

THE OBJECT AND MEANING OF METAPHYSICS  
IN ARISTOTLE

By



ANGELO T. COSTANZO, B.A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

(in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

October 1979

THE OBJECT AND MEANING OF METAPHYSICS  
IN ARISTOTLE

MASTER OF ARTS  
(Philosophy)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: The Object and Meaning of Metaphysics in Aristotle

AUTHOR: Angelo T. Costanzo, B.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Constantine Georgiadis

NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 72

## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to determine--against the background of twentieth century development theories regarding the Metaphysics--what Aristotle conceived metaphysics to be. The position which we defend maintains that Aristotle made a distinction between the "science of being qua being" (what we today call metaphysics) and "primary philosophy" (or theology). The object of the former is universal being; that of the latter, primary substance (or God). This double role assigned to philosophy must not, however, be construed to represent two different, and inimical, stages in the Philosopher's thinking on the subject, as is done, for example, by the development theories. What the latter theories point to as antithetical in the aforementioned definitions of philosophy, we defend as compatible definitions. The symbiotic relationship of the latter is made possible in the philosopher who, Aristotle tells us, studies both universal being and primary substance (IV 3, 1005a33-b1). Furthermore, given the fact that primary substance acts at the cause and principle of all being, it will be distinct from its effect, as all effects are from their causes. Given the latter and what we have said above, the distinction between metaphysics and theology cannot be eliminated à la Owens and Merlan, who end up identifying metaphysics with theology. In addition to an examination of the above controversy we also include an analysis of those subjects which figure as most fundamental to Aristotelian metaphysics, viz., substance and theology.

### Acknowledgments

I would like, by this opportunity, to express my indebtedness to Dr. Constantine Georgiadis, my supervisor, who suggested to me such a thesis, and who has offered some greatly appreciated guidance in the maze of trying to make sense of it all. I would also like to thank my friend Raymond Melkom, who has helped me in more ways than can be enumerated here.

For hym was levere have at his beddes heed  
Twenty bookes, clade in blak or reed,  
Of Aristotle and his philosophie,  
Than robes riche, or fithele, or gay sautrie.

Geoffrey Chaucer, "General  
Prologue" to the Canterbury  
Tales, ll. 293-296.

Table of Contents

|  | <u>Page</u> |
|--|-------------|
| Introduction . . . . .                                       | 1           |
| CHAPTER ONE: The Science of Being <u>Qua</u> Being . . . . . | 4           |
| CHAPTER TWO: Substance . . . . .                             | 39          |
| CHAPTER THREE: Theology . . . . .                            | 56          |
| Bibliography . . . . .                                       | 70          |

## INTRODUCTION

The investigations of this thesis center around the subject and character of metaphysics in the Aristotelian work by that name. The twentieth century has seen the raging of an animated controversy surrounding the text, which began with the publication in 1923 of Werner Jaeger's seminar work Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of his Development. In the latter work Jaeger presented the thesis that what we have in Aristotle's book are in fact two distinct conceptions of metaphysics which are to be understood as representing two different stages in the development of the Philosopher's thought. In the first stage Aristotle is writing under the still fresh influence of Plato's Academy, and it is to this stage that metaphysics as the study of first substance, or theology, belongs. While the conception of metaphysics as a general science of universal being belongs to the second stage, a stage in which the older Aristotle, no longer under the spell of his master, turns to a more personalized view of metaphysics. In 1961 Giovanni Reale brought out his important book Il Concetto di Filosofia Prima e l'Unità della Metafisica di Aristotele, which effectively discredited evolutionary approaches of this kind as philosophically fruitless. Joseph Owens, in a discussion of Reale's work, has said, for example:

Reale's quite confrontation of the leading theories with the text of the Metaphysics shows how these theories fail to come to grips with the genuine



meaning of the Aristotelian motions. It is not surprising, therefore, that they "demonstrate" opposite conclusions and cancel each other out ... Viewed in Reale's comprehensive panorama, they offer a sorry picture of four decades of intensive effort adding up to a laborious zero.<sup>1</sup>

Our own opinion is that the Aristotelian text provides a unitary conception of thought, and that the two stages marked out by Jaeger should be understood, not as different and opposed conceptions of metaphysics, but, rather, as two distinct strands of a philosophic symbiosis. In this regard our interpretation is indebted to Augustin Mansion, who proposed this kind of reading in two articles<sup>2</sup> of his which saw the light of publication in the latter part of the 1950's. Mansion argued that Aristotle distinguishes between "primary philosophy", which studies separate and immobile substance, and the "science of being as such", which studies being in its entirety (without restriction). What we have, in other words, is a general metaphysics and theology (the science of the first substance). What gives rise to some difficulty in interpretation is the fact that Aristotle wishes to assign the status of universality also to theology. Is this possible given

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Owens, 'Critical Notice' on Giovanni Reale, Il Concetto di Filosofia Prima e l'Unità della Metafisica di Aristotele, New Scholasticism, XXXVIII (1964), 254-256.

<sup>2</sup> Augustin Mansion, "L'Objet de la Science Philosophique Supreme d'après Aristote, Métaphysique E, 1," in Mélanges de Philosophie Grecque offerts à Mgr. Diès. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1956, pp. 151-168. Augustin Mansion, "Philosophie Première, Philosophie Seconde et Métaphysique chez Aristote," Revue Philosophique de Louvain, LVI (1958) 165-221.

the particularity of its subject-matter? At the end of E1 Aristotle states that primary philosophy is distinguished as such by the fact that it studies primary substance, and insofar as the latter is first substance and the cause and principle of all reality, and universal thereby, primary philosophy is universal. In addition to this evidence we should also be mindful of IV 3, 1005a33-b1, where Aristotle tells us that it belongs to the philosopher to study both universal being and the first substance. The mind of the philosopher is the meeting ground of metaphysics and theology.

Moreover, given the fact that the primary substance is the cause and principle of sensible reality, this will mean that the two must be kept distinct as cause and effect. All of this points strongly against reductionist interpretations of the kind we have in Joseph Owens and Philip Merlan, who eliminate any kind of distinction between metaphysics and theology, and reserve the title of science of being qua being for theology only.

A detailed examination of this controversy makes up the whole of our first chapter, which is followed by two further chapters in which we examine those subjects which figure as the most fundamental in the Metaphysics, viz., substance and theology.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### The Science of Being Qua Being

The ontological component of metaphysics is stated by Aristotle in the celebrated passage which opens Bk. IV of his Metaphysics:

There is a science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature. Now this is not the same as any of the so-called special sciences; for none of these others treats universally of being as being. They cut off a part of being and investigate the attribute of this part; this is what the mathematical sciences for instance do.<sup>1</sup>  
(IV 9, 1003a21-26)

The definition we are offered here of ontology is distinguished by its subject. The science in question studies reality in its totality. Its universal character is contrasted with the "special sciences", which isolate a particular part of being, and its attributes, as their proper subject. The status of particularity belongs, for example, to the science of mathematics which studies being in terms of quantity. Such also is astronomy, which studies the attributes of the celestial spheres, and botany, whose subject matter is plants and their properties. Against those who reduce ontology to theology, which is, as will be seen, a particular science of the first substance, we shall defend the integrity of its independent status as a universal science which

---

<sup>1</sup>Aristotle, Metaphysics. (Translated by W.D. Ross) Included in The Basic Works of Aristotle. Edited by Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, Inc., 1941. Unless otherwise specified quotations from the Metaphysics will be taken from Ross' translation.

studies being in its generality. In Jaeger's succinct statement, ontology "treats being not as a sort of object separate and distinct from others, but as the common point of reference for all states, properties and relations, that are connected with the problem of reality."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, ontology includes in its study of being the study of attributes, not of particular beings, but of being as being. The implication is that the being studied is the most fundamental or primary component of reality, and its attributes belong to it not accidentally, but by virtue of its nature as being.

The rest of chapter one re-introduces the outlook developed in Bk. I, that the metaphysician seeks to know the first causes and the principles of things. Consequently, the study of being as being involves finding the first causes and principles of being, and they will belong to this "in virtue of its own nature." (IV 1, 1003a27)

What does Aristotle mean by "being"? "There are", he writes "many senses in which a thing may be said to 'be', but all that 'is' is related to one central point, one definite kind of thing, and is not said to 'be' by a mere ambiguity." (IV 1, 103a33-34) "Being" has a multiplicity of meanings, but all of them imply a relation to some single fundamental thing. The philosopher furnishes us with the example of "healthy". Bodily

---

<sup>2</sup>Werner Jaeger, Aristotle. Translated by Richard Robinson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 215.

health is the central idea in reference to which one may speak of "healthy". Someone's complexion may be said to be healthy because it is a symptom of health, medicine is healthy because it restores health in a body, exercise is healthy because it preserves health, etc. Here, although "healthy" has several senses it is, nevertheless, used correctly in each case by virtue of its relation to the central idea of bodily health. (IV 2, 1003a34-1003b)

Likewise "being", also, is used in various senses, but all the senses imply a common reference to a single idea, which it turns out, is substance. That substance holds a privileged status as the proper study of being is stated explicitly in Bk. VII, where we find written:

And indeed the question which was raised of old and is raised now and always, and is always the subject of doubt, viz. what being is, is just the question, what is substance?  
... And so we also must consider chiefly and primarily and almost exclusively what that is which is in this sense. (VII 1, 1028b2-7)

How substance is primary, while everything else is dependent upon substance, is explained by Giovanni Reale as follows:

Essere è ad esempio un uomo, poniamo Socrate, e lo è a pieno titolo. Ma essere è anche l'essere musico di Socrate; tuttavia, l'essere musico si riferisce all'essere di Socrate e anche il correre di Socrate; ma anche in questo caso, l'essere del correre non ci sarebbe se non ci fosse l'essere di colui che corre. L'essere di un determinato peso o di una determinata statura è un modo d'essere che, però, suppone l'essere di un'altra cosa; per

stare al nostro esempio, presuppone Socrate che ha quel peso e quella statura. E così di seguito.<sup>3</sup>

Since substance is primary and the nuclear constituent of everything else, ontology will study the causes and principles of substance.

In addition to substance, however, Aristotle adds "the species of being" as the subject-matter of ontology. These (i.e., the species of being) are reduceable to the "species of unity" because of a relationship of mutual implication. "Being" and "unity", Aristotle says, are the same because of their common reference to a single nature. St. Thomas interpreted this quite correctly when he said that "unity and being are the same numerically but differ conceptually."<sup>4</sup> Stated differently, they have the same denotation but different connotations, for, otherwise they would be in complete agreement in meaning and thus indistinguishable one from another. This can be shown as follows. The expressions "one man" and "existent man" denote a single ultimate reality, viz., man, and the addition of the appositions "one" and "existent" does nothing to compound this primary reality. This being so, to say "one man" is the same as saying "man", and so, likewise, with "existent man". The strict unity involved between a thing and its being and unity is expressed

---

<sup>3</sup>Giovanni Reale, Aristotele, La Metafisica, introduzione, traduzione e parafrasi. Milano: Rusconi Libri, 1978, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup>St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle. Translated by John P. Rowan. Henry Regnery Co., 1961, p. 223.

in the process of generation and corruption of that thing; for, as something comes to be so also its being and unity come to be, and as that something ceases to be, likewise do its being and unity. All this must yield the conclusion that "being" and "unity" are identical.

This identity may further be shown by the way "being" and "unity" are predicated of the substance of a thing: the substance of anything is "one" essentially and not accidentally, and, likewise, it is essentially something which "is". Substance and its being and unity form a single indivisible component. However, as we have said above, they are the same numerically but not conceptually for, then, they would be wholly synonymous. This point is driven home forcefully by St. Thomas as follows:

The term man is derived from the quiddity or the nature of man, and the term thing from the quiddity only; but the term being is derived from the act of being, and the term one from order or lack of division; for what is one is an undivided being. Now what has an essence, and a quiddity by reason of that essence and what is undivided in itself, are the same. Hence these three--thing, being, and one--signify absolutely the same thing but according to different concepts.<sup>5</sup>

Since "being" and "unity" are correlatives it will follow that there shall be as many "species of unity" as there are of being. The species of unity will, in fact, correspond to the species of being for, as Aristotle writes in Bk. V of the

---

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

Metaphysics, "For all refer to unity [i.e., the equal and the like and the same]. Those things are the same whose substance is one; those are like whose quality is one; those are equal whose quantity is one." (V 15, 1021a10-12) In other words, just as identity, likeness, and equality are parts of unity, substance, quality, and quantity are parts of being. And it will belong to the office of ontology to study both species.

Returning to the Aristotelian concept of "being" we can now see that this is not some highly general and abstract concept, but that it refers, rather, to substance and to everything which is dependent upon substance. "Being", as we have seen, although it expresses a multiplicity of meanings, is reducible to a unity by virtue of a reference to a single nature or one principle. Because of this it is not predicated equivocally but in reference to one thing, viz., substance:

... there are many senses in which a thing is said to be, but all refer to one starting-point; some things are said to be because they are substances, others because they are affections of substance, others because they are a process towards substance, or destructions, or privations or qualities of substance, or productive or generative of substance, or of things which are relative to substance, or negations of one of these things or of substance itself. It is for this reason that we say even of non-being that it is non-being. (IV 2, 1003b5-10)

Ontology, as a science which is generically one, will study substance, since this is the central unifying principle of the manifold meanings of "being" (and without which "being" would have no meaning), and the "species of being", and the



"species of unity".

It soon becomes obvious, however, that for Aristotle what deserves the label "being" principally and unqualifiedly is substance. Thus we find written in Bk. VII:

... l'è si predica di tutte le categorie, ma non nello stesso modo, bensì della sostanza in modo primario e delle altre categorie in modo derivato.<sup>6</sup> (VII 4, 1030a21-23)

Of all the categories only substance possesses the privileged ontological property of self-existence. The non-substantial categories have only a parasitic existence by reference to substance. This brings us to a point of considerable contention: given the special status enjoyed by substance in Aristotle's ontology would we be right to identify "being qua being" with substance? Among contemporary commentators who hold to the latter view are Joseph Owens and Giovanni Reale. The position has much to recommend it, and both men argue along similar lines. As formulated by Owens the position reads as follows:

Being in its own nature, Being according as it is Being, Being qua Being, should be found only in Entity. 'Being qua Being' should be synonymous with Entity--"Beingness".<sup>7</sup>

As Owens himself realizes, can it not be objected that this interpretation will deprive ontology of its universal

---

<sup>6</sup> Aristotele, La Metafisica. Traduzione di Giovanni Reale. Milano: Rusconi Libri, 1978.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Owens, The Doctrine of Being In the Aristotelian 'Metaphysics'. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963, p. 267.

scope by locating being qua being in the category of substance, and, thereby one type of being?<sup>8</sup> This objection is met, however, by Aristotle's view regarding how substance is the primary component of reality, while everything else is said to be, only by reference to substance. Referring back to a passage of the Metaphysics already quoted (IV 2, 1003b5-10) substance is presupposed by all the other forms of being. We saw that affections exist because substances exist; their ontological status is one of total dependence upon substance. We saw as much regarding the other senses of being: "destructions" exist only because substances exist which can undergo destruction; the being of "privations" is the being of substances which suffer privation; the being of qualities is the being of substances which take qualities; the being of production and generation is the being of substance insofar as it is produced or generated; and, likewise, negations have no positive existence of their own but only by reference to substance, as negations of substance. If we remove substance we thereby remove the other meanings which being can assume. It is precisely with regard to this point that Aristotle criticizes the Sophists, for example, who make the properties of unity and being the subject-matter of their researches, but err "in not considering substances ... as prior to attributes." (IV 2, 1004b9) The implication is clear enough: the Sophists commit the uncanny blunder of

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

studying the senses of being (e.g., identity, likeness, quality, etc.) without having any notion whatsoever of substance, which is the unifying principle of all modes of being, and which qualifies most strictly as being. How "being" which is located in the first category still maintains its universal character is stated by Owens as follows:

Entity is the common nature considered in all things that are treated of as Beings--whether they are affections, changes, negations or privations, either immediately or mediately, of Entity. One single science of Entity extends universally to all things whatsoever. In this way "Being is common to all things."<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, in chapter two of Bk. IV, Aristotle states that "there are as many parts of philosophy as there are kinds of substance," (IV 2, 1004a3) while in chapter three he describes the philosopher as a man who studies the nature of all substance, (IV 3, 1005b6) We must surely take this as stating in unambiguous terms that the investigations conducted by philosophy all center around substance. Moreover, the causes and principles of being qua being can only be meaningfully discussed in relation to substance, but not in relation to the other forms of being. The whole of our argument finds clear expression in a laconic passage on this point by Reale:

... l'ontologia aristotelica non è che usiologia; in fatti, anche quando si sia ben dimostrato che, in  $\tau$ ,  $\acute{\omicron}\nu$   $\eta$   $\acute{\omicron}\nu$  spesso vuol dire tutto l'essere: l' $\acute{\omicron}\nu\sigma\iota\alpha$ , insieme gli altri significati, resta

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

pur sempre vero che tutti i significati dell'essere che non sono l'οὐσία, non si possono definire se non πρὸς τὴν οὐσίαν, cosicché la formula "scienza dell' essere in quanto essere e di ciò che in quanto tale gli compete significa: scienza dell'οὐσία e di ciò che è πρὸς τὴν οὐσίαν, scienza della sostanza e di ciò che alla sostanza compete.<sup>10</sup>

The objections one finds to this interpretation are often pithy and trivial. Décarie, for example, believes he can discredit this interpretation in one sentence: "Nous nous limiterons à un argument: si l'être, en tant qu'être est la substance, comment les espèces de l'être pourraient-elles inclure les accidents?"<sup>11</sup> A similar, though slightly expanded version of this objection, is given by Alan Gewirth in an article by him which discusses Owens' position. Gewirth's objection is the more puzzling of the two since it is incompatible with Aristotle's text. He finds Owens' position that being qua being is synonymous with substance incorrect on the grounds that "against those who deny the reality of accidents, Aristotle is emphatic in his assertion that accidents also exist. Hence Being qua Being must provide a place for accidents as well as for entities or substances."<sup>12</sup> The meaning of "accident" that Gewirth

<sup>10</sup> Giovanni Reale, Il Concetto di Filosofia Prima e l'Unità della Metafisica di Aristotele. Milano: Società Editrice "Vita e Pensiero", 1965, pp. 113-114, n. 39.

<sup>11</sup> Vianney Décarie, L'Objet De La Metaphysique Selon Aristote. Montreal: Publications De L'Institut D'Etude Médiévales, 1972, p. 109, n. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Gewirth, "Aristotle's Doctrine of Being", The Philosophical Review 62 (1953), p. 583.

has in mind is that offered by Aristotle at the opening of Ch. 30 of Bk. V: "Accident means (1) that which attaches to something and can be truly asserted, but neither of necessity nor usually." (V 30, 1025a13-14) As we shall see, however, Aristotle explicitly denies that philosophy studies the accidental. In order for us to answer this objection, and make more evident to the reader that for Aristotle substance alone fully deserves the title of "being", and thence qualifies as the proper subject of ontology, let us resume our discussion on the various meanings of being treated by the philosopher.

In Ch. 7 of Bk. V and chs. 2-4 of Bk. VI Aristotle sets down a table of the several meanings of "being":

... the unqualified term 'being' has several meanings, of which one was seen to be the accidental, and another the true ('non-being' being the false), while besides these there are the figures of predication (e.g. the 'what', quality, quantity, place, time, and any similar meanings which 'being' may have), and again besides all these there is that which 'is' potentially or actually. (VI 2, 1026a33-b2)

Aristotle then immediately goes on to dismiss accidental being from the realm of metaphysics on the grounds that there is no science--either practical or theoretical--which concerns itself with it. The accidental is characterized by coincidence and fortuity, as Aristotle's examples illustrate. Thus, the science of building a house concentrates on bringing about what will essentially constitute a house (viz., a place of habitation), but pays no attention to what will turn out to be its accidental

features (since these will be infinite), such as being liked by one person, but disliked by another, or being found comfortable by some and not by others. Likewise, the geometer does not study the accidental attributes of triangles, but, rather, its essential attributes. This leads Aristotle to observe that the accidental "is practically a mere name", (VI 2, 1026b13) and that "it is obviously akin to non-being." (VI 2, 1026b21) This can be shown by the fact that, whereas substances undergo generation and corruption, there is no determinate process which yields the accidental. In addition to this there is the further important consideration that while there are things which persist always in one definite type of state, and necessarily so, others are not so governed, but only for the most part. The accidental belongs to this last category, for, repeating the definition of Bk. V ch. 30 the accidental is that "which is neither always nor for the most part." (VI 2, 1026b31-33) If, for example, we experience stifling heat during the month of July we do not say this is an accident since it's the weather condition typical of that month (usually and always). If, on the other hand, we should get cold stormy weather during that month then we would be entitled to say that it was an accident, since that does not occur always nor for the most part. Or, furthermore, that a man is pale is an accident (since he is not such either always or usually), but that he is an animal is necessary. As our discussion shows the cause of the accidental is itself accidental,

since it is marked by fortuity rather than by necessity. For this reason there can be no science of it, since science treats only that which exists always or for the most part. However, it is also the case that the accidental must exist since not everything which is is so of necessity or always, but, rather, only for the most part. Of this Reale observes:

l'accidente è, pertanto, necessario, data la struttura "contingente" del mondo sensibile, dato, cioè, il carattere del poter essere altrimenti dal come è di quest' ultimo.<sup>13</sup>

Aristotle ultimately locates the cause of the accidental in matter, whose nature is one of potentiality and indeterminateness and, consequently, capable of admitting variation from the usual.

Since metaphysics studies causes and principles, and the causes of the accidental are indeterminate, the accidental does not qualify as a subject of metaphysics.

Regarding "being as truth" (and "not-being as falsity") this, also, is dismissed by Aristotle from the realm of metaphysics because this mode of being is merely an affection of thought, and is nothing in itself. That is to say "being" in the sense of being true consists in the mental operation of affirming of a subject and a predicate that they belong together, when in fact they do, and of denying their combination, when they don't. "Being" in the sense of being false is just

---

<sup>13</sup> Giovanni Reale, Il Concetto di Filosofia Prima e l'Unità della Metafisica di Aristotele. p. 159.

the opposite of this. Because the "being" referred to here has only a mental life "that which is accidentally and that which is in the sense of being true must be dismissed. For the cause of the former is indeterminate, and that of the latter is some affection of the thought, and both are related to the remaining genus of being and do not indicate the existence of any separate class of being." (VI 4, 1027b33-a2)

"Being", again, can have the further reference to a thing's state as being either one of potentiality or actuality. Experience being the teacher, we come to realize that the being of a thing is not limited solely to its state of actuality, but will also require the concept of potentiality to explain it. Potentiality, according to Aristotle, is that mode of being which is not actual but which is capable of assuming a state of actuality. For example, we say of something that "it is seeing" both if it sees only potentially (that is, has the capacity of seeing but is not seeing at the moment because, let us suppose, it has its eyes shut) and if it sees actually; or, we say of a person that it "knows" both if it is capable of utilizing the knowledge it has (as, for example, a man who knows how to build, but is not now building), and if it is actually so doing. Likewise, we say of a statue which has already been executed that it exists actually, while it has only a potential existence in the material which will be used by the sculptor. And when grain is not yet ripe, but is a mere blade, we say that it is potentially grain, while when it has achieved full growth we say



that it is actually grain. It is evident that the importance of this theory of being for Aristotle lies in its ability to explain change as something which is not without rhyme or reason. If one denies the existence of potentiality, as was done for example by the Megaric school, "being" will end up being something static and immobile with no principle of movement and change.

The question arises: does "being" in the sense of potentiality and actuality qualify as the being to be studied by ontology? Our opinion is that it does not on the grounds that this being has no ontological independence of itself, but must be located in substance and the latter's nature. Potentiality and actuality are, ultimately, the correlative momenta of the individual categories. In this we agree with Reale who explicates the matter as follows:

... l'atto e la potenza si estendono a tutte quante le categorie e assumono altrettanti significati diversi, quante sono le categorie. Questo significa che c'è una forma di essere in atto e di essere in potenza secondo la sostanza, una diversa forma di essere in atto ed essere in potenza secondo la qualità, un'altra forma ancora diversa di atto e di potenza secondo la quantità, e così di seguito.<sup>14</sup>

"Being" as potentiality and actuality is, thus, also shown not to be the proper subject of ontology.

This brings us to the last, and most important, form of

---

<sup>14</sup> Giovanni Reale, Storia Della Filosofia Antica, II. Platone e Aristotele. Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1976, p. 279.

being, viz., being in the sense of substance and the non-substantial categories. The issue here, it will be remembered, is whether the non-substantial categories ought to be included in being qua being, or whether the latter is to be identified with substance alone. We saw in our previous discussion the privileged ontological status enjoyed by substance. Substance is the unifying principle of the non-substantial categories (IV 1, 1003a33; 1003b14), and, as such, "that which is primary, and on which the other things depend, and in virtue of which they get their names." (IV 2, 1003b17-18) Substance has, as well, the unique distinction of self-existence. According to the well-known passage of ch. 1 of Bk. VII it fulfills all the senses in which a thing is said to be first: "(1) in definition, (2) in order of knowledge, (3) in time." (VII 1, 1028a 32-33) The non-substantial categories, on the other hand, have only a proximate and derivative existence by reference to substance. Substance imbues the other categories with being: "[it is] that which is primarily and to which all the other categories of being are referred... For it is in virtue of the concept of substance that the others are also said to be--quantity and quality and the like; for all will be found to involve the concept of substance..." (IX 1, 1045b28-32) The non-substantial categories do not admit of self-existence; they cannot stand alone. The brownness of the table, for example, has no being independent of the table. Its being is only a moment of the existence of the table. Considered by itself it

is but an abstraction. Aristotle's text leaves little doubt on this point, as we can further see from the distinction he makes between what may be said to be "being" in an unqualified sense (substance) and what is "being" in a qualified sense only (the non-substantial categories):

There are several senses in which a thing may be said to 'be' ... for in one sense the 'being' meant is 'what a thing is' and a 'this', and in another sense it means a quality or quantity or one of the other things that are predicated as these are. While 'being' has all these senses, obviously that which 'is' primarily is the 'what', which indicates the substance of the thing. For when we say of what quality a thing is, we say that it is good or bad, not that it is three cubits long or that it is a man; but when we say what it is, we do not say 'white' or 'hot' or 'three cubits long', but 'a man' or 'a god'. And all other things are said to be because they are, some of them, quantities of that which is in this primary sense, others qualities of it, others affections of it, and others some other determination of it... Clearly then it is in virtue of this category that each of the others also is. Therefore that which is primarily, i.e. not in a qualified sense but without qualification, must be substance. (VII 1, 1028a10-30)

So, then, substance alone of the categories expresses what a thing is, simply and without qualification, whereas the non-substantial categories indicate what sort of thing it is. Substance is what exists of itself; it is neither in anything nor is it said of anything. The non-substantial categories, however, do not enjoy this kind of ultimate existence, but are designated beings only because of some connection they have with substance: "... each thing that is is said to 'be'

because it is a modification of being qua being or a permanent or a transient state or a movement of it, or something else of the sort." (XI 3, 1061a7-10)

Because the being of the non-substantial categories is parasitic in this way some commentators have called it "accidental"--i.e., for example, it is but an accident that the table is brown and rectangular, for it could just as easily have been of another colour and another shape. This, however, can lead one to confuse the "accidental" being of the non-substantial categories with Aristotle's "accidental being", which, we saw, the philosopher denied outright is to be studied by philosophy. The non-substantial categories are not, however, accidents (in the Aristotelian sense of "that which is neither always nor for the most part"), but are necessary insofar as a substance without the other categories is inconceivable. Substance necessarily implies the other categorial ways of being of qualities, quantities, relations, etc., for, the concept of a propertyless substance is a chimera and unaristotelian. So that, while it is an accident that a particular individual (Socrates) is pale, it is no accident that he has quality; or, that he is six feet tall is also an accident but that he has quantity is not accidental. Is not the obvious conclusion of all this, then, that the non-substantial categories will also be included in "being qua being" along with substance? This, for example, is the reading proposed by Gewirth (contra Owens):

... it is not true to say that the being of accidents 'is' the being of their substances or entities; for although for accidents to be is for them to be in substances, nevertheless the being or essence of accidents is distinct from that of substances.<sup>15</sup>

This, however, is simply mistaken, for the being of the non-substantial categories is not in fact other than that of their substance, for (to use the distinction used by Aquinas in reference to being and unity, and already quoted above) the being of the non-substantial categories and the being of their substance differ conceptually, but they are the same numerically. When we consider any of the non-substantial categories apart from substance we do so only by an abstraction. Substance embraces all the categories and in this way confers upon them too the title of "being". This all points to Owens' position that "Entity so considered is synonymous with Being qua Being".<sup>16</sup> When ontology studies being qua being it studies substance. This is not to say, however, that it does not also study the non-substantial categories, since these are ontologically included in substance. When we study substance we study the non-substantial categories because they are the ways of being of substance, and necessarily so.

We turn now to what is probably the most topical issue surrounding the Metaphysics, viz., whether or not the work

---

<sup>15</sup> Alan Gewirth, op. cit., p. 583.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Owens, op. cit., p. 275.

contains a general metaphysics which is distinct from theology. In 1923 the philosophic world saw the publication of a study of Aristotle's thought which has since become a classic. Werner Jaeger then presented the thesis that what we have in the Metaphysics are two quite distinct accounts of the nature of metaphysics which must be understood as corresponding to two separate stages in the development of the philosopher's thought. Commenting on the controversial passage which ends ch. 1 of Bk. VI, where Aristotle asks the question of whether first philosophy is universal, Jaeger formulates the problem as follows:

This gloss does not remove the contradiction. On the contrary, it only makes it more obvious. In attempting here to combine the two definitions he understands by a universal science a science of the "first" object, which is a principle in a more comprehensive sense than are the other two kinds of being; but in Γ I and the beginning of E universal meant that which does not refer to any particular part of being at all, and Aristotle could not and does not assert that the immaterial movers of the stars are not "particular beings" nor "one sort of being"...

These two accounts of the nature of metaphysics certainly did not arise out of one and the same act of reflection. Two fundamentally different trains of thought are here interwoven. It is obvious at once that the theological and Platonic one is the older of the two, ... When metaphysics is defined as the study of being as being, on the other hand, reality is regarded as one single unified series of levels, and this, therefore is the more Aristotelian account of the two, that is to say, the one that corresponds to the last and most characteristic stage of this thought.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup>Werner Jaeger, op. cit., pp. 218-219.

Other commentators have tried to meet this bifurcation of thought by claiming that the two definitions of metaphysics are ultimately reducible to one, viz., the theological, so that the study of being qua being is to be identified with the study of God, and thus the contradiction is removed. The noteworthy spokesmen of this interpretation are Joseph Owens and Philip Merlan. A still different solution claims that the two definitions of metaphysics are not, in fact, contradictory, nor are they to be reconciled by assimilating the general study of being to theology. They are distinct, but not inimical to one another, since the general study of being leads to the study of the primary cause, or the supersensible substance, God. Representatives of this interpretation are Avicenna and St. Thomas in the Middle Ages, and more recently, Augustin Mansion, Giovanni Reale, and Vianney Décarie. The chronological type answer which Jaeger's thesis encouraged has been effectively discredited by Reale in his comprehensive study of the Metaphysics, Il Concetto di Filosofia Prima e l'Unità della Metafisica di Aristotele, to which we refer the reader who would like to acquaint himself with the problem in some detail.

Owens argues for his position in the following manner. The subject proper of metaphysics is substance, since this is the primary kind of being, while all other beings are such only in a derivative sense by reference to substance. Aristotle's point that "being" has multifarious meanings, but always by a

reference to a single nature and, therefore, not equivocally (IV 2, 1003a34) Owens refers to as a "πρὸς ἓν equivocal" or "equivocal by reference"<sup>18</sup>:

'Being' is therefore a πρὸς ἓν equivocal ... the true nature concerned in this type of equivocal is located as such only in the primary instance ... In every case the nature of the primary instance is designated by the term, according to the different relations that other things bear to it.<sup>19</sup>

The single nature designated is substance, while everything else has a claim to the title "being" either mediately or immediately by reference to substance. The innovative aspect of Owens' thesis is to be found in the way he deals with Aristotle's dual claim that on the one hand metaphysics deals with substance as such, while on the other he seems to want to assign to it the study of a particular type of substance, viz., separate and immobile substance. Here he says that just in the same way that "being" is a πρὸς ἓν equivocal and substance the primary instance of being and the single nature referred to by other beings, in a like manner substance itself is a πρὸς ἓν equivocal, having a relation of dependence with a primary kind of substance. "As Entity extends to all Beings, so the primary Entity extends to all Entities."<sup>20</sup> The causes which have been sought by Aristotle have progressively

---

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Owens, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Owens, op. cit., p. 265.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 282.



changed from causes of being qua being, to those of substance, to finally those of the divine. All causes, according to ch. 1 of Bk. VI of Aristotle's text, must be eternal. The science which is par excellence the science of the eternal and the permanent is theology since it deals with things which both exist separately and are immovable. (VI 1, 1026a15) The universal and permanent causes of sensible substances then become located in separate Entity since this is the primary instance of permanence. The science of separate Entity will also be universal since in studying it "one studies the Being found in everything else."<sup>21</sup>

Because it is the science of Being qua Being, Wisdom is a science of  $\pi\rho\acute{o}\varsigma \epsilon\nu$  equivocals. It must therefore study one definite nature. This definite nature is found as such in the primary instance only. That primary instance of Being is Entity. But there are different instance or "parts"—genera—of Entity. The primary science of Entity, i.e., the primary Wisdom or the Primary Philosophy, will accordingly be the science of the primary Entity. If there are separate Entities, these will constitute the primary type. The Primary philosophy will be the science of these primary Entities. The nature of the primary Entity will be the Being expressed in every other instance of Being. In studying the separate Entities, therefore, the Primary Philosophy will be studying all Beings insofar as they are Being. It will demonstrate Being and Entity in mobile things. It will be studying the causes of the divine in things visible to men, and will accordingly be a science of the divine. It will be theology.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

While discussing the so-called "central books" of the Metaphysics (VII, VIII, IX), where we have a lengthy and detailed discussion by the philosopher on sensible substance, Owens remarks that this is but preparatory, insofar as it is endeavouring to effect a transition in the mind of the reader from the sensible plane to the supersensible.<sup>23</sup>

The immediate dissatisfaction one feels in reading this interpretation arises over the predominantly Platonic mould into which Aristotle is being cast. Regarding the relation existing between separate Entity and the sensible entities the most that the text allows us to say is that the one acts as the final cause of the other: God moves the sensible entities as final cause, as being the object of desire. (XII 7, 1072b3-4) God, is further, a first principle upon which depend the heavens and the world of nature. (XII 7, 1072b13-14) Although Owens is well aware of this he is not content to leave the matter there, and, taking leave of the text, goes on to identify the being of the sensible plane with that of the supersensible:

The "Being" expressed in regard to anything else seems the Being of the separate Entities. The science of the separate Entities, therefore, treats universally of all Beings insofar as they are Beings. Just as the "health" studied in all the instances of "healthy" is the health in the bodily organism, so the

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 415.

Being studied in anything whatsoever is the Being of the separate and divine Entities.<sup>24</sup>

To be fair to Owens we should mention his own admission that the reference which the sensible entities will have to the separate Entity will not be the kind of relation existing between the non-substantial categories and substance;<sup>25</sup> and yet he does not seem to be able to escape attributing to the relation an obviously Platonic explanation. Nor does he feel any misgivings at so doing. In the concluding chapter to his book he accounts for the relation in terms of final cause.<sup>26</sup> Sensible things strive to imitate and long for the eternal and the divine. This, however, they cannot attain individually, since they are given to corruption, but do so through the perpetuity of their species. "It is the species that is divine and eternal."<sup>27</sup> This further suggests that it is the

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 460f.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 461. Owens gives a passage from De Anima as a basis for his argument, and this we quote for the benefit of the reader:

... the most natural act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far as its nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and divine. That is the goal towards which all things strive, that for the sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible.

... Since then no living thing is able to partake in what is eternal and divine by uninterrupted continuance (for nothing perishable

formal cause which imparts to substance its eternity and divinity, so that "Entity is derived to sensible things because their form is able to share in a greater or lesser degree in the permanence of the divine."<sup>28</sup> The phrase "Entity is derived to sensible things" again betrays the Platonism which pervades his entire interpretation. The being of the sensible realm cannot be relegated to that of the supersensible as Owens seems to want to do, since the latter is the cause and principle of the former (however, in no Platonic sense: "God is the efficient cause by being the final cause, but in no other way"<sup>29</sup>). Furthermore, Owens' interpretation is at variance with Bk. IV of Aristotle's text which is sufficiently unambiguous in its claim that metaphysics is a general study of being (and this he stresses by contrasting this science with the "special sciences" which treat only a particular part of being). Theology is a particular science which considers first substance, but Aristotle wishes to assign to it also the title of universality

---

can for ever remain one and the same), it tries to achieve that end in the only way possible to it, and success is possible in varying degrees; so it remains not indeed as the self-same individual but continues as something like itself--not numerically but specifically one. (De An., II 4, 415a26-b7)

This passage is quoted on p. 461 of Owens' book.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Sir David Ross, Aristotle. London: Methuen & Co., 1971, p. 181.

"because it is first. And it will belong to this to consider being qua being--both what it is and the attributes which belong to it qua being." (VI 1, 1026a31-32) However, the two sciences are sufficiently sui generis to be kept distinct.

Philip Merlan proposed a view--remarkable for its affinity to that of Owens'--in his book From Platonism to Neoplatonism (which was published in the wake of Owens' book, but the reading of which he expressly put off till his own book had reached the press). Merlan meets the difficulty of the controversy surrounding the reading of Met. IV and VI, 1, by claiming that Aristotle was writing in the Academic tradition and that therefore he was quite unaware that the metaphysics he was drawing up was a "general metaphysics as different from special metaphysics."<sup>30</sup> Metaphysics is, for Aristotle, theology and the latter's universal scope is implied in the meaning of  $\chi\alpha\theta\acute{o}\lambda\omicron\upsilon$  as used in IV and VI 1:

It is not the abstract (general, universal);  
it is what is common to all cases as concrete.  
If all men have hair, it is a  $\chi\alpha\theta\acute{o}\lambda\omicron\upsilon$  quality.  
Because being as an element is present everywhere, it is  $\chi\alpha\theta\acute{o}\lambda\omicron\upsilon$ . It is one of the two basic constituents of the uppermost sphere of being (with non-being as the other). This uppermost sphere of being somehow "causes" all the other spheres and its elements are the elements of everything. Therefore, the true philosopher, i.e., the one dealing with first philosophy--first philosophy being the one that deals with the first (uppermost) sphere of being--deals with the elements of this

---

<sup>30</sup> Philip Merlan, From Platonism to Neoplatonism. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960, p. 169.

uppermost sphere and thus with being. By implication he deals with being as it is present everywhere. The thesis, "first philosophy deals with the uppermost sphere of being and is general knowledge, because the elements of this uppermost sphere, being (and non-being), are common to all [this is the meaning of  $\chi\alpha\theta\acute{o}\lambda\omicron\upsilon$ ] spheres of being and therefore to all things", is perfectly consistent.<sup>31</sup>

Because of its kinship to Owens' interpretation the same criticism which we brought against the latter also applies here. However, a few things must be said regarding what is idiosyncratic to Merlan's view. He goes quite wrong, in our opinion, in his discussion of the meaning of  $\chi\alpha\theta\acute{o}\lambda\omicron\upsilon$ . He defines it, first of all, as "what is common to all cases as concrete" and provides the example of hair to illustrate his meaning: as all men have hair it is a  $\chi\alpha\theta\acute{o}\lambda\omicron\upsilon$  quality. This point is well taken. However, it is when he speaks of being as an element, "something in-dwelling in all that is"<sup>32</sup> that we feel he must be taken to task. By saying that being is an element he is, in fact, treating it as a property, which Aristotle does not allow. He wants to say that as "all men have hair", where hair is a property belonging to men, "all substances have being", where being is a property belonging to substance. The illegitimacy of such a view is obvious. If being is to be identified with substance, as we have tried to

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

show above, it cannot be a property, for, as Aristotle points out, things which qualify as substance do so because "they are not predicated of a subject but everything else is predicated of them." (V 8, 1017b13-14; VII 13, 1038b15). Furthermore, Merlan locates being qua being in the primary substance:

... being-as-such is only a different name for what Aristotle otherwise calls the divine. To use a somewhat different terminology: Aristotle's being-qua-being is something transcendent--something like Plato's ideas. It is not, like Aristotle's forms, something immanent.<sup>33</sup>

The sensible realm is, thus, deprived of its ontological integrity and rendered accessory to the supersensible realm which, we are told, "somehow 'causes' all the other spheres and its elements are the elements of everything." This, however, will not do. We have already seen that, for Aristotle, metaphysics is a study of substance, since this is the fundamental principle of being, and that substance has its own ontological integrity which merits the philosopher's consideration. Thus we find Aristotle devoting three integral books (VII, VIII, IX) to its discussion without any intimation that this being is somehow ontologically wanting or that to have a full knowledge of it we must look elsewhere than itself. When we study substance we do not posit an ideal world (as in Plato) in order to explain its intelligibility, but look rather at substance

---

<sup>33</sup> Philip Merlan, "On the Terms 'Metaphysics' And 'Being-Qua-Being'," The Monist, L II (1968), p. 190.

itself. What Aristotle does say is the following:

Regarding these matters, then, we must inquire which of the common statements are right and which are not, and what substances there are, and whether there are or are not any besides sensible substances, and how sensible substances exist, and whether there is a substance capable of separate existence (and if so why and how) or no such substance, apart from sensible substance, and we must first sketch the nature of substance. (VII 2, 1028b28-33)

When Aristotle does establish that there is a substance capable of separate existence he identifies this as the cause and principle of substance which he was seeking. But as Décarie properly points out: "ces causes ou principes seront distincts de leurs effets, les êtres, comme tout effet l'est de sa cause."<sup>34</sup>

It should be clear now that our own sympathies lie with the interpretation which is able to explain how metaphysics and theology are sciences of being qua being, while keeping them distinct sciences. A central passage in the text which must be brought in as a crucial piece of evidence favouring our interpretation comes in ch. 3 of Bk. IV, where Aristotle states the philosopher's task to be a double one: the study of universal being and the study of primary substance. (IV 3, 1005b) Augustin Mansion has taken a useful line of argument in this regard by pointing out that Aristotle keeps this distinction clear by using the appellation "primary philosophy",

---

<sup>34</sup>Vianney Décarie, op. cit., p. 123.



when he has in mind the science of the divine substance, and "the science of being as such," (what we today refer to as "metaphysics"), when the reference is to the science of being in all its vastness, without any restriction. Commenting on the closing section of ch. 1 of Bk. VI (where the question is posed as to whether primary philosophy is universal) Mansion says:

... le simple fait qu'Aristote soulève la question et croit devoir prouver, fut-ce brièvement, le bien-fondé de sa réponse, montre qu'il y a au moins une nuance qui sépare sa conception de la philosophie première et celle de la science de l'être comme tel, bien qu'elles soient inséparables et coïncident dans une certaine mesure. Retenons donc que la philosophie première, considérée spécifiquement et formellement, est celle qui a pour objet propre l'immatériel ou Dieu. Il est clair que la discipline philosophique qui a comme objet propre l'être en tant que tel et donc pris dans toute son extension, ne saurait se confondre entièrement avec la philosophie première.<sup>35</sup>

Aristotle's purpose is methodical. As we have already seen, in Bk. IV he announces a philosophical excursion which is to survey being in its entirety with the purpose in mind of arriving at its causes. Given that this is the philosopher's task we can say along with one of the commentators: "The first causes are, so to speak, what the philosopher will look for, whereas Being as Being is what he will look at."<sup>36</sup> We have

<sup>35</sup> Augustin Mansion, "Philosophie première, philosophie seconde et métaphysique chez Aristote", Revue Philosophique de Louvain, LVI (1958), pp. 179-180.

<sup>36</sup> D.J. Allan, The Philosophy of Aristotle. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 72.

further seen that what qualifies par excellence as being qua being is substance. As it turns out there are gradations of substances, with the uppermost being the most excellent because of its permanence and causal power. While sensible substance is the one most easily known to us, and possesses its own *raison d'être* in terms of its intelligibility, its corruptibility points to an eternal movement which demands an eternal cause, which cannot be part of the sensible reality. Thus, the study of sensible substance raises us to the supersensible plane, the knowledge of which Aristotle often calls "primary philosophy". In ch. 2 of Bk. I Aristotle writes: "For the science which it would be most meet for God to have is a divine science and so is any science that deals with divine objects." (I 2, 983a6-7)

Bk. VI opens by re-introducing a theme we have already met in Bk. IV: "We are seeking the principles and the causes of the things that are and obviously of them qua being." (VI 1, 1025b3-4) Again we are reminded of the universal scope of metaphysics, which is (again) contrasted with the special sciences which make the causes and principles of some particular genus of being the object of their investigations. Metaphysics is the study of the causes and principles of all being, or of the first causes of being, and of them qua being.

Of the theoretical sciences primary philosophy ranks first in order of importance and dignity, over physics and mathematics. The subject-matter of physics, we are told, is

that class of being which has within itself the principle of movement and rest, as well as form, though form only as inseparable from matter. As Aristotle goes on to say in Bk. VII:

"Trying to determine the nature of perceptible substance ... is the work of physics, i.e. of second philosophy; for the physicist must come to know not only about the matter, but also about the substance expressed in the formula, and even more than about the other." (VII 11, 1037a13-17) The "substance expressed in the formula"--that is, the "form" considered by the physicist--is the form which exists together with matter.

Mathematics, also a theoretical science, studies "things which are immovable but [which] do not exist separately, but as embodied in matter." (VI 1, 1026a13-15) However, says Aristotle, if there is a substance which is eternal, immovable and has separate existence from matter, the study of this will belong neither to physics nor to mathematics, but to a science prior to both, and it will be the highest science, viz., theology or primary philosophy. The philosopher goes on to characterize this separable Being as an eternal cause which operates on what is visible to us of the divine, viz., the celestial spheres.

This is consistent with passages elsewhere in the text where God figures as cause or principle: "God is thought to be among the causes of all things and to be a first principle."

(I 2, 983a8-9) ... "On such a principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature." (XII 7, 1072b13-14) To recapitulate: the chapter opens by stating that the object of

the science in question is being qua being, or being in its entirety, and that of this being we must determine the causes and principles. We then go on to learn that the aforementioned object is also to be found as the object of theology or primary philosophy, which studies immovable and separable Being (i.e., God), which is an eternal cause of the whole of reality.

Then comes the passage which has served as so much grist for the commentators' mill: is primary philosophy (that is, the science which studies the divine) a particular science (given its special subject-matter) or is it universal (as it must be if it will fall within its domain to also study being qua being)? A cogent answer to this aporia and one which we think does justice to Aristotle's intention is given by Professor Constantine Georgiadis, who is of the opinion that the solution is to be sought in IV 3, 1005a33-b1:

Since there is one kind of thinker who is above even the natural philosopher (for nature is only one particular genus of being), the discussion of these truths also will belong to him whose inquiry is universal and deals with primary substance.

Professor Georgiadis argues for his position as follows:

Aristotle argues that the same theorist examines the universal (being qua being) and the first substance (God). The universal science of being qua being and the particular science of the first substance (i.e. theology) are linked together in the same person who occupies himself with both sciences. I believe that lines 1026a31-32 ... should be understood against the background of IV, 3, 1005a33-b1. Though they give the impression of an implausible merger

between theology and the science of being qua being, what they mean is, as in IV, 3, that only the scientist who is able to contemplate the nature of the most dignified being, God, may also contemplate being in its totality qua being. Thus the unifying factor between philosophy and the science of being qua being is the philosopher.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Constantine Georgiadis, "Critical Notice" on Walter Lezl, Logic and Metaphysics in Aristotle, in Dialogue, XI, 1, 1972, p. 137.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### Substance

Given that our knowledge of being is to be sought primarily in substance we turn now to an examination of this complex Aristotelian concept.

We have already discussed how being may assume various meanings and yet remain unambiguous because of its necessary reference to a single ultimate nature. Substance, we saw, is the unifying principle of the manifold momenta of a thing, and is being most strictly. It is, also, what confers identity and individuality on a thing and, thus, renders it intelligible to us. In Aristotle's words it is "what a thing is" and a "this" (VII 1, 1028a11-12) as are, for example, a man or a god. Substance is the primary reality presupposed by all modes of being.

And so one might even raise the question whether the words "to walk", "to be healthy", "to sit" imply that each of these things is existent, and similarly in any other case of this sort; for none of them is either self-subsistent or capable of being separated from substance, but rather, if at all, it is that which walks or sits or is healthy that is an existent thing. Now these are seen to be more real because there is something definite which underlies them (i.e. the substance or individual), which is implied in such a predicate; for we never use the word 'good' or 'sitting' without implying this. (VII 1, 1028a20-29)

Some further ways of characterizing substance given in this passage are: it is self-subsistent, separate, something definite, and a substratum. Aristotle goes on to add that substance is first in all the senses in which a thing may be said to be first: (1) in definition, (2) in order of knowledge, (3) in time. In definition

it is first because one cannot give a definition of anything without also including the definition of that thing's substance; in order of knowledge it is first because to know something we must know what it is (e.g., a man, a table) rather than what predicates belong to it; and in time it is first because of the categories it alone is self-subsistent. It is following these observations that Aristotle concludes that the eternal perplexing question of "what is being" becomes the more definite one of "what is substance", which he then goes on to examine in painstaking detail.

Having thus reduced the general ontological problem of being to that of substance Aristotle goes on to say that what will have to be resolved in its turn is the further problem of what substances exist: whether there are or are not any substances besides sensible substances and whether there is a substance capable of separate existence. However before this can be done we must first examine the problem of what is substance in general. The procedure is strictly methodological: we shall be better able to answer the question as to whether other substances in addition to the sensible ones exist when we have first outlined what the nature of substance is. If, for example, it should turn out that substance is matter or the compound of matter and form this would illegitimate any excursus regarding non-sensible substances. If, on the other hand, we find that substance is not matter then the question of a non-sensible substance remains.

Where shall we look in order to learn of the nature of substance? Among sensible substances which are admitted by everyone

to be substances:

... we must look first among these. For it is an advantage to advance to that which is more knowable. For learning proceeds for all in this way--through that which is less knowable by nature to that which is more knowable. (VII 3, 1029a34-1029b5)

For the purpose of his discussion Aristotle limits the senses of substance to four:

The word 'substance' is applied, if not in more senses, still at least to four main objects; for both the essence and the universal and the genus are thought to be the substance of each thing, and fourthly the substratum. (VII 3, 1028b33-36)

The substratum is "that of which everything else is predicated, while it is itself not predicated of anything else" (VII 3, 1028b36-37) and is, further, subdivided into matter, form, and the compound of these. Given the criterion of substance as the ultimate subject of predication it would appear that matter best qualifies as substance, for, when a thing's attributes are taken away matter will still remain. Furthermore matter is not predicated of anything, and while the other categories are predicated of substance, substance is predicated of matter. However, we mentioned in our opening remarks that substance is something definite and matter, Aristotle tells us, lacks all determination:

By matter I mean that which in itself is neither a particular thing nor of a certain quantity nor assigned to any other of the categories by which being is determined. (VII 3, 1029a19-21)

Furthermore, matter also fails to meet the further criterion required of substance of "separability" and "thisness" (VII 3, 1029a27), all of which suggests that form and the compound of form and matter



are, rather, substance. This last criterion is decisive in ruling out matter's candidacy for substance because, while being a subject is a necessary condition for being a substance, it is not a sufficient condition; to subject must be added the further conditions of thisness and separability. As Aristotle says in Bk. IX there are two kinds of substratum, one which is a "this", one which isn't:

A casket is not 'earthen' nor 'earth', but 'wooden'; for this is potentially a casket and this is the matter of a casket, wood in general of a casket in general, and this particular wood of this particular casket. And if there is a first thing, which is no longer, in reference to something else, called 'thaten' this is prime matter; e.g. if earth is 'airy' and air is not 'fire' but 'fiery', fire is prime matter, which is not a this. For the subject or substratum is differentiated by being a 'this' or not being one; i.e. the substratum of modifications is, e.g., a man, i.e. a body and a soul, while the modification is 'musical' or 'pale' ... Wherever this is so, then, the ultimate subject is a substance; but when this is not so but the predicate is a form and a 'this', the ultimate subject is matter and material substance. And it is only right that 'thaten' should be used with reference both to the matter and to the accidents; for both are indeterminates.  
(IX 7, 1049a22-1049b1)

There are in this quotation two notions of matter present. On the one hand matter is seen as proximate matter, that is, as that which is the potentiality of some form: a casket; wood is made of earth and earth is potentially wood; etc. On the other hand matter is prime matter, that is, something which does not have something else predicated of it in the derivative way discussed in the quotation. The notion of prime matter in Aristotle is controversial. Some commentators such as Reale<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Giovanni Reale, Aristotele, La Metafisica, traduzione, introduzione e commento. Napoli: Luigi Loffredo, 1968, Vol. II, pp. 81-82.

and Owens<sup>2</sup> defend the interpretation of prime matter as something lacking all determination, and, therefore, unknowable. Ross, however, rejects the suggestion of an entirely formless matter and talks about a "matter with the minimum of form."<sup>3</sup> However, the suggestion in the above quotation seems to be that prime matter is something undetermined ("which is not a this") (IX 7, 1049a27) and elsewhere Aristotle speaks of matter as something unknowable of itself (VII 3, 1029a19-21; VII 10, 1036a8-9), which would militate against Ross' view. Our interest here, however, is with matter as substratum which is not a this. As Aristotle says also elsewhere in the text, a substratum underlies in two senses: "either being a 'this'--which is the way in which an animal underlies its attributes--or as the matter underlies the complete reality." (VII 13, 1038b5-7) A substratum is a "this", i.e. something definite, when it acts as the subject of affections. Affections, for example, such as pale, musical, walking are predicates fitting only for a substance such as man, where man is the subject which underlies the affections. Substratum in the second sense, i.e., as something which acts as the subject of a form, viz., the matter, is undetermined and therefore, not a this. Why is substratum in this last sense not a this? Joseph Owens provides a clear explanation as follows:

The bronze as potency to the statue is undetermined and unknowable as a statue. There is nothing in the

---

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Owens, Op. cit., pp. 337-339.

<sup>3</sup>David Ross, Aristotle's Metaphysics. A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958, Vol. II, p. 256.

nature of bronze as such to account for the figure of a statue. It has nothing in itself to provide the determination and the knowability of the artistic work. It has its own form, that of bronze; as such it is determined, knowable. But considered precisely as potency to the statue, it is undetermined and unknowable. Of itself, it has nothing to reveal the figure of a statue.<sup>4</sup>

The material substrate doesn't determine what a thing is, but, rather, what a thing is made of, and it becomes something determinate through the agency of some form. What is a "this" is the form which is predicated of the matter but not the matter itself. It also becomes evident that matter is not capable of separate existence since its determinability necessarily demands the accompaniment of some form; otherwise, of itself it remains something potential.

Having thus ruled out matter, and since the composite is posterior to form and its nature familiar, Aristotle then decides to turn his attention to form, which of the three is the most baffling. He abandons, however, form as the sensible shape of a thing and takes up form as the "essence" of a thing--i.e., the thing's indigenous nature. The form has variously been called "the principle of knowability of a sensible thing",<sup>5</sup> "the constitutive nature" of a sensible thing,<sup>6</sup> and "a principle of structure".<sup>7</sup> The essence of a thing, then, is what something may be said to be in virtue of itself,

---

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Owens, Op. cit., p. 338.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Owens, Op. cit., p. 354.

<sup>6</sup>Constantine Georgiadis, "Two Conceptions of Substance in Aristotle", New Scholasticism, vol. 47 (1973), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup>D.J. Allan, Op. cit., p. 84.

regardless of its accidental attributes, for, while these latter may change, the essence does not. This point Aristotle makes in the Categories when he writes of substance:

The most distinctive mark of substance appears to be that, while remaining numerically one and the same, it is capable of admitting contrary qualities.<sup>8</sup>

Essence is what constitutes a thing's lifelong identity: "For being you is not being musical, since you are not by your very nature musical. What, then, you are by your very nature is your essence."

(VII 4, 1029b14-15) In other words, while a thing's accidental attributes may change its essence persists through the change, because the thing is identical with its essence. St. Thomas puts the matter this way:

By the essence of a thing we mean the proper answer which can be given to the question what is it. And when we ask what a thing is we cannot give a proper answer by mentioning attributes which belong to it accidentally; for when someone asks what man is, one cannot answer that he is white or sitting or musical. Hence none of those attributes which are predicated of a thing accidentally belong to its essence; for being you is not being musical.<sup>9</sup>

Essence is, further, the object of definition; the definition being the linguistic formula of the essence. Given that essence is what a thing is in virtue of itself (propter se) only substances can properly be said to have essences: "Essence will belong ... primarily and in the simple sense to substance, and in a secondary way to the

---

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, Categoriae. Trans. by E.M. Edghill. Included in The Basic Works of Aristotle. Edited by Richard McKeon. 4a10-12.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle, Vol. II, p. 506.

other categories also." (VII 4, 1030a28-30) In a like manner definition (as the linguistic formula of essence) will be most properly of substance and, in a weak sense, of the other categories as well. That is, an intelligible account may be given of those things which are not substances, only such an account will not be a definition in the strict sense.

From saying of essence that it is the immanent principle of knowability of a thing Aristotle goes on to say, what follows naturally from this, that a thing is to be identified with (is the same as) its essence.

Self-subsistent things which have no other entities prior to them (such as Plato's Ideas, for example) must necessarily possess their own *raison d'etre*: otherwise, if a thing is different from its essence the implication would be that the thing is preceded by other essences and substances (on the supposition that essences are substances) which would extrinsically constitute the thing's essence, and the thing will not be ontologically primary as was assumed.

Maintaining the example of self-subsistent entities such as the Ideas, Aristotle provides this second argument:

If the posterior substances and the prior are severed from each other (a) there will be no knowledge of the former, and (b) the latter will have no being. (By 'severed' I mean, if the good-itself has not the essence of good, and the latter has not the property of being good). For (a) there is knowledge of each thing only when we know its essence. And (b) the case is the same for other things as for the good; so that if the essence of good is not good neither is the essence of reality real, nor the essence of unity one. And all essences alike exist or none of them does; so that if the essence of reality is not real, neither is any of the others. Again, that to

which the essence of good does not belong is not good. (VII 6, 1031b3-13)

Aristotle's reasoning here is not altogether straightforward.

Part (a) of the argument is manageable: we know something insofar as that something is intelligible to us through its essence; if, however, the thing is separate from its essence it will have no intelligible content by which it can be known. Part (b) does not prove as wieldy. Aristotle's purpose is to show that each primary and self-subsistent thing is one and the same as its essence, and he goes about this as follows. The premises of the argument are two:

- (1) All essences alike exist or none of them does.  
(11. 10-11)
- (2) If the essence of 1. \_\_\_\_\_ does not belong to 2. \_\_\_\_\_ the 2. \_\_\_\_\_ is not 3. \_\_\_\_\_. (11. 12-13)

In the second premise 1. \_\_\_\_\_ stands for any subject, 2. \_\_\_\_\_ for the definite description of 1. \_\_\_\_\_, and 3. \_\_\_\_\_ is the adjectival form of the subject. By stating this premise in terms which are linguistic rather than ontological we provide against complications which could arise if the contents of 3. \_\_\_\_\_ were to represent properties. This consideration is especially valid in the case of "being". By having 3. \_\_\_\_\_ stand for the adjectival form of the subject we avoid making "being" into a property. This singular example can be salvaged thus: if the essence of being does not belong to being then being is not existent. A more conventional example, however, is Aristotle's own: if the essence of goodness does not belong to the good then the good is not good. Even a modern example will comply with our schema: if

the essence of the King of France does not belong to the King of France then the King of France is not King-of-France-like.

What next needs to be done is to show that essences do in fact exist, and this Aristotle does by establishing that at least one essence must exist, that of reality. The philosopher doesn't use argument here, but simply assumes that the essence of reality must exist since its denial would be absurd: if the essence of reality does not belong to the real then the real is not real! Consequently he can say:

(3) The essence of reality is real.

(4) The essence of reality exists.

∴ (5) All essences exist. 1 & 4.

Having established that essences exist Aristotle now needs to show that essences belong to their appropriate self-subsistent things. Premise number two acknowledges an elementary rule of logic, viz., that in order for something to exist it must be identical with itself: that to which the essence of good does not belong is not good. From this premise we can continue the argument as follows:

(6) If the essence of x does not belong to x then the essence of x does not exist.

(7) If the essence of x exists then the essence of x belongs to x. Contrap. 6.

∴ (8) The essence of x belongs to x. 5, 7 M.P.

The argument being thus made intelligible we can then appreciate Aristotle's conclusion:

Each thing itself, then, and its essence are one and the same in no merely accidental way, as is evident from the preceding arguments and because to know each thing, at least, is just to know its essence so that even by the exhibition of instances it becomes clear

that both must be one. (VII 6, 1031b18-22)

However cryptic Aristotle's language may be his point emerges with sufficient clarity: whereas Plato had found it necessary to posit a theory of Forms as the principle of knowability of sensible things, Aristotle insists upon a principle of knowability immanent in the thing itself. Things are imbued with essences, which makes knowledge of them possible.

What Aristotle says here about essences becomes an all-important point in explaining the generation of entities. The assumption is that essences, such as Plato conceived them (i.e., as principles separate from sensible things) will not be able to explain generation; it is only if essences are immanent in things that we shall be able to account for generation. The production of new substances is made possible by the presence in the agent of a form qualitatively the same as the thing produced. When, as in natural generation, an individual is the efficient cause of another individual like itself (i.e., of the same species) the parent animal or plant will communicate a like form to its offspring:

In some cases indeed it is even obvious that the begetter is of the same kind as the begotten (not, however, the same nor one in number, but in form), i.e. in the case of natural products (for man begets man). (VII 8, 1033b29-32)

In artistic production the artificer communicates to the artifact the form which he will have conceived in his mind:

Therefore it follows that in a sense health comes from health and house from house, that with matter from that without matter; for the medical art and the building art are the form of health and of the house, and when I speak of substance without matter



I mean the essence. (VII 7, 1032b11-14)

The principles of becoming are matter and form. For Aristotle, unlike Plato, the existing individual (as efficient cause) suffices to account for generation. However, as matter, devoid of form, is something characterless and unknowable it is form which is the mediating principle between the agent and the thing produced. Both begetter and the thing begot share the same form, although they are numerically distinct in virtue of the different matter that is informed. While matter and form are the principles of generation they are not themselves generated. No one, for example, produces a sphere (the form) or the brass (the matter), rather what is produced is the composite thing, the brazen sphere:

It is obvious, then, from what has been said, that that which is spoken of as form or substance is not produced, but the concrete thing which gets its name from this is produced, and that in everything which is generated matter is present, and one part of the thing is matter and the other form. (VII 8, 1033b16-19)

The form is produced only per accidens, insofar as the composite thing which, only, can strictly be produced happens to be endowed with a particular form. Insofar as form is neither generated nor destroyed but is immutably given it is like Plato's Forms.

We have already mentioned that form, as the principle of knowability of a thing, best qualifies as the object of definition. Matter, however, will have no part in the formula of the substance because what is substance par excellence for Aristotle is the form, and matter has no part in the form. Matter figures rather, as part of the composite thing. What makes a man to be a man, for example, is not a

combination of flesh and bones, but rather a rational soul, which is the principle of structure of the flesh and bones. It soon becomes clear that definition of the form has the advantage of extending likewise to the singular thing as well as the universal. Aristotle explains the matter thus:

'A part' may be a part either of the form (i.e. of the essence), or of the compound of the form and the matter, or of the matter itself. But only the parts of the form are parts of the formula, and the formula is of the universal; for 'being a circle' is the same as the circle, and 'being a soul' the same as the soul. But when we come to the concrete thing, e.g., this circle, i.e. one of the individual circles, whether perceptible or intelligible (I mean by intelligible circles the mathematical, and by perceptible circles those of bronze and of wood)—and of these there is no definition, but they are known by the aid of intuitive thinking or of perception; and when they pass out of this complete realization it is not clear whether they exist or not; but they are always stated and recognized by means of the universal formula. But matter is unknowable in itself. (VII 10, 1035b31-1036a9)

The sensible particular cannot constitute the object of knowledge since it is but a moment in our perception and has an indefinite life otherwise. Consequently, knowledge is of the form (the thing's constitutive nature) expressed linguistically in definition, which will apply to all instances of the particular (i.e. universally).

Michael Novak has commented insightfully on this point as follows:

... substance is grasped by the peculiar kind of intellectual knowing Aristotle speaks of as always conjoined with a concrete image. It is insight into particulars; it is a grasp of the universal in the particular. It is an insight into the 'necessary' unity or relationship in the data ... it is seeing the what-IS-it within the presented data ... the what-IS-it achieved within the presented data of a sensible substance is at one and the same time a 'this' and the necessary, universal ;

formula' ... The universal has no extension beyond its particulars. We cannot understand except through a concrete example, but what is understood is a necessity, an intelligible, nonsensible content.<sup>10</sup>

This leads naturally into Aristotle's treatment of the remaining candidate for substance, viz., the universal. Given what has been said hitherto on the subject of substance the implication is fairly clear that universals cannot be substance. Some of the unique characteristics of substance, we saw, are those of being ultimate subject of predication, something separate, and a "this" (i.e. something definite); universals, however, fulfill none of these requirements. First of all:

... the substance of each thing is that which is peculiar to it, which does not belong to anything else; but the universal is common, since that is called universal which is such as to belong to more than one. Of which individual then will this be the substance? Either of all or of none; but it cannot be the substance of all. And if it is to be the substance of one, this one, this one will be the others also; for things whose substance is one and whose essence is one are themselves also one. (VII 13, 1038b9-14)

Substance is a principle of structure which confers identity upon an individual thing. A thing is identical with its essence or form. The universal, however, is a common predicate of its particular instances, and being peculiar to none of them can be the substance of none of them. Furthermore:

substance means that which is not predicable of a subject, but the universal is predicable of some subject always. (VII 13, 1038b15-16)

---

<sup>10</sup>Michael Novak, 'A Key to Aristotle's Substance', Philosophy and Phenomenological Research. XXIV (1963/64) pp. 9-10.

Although some further arguments are put forth to show why universals cannot be substance they do not add to the above arguments, which are fundamental. At the beginning of Bk. VII substance was defined as "what a thing is" and a "this", which, in the light of what has been said, emerges as "an individual subject endowed with a principle of knowability (the form)." As something which is ontologically primary and which is ultimately to be identified with form substance is a subject and singular and, therefore, not universal.

Aristotle's definitive answer to the question "what is substance?" is given in ch. 17 of Bk. VII, where the philosopher brings the discussion back to bear on substance as the cause and principle of things. When we enquire after the cause of something what is being sought is the reason why one thing belongs to another, of the sort, for example, that we find in the question "why does it thunder?" (i.e., why is sound produced in clouds?). Or, to use another example, when we ask about the cause of a house what we are asking is the reason in virtue of which bricks and stones constitute a house, i.e. why is matter this determinate reality. What will constitute a proper answer to these questions is the one which will give the substance of the thing, viz., the essence or formal cause:

Why are these materials a house? Because that which was the essence of a house is present. And why is this individual thing, or this body having this form, a man? Therefore what we seek is the cause, i.e. the form, by reason of which the matter is some definite thing; and this is the substance of the thing. (VII 17, 1041b4-9)

Form emerges, then, as what is principally ~~sub~~ substance for Aristotle. It is a thing's immanent ontological structure which acts

as a unifying principle for the thing's momenta and determines the latter to be a unity rather than a mere heap. The substance of the syllable BA, for example, isn't merely the sum of B + A but something else which together with B and A constitutes a syllable. Nor is the substance of flesh the sum of its material elements such as earth and fire, but, rather, a principle which arranges those elements into a unity which we recognize as flesh. The "something else" needed for a thing to be a unity is a principle, which is responsible for the unity:

... while some things are not substances, as many as are substances are formed in accordance with a nature of their own and by a process of nature their substance would seem to be this kind of 'nature', which is not an element but a principle. An element, on the other hand, is that into which a thing is divided and which is present in it as matter; e.g. a and b are the elements of the syllable. (VII 17, 1041b28-32)

It is abundantly clear from our foregoing discussion, then, that for Aristotle what is substance par excellence is form since it is this which constitutes the essential nature of a thing. Matter as the substratum of the form plays no part in the constitutive nature of a thing, and relative to the form is something indefinite. A thing's affections also are unessential to the thing's nature and like matter, are indefinite insofar as they are "'floating universals', not in themselves fixed down to any one substance but capable of belonging to any one out of many."<sup>11</sup> In Bk. IX Aristotle goes on to equate form and substance: "Obviously, therefore, the substance or

---

<sup>11</sup> Ross, Aristotle's Metaphysics, Vol. II, p. 258.

form is actuality." (IX 8, 1050b2) We go on to quote a longer passage from Bk. IX which not only may serve as a proper conclusion to our present argument, but will also be an appropriate transition piece to the argument which is to follow: The passage involves a demonstration as to how actuality is ontologically prior to potency:

[Actuality] is also prior in substantiality; firstly, (a) because the things that are posterior in becoming are prior in form and in substantiality (e.g. man is prior to boy and human being to seed; for the one already has its form, and the other has not), and because everything that comes to be moves towards a principle, i.e. an end (for that for the sake of which a thing is, is its principle, and the becoming is for the sake of the end), and the actuality is the end, and it is for the sake of this that the potency is acquired. For animals do not see in order that they may have sight, but have sight in order to see ... Further, matter exists in a potential state, just because it may come to its form; and when it exists actually, then it is in its form ... actuality is prior in a stricter sense also; for eternal things are prior in substance to perishable things, and no eternal thing exists potentially ... And that which is capable of not being may possibly not be; and that which may possibly not be is perishable, either in the full sense, or in the precise sense in which it is said that it possibly may not be ... all imperishable things, then, exist actually. Nor can anything which is of necessity exist potentially; yet these things are primary; for if these things did not exist, nothing would exist. (IX 8, 1050a4-1050b19)

## CHAPTER THREE:

### Theology

The thread of discourse running throughout the Metaphysics concerns the question of substance. It has been our purpose in the preceding chapters to vindicate how substance is central to Aristotle's argument and how it may be said to constitute what is unqualifiedly being. The philosopher is, in fact, one who studies the nature of all substance. (IV 3, 1005b6-7)

It is a shared opinion among commentators that Book XII is the philosophical cupola of the Metaphysics. It is here that we are introduced to the God of the Philosopher. The Book begins, however, by affirming its continuity with the preceding Books: "The subject of our inquiry is substance; for the principles and causes we are seeking are those of substance". (XII 1, 1069a18-19) The Book goes on to reiterate some already familiar descriptions of substance. Substance is the peg on which reality hangs: -it is ontologically primary, and the condition for the existence of the other categorial ways of being such that "when substances are removed all things are removed." (XII 5, 1071a35) Given sensible substance's mutability, however, substance cannot be limited to sensible substance, for then everything would be perishable (since everything which is not substance is posterior and dependent on substance). Two things, however, are imperishable, as they are also ingenerable, viz., movement and time. Time is perpetual, because to suppose a point at which time came into being would suggest a period

antecedent to time, but such a period necessarily implies time. For the same reason time cannot come to an end, for the period which would follow its destruction would imply time. Likewise with movement. Movement is neither generable nor destructible because time, as the measure of movement, is intimately bound up with movement. The two share a relationship of mutual dependence, so that, if time is eternal movement will also be eternal. However, of the various kinds of movement only locomotion is continuous, and of this only circular movement. The implications to be noted in what Aristotle says here are pointed out by Reale as follows:

L'affermazione che il movimento, così come il tempo, è eterno, implica l'esistenza di una o più sostanze eternamente mosse: il movimento non esiste, in fatti, secondo Arist., fuori delle cose, ossia nelle sostanze mosse. Ora, se ci sono sostanze eternamente mosse, dovrà, di necessità, esserci anche un principio che muove eternamente.<sup>1</sup>

The principle must obviously be an eternal substance which is not only capable of producing movement (since this would imply a potency which need not attain unto an actuality), but must be incapable of ever ceasing to produce movement. Such a substance must, in other words, be forever acting; its very essence must be actuality. Plato's Forms, for example, cannot fill this role as they are wanting a principle which will cause movement. As well, if the substance in question is to be eternal and perpetual act it must also be immaterial,

---

<sup>1</sup>Giovanni Reale, Aristotele. La Metafisica. Vol. II, p. 277.



since matter involves change and potentiality. A.H. Armstrong emphasizes the need for a cause which exists of necessity and is eternally in act, which will guarantee the eternity of movement, as follows:

... motion is the actualization of a potency, and requires something already actual to produce it; and the something actual must be itself pure actuality, eternal, without movement or change, that is without potency, or we shall require a further actuality to actuate it and so on ... It is a very important principle of Aristotle's philosophy that there are two stages of actuality, the first in which a thing possesses all its powers in full development but is not necessarily exercising them (like a man when he is asleep), and the second when it not only possesses the powers but is exercising them to the full (like the same man awake and going about his business). The Unmoved Mover must be necessarily and everlastingly in act in this second and fuller sense if it is to be the necessary cause of a continuous everlasting motion.<sup>2</sup>

That there is eternal motion is, further, a fact attested by the first heaven, which moves in an unceasing circular motion. The first heaven must, then, be eternal.

There is therefore also something which moves it. And since that which is moved and moves is intermediate, there is something which moves without being moved, being eternal, substance, and actuality. And the object of desire and the object of thought move in this way; they move without being moved. (XII 7, 1072a23-27)

We arrive, then, at an immobile first mover which causes the daily rotation of the stars around the earth. (The immobility

---

<sup>2</sup>A.H. Armstrong, An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1965, p. 88.

of this substance has already been suggested, in part, by its immateriality, since matter involves change.) How does the first mover produce movement? According to Aristotle it must do so in a non-physical way for, otherwise, he tells us in the Physics, if there is contact between the mover and the moved, the latter will also be acted on as there will be a reaction of the moved on the mover. (Phys. 202a3-7) Rather, the first mover causes movement by acting as final cause, by inspiring love and desire. Joseph Owens has written lucidly on these points as follows:

The notion of an unmoved mover is formed from the way in which things are known or desired without undergoing any change in themselves. They cause change in the one knowing or desiring them, but remain unchanged while causing the movement. They are accordingly unmoved movers ... The unmoved mover causes motion by being good, i.e., as final cause. This is the only way in which Aristotle speaks of its causality. "On such a principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature." [XII 7, 1072b13-14] The relation of both the heavens and nature to the unmoved mover is in the order of final causality.<sup>3</sup>

Such a theory is not altogether irreproachable. That movement is produced by the prime mover by inspiring love and desire seems to be a crude anthropomorphism of little philosophic value. Aristotle's language suggests that we ought not to think of the prime mover as being spatially located. The Philosopher goes on to identify this principle of movement

---

<sup>3</sup>Joseph Owens, Op. cit., pp. 442-443.

with God (and the latter with mind). Is, then, the movement of the first heaven as the result of the latter's longing and desire for God (or mind) intelligible, unless, indeed, the first heaven is itself invested with a mind? Ross, for example, is of the opinion that Aristotle was in fact committed to such a position:

The prime mover moves directly, as we have seen, the 'first heaven'; i.e. it causes the daily rotation of the stars round the earth. Since it moves by inspiring love and desire, it seems implied that the 'first heaven' is capable of feeling love and desire, i.e. has soul. And this is confirmed by what Aristotle says elsewhere; the first heaven, the planets, and the sun and moon are all thought of as living beings. [De Caelo 285a29, 292a20, b1]<sup>4</sup>

Our opinion is that Aristotle is beguiled by his own analogy. When he is faced with the problem of explaining how the prime mover will cause movement while remaining itself unmoved he hits upon the example of something being the object of unrequited love and desire. He is faced, in other words, with making intelligible the concept of how something immutable can be the cause of movement, and decides that it can do this by inspiring love and desire. While his explanation makes intelligible how something can produce motion, and yet be itself unmoved, it does not provide a basis for supposing that this is how the prime mover moves the universe (i.e., that it does so by inspiring love and desire). We can understand the

---

<sup>4</sup>David Ross, Aristotle's Metaphysics, Vol. I, p. CXXXV.

concept of an unmoved mover through the example of something which inspires love and desire; however, this does not mean that the prime mover moves in this way.

In employing the analogy of something causing motion by acting as the object of thought and desire in order to explain the concept of an unmoved mover Aristotle makes the very serious blunder of supposing his analogy to be an actual explanation of how the prime mover causes movement. Thus, he says, for example, that what is the object of thought and desire is what is good:

For the apparent good is the object of appetite, and the real good is the primary object of rational wish. But desire is consequent on opinion rather than opinion on desire; for the thinking is the starting-point. (XII 7, 1072a28-30)

Since we always desire the good which we know rather than the good which we don't know (i.e., desire is consequent on opinion) Aristotle's argument is that if something inspires love and desire this must mean that the thing is good (whether real or apparent). The Philosopher then proceeds to lay down a case for the prime mover being supremely good:

Thought is moved by the intelligible, and one of the series of contraries<sup>5</sup> is essentially

---

<sup>5</sup>Hugh Tredennick, the Loeb translator of the Metaphysics provides an explanatory footnote for this: "Aristotle himself recognizes two series, lists or columns of contraries, similar to those of the Pythagoreans (I. v. 6). One, the positive, contains being, unity, substance, etc.; the other is negative and contains not-being, plurality, non-substance, etc. The negative terms are intelligible only in reference to the positive." Aristotle Metaphysics. London: Wm. Heinemann Ltd., 1958, Vol. II, p. 147.

intelligible. In this series substance stands first, and of substance that which is simple and exists actually ... But the Good, and that which is in itself desirable, are also in the same series; and that which is first in a class is always best or analogous to the best.<sup>6</sup>

The prime mover, as a simple substance existing in a state of pure actuality, is first in the series of intelligibles and, as such, is also the best. This, Aristotle thinks, provides a basis for implying that the prime mover, also, inspires love and desire, and moves in this way. He assumes, in other words, that the analogy he has made use of in order to explain the causality of an unmoved mover is not a mere analogy but is an actual description of how the latter causality occurs. That this is in fact the case becomes still more pronounced in the last part of this present section (XII 7, 1072b10-11):

Since it is not subject even to the minimal change (and therefore, a fortiori, is not subject to generation or destruction), it is a thing that exists of necessity; and inasmuch as it exists of necessity, its existence is good, and it is in this way (sc. as good or object of desire) that it is a principle, i.e. the principle of movement of the universe.<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle's reasoning which leads him to posit a prime mover (which causes motion while remaining itself unmoved) is cogent; so, also, is the reasoning which characterizes the prime mover as good. However, that the prime mover is a principle

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., (XII 7, 1072a30-35).

<sup>7</sup> David Ross, Aristotle's Metaphysics, Vol. II, p. 378.

of motion by being good (i.e., by inspiring love and desire) is not. The Philosopher wrongly assumes, because he has found a way of explaining what would otherwise be a suspect concept, that this explanation will naturally apply to the prime mover and the latter's relationship to the universe. It may. But there is nothing in the argument which necessitates that this must be the case.

We mention by way of making complete Aristotle's argument, how the Philosopher thought love or desire for the prime mover explains the resulting physical movements.

The theory is that each of these unities of soul and body [the spheres] desires a life as like as possible to that of its moving principle. The life of its moving principle is a continuous unchanging activity of pure thought ... The spheres cannot reproduce this, but they do the next best by performing the only perfectly continuous physical movement, viz. movement in a circle.<sup>8</sup>

Such a theory, however, involves an anthropomorphism which, if the philosopher intended to be taken seriously, is at odds with our modern scientific temperament.

We turn next to the celebrated account given by Aristotle of the nature of the prime mover or God.

The Philosopher assumes as a matter of course that since the prime mover is free of any matter (and therefore of potentiality) it is mind. Its life, as a state of perpetual mental activity, is the highest and most blessed form of life, a life

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. CXXXVIII.

which, in a lesser degree, we ourselves are able to enjoy intermittently during our lifetime. Its life also constitutes pleasure, given that pleasure accompanies states of actuality (e.g. waking, perception, thinking) rather than states of potentiality. Thinking in itself, "as distinguished from the human thinking which depends on sense and imagination,"<sup>9</sup> is concerned with what is best in itself, and the highest form of mental activity is concerned with what qualifies as knowledge in the highest degree. Furthermore, it is a doctrine of De Anima that mind and its object are the same, insofar as the intelligible object is contained in the act of apprehension:

What it thinks must be in it just as characters may be said to be on a writing-tablet ... In the case of objects which involve no matter, <sup>10</sup> what thinks and what is thought are identical.

Because it is in thinking that mind exercises its capacities, by attaining its intelligible object it will be in a state of actuality. The manner in which the divine mind knows itself, however, will be different from the manner in which the human mind knows itself, for the latter knows itself only indirectly, or per accidens, by thinking other things than itself. R.D. Hicks, in his Commentary on the De Anima, writes the following regarding the human mind:

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 379.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, De Anima. Trans. by J.A. Smith. Included in The Basic Works of Aristotle. Edited by Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941, 429b31-430a5.

Mind thinks itself, not directly, but in contradistinction to other things ... and so per accidens: cf. Metaph. 1074b35 sq. ... Experience shows that the mind thinks other things without any self-consciousness ... Hence intellect must know itself as different from the things which it thinks. It knows itself, then, by reflecting, or insofar as it reflects upon its own operation.<sup>11</sup>

The human mind is, further, operative only at intervals and for a short time, but the divine mind knows itself directly, and will always be in a state of actuality. God, as pure thought, is eternally in a state of blessed contemplation:

If, then, God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better this compels it yet more. And God is in a better state. And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's self-dependent actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this is God. (XII 7, 1072b24-29)

It is obvious from the foregoing that the divine thought must be in a state of actuality with regards to its object, otherwise, if it were only in a state of potentiality, it would be like a man asleep, a state hardly suggestive of dignity. Nor can the divine thought be dependent on a knowable different from itself for, then, as its thinking will be determined by something else this will mean that it will be in potency with regards to the knowable, and its essence will not be one of

---

<sup>11</sup>R.D. Hicks, Aristotle De Anima. Text, Translation, Introduction, and Commentary. Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1965, p. 485.



pure actuality. As well, the divine mind will not then be the most excellent substance, for it is distinguished as such only by reason of its intellectual activity. So, then, it must think either of itself or something else, and if of the latter either always the same thing or different things at different times. Since, however, the character of thought is judged to be noble or vile according to the intelligible object, the divine intellect—if it is to be the most excellent substance—will think upon what is most excellent, viz. itself. This must mean that the object of the divine thought cannot be variable, for if it were, the divine thought would then be subject to change, and since it is the most excellent substance, any change would be change for the worse. Moreover, as God has been shown to be an unmovable substance any form of mutability would be incompatible with its nature.

Therefore it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking. (XII 9, 1074b33-34)

Aristotle thought that it would be a mark of imperfection to attribute to God knowledge of things vile or contingent. As he says, thoughts of what is mean ought to be avoided "for there are even some things which it is better not to see than to see." (XII 9, 1074b32-33) And as the nobility of intellectual activity lies not in the act of thinking (since this is capable of choosing what is mean to think upon) but, rather, in that which is thought, the Philosopher found it necessary

to make what is most excellent the object of God's thought, and this is nothing less than God himself. God continuously reflects upon his own nature in what is a single unchanging eternal intuition. The result of all this, however, is what Ross rightly characterizes as "the impossible and barren ideal of a knowledge with no object but itself."<sup>12</sup>

A possible line of argument, which one can take in trying to make sense of what seems otherwise to be a sterile concept, involves the bringing in of a passage from the De Anima to bear on the question of divine thinking. In the latter work Aristotle defines the soul as "a place of forms or ideas." (Hicks ed., 429a27) On this view, given that God is pure mind and perpetual actuality, we can safely suppose his thinking to be about forms. The crux of the matter, however, lies in determining which forms we can assign to His thinking, His own form only, or also the multitude of non-empirical forms which make up the intelligible universe. If we permit the latter to be included in His thinking, God will be the philosopher divinized, who is eternally beholding formal non-empirical truths. However, we must ask ourselves if purely abstract and non-empirical forms, totally devoid of any reference to the empirical and the particular, make sense. On this point B.A.G. Fuller has written:

All ordinary forms or concepts are forms of something. They are found only in the particular

---

<sup>12</sup>David Ross, Aristotle's Metaphysics, Vol. I, p. CXLIII

objects which exemplify them, and from these particulars can never be wholly extracted ... Or, to put it in psychological terms, we can never get a pure concept. Abstract our thought as we may, we can never rid it completely of an admixture of sense and fancy.<sup>13</sup>

Any link with the empirical, however, would impede mind's actuality and mar its pure consciousness. It would appear, then, that God's thinking will have only His own form as Its object, to the exclusion of all other forms. This interpretation is, also, the one which the text seems to favour when it affirms that the divine thought thinks itself. This, however, leads us back to the sterile concept which we sought to escape.

Ross' general assessment of this theology is, we think, salutary:

The conception of God presented in  $\Lambda$  is certainly an unsatisfactory one. God, as conceived by Aristotle, has a knowledge which is not knowledge of the universe, and an influence on the universe which does not flow from His inner life of knowledge as action in man flows from knowledge; an influence which can hardly be called an activity since it is the sort of influence that one person may unconsciously have on another, or that even a statue or a picture may have on its admirer. Little wonder that generation after generation of commentators has found it hard to believe that this is really Aristotle's view, and has tried to read something different into what he says.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup>B.A.G. Fuller, "The Theory of God In Book  $\Lambda$  Of Aristotle's Metaphysics," Philosophical Review, XVI (1907), pp. 175-176. The only truths which suggest themselves as exceptions to this are those of mathematics and logic, and one could legitimately argue for the inclusion of these in God's thinking.

<sup>14</sup>David Ross, Aristotle's Metaphysics, Vol. I, p. CXLIX.

Aristotle's theology is, on the whole, an attempt to provide an explanation for movement. The defects of his explanation we can attribute, in part at least, to the defective scientific hypotheses of the age he lived in. That movement does not need an ultimate cause as Aristotle thought, is a hypothesis of the modern world. Newton's first law of motion, which states that every body perseveres in its state of rest, or of uniform motion in a straight line, unless acted upon by an external force, neatly overcomes the need felt by Aristotle.

## Bibliography

- Allan, Donald James. The Philosophy of Aristotle. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Apostle, Hippocrates G. Aristotle's Metaphysics. Translated with Commentaries and Glossary. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1966.
- Aquinas, St. Thomas. Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle. Translated by John P. Rowman. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961.
- Armstrong, A.H. An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1965.
- Chen, Chung-Hwan. "Aristotle's Concept of Primary Substance in Books Z and H of the Metaphysics," Phronesis, II (1957), 46-59.
- Composta, Dario. "Oggetto e aspetti della prova dell-esistenza del Motore immobile nel libro XII della Metafisica", Salesianum. XIX (1957), 618-634.
- Copleston, Frederick. A History of Philosophy: Greece & Rome. Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1962.
- Cousin, D.R. "Aristotle's Doctrine of Substance," Mind, XLII (1933), 319-337; XLIV (1935), 168-185.
- Décarie, Vianney. L'objet de la Métaphysique selon Aristote, Montreal: Publications de l'Institut d'Etudes Médiévales, 1972.
- Dhondt, Urbain. "Science Supreme et Ontologie chez Aristote," Revue Philosophique de Louvain, LIX. (1961), 5-30.
- Doig, James C. Aquinas On Metaphysics. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972.
- Forsyth, T.M. "Aristotle's Concept of God as Final Cause," Philosophy, XXII (1947), 112-123.
- Fuller, B.A.G. "The Theory of God in Book  $\Lambda$  of Aristotle's Metaphysics," The Philosophical Review, XVI (1970), 170-183.

- Georgiadis, Constantine. 'Critical Notice' on Walter Leszl, Logic and Metaphysics in Aristotle; Dialogue, XI (1972), 135-137.
- Georgiadis, Constantine. "Two Conceptions of Substance in Aristotle," New Scholasticism, XLVII (1973), 22-37.
- Georgiadis, Constantine. "The Individual Thing and its Properties in Aristotle," Dialectics and Humanism, no. 4 (1977), 157-167.
- Gewirth, A. "Aristotle's Doctrine of Being," The Philosophical Review, LXII (1953), 577-589.
- Haring, Ellen Stone. "Substantial Form in Aristotle's Metaphysics Z," The Review of Metaphysics, X (1956) 308-332; (1957), 482-501; 698-713.
- Hicks, R.D. Aristotle, De Anima. Text, Translation, Introduction, and Commentary. Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1965.
- Jaeger, Werner. Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of his Development. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.
- Lacey, A.R. "Ὀνεία and Form in Aristotle," Phronesis, X (1965), 54-69.
- Leszl, Walter. Logic and Metaphysics in Aristotle. Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1970.
- Leszl, Walter. "Knowledge of the Universal and Knowledge of the Particular, in Aristotle," Review of Metaphysics, XXVI (1972), 278-313.
- Leszl, Walter. Aristotle's Conception of Ontology. Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1975.
- Mansion, Augustin. "L'Objet de la Science Philosophique Suprême d'après Aristote, Métaphysique, E, I," in Mélanges de Philosophie Grecque offerts à Mgr. Diès. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1956, pp. 151-168.
- Mansion, Augustin. "Philosophie Première, Philosophie Seconde et Métaphysique chez Aristote," Revue Philosophique de Louvain, LVI (1958), 165-221.
- Marx, Werner. The Meaning of Aristotle's "Ontology". The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954.
- Merlan, Philip. From Platonism to Neoplatonism. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960.

- Merlan, Philip. "On the Terms 'Metaphysics' and 'Being-Qua-Being,'" The Monist, LII (1968), 174-194.
- Novak, Michael. "A Key to Aristotle's 'Substance'," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, XXIV (1963/1964), 1-19.
- Owens, Joseph. "The Reality of the Aristotelian Separate Movers," Review of Metaphysics, III (1950), 319-337.
- Owens, Joseph. The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963.
- Reale, Giovanni. Il Concetto di Filosofia Prima e l'Unità della Metafisica di Aristotele. Milano: Editrice Vita e Pensiero, 1965.
- Reale, Giovanni. Aristotele. La Metafisica. Traduzione, Introduzione, e Commento. Napoli: Luigi Loffredo, 1968.
- Reale, Giovanni. Storia Della Filosofia Antica. Vol. II, Platone e Aristotele. Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1975.
- Ross, W. David. Metaphysica in The Basic Works of Aristotle, pp. 689-926, ed. Richard McKeon, New York: Random House, 1941.
- Ross, W. David. Aristotle's Metaphysics. A revised Text with Introduction and Commentary. 2 Vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.
- Ross, W. David. Aristotle. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1971.
- Ryan, Eugene E. "Pure Form in Aristotle," Phronesis, XVIII (1973), 209-224.
- Tredennik, Hugh. Aristotle. The Metaphysics. With an English Translation. 2 v. (in The Loeb Classical Library) London: William Heinemann, 1956.