an Achaean, since he descended from Heracles!
event by which the Greeks even reckoned the years – is also reflected in
religion, where we find a single yet varying pantheon of divine figures,
which are made the object of frequently conflicting narratives.\textsuperscript{20}

This interplay of unity and multiplicity is already detectable in the ear-
liest Greek thought, which seeks to justify the unity of experience (i.e. of
the world that we experience) based on a principle that is “dual” from
two points of view: 1) the elements these ancient philosophers refer to
(water, air and fire) are certainly not those we can empirically experience
(as is confirmed by Anaximander’s notion of \textit{apeiron}); 2) the principle
\textit{(archê)} is both that \textit{from which} things derive and that \textit{of which} they are
made up. In an equally coherent way, the \textit{logos} takes the two opposite
forms of becoming and being, with a further dynamic twist: Heraclitus
affirms all the various possibilities through the famous image of the riv-
er,\textsuperscript{21} whereas scholars have often privileged only one, ignoring the whole
question; Parmenides affirms the absoluteness of being and at the same
time strives to save phenomena by means of an (impossible) third way
that may justify the opinions of mortals.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} The very figure of Hellen takes a number of different forms: either \textit{the son or
brother} of Deucalion, he had three sons, Dorus, Xuthus and Aeolus, to whom
the Doriants, Ionians and Aeolians were traced back. The eponymous hero of
the Ionians, however, is Ion – the son of Xuthus according to some sources, that
of Apollo according to others; his brother Achaeus is the eponymous hero of
the Achaeanas, who according to other sources, however, is the son of Poseidon,
or Zeus, or Haemon, Thessalus’ father; likewise, some sources present Aeolus
as the son of Poseidon.

\textsuperscript{21} The widely known statement \textit{«it is impossible to step into the same river twice»}
(B 91) would appear to be contradicted by the statement that \textit{«ever-newer wa-
ters flow on those who step into the same rivers»} (B 12), whereas a third state-
ment clarifies that we are dealing here with different kinds of relations: \textit{«Into
the same rivers we step and do not step, we are and are not»} (B 49a).

\textsuperscript{22} See Reale 1995, v. I, pp. 127–130. The attempt to deny this third way and to
reduce the phenomenological treatment of the poem to a pure list of errors runs
up against what is in my view an unsolvable puzzle: why should a Goddess who
is revealing the truth of being waste so much time (i.e. most of the poem) to
listing irreparable mistakes?
3. *The emergence of the multifocal approach*

The failures encountered by early Greek thought – from the discovery of the irrational to the constant development of new hypotheses within the same strand of research (let us think of Mylesian school) – did not lead to defeatism, but rather to a renewed inventiveness (let us think of the Pythagorean school), with the Eleatic school marking a genuine turning point. This school emphasised the fundamental driving force behind early philosophical thought: the need to go beyond phenomena in order to identify a principle that could account for reality as a whole – and serve as its foundation. The opening lines of Parmenides’ poem may be viewed from this perspective: the narrator is led by the Daughters of the Sun onto the deity’s path, beyond the gates separating Night and Day, where the Goddess reveals the truth to him.

However, as the second generation of the so-called Eleatic philosophers reveals, Parmenides’ attempt to “save phenomena” fell short of its goal: if, in order to explain phenomena, an interplay of opposites is required, and if these opposites are both associated with being, which is the only point of reference for reality, then the opposition itself does not hold, since the two opposites can no longer be distinguished. Significantly, Parmenides’ disciple Zeno attacked the established view of reality as motion and plurality, while Melissus of Samos brought the investigation full circle by developing an absolute monism that regarded the whole of experiential reality as an illusion.

The sophists’ contribution

The above position is explicitly opposed by the leading sophists: «the main exponents of this breakthrough are Protagoras and Gorgias, whose themes may be intertwined: they are two “post-Parmenidean” thinkers who are openly opposed to Eleatism\(^\text{23}\). The two sophists take up again the phenomenological need against Eleatism, as is clear from the title of

\[^{23}\text{Though less explicit, Prodicus of Ceos and his synonymic art also undermined the Parmenidean identity of being-thinking-saying, by revealing the gap between thought and language that arises from the semantic multivalence of words (a very significant aspect that we shall consider below).}\]
the Gorgian booklet (Περὶ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος ἢ Περὶ φύσεως), overthrowing that of Melissus (Περὶ τοῦ ὄντος ἢ Περὶ φύσεως), and from the Protagorean maxim that places homo mensura as the underlying basis for the enquiry into «the things that are and (…) the things that are not», thus in clear contrast with the words of Parmenides’ Goddess. The two authors reject the enquiry into physis in the Eleatic sense by taking different approaches: Protagoras acknowledges the failure of the Eleatic proposal and with homo mensura he forthwith abandons the dimension of absolute knowledge by accepting the limits of human cognitive forms; Gorgias highlights the need to forsake the Eleatic logic that he tackles head-on, assuming its category system and then driving it to absurdity (Eustacchi 2016, pp. 33–34).

The most important outcome of the sophists’ reflection, however, lies not in its critical dimension but in its positive content. Contrary to a widespread opinion, «Protagoras’ position cannot be defined as relativistic … Protagoras’ homo mensura cannot be understood as the onto-epistemological foundation of reality, for that would imply a metaphysical interest that is utterly unknown to him. We had better limit ourselves to focusing on the paradigm shift he brought about with regard to the Eleatic reflection. In fact, he underscores aspects that are specific of the human dimension, such as feeling and empiria» (pp. 34–35).

Within this context, the example of Epitimus the Pharsalian proves particularly revealing:

A certain athlete had hit Epitimus the Pharsalian with a javelin, accidentally, and killed him, and Pericles squandered an entire day discussing with Protagoras whether “in the strictest sense” (ὀρθότατον) it was necessary to attribute the cause of the disaster to the javelin, or

24 In Parmenides’ On Nature it is the Goddess who shows man the way: «Come then, listen to my word and take heed of it: I will tell you of the two roads of inquiry» (DK28B2).
25 Likewise, we may acknowledge that «Gorgias is not a nihilist: the statement “Not-being is” only serves as a transition towards the conclusion “nothing exists” which serves to highlight the aporetic nature of the Eleatic theorising. This is an anti-Eleatic provocation» (Eustacchi 2016, pp 41–42; in this case too I will refer the reader to the succinct analysis provided in this text: pp. 40–44).
26 For a succinct, yet no doubt more satisfactory, justification of this statement, see Eustacchi 2016, pp. 34–40.
rather to the one who hurled it, or the judges of the contests (Plutarch, *Pericles*, 36.3=DK80A10).

The episode shows how «the different explanations are not equivalent, but the one that works best can be found. Also, the event doesn’t matter in itself, but needs to be judged through logical parameters that allow the different causes to be ranked according to *the most sound* argument logically» (Eustacchi 2016, p. 45). An attempt is made to find what is *truly* the most correct argument (the superlative form ὀρθότατον is used) with respect to the cause of Epitimus’ death, which is not easy, since one cannot speak of a single cause: «If raised with a doctor, so looking at it from the point of view of a forensic examination as to the causes of death, the answer would have been: the javelin. If brought before the court, and thus from the point of view of criminal responsibility, the answer would have been: the javelin thrower. If raised with the head of the administration, and thus from the point of view of the duty of care that officials entrusted with law and order must guarantee, the answer would have been: the overseers».27 All three explanations are correct, *depending* on our point of view and the relation we wish to consider. Yet this does not lead to relativism, since: 1) the text identifies only three acceptable causes starting from the fact under investigation (there is no fourth possible cause); 2) each point of view identifies only one cause; 3) the points of view and related causes are not all equally valid and may be ranked, depending on the kind of investigation we wish to carry out.

In this respect, it is possible to argue that the peculiarity and, at the same time, value of ancient thought «lie in its ability to offer a wonderful wealth of “unsortable” explanatory models of reality, and (drawing upon its amazing flexibility) to come up with a kind of a multifaceted yet faithful *replica moulding of reality*. In this regard, the likeness of the moulding ought not to be sought in the unchangeable and motionless accuracy of the contours, let alone in its attempt to foist itself monolithically upon its object, in a desperate bid to replicate it unequivocally; on the contrary, it should be sought in the flexibility of its profiles and in its ability to accommodate little by little the many diverse strains of reality that is de-
scribed through a plurality of voices and tones “quietly” and “proudly” focusing upon its own object of enquiry».  

From the sophists’ polemic emerges the importance of relations: things and arguments must not be evaluated in themselves, but in the context of their relations, in the light of which they may be regarded as more or less useful, opportune, and so on. Particularly from a practical standpoint, this gives rise to a multifocal view of reality: «this cultural movement has turned out to be fairly homogeneous with regard to a number of themes recurring in many of its representatives... and for the use of the multifocal approach, which can be said to have its inception here. As we have seen, this approach is less about opposing the flat-out statements of Eleatic stock than about assuming the closely-knit web of relations that characterizes reality. The Sophists acknowledge a kind of phenomenological evidence of complexity that justifies the diversity of opinions about the same things: indeed, these are involved in different relations, in which they take on changing values, senses and meanings... The different examples of relations and judgements that have arisen represent the very richness that is at the heart of sophistry’s multifocal approach. It is not an arbitrary game, but it is phenomenologically and/or logically justified, and thus, in a way, subject to constraints. The identification of specific relations hinders us from freely saying anything: all is unstable, yet at the same time everything changes within a specific relation. Therefore, a judgement on a single fact or concept could vary greatly, depending on all of the following: the kind of relation that is being analyzed (e.g. binary or ternary), the point of view that has been adopted (responsibility for a death or its physical cause) or the paradigm that has been accepted (that of absolute truth or of likelihood)» (Eustacchi 2016, pp. 63–65).

The Platonic experience

In the light of the picture just outlined, we can understand Plato’s “dogmatic system”, which nonetheless affirms the intrinsic weakness of all cognitive degrees (including that of epistemic knowledge) and the irreducible otherness of the “object” with respect to knowledge:

28 Fermani 2009a, p. 6.
For each being there are three means by which epistemic knowledge is acquired (epistemic knowledge itself is the fourth, while the object of knowledge itself, which is to say true being, must be posited as the fifth). The first of these means is the name (ὄνομα), the second is the definition (λόγος), the third is the image (εἴδωλον), and the fourth is epistemic knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) (Seventh Letter 342A7–342B3).

The object, then, stands as a fifth element, after the four levels of cognition, determining an inevitable break between the ontological level and the gnoseological one. This impossibility of fully accessing the object of knowledge finds a counterpart in the intrinsic endlessness of the process described in the Phaeno 96A-102A, and Parmenides.29 The ascent from things to the Ideas, and from the latter to the first Principles, is followed by a return to things, with the discovery of new aporias, identified precisely in the light of what has been gained; in turn, this engenders the need for a new ascent, leading to a practically endless procedure which is nonetheless always complete, as far as this is possible: for the truth that is acquired at each stage30 cannot be denied,31 but must always be “rethought”. In this respect, the Platonic model may be regarded as a well-defined yet at the same time open system, which is to say a system that is always required to put itself to the test by engaging with the boundless variety of reality. From this perspective, we can understand why Plato affirms the existence of an absolute knowledge reserved to the deity, which the human soul may attain in the afterlife, once it is free

29 For a more in-depth investigation of this topic, see Migliori 2013, pp. 195–202, 325–328.
30 Contrary to what many scholars suggest, Plato’s research, while emphasising the limits of human knowledge, does indeed reach an outcome. Let us think, for instance, of how the soul is said to grasp the truth in Phaeno 65B9 (ἡ ψυχή τῆς ἀληθείας ἁπτεται): the verb used is ἁπτω, which in the middle form means “to touch”, “to grasp”, “to take”.
31 See e.g.: «Socrates – I instead say they are most wretched, and those who pay the penalty, less so. Do you wish to refute this as well? Polus <sarcastic> – In fact, Socrates, this is even harder to refute than the other! Socrates – It is not just harder, but impossible: for the truth can never be refuted» (Gorgias 473B6–11); «it is the truth, dear Agathon, that you cannot contradict – Socrates you easily may» (Symposium 201C8–9).
from the body. In this life knowledge is always “human” and so it is necessary to resort to the multifocal approach, a mode of knowing objects that is never complete and final, and yet is true and epistemic kata to dynaton – as far as this is possible.

We may thus consider the many different ways in which Plato develops his view of sense perception (cf. Migliori 2016, pp. 87–99), for instance, or of the function and nature of the soul (pp. 99–113). Limiting our enquiry to the latter example, in the Phaedrus we find all three ways in which Plato presents the soul: «it clearly demonstrates how the view that considers them as instances of an evolution in Platonic thought is deeply flawed. Hence: 1) at first the word soul, ψυχή, is found (241C5; 242C7; 245A2) in a unitary view, with nothing to hint at a possible tripartite division; the proof of the immortality of the soul (245C-246A) makes no reference to parts and refers to a single reality; 2) yet at 245C2–3, before commencing the proof, the soul divine and human is mentioned, that is to say, a distinction is drawn in a binary perspective that is never remarked upon again here; 3) the winged chariot represents the most classic ternary figure. Now, if all this is found in a same dialogue, within the space of a few pages, one had better take note that these are not alterna-

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32 From the point of view of the acquisition of knowledge, the body constitutes an obstacle: the soul reasons far better when the senses are not involved; it can thus know – as far as this is possible – justice, beauty, etc., which is to say the essence of things, that which makes them what they are (Phaedo 65D-66E). In this passage, which is mistakenly adduced as evidence against the possibility for man to acquire knowledge, Plato uses very particular terms: he speaks of absolute truth (τὸ ἁλθεστάτον, 65E2), of the purest knowledge (καθαρώτατα, 65E6); the text is redundant and full of superlatives. The conclusion is bound to be a radical one: «So, if it is impossible to know anything in a pure way while the body is with us, one of two thing must follow: either knowledge cannot be acquired at all or it is only possible to acquire it when we are dead, for then the soul will be by itself apart from the body, but not before» (66E4–67A2). While we live, we «will be very near to knowledge» (67A3), but we will only possess knowledge after death, when we become pure: for what is impure cannot grasp what is pure (67B). This leads Socrates to speak of «the great hope – harboured by him who reaches the place to which I am going – of attaining in a suitable way, if this is indeed possible anywhere, that which has been our chief object in our past life» (67B8–10).

33 On this formula, which is truly paradigmatic of the sense of limit inherent in Platonic thought, and which appears in countless guises throughout many passages of the dialogues, see Migliori 2013, I, pp. 304–307.
tive models, but three different approaches to the same soul. Otherwise one would have to blame Plato for making a complete mess of things in the very dialogue that lays down the rules for constructing well-crafted speeches... In summary, if we accept Plato’s multifocal approach, we find that (on the whole) when he sets out to explain the nature of the human being, or to prove the immortality of the psyché, the Author shows no interest in telling the parts from one another. When he speaks from an ontological perspective on the structure of the soul, he often presents it in a binary form, because the fundamental issue is the distinction between the divine immortal part and the human mortal part. Finally, a more careful description of the operational aspect requires the ternary model» (Migliori 2016, pp. 105–107).

What explains this wide range of approaches is Plato’s view of reality: «he assumes a highly dynamic vision of reality that he sees as a framework of well-structured relations regulating a relentless and ever-present disarray. His vision is expressed by a formula that is paradigmatic, in my opinion: «it is better to say, as we have often said, that there is in the universe a mighty infinite and an adequate limit, and above them a presiding Cause of no mean power, which orders and arranges years and seasons and months, and may be justly called wisdom and mind» (Philebus 30C3–7). This passage underlines the weakness of the ontogonic process, for the infinite is quantitatively far superior to the adequate limit... Still, given the strength of the Limit that is manifested in different ways at different levels of reality, the real world is both orderly and marked by disarray; it is one as much as it is many. This leads to a multiplicity of one-many entities that are connected in a manifold (and, on a physical level, changeable) order of things that always appear “complex”. The fundamental expression of this complexity is the view of each entity as a whole: a being endowed with a constitutive logic that connects and unifies the parts of which the whole is necessarily formed. This pervasive pattern also touches on the “perfect and stable” dimension of Ideas, which in fact feature a number of multiple relations and a complex structure – as that marvellous “rational provocation” that is the long example in the second part of Parmenides has striven to get across. Thus a vision of reality is configured that appears close to modern complexity theories. Yet if reality is to be conceived thus, evidently there is a possibility, or indeed a necessity, to apprehend it from different points of view. Sure, these are not of equal value, but are nonetheless capable of sketching a suffi-
ciently comprehensive picture of a reality that is always one-many» (Migliori 2016, pp. 84–87).

Aristotelian developments

In line with the slant he gives his “lessons”, Aristotle is led to develop the multifocal approach even further, in the light of his awareness of the various spheres of human knowledge:

And we must also remember what has been said before, and not look for precision in all things alike, but in each class of things such precision as accords with the subject-matter, and so much as is appropriate to the inquiry. For a carpenter and a geometer investigate the right angle in different ways; the former does so in so far as the right angle is useful for his work, while the latter inquires what it is or what sort of thing it is; for he is a spectator of the truth (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics I, 7, 1098 a 26–32).

«As expressly stated by Aristotle, there are many perspectives from which to observe a single object and, consequently, many “schemas of interpretation”, or frames, capable of “reading” and of classifying the different profiles of the same notion, as the essays herein will show through a broad range of examples. The claim of beholding reality from only one perspective, and then expecting to apply always the same yardstick and to keep contemplating the world through the same lenses, is plain wrong and even silly: “precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts … We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits”... The true philosophers are those who can skilfully balance and fine-tune their own cognitive tools, acknowledging

34 Fermani 2016b, p. 154.
that the constraints set by their own anthropological limitations along with the unfathomable nature of certain domains of reality make it impossible to apprehend every subject-matter of enquiry accurately or thoroughly» (Fermani 2016, pp. 13–14).

Far from promoting a sceptical or defeatist position, all this leads Aristotle – and Plato before him – to acknowledge that the same reality, when viewed from different perspectives, appears to be both one thing and the other, with sometimes bewildering results. There is one passage of the *Metaphysics*, in particular, that Fermani often quotes, as it perfectly illustrates this perspective:

> motion is clearly an act, yet it is an incomplete act; and precisely for this reason it is difficult to understand what motion is. It cannot be reduced to privation or potentiality or pure act; hence, the only possible explanation is the one we have given: *motion both *is* and *is not an act*, and it is difficult to understand, but possible (*Metaphysics XI, 9, 1066 a 20–26*).

The same reality, therefore, is *A* and, at the same time, is *non-A, albeit from a different perspective*. This was certainly one of the central features of the teaching imparted in the Lyceum, as is clearly illustrated by *Metaphysics Delta*. Palpacelli has investigated this text in depth by focusing on one of its many key concepts, that of *physis*, or nature: «What is striking about this plethora of meanings is that Aristotle effortlessly lays out in sequence three such disparate definitions: *in one sense* nature *is form, in another matter, and in another still* synolon and substance; the undertaking involves no hardship as Aristotle carefully maps out the different senses that he brings into play... This multifocal characterization of *physis* is fully endorsed in the somewhat more suitable and more technical context of Aristotle’s *Physics*. Throughout chapter 1 of Book II Aristotle reiterates his accounts of “nature” as applying to matter and form. Also here such meanings are closely bound to the concept of nature as the principle of motion... In this case too, and fully consistent with *Metaphysics V*, Aristotle clarifies how *physis* may be construed in one sense as that matter which has in itself the principle of motion, and in another sense as form or species» (2016, pp. 127–128).

Aristotle puts forward two models that further define the multifocal approach. The first is the “*in itself and for us*” model, which «adds a further element of “dynamization” and problematization to the epistemo-
logical framework relating to the philosophers under review» (Fermani 2016, p. 23). On her part, Palpacelli shows how according to Aristotle’s Physics «time in itself is infinite, although time may be assumed to be finite according to one’s perception of it: so, for us there is a time that is finite and continuous» (Palpacelli 2016, p. 200).

The second model consists in the “in relation to” perspective. This «formula was invented by Aristotle (though conceptually already present in his forerunners in a more or less embryonic form) ... Once again we are confronted by a clearly prospective and multifocal approach that, by shifting its focus from one viewpoint to another of a same reality, makes it possible to express very different, if not opposite, evaluations of that same reality. A most telling example of this movement is the passage below from Topics VIII, 11, 161b38–162a3: “Clearly, then, not even the argument itself is open to the same adverse criticism when taken 'in relation' to the proposed conclusion and when taken by itself. For there is nothing to prevent the argument being open to reproach in itself, and yet commendable 'in relation' to the proposed conclusion, or again, vice versa, being commendable in itself, and yet open to reproach in relation to the proposed conclusion, whenever there are many propositions both generally held and also true whereby it could easily be proved”» (Fermani 2016, pp. 26–27).

Because of time constraints, I will leave out the examples provided by Fermani in Some Examples..., where the multifocal approach is used to reconstruct the various ethical treatments of the notions of friendship, vice and suicide, and the treatment of time which Palpacelli offers in Time.... In this text the author also discusses the issue of the animation of the stars, which reveals «a second and more radical use of the multifocal approach <that> occurs when Aristotle, as well as adding the number of meanings, goes so far even as to multiply the explanatory paradigms before a given reality, reaching conclusions that may be seen as bordering on contradiction. The question of the animation of the stars and the cosmos actually brings to the fore such a use of the multifocal approach, showing the actual implementation of two fundamentally different explanatory systems: a physical and metaphysical one» (Palpacelli 2016, pp. 205–206).

«From the brief analysis outlined in this paper it is evident that, when set side by side, the physical and the metaphysical discussions presuppose a different starting point: in his De caelo Aristotle seems to go to great
lengths to eschew the metaphysical plane and proceeds from the first physical cause; whereas in *Metaphysics*, his analysis shifts over to the Unmoved Mover as he postulates his cosmological theory from this other point of view, thus underlining the finalistic quality of the movement. It seems safe to say that the argumentative tensions in *De caelo* stem from a few instances in which the metaphysical encroaches upon an explanation that would rather stick to the physical, but cannot and is unable to do so. The ether not only cannot exclude, but must actually imply, the divine nature of stars, hence, the concept of life and, ultimately, that of purposive movement, a “soul that strives towards...”. The *De caelo* therefore presents us with a scenario bordering on the contradictory, as it fosters the rise of metaphysical tensions, which the doctrine of ether as the first divine body fails to eliminate or explain altogether; instead, said tensions are located in a metaphysical setting in which, conversely, the premises of the physical world (the ether) seem to have no role to play. However, the issue that emerges most clearly from this comparison, namely the relationship between ether and Unmoved Mover, seem to not have been addressed by Aristotle at all, either in the context of physics or metaphysics. This appears to substantiate the belief that he regards these two discussions as *distinct in their own right*, and justifies any changes with the different point of view brought into play, without worrying about linking one level to another. In the final reference to the metaphysical plane, Aristotle shows his willingness to share and embrace the Platonic theory according to which the sensible world finds its ultimate purpose in a metaphysical reality. Even though the metaphysical level may remain the ultimate horizon of explanation, it is evident upon evaluation that Aristotelian physics features a *joint presence of different levels of perspective*. Amid these levels, an explanatory level abides which is *purely physical* and, as such, stands out and is separated from the metaphysical momentum, in that it responds to other principles and follows its own method of development. The physical is only *one of the possible points of view* applicable to reality. While more fitting to the reality at hand, by nature of its being physical, it sometimes cannot help being affected by the metaphysical reconstruction – acting as ultimate explanation – lingering in the background» (Palpacelli 2016, pp. 217–219).
Some interesting elements emerge from this approach to the philosophy of the ancients. First of all, the rejection of all self-justifying theoretical frameworks: the aim is to understand reality, by multiplying the points of view and interpretative models. This is almost inevitable: for these thinkers «philosophy is essentially a form of life and not a set of doctrines. Socrates could serve as model for the philosophic life because (in Plato’s eyes) he was wholly committed to a life of strenuous search and inquiry, summed up in the phrase “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Apology 38A)». Hence, the philosophers we have been dealing with endeavour to approach reality in all possible ways: this is an effort connected to the very life they have chosen to lead.

Reality is complex and calls for a careful use of methodological tools, the respecting of factual evidence, and great open-mindedness. Aristotle clearly illustrates this in De generatione et corruptione, where he criticises the vague method that Empedocles uses to investigate the topic of motion:

> it was necessary, then, to give some definitions, or build some hypotheses, or suggest some demonstrations to be later carried out either in a rigorous manner or in a weaker one or in any way at all (B, 6, 333b24–26).

This makes it possible to also investigate issues that are remote from everyday experience, while always consciously emphasizing the “limits” that the research is bound to be subject to, insofar as it is “human”. Plato has Simmias clearly state this in relation to the soul:

> For I think, Socrates, as perhaps you do yourself, that it is either impossible or very difficult to acquire clear knowledge about such matters in this life. And yet he is a weakling who does not test in every way what is said about them and persevere until he is worn out by studying them on every side. For it is necessary to do one of two things: either learn from others the truth about such matters, or discover it on one’s own; or, if this is impossible, accept whatever human reasoning is best and hardest to disprove and, embarking upon

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it as upon a raft, sail through life in the midst of dangers, unless one can make one's voyage more safely and securely by sailing upon some stronger vessel, which is to say some divine speech (*Phaedo* 85C1-D4).

If you can not get any better, we must rest satisfied with those arguments which are the best and the hardest to disprove. The only possibility that is ruled out is that we abandon our enquiry because the matter is too difficult and too remote from our experience: for we must be willing to face some risks. Socrates himself, in the *Phaedo*, confirms this attitude when he poses the problem of fate and of the destination of the soul after death:

> Now it would not be fitting for an intelligent man to confidently maintain that all this is just as I have described it; but I think that he may properly venture to believe that this or something like it is true concerning our souls and their abodes, since the soul is shown to be immortal, and that it is worth running the risk of believing that things are so – for risk is nice (*Phaedo* 114D2–6).

Paradoxically, this view ties in with the problems investigated by contemporary epistemology: the fact that the truth always presents some limits and always exists within a web of relations does not mean that we should forsake the truth itself, but only the idea that it has an absolute character. It is necessary to acknowledge that the same reality will appear different depending on the point of view we adopt and/or paradigm we bring into play and/or question we wish to investigate. «In this sense the Ancients have taught us that truth always necessarily manifests itself in perspective, and their thinking works as a relative thinking, in the sense of “topical”, which falls exactly within the meaning Aristotle gives to the term *topos*: “point of view” ... If it can be said that all is relative in the perspective of the Ancients, then it can also be said that in the same philosophical horizon nothing is relativistic, since they are never about forsaking truth... The ever-changing dynamics of relationships can only occur under a given set of clear rules and within fixed borders... Here, the affirmation of multifocality, being an approach that underscores the predominance of the relationship and of the relative in an effort to understand reality, ... has nothing to do with relativism» (Fermani 2016, pp. 28–29).
Our incapacity to attain (divine) perfection does not prevent us from searching for a human truth, which laboriously yields a richer view of reality through many partial reconstructions.

4. The contemporary value of this view of ancient philosophy