



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## 247b1-247b13: commentary

Haas, F.A.J. de; Maso, S.; Natali, C.; Seel, G.

### Citation

Haas, F. A. J. de. (2012). 247b1-247b13: commentary. In S. Maso, C. Natali, & G. Seel (Eds.), *Reading Aristotle Physics VII.3* (pp. 99-108). Las Vegas Zürich Athens: Parmenides Publishing. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4020579>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4020579>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## 247b1–247b13

Frans A. J. de Haas

### Commentary

In this section of *Phys.* VII.3 Aristotle continues his argument designed to show that no alleged modification of the soul is an alteration strictly speaking. He now turns his attention to the states (ἔξεις) of the intellectual part of the soul. He claims both [1] that these states themselves are not alterations, and [2] that there is no generation proper of such states (247b1–7). For the first time in *Phys.* VII.3, Aristotle adds that [3] there is no generation of the use and actuality of the state either (247b7–9). Here he employs a distinction he makes in *de An.* II.5, viz., between the presence of a state, e.g., the possession of a piece of knowledge (first actuality), and the use of the state in the application of that piece of knowledge in the act of thinking about a particular case (more details below). The final paragraph focuses on the very first acquisition of knowledge rather than the state that results from it, and emphasises [4] that the original grasping of knowledge is itself neither a generation nor an alteration (247b10–14).

The first claim [1] echoes the introduction of the topic at 246a10–11. The claim is at first sight puzzling because Aristotle tends to regard states (ἔξεις) as relatively stable qualitative conditions which are not themselves a process of any kind. The *Categories* chapter on quality distinguishes ἔξις from διάθεσις in this way, with instances of understanding (ἐπιστημαί in the plural) and excellences as prime examples of such ἔξεις; see *Cat.* 8.8b27–35, 9a4–10. *De An.* II.5.417b15–16 recalls this distinction, to which we shall return below. In so far as knowledge is considered

a quality (ποιότης), it may come up for discussion under the heading of qualitative change or alteration (ἀλλοίωσις). However, in the *Categories* Aristotle specifies that only particular instances of knowledge are to be ranked under quality, because qualitative descriptions like “knowing” or “knowledgeable” (ἐπιστήμων) rest upon a person’s having a particular instance of knowledge. On the generic level, however, such states and dispositions belong to the category of relatives, just like excellences and defects (246b3–4, 247a1–2). Like sense perception, knowledge is relative to its object (*Cat.* 8.11a20–38). Hence knowledge (ἐπιστήμη in the singular) is duly listed as relative in respect of the object known in *Cat.* 7.6b2–6; 33–35; 7b22–35.

In *de An.* II.5.416b33–35 Aristotle claims for perception that it occurs “in being moved and undergoing” (ἐν τῷ κινεῖσθαι τε καὶ πάσχειν) and is therefore considered to be a kind of alteration (δοκεῖ ἀλλοίωσις τις εἶναι). On the basis of the parallel between perception and thought which characterizes Aristotle’s method in *De anima*, he suggests that thinking (τὸ νοεῖν), too, might consist in a kind of πάσχειν (*de An.* III.4.429a13–15). The chapter continues by specifying the difference between πάσχειν in perception and thought respectively, with a most striking claim that thinking occurs entirely apart from the body (*de An.* III.4.429b4–5). This would already rule out thinking from being associated with any ordinary kind of alteration. However, Aristotle chose to be notoriously unclear about the special status of thinking in this regard. Throughout *de An.* II–III Aristotle labors to specify the relevance for perception and thought of changes in the material sense organs.<sup>34</sup> In this wider context it makes sense to deny that a state of the intellectual part of the soul is itself an alteration. On even more general terms, the exclusion of motion from the states of the soul in *Phys.* VII.3 contributes to Aristotle’s aim from *de An.* I.3 onwards of showing why his predecessors were wrong in assuming that the soul moves the body by being in motion itself.

<sup>34</sup> This is a vexed issue in Aristotelian scholarship. For a cautious summary of the debate, with references to *Phys.* VII.3, see Magee (2000), 121–149.

On the contrary, so Aristotle argues, motions start from or end in the soul. Our passage in *Phys.* VII.3 can be read as providing the more general physical underpinnings of the view of the soul expressed in *de An.* I.4.408b13–18:

It is doubtless better to avoid saying that the soul pities or learns or thinks, and rather to say that it is the man who does this with his soul. What we mean is not that the movement is in the soul, but that sometimes it terminates in the soul and sometimes starts from it, sensation e.g., coming from without, and reminiscence starting from the soul and terminating with the movements or states of rest in the sense organs.<sup>35</sup>

According to the second claim [2], in 247b3–7, there is no generation of intellectual states of the soul. The  $\beta$  version has “And this is clear” ( $\tau\omicron\upsilon\tau\omicron\ \delta\grave{\epsilon}\ \delta\eta\lambda\omicron\nu$ ) instead of “And further” ( $\xi\tau\iota\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}$ ), thus suggesting a closer connection between the first and second paragraph. This is quite right insofar as the argument constitutes an example of the claim that knowledge is relative. The generation of a state of the intellectual part of the soul is an example of the realization of a *first* actuality from the lack of that state, or first potentiality. *Second* actuality (the actual thinking of a particular object) is not referred to as  $\xi\xi\iota\varsigma$  in Aristotle. Nevertheless, in *de An.* II.5.417a31ff., Aristotle doubted whether it would be at all appropriate to speak of “alteration” ( $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\lambda\omicron\iota\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$ ) in both cases that will be under discussion here, i.e., the transition from potentially knowing to actually knowing as in knowledge acquisition (first potentiality to first actuality), as well as the transition from the possession of knowledge to the actual use and activity of knowledge in its application to a particular case (second potentiality to second actuality).

The argument in 247b4–7 regards the generation of knowledge in a soul which turns a potential knower into an actual knower.

---

<sup>35</sup> All translations of Aristotle are taken from J. Barnes, ed., *Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, 1984), with slight modifications.

Aristotle states that this transition is not a change properly speaking, because it is caused by the presence of something else, viz., a particular object. The  $\beta$  version reads “for from experience of the particular we take knowledge of the universal” (ἐκ γὰρ τῆς κατὰ μέρος ἐμπειρίας τὴν καθόλου λαμβάνομεν ἐπιστήμην), thus providing a more obvious link to sense experience as the source of universals.<sup>36</sup> The presence of a particular somehow causes the potential knower to know the universal that resides in the particular. For, according to *de An.* III.8.432a3–6 intelligible forms reside in perceptible forms. In other words: when a particular has come to be present (whatever changes that process might entail) the required relation between the potential knower and its proper object, the universal in the particular, comes to be.<sup>37</sup>

Since Aristotle has already argued in *Phys.* V.2.225b11–13 (invoked at 246b10–12, 247a1–2) that there is no proper change in the category of relatives, the reduction of the generation of an intellectual state to the presence of its co-relative immediately excludes alteration (as well the other three modes of change). It is puzzling, however, that this argument is applied to the alleged coming to be of what must be *particular* states of the soul, which, in the *Categories* at least, *did* count as qualities rather than relatives (see above).

In *de An.* II.5.417b19–28 Aristotle explains that the objects of perception are particulars, which are external to the soul; cf. *Phys.* I.5.189a5–8. Hence perception, as well as knowledge of perceptibles, depend on the presence of their object, which they do not have at their disposal. Knowledge of intelligibles is different in two ways: it concerns universals, and universals are somehow present in the soul; hence the mind can focus its attention on any universal whenever it wants. A grammarian who is actively thinking about a particular alpha, is concerned primarily with

<sup>36</sup> For discussion of the different readings see Wardy (1990), 227ff.

<sup>37</sup> It is a moot point whether Aristotle considers the form in a particular as a particular, a universal, or both. For a concise discussion of the problem see Politis (2004), 251–254; for more details see e.g., Woods (1991), 41–56, and Frede-Patzig (1988).

this particular alpha, even if he does so by knowing it qua alpha, i.e., qua the universal alpha which is in the particular alpha that instantiates it. In this sense, knowledge, too, consists in a relation with an object that has to be present. As Aristotle states in *Metaph.* XIII.10.1087a15–21:

For knowledge, like knowing, is spoken of in two ways: as potential and as actual. The potentiality, being, as matter, universal and indefinite, deals with the universal and indefinite; but the actuality, being definite, deals with a definite object; being a “this,” it deals with a “this.” But indirectly sight sees universal color, because this individual color which it sees is color; and this individual alpha which the grammarian considers (ἰσῶρεῖ) is an alpha.

From this text it seems clear that knowledge depends for its functioning on the presence of universals that inhere in sensible forms (see *de An.* III.8.432a3–6). The mind manipulates representations of these in the imagination which Aristotle considers indispensable for human thought (see *de An.* III.7.431a14–15; b2–10; III.9.432a7–12). Ultimately, however, all knowledge derives from sensible particulars that are present to the individual, who—as 247b4–7 explain—is acquiring knowledge through sense perception. In *APo.* I.18 Aristotle states in the clearest possible way that universals derive from sense perception and induction, and that therefore all knowledge, whether acquired by induction or by proof, depends on sense perception. It is to this necessary condition of knowledge that our passage draws attention.

In the third paragraph (247b7–9) Aristotle proceeds to the claim [3] that the transition from states of the intellectual part of the soul to their use and actuality is no generation either. As pointed out in the introduction, it is for the first time in *Phys.* VII.3 that Aristotle addresses the generation of second actuality. The reader is invited to consider such transitions as being similar to opening one’s eyes (ἀνάβλεψις), and touching (ἄφῆ). What is

the point of comparison? Wardy has argued that in all of these cases there is no *process* of generation; *a fortiori* their use will involve no real change.<sup>38</sup> It is hard to see why the lack of a *process* of generation would entail that the use of the result involves no real change either, especially since the use of knowledge occurs *after* it has come to be. Nor does it seem possible to distinguish between “generation” and “use” in the cases of opening one’s eyes and touching at all.

At this point, one of the rare parallels for ἀναβλέπειν and cognates in Aristotle is illuminating. In *History of Animals* VI.3.562a17–21 Aristotle describes the various stages of the growth of a bird within the egg as they can be observed when breaking the shell at different intervals. He states:

During the period above referred to the chick sleeps, but if it is moved it wakes, looks up and chirps (ἐγείρεται δὲ καὶ ἀναβλέπει κινούμενος καὶ φθέγγεται); and the heart and the navel together palpitate as though the creature were respiring.

This text suggests that waking up and opening the eyes, or looking up, are closely connected to a motion (κινούμενος) with which they are not identical. Waking up is Aristotle’s favorite example of second actuality (see *de An.* II.5 *passim*; and below *Phys.* VII.3.248a6). For touching a similar story can be told: two things have to have moved towards each other before they actually touch, but the touching itself is not a motion with a beginning and an end. Things either touch or they do not. The point of comparison, then, is rather that looking up and touching are examples of actualities which are the result of antecedent motions but are themselves without coming to be—precisely because no process is involved in their actualization.

The analog of touching has a further application in Aristotle’s philosophy since it is sometimes used with reference

---

<sup>38</sup> Wardy (1990), 234 (his emphasis).

to the thinking of non-composite substances or essences. In his exploration of being in terms of truth and falsity Aristotle states that thinking or asserting are similar to contact, ignorance to the lack of contact. Non-composite substances exist actually, and do not come to be. One cannot be in error about them; one can only think them or fail to do so. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Truth or falsity is as follows: contact and assertion are truth (assertion not being the same as affirmation), and ignorance is non-contact. For it is not possible to be in error regarding the question what a thing is, save in an accidental sense; and the same holds good regarding non-composite substances (for it is not possible to be in error about them). And they all exist actually, not potentially; for otherwise they would come to be and cease to be; but, as it is, being itself does not come to be nor cease to be; for if it did it would have to come out of something. About the things, then, which are essences and exist in actuality, it is not possible to be in error, but only to think them or not to think them. (*Metaph.* IX.10.1051b23–32).

Since thinking is contact between the mind and its object (see e.g., *Metaph.* XII.7.1072b18–21), *qua* contact the state itself does not come to be nor cease to be, even though reaching this state may depend on antecedent motions of various kinds.

The final paragraph of this section (247b9–13) returns to the original grasp of knowledge, which one would be most inclined to regard as some kind of generation or alteration. Aristotle has recourse to the familiar claim that to know and to have understanding obtain when our reasoning faculty (*διάνοια*) has come to rest. This is crucial, for if this is what knowledge and understanding amount to, Aristotle can directly apply the results he argued for in *Phys.* V.2 to the effect that there is no process of generation that leads to rest, nor generation of any change whatsoever.

Nor is there motion in respect of agent and patient—in fact there can never be motion of mover and moved, because there cannot be motion of motion or generation of generation or in general change of change.

(*Phys.* V.2.225b13–16)

These claims are argued for at length in *Phys.* V.2. How is change of change to be conceived?<sup>39</sup> A change cannot serve as a substrate of change, nor as a form that is replaced with another form in the same change (225b16–33). If change is itself changed, and generation generated at the moment of their occurrence, an infinite regress arises that points to the lack of a first change; if there is no first change, all change will be abolished (225b33–226a6). In general, the same thing is capable of contrary motions as well as rest, and the same thing is capable of both generation and rest. So something which is in the process of coming to be coming-to-be (as in “generation of generation”), will be perishing once it *has* come to be coming-to-be, i.e., its opposite, or rest (226a6–10). Moreover, it is impossible to conceive of a substrate for the change of change, or the generation of generation. If the generation of learning (μάθησις) cannot itself be a case of learning, nor will the generation of generation itself be a case of generation (226a10–16). Finally, which of the three kinds of change apart from substantial change, viz., alteration, growth and diminution, or locomotion, will be at stake if change changes (226a16–23)? These are the arguments Aristotle relies on in support of his claim that the first grasp of knowledge is neither generation nor alteration.

How are knowledge and understanding a state of rest? More than once Aristotle hints at a connection, also on the etymological level, between knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) and coming to a standstill (ἐφιστάναί), or more generally between the reasoning faculty (διάνοια, τὸ ἐπιστημονικόν) and resting (ἡρεμεῖν): cf. *de An.* I.3.407a33–34; III.11.434a16–21; *APo* II.19.100a6–b5; *Int.* 16b19–21;

<sup>39</sup> For a full discussion of the problems involved see Sorabji (1979), 159–177.

and below, *Phys.* VII.3.247b17–248a6.<sup>40</sup> The most famous account of knowledge acquisition along the lines indicated here is found in *APo.* II.19:

So from perception there comes memory, as we call it, and from memory (when it occurs often in connection with the same thing), experience; for memories that are many in number form a single experience. And from experience, or from the whole universal that has come to rest in the soul (the one apart from the many, whatever is one and the same in all those things), there comes a principle of skill and of understanding—of skill if it deals with how things come about, of understanding if it deals with what is the case. [. . .]

What we have just said but not said clearly, let us say again: when one of the undifferentiated things makes a stand, there is a primitive universal in the mind (for though one perceives the particular, perception is of the universal—e.g., of man but not of Callias the man); again a stand is made in these, until what has no parts and is universal stands—e.g., such and such an animal stands, until animal does, and in this a stand is made in the same way. Thus it is clear that it is necessary for us to become familiar with the primitives by induction; for perception too instills the universal in this way. (*APo* II.19.100a3–9; 100a14–b5).

As a whole, this text may serve as a summary of the various themes invoked in *Phys.* VII.3.247b1–13, even though its emphasis is different. *APo* II.19 aims at showing how the discriminatory power of perception<sup>41</sup> is fundamental to the acquisition of universal concepts and renders innate knowledge superfluous (against Plato).

---

<sup>40</sup> For a useful account of our passage from this angle see Tracy (1969), 274–275.

<sup>41</sup> For the importance of the discriminatory powers of the soul see de Haas (2005), 321–344.

Our section of *Phys.* VII.3, on the other hand, exploits the fact that this process *comes to rest* in universals: intellectual states of the soul are states of rest which are thereby themselves excluded from alteration and generation properly speaking.