Aristotle and Plato on the transition from practice to theory.

The title of my paper is admittedly ambiguous. For when we talk about the transition from practice to theory, especially in the context of rhetoric, one might have in mind the sort of project undertaken by Thomas Cole in his *Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*. Thus, Harvey Yunis, acknowledgeing Cole's contribution, suggests that «the most important recent scholarship on Greek rhetoric has focused on the role of theory as the essential component in rhetorical art».[1] The term «theory» here denotes «that department of an art or technical subject which consists in the knowledge or statement of the facts on which it depends, or of its principles and methods, as distinguished from the *practice* of it». (Oxford English Dictionary). Indeed, 4th century discussions on the means and ends of rhetoric often involve a notion which is very similar to the one captured by our term «theory». The relevant evidence describes the distinction between practice (*empeiria*) and *logos* — which *prima facie* comes close to the sense of theory as we described it above. Let me call this aspect of the question aspect A.

But there is a second way to talk about the transition from practice to theory, in the sense of theoretical wisdom. In fact, a number of texts dating from the time of the Sophists discuss a succession in the process of civilization, whereby the stage of «pure» wisdom comes after the satisfaction of bare necessities. Let me call this aspect of the question aspect B.

Is there any connection between these two aspects? Would it be wiser to treat them in different discussions? In what follows I will try to show how aspect B sheds light on aspect A — and in what sense the interface between A and B in turn sheds light on the interface between philosophy and rhetoric in early Greece. Let me start with aspect A.

The juxtaposition between the practice of X and theory of X is reminiscent of some well-known texts in which Aristotle distinguishes a physician who proceeds on the basis of mere *empeiria* from the one who has also mastered the corresponding art (*Met.* 981a). A similar idea can be found in Plato's *Gorgias*. Those who claim to possess a *techne* must demonstrate knowledge of its principles and its aims.[2]. Plato and Aristotle agree that mere accumulation of practice is not a sufficient condition for the acquisition of art. Aristotle regards experience as a necessary condition for the acquisition of an art, and Plato would not disagree. But, as both Plato and Aristotle argue, experience does not

[1] Yunis (1998), 223.

necessarily lead to art; in fact, someone who has what *we* can describe as «purely theoretical» knowledge on a subject —Aristotle uses the term *logos*— is inferior to someone who has accumulated experience, without having any «theoretical background» (see *e.g. Met.* 981a12-15). It is at least conceivable that people can acquire «theoretical knowledge» of *e.g.* medicine by reading a scientific book. One can even learn what causes a particular disease, so that unlike an empirical physician, he/she in a peculiar sense can at least appear to state the *dioti*. That Plato has a special interest in this peculiar case becomes clear from his exploitation of the character Phaedrus. Plato shows how Phaedrus admires not only Lysias but also Eryximachus (the doctor whom Plato parodies in the *Symposium* as a «rationalist» who pursues the question of *eros* from the disinterested perspective of «science»). Phaedrus has venerates texts (*logoi*) and speculation. From Plato's point of view, the situation is simple: Phaedrus is seeking the easy (and painless) way out; instead of learning about love himself he recites the lore of other intellectuals. Phaedrus is happy with his second-hand knowledge and, because of his perverted interest in *logoi*, he appropriates it as his own. Plato's criticism is clear when he makes Socrates use the example of doctors who have memorized some rules of thumb, without, however, knowing when they need to apply them (*Phaedrus* 268A-C). Further evidence can be drawn, again in the *Phaedrus*, on the passage on the so-called Hippocratic method, in which Socrates juxtaposes those who proceed only by *tribe* and *empeiria* to those who proceed by real *techne*. The fact that Socrates describes as empiricists people who would, for instance, memorize some medical rules, without having what we would readily describe as real experience on the subject may sound paradoxical. But what Plato has in mind when he talks about mere *empeiria* or *tribe* is the kind of superficial knowledge one acquires by watching others do the same thing —or by being instructed by others in a similarly superficial way.

«Second-hand knowledge» is also condemned as merely empirical in the *Laws*, when Plato describes the practice of doctors who *slavishly* imitate their masters (and I suspect that this is the significance of the image of the slave doctor as a person who runs after his master and has no autonomy in his thought or action). Unlike free physicians who learn their art according to nature, slave physicians acquire their skill *kat' epitaxin … ton despoton kai theorian* (obviously in its non-technical sense) *kai kat' empeirian* (*Laws* 720B3). By contrast, free doctors study their subject *ap' arches kai kata physin* (720D3).

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[2] See *On Ancient Medicine* 20; *Gorgias* 500E5-501B1; *Metaphysics* 981a29-30.

The description of the free doctor in the *Laws* fits nicely with Socrates' advice in the *Phaedrus* (the so-called method of Hippocrates). A competent rhetorician, just like a competent physician, must study the nature of his subject. This seems to be what Aristotle is doing not only when, in the course of his career, he collects and studies specimens of animals, but also when he studies the constitutions of different states. In a passage from the *Protrepticus* he argues: «just as that man will not be a good builder who does not use the ruler or the other instruments of this kind [earlier in the text Aristotle argues that these instruments are derived from nature: *apo tes physeos heuretai ta beltista ton organon*] but takes his measure from other buildings; so he would, perhaps, not be a good lawgiver or serious statesman who gives his laws or administers the affairs of the sate with a view to, and in imitation of, either administration as conducted by other men or the constitutions of actual human communities, as for instance those of the Lacaedaemonians or the Cretans or others. For a copy of what is not beautiful itself cannot be beautiful… as the most intelligent doctors and the majority of those who are expert in physical training agree that good doctors and good trainers must have a general knowledge of nature, so, and even to a much higher degree, good lawmakers must have a thorough knowledge of nature.»[3] …

The similarity of Aristotle with Plato is striking and at the same time revealing, insofar as Aristotle offers a reconstruction of an argument which remains implicit in Plato. Both Plato and Aristotle condemn people who imitate, metaphysically speaking, «copies» of other (original) things. But what is the alternative advice that the philosophers suggest? The answer is more clear in some celebrated texts of Aristotle, such as *Metaphysics* A1, or *Posterior Analytics* B19, where we find out that *empeiria* is where we start from in order to acquire knowledge of first principles, which is what one needs in order to possess art or episteme. At this point, Aristotle clearly invests *empeiria* with a value which was missing from Plato's discussion. In fact, Plato's discussion is a little confusing. As we have already seen, in the *Phaedrus* Socrates condemns as empiricists (he uses the terms *empeiria* and *tribe*) people who, like the putative doctor of the discussion, rely on «second-hand» knowledge. But the alternative he proposes involves a kind of autopsy (careful study of *physis*) which does not rule out experience as we would understand it. There is nothing wrong with Plato's discussion, insofar as we appreciate the contexts in which he uses the term *empeiria*; but what makes the situation rather confusing is the fact that when Aristotle talks about εμπειρία in contexts such as

[3] *Protrepticus* 13 (Ross)- trans. K. von Fritz and E. Kapp.

Metaphysics A1 and *Posterior Analytics* B19 he uses the word that Plato had used to describe *mere* experience to refer to a much more generous notion of experience. I suspect that this more generous notion of experience comes close to Plato's study of *physis*.[4]

In fact, Aristotle's interest in the collection of specimens suggests that there is a way in which one can profit from studying particulars — or, indeed, that studying particulars is the only way in which one can attain knowledge. I do not propose to address the question of the difference between Plato and Aristotle, or to propose that there is no difference – although I would like to stress that much of what Plato has to say about *empeiria* —including texts like the *Gorgias* which contain striking parallells with Aristotle's *Metaphysics* A1— is part of a larger agenda, which includes his criticism of orators in the context of democracy on the one hand, and (closely connected to the former) the metaphysical scheme of copies and originals. If we overlook this condition we misleadingly conclude that Plato despises, whereas Aristotle endorses, the world of *empeiria*.

But let me go back to our original question of the transition from practice to theory, and let me narrow down the question to the case of politics. The evidence we have considered so far suggests that both Plato and Aristotle require a competent speaker or statesman to study his subject according to nature. Does this mean reflection on the «logic» and/or particular conditions/needs of each particular patient (if we take the example of medicine) or addressee (if we take the example of rhetoric)? The context of the *Phaedrus*, but also that of the *Protrepticus*, suggest that the task is somewhat more complicated.

In the *Phaedrus*, a few pages before he introduces the «method of Hippocrates», Socrates uses the example of Pericles who studied under Anaxagoras in order to argue that any art is in need of *adoleschia* and *perittologia physeos peri* (270A). The language of the passage suggests that Plato has in mind the kind of ironical attitude toward philosophy that one finds, for instance, in Aristophanes.[5] Use of such language is not unmatched in the Platonic dialogues. In the *Theaetetus* (195B-D) Socrates is playing the devil's advocate, when he describes his own views as garrulous — a view to which his interlocutor readily objects. In *Parmenides* 135D Parmenides advises Socrates to «exercise and train [him]self while [he is] still young in an art which seems to be useless and is called by most people loquacity (*dia tes dokouses ahrestou einai kai kaloumenes hypo ton pollon adoleschias*)[6] But the

[4] This point is further discussed in Balla (2003).
[5] For evidence from Aristophanes, see Natali (1987) 235.
[6] Cf. Natali (1987), 236.

ironic attitude toward philosophy is by no means inherent in the relation between the city and the philosophers . Scholars, like Robert Wallace have brought to our attention the fact that public opinion about philosophy changes dramatically in the course of the fifth century.[7] And certainly Plato's ironical formulation in the *Phaedrus* must not prevent us from appreciating the story about Pericles' interest in philosophy, as this is attested not only by the biographical evidence concerning his discipleship to Anaxagoras but also by the Funeral Oration. Pericles' famous line «*philosophoumen aneu malakias*» (Thucydides, II.40.1) does not pressuppose any technical notion of philosophy, but a, possibly non-systematic, interest in wisdom or intellectual cultivation. What I think makes Pericles' interest in *sophia* relevant to our discussion is the assumption it seems to make concerning the interface between theory and practice. That is, as Michael Frede remarks concerning this passage: «what Pericles has in mind seems…to be this: the Athenians take a remarkable interest in general questions, go to great length discussing and arguing about them, though these questions are of no immediate relevance to their current affairs, private or public, indeed may have no bearing on them at all. They are interested in these questions for their own sake».[8]

In order to appreciate the distance that separates this kind of disinterested knowledge (connected with aspect b in my original distinction) from our more trivial notion of theory (whereby theory of x is contrasted to application of x — connected with aspect a in my original distinction), it will be helpful to recall the original meaning of the Greek term *theoria*. I quote from LSJ, *s.v.*, III: viewing, beholding, *theories heneken ekdemein* to go abroad *to see the world*, Hdt. 1.30; *s.v.* I, sending of *theoroi* or state-ambassadors to the oracles or games, or , collectively, the *theoroi* themselves… According to Andrea Nightingale, «the defining feature of *theoria* in its traditional forms is a journey to a region outside the boundaries of one's own city for the purpose of seeing a spectacle or witnessing another kind of object or event. This activity emphasizes «autopsy» or seeing something for oneself: the *theoros* is an eyewitness whose experience is radically different from those who stay home and receive a mere report of the news.»[9] It is true that Pericles doesn't speak about *theoria*; but if we keep in mind his own discipleship to Anaxagoras and also the fact that terms such as *sophia*, *theoria*, and of course *phronesis* are not used in a technical way before Aristotle we can at least start to think that (a) 5th century intellectuals did not have a clear conception of what distinghished practice from

[7] Wallace (1998); see also Natali.
[8] Frede (2004), 21.
[9] Nightingale (2001), 33. On this topic see now also Nightingale (2004).

theory; and also (b) that our own tendency to understand 5th century intellectuals as oriented toward practical, utilitarian ends comes from polemical sources like Plato and Aristotle. I will now try to support this suggestion by considering the «historical» (or phylogenetic) transition from practice to theory (aspect B in my original distinction).

In the case of rhetoric, we often assume that the Sophists and early Orators, unlike philosophers had a practical orientation. This insight draws support on the story about the origins of rhetoric related by Cicero: the practical needs of states in Sicily after the overthrow of the tyrants bring about the phenomenon of rhetoric (*Brutus* 46). Plato as well as Aristotle often describe the Sophists as naïve users of techniques, people who never reflect on the deeper principles of their practice. But evidence of this kind must be considered with a grain of salt. There has been a lot of discussion about how Plato might have coined the word *rhetorike*. Regardless of the answer we may give to this question, I think it is now commonly aggreed that our understanding of the Sophists as a group of intellectuals with clearly defined practices (and mostly practical orientation) depends heavily on Plato's testimony.[10] Another factor which fosters the impression that theory follows practice — in other words, that practice of any skill can be isolated from theoretical principles — is the abundance of fifth and fourth century texts discussing the succession of different stages of civilization. Again, one of the most important texts is in the opening part of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, on the transition from techne to *sophia*. Aristotle repeats a view which we also find in Isocrates' *Busiris*. Leisure, *schole*, is a necessary condition for the emergence of wisdom. The idea may sound appealing, but it is potentially misleading. Leaving aside the question of *sophia*, would we concede that things like play (under which one can classify any kind of competition, including arithmetic in the sense of calculation), art, or story-telling make their appearance in human civilization once all the «basic» needs have been satisfied? This kind of objection is certainly ignored by our ancient sources, which, especially in the period we are concerned with, as I pointed out at the outset of my paper, favor the topic of the process of civilization, whereby the stage of *logos* and «pure» wisdom comes after the satisfaction of bare necessities. Another important piece of evidence comes from Aristotle's *De philosophia*, which distinguishes five successive stages of *sophia*. First comes the *sophia* of the arts which meet the necessities of life; second come arts which go beyond the necessities of life and advance as far as beauty and elegance; political wisdom comes next (at this stage Aristotle includes the Seven Wise Men); then comes *physike theoria*; last

[10] See Striker (1996).

comes the highest form of *sophia*, the study of divine things.[11] Aristotle does not want to suggest that noone before him (or Plato) had pursued the kind of subject-matter that theoretical wisdom deals with.[12] But I think he is responsible for our conception of an opposition between a kind of wisdom that does not aim at utility and the more practically oriented kind of wisdom that he himself describes as *phronesis*.[13] Here is a typical statement from the *Cambridge Ancient History* «the *philosophia* of Isocrates retains the practical connotation the term had in the fifth century and before, encompassing any serious study conducive to fostering sound opinions and correct judgements on factors inherent in a given situation and how to cope with them.»[14] But the assumption is question-begging, since it attributes on the «Sophists» a complete lack of interest in «theoretical issues». One can reasonably ask «do we have any positive evidence that the Sophists had an interest in theoretical issues?»; and, further, «isn't it rather the case that one of the distinguishing features about the Sophists is precisely their interest in empirical research?»[15]

Perhaps I don't have a sufficient answer to these questions. However, I am not sure that these questions are legitimate. How do we decide that an intellectual with an interest in music is demonstrating an empirical rather than a theoretical interest? Or even that an author who composes a speech has an empirical interest in the impact of his speech rather than a theoretical interest in the logic of its composition?[16] Moreover, if what we mean by empirical research is an interest in systematic autopsy, then, at least according to Plato, in the evidence I have presented, there is no need to divorce practice/experience from theory. On a charitable Platonic reading, what the Sophists lack is the propaideutic background which shapes both mind and character in such a way as to allow them to conduct autopsy in a serious way. I think that a text like the *Phaedo* can be seen as a Platonic manifesto of how an interest in cosmology, in principle like the one demonstrated by Anaxagoras, may be the best introduction to politics and ethics (I have in mind the end of the dialogue, when Socrates criticizes the failure of Anaxagoras' theory to integrate *nous* and what is best in its account of the *cosmos*).

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[11] Fr. 8 Ross. For discussion of this passage in the context of the emergence of the image of *sophos* see Kerferd (1976).
[12] See Frede (2004).
[13] Aristotle, *NE* 1141b.
[14] M. Ostwald and J.P.Lynch (1994).
[15] Cf. Wallace (1998), 208.
[16] «If we are to engage in philosophy, we are to engage in philosophy; and if we are not to engage in philosophy, we are to engage in philosophy. In every case, therefore, we are to engage in philosophy. For if philosophy is possible, then we must in every way engage in it, since it exists. And if it is not possible, in

One may object that we should not base any conclusions on the evidence of the *Phaedrus*. The *Republic* and also the *Theaetetus* support an ideal of philosophy that has nothing to do with autopsy. And even the *Phaedrus* suggests that in order to be able to conduct autopsy one must be trained in a kind of knowledge that *apparently* has nothing to do with practice. It is not clear that Plato himself endorses the model of a philosopher who has no interest in practical affairs. But I think to a large extent he is responsible for the putative model of an intellectual whose interest lies merely in practical affairs. One of Plato's targets here is of course Isocrates. Again, the question whether Isocrates himself was interested solely in practical affairs is an open question. Aristotle's claim in the *Protrepticus* that philosophy is a theoretical entrerprise is usually regarded as part of his debate with Isocrates. But this is not enough to suggest that Isocrates, who admittedly insisted on the practical value of his profession had no interest in theory. I do not intend to discuss what is the origin of the arguments concerning the value of *theoria*. What I have tried to describe is how the interest in the relevant discussion by 4th century «theorists» (such as Plato and Aristotle) often biases our own understanding of the transition from practice to theory.

Ch. Balla, «Isocrates, Plato, and Aristotle on Rhetoric», *Rhizai* I (2004), 45-71.

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Th. Cole, *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*. Baltimore/London, 1991.

M. Frede, «Aristotle's account of the origins of philosophy», *Rhizai* I (2004), 9-44.

M. Gagarin "Did the Sophists aim to persuade?", *Rhetorica* XIX.3 (2001), 275-91.

G.B. Kerferd, "The image of the wise man in Greece in the Period before Plato" in *Images of Man in Ancient and Mediecal Thought*: Studia Gerardo Verbeke ab amicis et collegis dicata. Leuven 1976, 17-28.

C. Natali. «Αδολεσχία, Λεπτολογία and the Philosophers in Athens». *Phronesis* XXXII/2 (1987): 232-41.

A. Nehamas, A. "Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato's Demarcation of philosophy from sophistry", *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7.1 (1990), 3-15. Republished in *Virtues of Authenticity*, Princeton, NJ, 1999, 108-22.

A. Wilson Nightingale, «On wandering and wondering: *theoria* in Greek philosophy and culture», *Arion* 9.2(Fall 2001), 23-58.

A. Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy*, Cambridge, 2004.

M. Ostwald and J.P. Lynch, "The growth of schools and the advance of knowledge", in: *Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed., vol. VI, 592-633.

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this case too we ought to inquire how it is possible for philosophy not to be, and in inquiring we engage in philosophy: for inquiry is the cause of philosophy» fr. 28 Ross (trans. A. Nehamas).

G. Striker. "Methods of Sophistry", *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*, Cambridge, 1996, 3-21.

R.W. Wallace, "The Sophists in Athens" in *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens*, ed. D. Boedeker and K. Raaflaub, Cambridge, 1998, 203-22.

H. Yunis, "The constraints of democracy and the rise of the art of rhetoric" in *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens*, ed. D. Boedeker and K. Raaflaub, Cambridge, 1998, 223-41.