

The Contemporary Relevance of Aristotle's Thought

ENRICO BERTI

Abstract: In order to explain the contemporary relevance of Aristotle's thought, the following discussion explores various examples of Aristotelian theories, concepts, and distinctions which remain at the centre of the philosophical debate. From the domain of logic we consider the notion of category, which was developed by G. Ryle, the distinction between apophantic and semantic discourse, that was stressed by J. Austin, the debate on the principle of non-contradiction, and the theory of fallacies; from the domain of physics, we examine the concepts of substrate, form, continuum, and time, which have been discussed by I. Prigogine and R. Thom; from the field of biology, we consider the function of form in animal generation, which M. Delbrück has compared to the role of DNA; from the field of psychology, we look at the notion of soul as a complex of dispositions, which has been identified by many philosophers as a solution of the "Mind-Body Problem;" from the realm of ethics, we investigate the distinction between action and production, an approach developed by H. Arendt, and the virtue of phronesis, which has been developed by H. G. Gadamer and A. McIntyre. In particular, we discuss the Aristotelian theory of the ambiguity of the concept of being, the notion of "focal meaning," that has been developed by G. E. L. Owen, and the function of form in the identification of individuals, which has been pursued by M. Frede.

The question concerning the contemporary relevance of Greek philosophy presupposes an overcoming of the historicist approach, i.e. the notion that ancient philosophies represent the poorest and most abstract contribution to philosophy (as Hegel thought), in favour of a new approach to the history of philosophy which is characteristic of analytical philosophy and hermeneutics. From this point of view, it is not on account of the particular doctrines or theories that they developed that ancient philosophers may prove relevant today, for generally speaking we cannot deny that modern and contemporary sciences have completely changed our vision of the world and our way of thinking. But they may maintain their relevance precisely because they discovered certain concepts, or distinctions and connections between concepts, that we continue to employ and that are still fundamental to our own vision of things.

In this sense Aristotle is certainly one of the most relevant of Greek philosophers, as we can see from the extraordinary fortune that he has enjoyed

over more than twenty centuries in many different medieval and modern cultures: in Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Renaissance, scientific, romantic, and analytical traditions. He is in fact the founder of a philosophical and scientific language whose technical terms, which express a number of sophisticated concepts, are still extremely useful for describing many aspects of reality, whether human or non-human, whether empirical and abstract. I have tried elsewhere to illustrate the presence of Aristotelian philosophy in 20th century culture, examining the works of hermeneutic philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer and Jonas, analytical thinkers such as Austin, Ryle, Strawson, Anscombe and von Wright, political philosophers such as Perelman, Arendt, Mc Intyre, and philosophers of science and scientists such as Feys, Kuhn, Prigogine and Thom.¹

Here I would like to take some examples of Aristotelian concepts or distinctions, selected from all areas of his work, and by showing how they are still employed in contemporary philosophy effectively demonstrate the continuing relevance of Aristotle. Starting with logic, a science that was literally founded by Aristotle, we can recognize that nobody today would subscribe to Kant's famous claim that logic has made no significant progress since Aristotle; but we must also concede that many distinctions originally developed in Aristotle's logic are still used by contemporary philosophers and logicians.

In the first place I could mention the Aristotelian distinction of categories, i.e. of subject and predicate and of different types of predicate, as presented by Aristotle in the treatise aptly named *Categories*. This distinction underlies the celebrated notion of the logical syntax of language developed by Gilbert Ryle, according to which some terms can only be connected with certain others, and not with all, because in some cases, if we fail to consider the category to which they belong, we merely produce the kind of nonsense known as a "category mistake."² Or I could mention the distinction between apophantic and merely semantic discourse, introduced by Aristotle in chapter 4 of *De interpretatione*, which anticipates the theory of linguistic acts developed by J. L. Austin, in particular his distinction between descriptive and performative sentences; and again we could refer to the issue of modal logic, in particular to Aristotle's discussion of the "sea-battle," presented in chapter 9 of the same book, an analysis which prompted the debate about future contingents, something that is still an open question amongst logicians.

¹ E. Berti, *Aristotele nel Novecento*, Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1992; Id., "Aristotle's Renaissance as an Example of the Essential Tension between Tradition and Innovation," *Philosophical Inquiry*, 16 (1994), pp. 26-37.

² G. Ryle, "Categories" [1938], in Id., *Collected Papers*, London: Hutchinson, 1971, vol. 2, pp. 170-184.

But, quite apart from the Aristotelian theory of the syllogism presented in the *Prior Analytics* (which is the earliest discussion of this form of reasoning), the distinction between proper and common principles that Aristotle develops in his *Posterior Analytics* not only contributed to the idea of an axiomatic system, but also preserved the autonomy of the different particular sciences, recognizing that they were irreducible to a single universal super-science. The principle of non-contradiction, formulated by Aristotle in his logical writings and defended in the fourth book of his *Metaphysics*, although it was contested by Hegel and by certain “paraconsistent” logics, is the fundamental principle of all contemporary sciences, as K. R. Popper demonstrated in his article *What is Dialectic?* (1940). For according to the “theorem of pseudo-Scotus,” wherever there is a contradiction it is possible to demonstrate every thesis, and consequently all discourse becomes pointless.³

Even the most despised logical works of Aristotle, namely the *Topics* and the *Sophistical Refutations*, have proved to be relevant in the contemporary debate on the subject of fallacies. One of the greatest specialists in this field, C. L. Hamblin, writes that “after two millennia of active study of logic [...] we still find fallacies classified, presented and studied in much the same old way. Aristotle’s principal list of thirteen types of fallacy in his *Sophistical Refutations* [...] still appears, usually with one or two omissions and a handful of additions, in many modern textbooks of logic; and though there have been many proposals for reform, none has met more than temporary acceptance.”⁴

The physics of Aristotle, which in the wake of the first “scientific revolution” accomplished by Galilei, Kepler, Descartes and Newton, might appear definitively outdated and justly forgotten, has revealed a certain unexpected relevance today thanks to the works of I. Prigogine, who has spoken of a “new alliance” between science and philosophy, which is quite different from that established by Newton and very similar to the Aristotelian philosophy of nature.⁵ And the French mathematician R. Thom, the author of “catastrophe theory,” has presented Aristotelian physics as a “semi-physics,” i.e. as an expression of the “physics of sense” or of “meaningful forms,” which is capable of making sense of experience and therefore of rendering the world intelligible. Above all, Thom appreciates the Aristotelian concepts of continuum, time, substrate, form and final cause, concepts which permit a “catastrophic lecture” of Aristotle’s physics.⁶ But the image of the universe which

³ K. R. Popper, “What is Dialectic?,” in Id., *Conjectures and Refutations*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, vol. 2.

⁴ C. L. Hamblin, *Fallacies*, London: Methuen, 1970, p. 9.

⁵ I. Prigogine and I. Stengers, *La Nouvelle alliance. Métamorphoses de la science*, Paris: Gallimard, 1979.

⁶ R. Thom, *Esquisse d'une sémiophysique. Physique aristotélicienne et théorie des catastrophes*, Paris: InterÉditions, 1988.

results from Einstein's physics, with time conceived as the fourth dimension of space and space considered as "curved," is also much closer to Aristotle's finite world than it is to Newton's infinite universe.

Biology was always regarded as the most valid part of Aristotelian physics, thanks to its methods of classifying animals and the parts of animals. But today it is especially the genetical aspect of his approach that has attracted the interest of biologists. One of these, M. Delbrück, has seen Aristotle's concept of a form, which guides the development of the embryo without existing as a material part of it, as anticipating the discovery of DNA.⁷ In fact the modern concept of "information" as something that is transmitted across generations also relates directly to the Aristotelian concept of "form" (*eidos* or *morphê*), i.e. to a cause which is not itself a material part of the body, but is active in its development and determines its principal features. Even the teleological perspective of Aristotelian physics, which seemed to have been decisively eliminated by the mechanistic character of Cartesian and Newtonian physics, has been partly rehabilitated by present-day biologists such as F. Jacob and E. Mayr, and has been employed as a basis for a new ecological ethics by Hans Jonas.⁸

The psychology of Aristotle, expounded in the *De anima*, has always enjoyed a good reputation among 20th century philosophers, given the way in which it defended an intimate connection between soul and body, and thus offered an attractive alternative to Cartesian dualism, as we can see from Ryle's discussion in *The Concept of Mind* (1949). But today it is considered as the most promising solution to the mind-body problem by H. Putnam as well, who gives the title "The Return of Aristotle" to the first part of his book, *Words and Life* (1994). He wrote one section part of this chapter in collaboration with Martha Craven Nussbaum, and with regard to his own functionalist approach does not hesitate to declare that "we are Aristotelians."⁹ The last section of the same chapter is entitled "Aristotle after Wittgenstein," which in many respects could stand as the motto for much recent analytical philosophy.

In the field of metaphysics, or – in modern terms – that of "ontology," there are two Aristotelian ideas above all which have attracted the attention of contemporary philosophers: the notion of being and that of substance. The discovery that "being" has a multiplicity of meanings, i.e. being *per se* (the set of categories), being as true, being in potency and in act, presented

⁷ M. Delbrück, "Aristotle-totle-totle," in J. Monod and E. Borek (eds.), *Of Microbes and Life*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1971, pp. 50 ff.

⁸ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. On Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

⁹ H. Putnam, *Words and Life*, ed. by J. Conant, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 46.

by Aristotle in book V of *Metaphysics*, encouraged M. Heidegger, under the influence of F. Brentano, to search for the most important of these meanings: firstly in the concept of *ousia* (during his “Catholic” period), secondly in the concept of *alêtheia* (during his “phenomenological” period), and thirdly in the concept of *energeia* (after the famous “turn” of his thought).¹⁰ But in analytical philosophy too, where the influence of Brentano was transmitted by G. E. Moore, a number of important British philosophers, such as J. L. Austin and G. Ryle, took the Aristotelian distinction between the meanings of terms like “being” or “good” as an interesting example of the philosophical analysis of language. Austin in particular, developing the Aristotelian theory of homonymy *pros hen*, clarified the connection amongst these many meanings as a relation to a certain “nuclear meaning,” something which was subsequently described as “focal meaning” (by G. E. L. Owen and his school).¹¹ For Ryle, on the other hand, the principal task of philosophy was to provide an analysis of concepts which are “transdepartmental,” i.e. concepts which embrace all the categories of being and which Aristotle described as “properties belonging to being itself.” In this way Ryle identified his own philosophy with the dialectic of the ancient Academy, or with what Aristotle called the science of being as being.¹²

Amongst the different meanings of being, in particular amongst the different categories, which are the meanings of being *per se*, the most important one for Aristotle is the notion of *ousia*, a word which can be translated as “substance” or “essence” or “entity.” The importance of this concept was fully recognized in 20th century philosophy during the debate on “identity” that was pursued in the seminar on “Identity and Individuation” held in New York in 1969-1970.¹³ On this occasion the participants recognized the importance of P. F. Strawson’s book *Individuals* (London 1959), where the author argued that the condition for re-identifying “particulars” lay in universal “sortals,” notions which correspond to the Aristotelian *hupokeimenon* and *ousia* respectively. This theory of identity was developed by S. Kripke in his theory of “rigid designators,” which presupposes the idea of reference to the essences of natural kinds, corresponding to the notion of *ousia* as essence developed by Aristotle in book Z of the *Metaphysics*.¹⁴ One of the participants

¹⁰ This development of Heidegger’s thought was first described in detail by F. Volpi, *Heidegger e Aristotele*, Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2010.

¹¹ J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970; G. E. L. Owen, *Logic, Science and Dialectic. Collected Papers in Greek Philosophy*, ed. by M. Craven Nussbaum, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986.

¹² G. Ryle, *Plato’s Progress*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966.

¹³ M. K. Munitz (ed.), *Identity and Individuation*, New York: New York University Press, 1971.

¹⁴ S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

in this debate, i.e. D. Wiggins, did not hesitate to speak of “substance” in this connection or to describe his own position as “neo-aristotelian.”¹⁵

But the contemporary relevance of Aristotle is not merely evident from the survival of certain fundamental concepts and distinctions that were developed in the context of his logic, his physics, and his metaphysics. For his “practical philosophy,” i.e. the content of his *Ethics* and *Politics*, is also a central object of discussion for many contemporary philosophers. In the first place, the very notion of “practical philosophy” has been “rehabilitated” by a German current of philosophical thought which was aptly described as the “rehabilitation of practical philosophy.”¹⁶ The best known representative of this approach, H. G. Gadamer, found a model for his own hermeneutics in Aristotelian practical philosophy because of the self-engagement that it implies, on account of its expressly practical orientation and its connexion with the experience of life. More particularly, Gadamer reemphasized the virtue of *phronêsis*, described by Aristotle in book VI of *Nicomachean Ethics*, on account of its capacity to connect the aims of our actions with the means that are necessary for attaining them,¹⁷ and he was followed in this direction by other German philosophers (R. Bubner, G. Bien).

The Aristotelian notion of virtue as a habit or disposition for acting well, and its intrinsic relation to a community and its customs (the *êthos*), was proposed by Alasdair MacIntyre as the basis of an “ethics of virtues” which, in his opinion, represents the only contemporary alternative to the destruction of rationalistic ethics that was accomplished by Nietzsche.¹⁸ The importance of the *êthos* for ethics was also emphasized by Bernard Williams,¹⁹ while the economist-philosopher Amartya Sen has utilized the Aristotelian notion of the human good, i.e. of happiness, understood as the “fulfilment” of all human capabilities and as a conception of “flourishing life,” in his own anti-utilitarian economic theories.²⁰

Even the notion of *polis* as the natural form of society, i.e. the only society in which man can realize his whole human nature, i.e. his culture and his public ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*, to use the German term), which Aristotle developed in his *Politics*, has been revived as something that is still valid today

¹⁵ D. Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

¹⁶ See M. Riedel (ed.), *Rehabilitierung der praktischen Philosophie*, 2 vols., Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1972-1974.

¹⁷ H. G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960.

¹⁸ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

¹⁹ B. Williams, *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984; Id., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

²⁰ A. Sen, *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982.

by J. Ritter,²¹ while Hannah Arendt expressly took up the Aristotelian notion of “political” or “practical life” as the way of life that is most worthwhile for contemporary man.²² The *Politics* of Aristotle had also been rehabilitated, in the nineteen-fifties, by other German philosophers who had emigrated to the U.S.A., i.e. L. Strauss and E. Voegelin, who were therefore described as “neo-aristotelians,” although they interpreted the Aristotelian tradition in a conservative and anti-modern way. Today, by contrast, J. Habermas not only deploys the Aristotelian distinction between *praxis* and *poiésis* in order to clarify his theory of “communicative action,” but regards Aristotle as the founder of the “republican tradition” of political thought, i.e. the tradition based on the principle of self-government.²³

Last but not least, even the *Rhetoric* of Aristotle has been invoked by Ch. Perelman as the model of a “new rhetoric,” i.e. of a theory of a non scientific, but nonetheless rational form of argumentation, one which can be used in discussing moral, political, or juridical questions, areas where formal logic clearly reveals its limits.²⁴ But other philosophers of law, such as the Frenchman M. Villey and the German Th. Viehweg, have also found an appropriate model of judicial forms of argumentation in Aristotle's treatment of dialectic and rhetoric. The *Poetics* too, thanks to its theory of *katharsis*, has continued to suggest new approaches and possibilities for philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur and Martha Nussbaum.²⁵

As an example of Aristotle's influence today I would like to return to the discussion regarding the meaning of the verb “to be,” taken in the sense of “to exist,” which was developed by the modern Oxford philosophy in the middle of the 20th century, a discussion which is by no means concluded. In opposition to the thesis of Bertrand Russell, who maintained that “to exist” has only one meaning, Gilbert Ryle argued, in agreement with Aristotle, that the term “being” has many meanings. Initially, Russell defended the position that the existence of physical objects and the existence of universals (e. g. numbers) were affirmed in different senses, equivalent respectively to being in space and time and not being in space and time. Later on he argued that these different senses or meanings could be reduced to only one. He claimed that affirming the existence of anything whatsoever is equivalent to saying that it

²¹ J. Ritter, *Metaphysik und Politik. Studien zu Aristoteles und Hegel*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969.

²² H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

²³ J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981; Id., *Die nachholende Revolution*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990.

²⁴ Ch. Perelman, *Traité de l'argumentation*, Paris: PUF, 1958; Id., *L'Empire rhétorique*, Paris: J.Vrin, 1977.

²⁵ P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris: Seuil, 1990; M. C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

is something, where being something is a genus of which being in space and time and not being in space and time are the species.

But some years later, a new conception of being was formulated by Gilbert Ryle, who wrote, in his major work *The Concept of Mind*, that:

It is perfectly proper to say, in one logical tone of voice, that there exist minds and to say, in another logical tone of voice, that there exist bodies. But these expressions do not indicate two different species of existence [...]. They indicate two different senses of “exist,” somewhat as “rising” has different senses in “the tide is rising,” “hopes are rising” and “the average age of death is rising.” A man would be thought to make a poor joke who said that three things are now rising, namely the tide, hopes and the average age of death. It would be just as good or bad a joke to say that there exist prime numbers and Wednesdays and public opinion and navies; or that there exist both minds and bodies.²⁶

In fact, Ryle was not the only philosopher who admitted different senses of being. For John L. Austin, the first person who introduced Aristotle into the context of analytical philosophy in Oxford, in his famous article entitled *The meaning of a word* (written in 1940, though published later) had already claimed that “‘exist’ is used paronymously,” i.e. with a “primary nuclear sense” and other senses dependent on it, just as “healthy” is used in Aristotle.²⁷ In *Sense and Sensibilia* he wrote:

“real” (the translation of the Greek *on*, i.e. “being”) is *not* a normal word at all, but highly exceptional; exceptional in this respect that, unlike “yellow” or “horse” or “walk,” it does not have one single specifiable, always-the-same *meaning*. (Even Aristotle saw through this idea). *Nor* does it have a large number of different meanings—it is not *ambiguous*, even “systematically.”²⁸

The doctrine that being, and perhaps also existence, is at least not univocal, if not equivocal, is distinctive of Aristotle. He refers to this point several times,²⁹ although in most cases he never offers any argument in defence of his doctrine. By so doing, Aristotle gives the impression of considering this doctrine perfectly evident, though he was clearly convinced that he was the first philosopher who discovered this truth.

A further clarification of Aristotle’s doctrine of being was proposed by G. E. L. Owen, who was professor in Oxford, in his paper entitled *Logic and*

²⁶ G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, London: Hutchinson’s University Library, 1949, p. 23.

²⁷ J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970², p. 71.

²⁸ J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962, p. 64 (italics in the text).

²⁹ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Gamma 2, 1003 a 33; Epsilon 4, 1028 a 5; Zeta 1, 1028 a 10; Ny 2, 1089 a 7.

metaphysics in some earlier works of Aristotle. He introduced the expression “focal meaning” to describe the first of the meanings of a word that is “said in many senses,” although these are all related to this meaning.³⁰ This is much better than “nuclear meaning:” it does not presuppose that the first meaning is a part of the others, but indicates that it is only the focus, i.e. the term of reference, of the others. Nevertheless, the way Owen describes focal meaning turns out to be very close to what was already suggested by Austin. According to Owen, in fact, a sense of a word is primary “in that its definition reappears as a component in each of the other definitions.” He speaks of a “reductive translation” with regard to the relation between the definition of substance and the definitions of the other categories, explaining that “all the senses of *on* must be defined in terms of *ousia*, ‘substance.’”³¹ Finally, he makes it clear that this is a relation of “logical priority,” i.e. priority in *logos* or definition. All these expressions could also be applied to the genus, which is also contained in the definition of the species, and therefore is logically prior with respect to it.

Logical priority as well as natural priority, or priority in being, is ascribed to substance in *Metaph.* Zeta 1. Here Aristotle says that substance is prior “in notion” (*tôî logôî*) to the other categories, because “in the definition of each term the notion of the substance must be present” (1028 a 35–36). Given, as we know, that the substance is prior to the other categories not as the genus in conformity with which (*kata*) they are said, but as the principle with which they are in relation (*pros*),³² the logical priority of substance must be interpreted in a particular way, something which does not emerge from Owen’s interpretation. Even the natural, or ontological, priority of substance with respect to the other categories must be different from that of the genus with respect to the species. This latter is presumably the ontological priority admitted by Plato,³³ but it is explicitly distinguished by Aristotle from the priority of substance with respect to the other categories.³⁴

The claim of *Metaph.* Zeta 1 that substance is not only that which is “primarily” (*to prôtôs on*), but also that which is “simply” (*haplôs*) rather than being

³⁰ G. E. L. Owen, “Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle,” in I. Düring and G. E. L. Owen (eds.), *Aristotle and Plato in the mid-fourth century*, Göteborg-Stockholm-Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960, pp. 162–190, repr. in Id., *Logic, Science and Dialectic*, pp. 180–199.

³¹ Ibid., p. 184 and note 16. The “reductionist” tendency of these expressions was strongly criticized by W. Leszl, *Logic and Metaphysics in Aristotle*, Padua: Antenore, 1970. It was also corrected by Owen himself in his later articles.

³² The substance is called “principle” (*arche*) in *Metaph.* Gamma 2, 1003 b 6, and the things said “in conformity with one” (*kath’hen*) are distinguished from the things said “in relation (*pros*) to one nature” in 1003 b 12–14.

³³ See *Metaph.* Delta 11, 1019 a 1–6.

³⁴ Ibid.

something (*ou ti on*) (1028 a 30), might appear to pose some problem for this interpretation. The expression “which is simply,” as opposed to “being something,” might suggest that substance is pure being, without qualifications, perhaps pure existence, i.e. the essence of being, or the essence of existence. This interpretation was favoured by the German translation furnished by Michael Frede and Günther Patzig: “das, was primär Seiendes und nicht nur in bestimmter Hinsicht, sondern uneingeschränkt Seiendes, die ousia ist.” On the basis of this translation, in fact, the substance turns out to be the “unlimited being,” which seems to be the being of essence, the essence itself of being.

This interpretation is also suggested by another contribution by Frede, who at this time was professor of philosophy in Oxford. In the light of Owen’s original article, Frede no longer speaks of paronymity but of “focal meaning.” He shows no hesitation in affirming that substance is the focal meaning of being, and that the unmovable substance is the focal meaning of substance, and therefore of the being as a whole. In his interpretation, the unmovable substance, i.e. the divine substance, would be the particular way of being, “in terms of which all other ways of being have to be explained.” The unmovable substance would be nothing but the focal way (or sense) of being. Apparently, Frede himself extends the use of the notion of focal meaning, as it was defined by Owen, i.e. as implying logical as well as ontological (or natural) priority. He makes use of this notion to describe *both* the relation between substance and the other categories *and* the relation between the unmovable substance and the other kinds of substance. The expression “in terms of which” seems in fact to be used to describe the situation in which a certain notion is contained in another, i.e. precisely a situation of logical priority.³⁵

Frede is well aware that this thesis is not explicitly stated in Aristotle’s texts. Nevertheless, he thinks that this thesis is implied in what Aristotle says about sensible substance in book Zeta of *Metaphysics*. Here, as it is well known, Aristotle identifies the “substantial form” – the expression is used by Frede – with the “first substance,” i.e. with the substance “in terms of which the substantiality of the sensible substances has to be explained.” Now since the unmovable substances are nothing but substantial forms separated from matter, they have the same type of substantiality as belongs to the substantial forms. They are prior, as substances, to the sensible ones, and “we shall achieve a full understanding of the substantiality of sensible substances only when we have understood the substantiality of non-sensible substances.” The conclusion that Frede proposes, on the basis of a passage where Aristotle says that the simple and actual substance, i.e. God, is the first intelligible object

³⁵ M. Frede, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp. 81-95.

(*Metaph.* Lambda 7, 1072 a 26 ss.), is that “ultimately nothing is intelligible unless it is understood in its dependence on God.” In the light of this it is clear that Frede is ready to accept that God is not only ontologically but also logically prior to the other beings.

This is confirmed by his presentation of the entire Aristotelian ontology in terms of a “scale of perfection,” in which the lower forms of being somehow imitate higher forms of being: on the one hand, animals procreate to imitate the eternity of the heavens, and by so doing they secure eternity for their own species; on the other, the heavens eternally rotate to imitate, insofar as they can, the unchanging nature of the unmoved mover. The unmovable movers – continues Frede – are “beings in a paradigmatic way, in that they are perfectly real,” and the separate substances are “paradigmatic as substances,” because they have the necessary qualifications for substantiality, which are to be the final subject of predication and also to be separate. In this way, general metaphysics has as its core the study of the way of being of the divine substances, and ultimately coincides with theology.

It seems to me that this is a Platonic rather than Aristotelian conception of being, or in any case results from interpreting Aristotle in a Platonizing, or even in a Neo-platonizing vein.³⁶ The relation of imitation that it establishes among the various ways of being is in fact the same as the relation which Plato admits between Ideas and sensible things. This can only be supported by certain Aristotelian texts, and stands in contrast with others. It is true that Aristotle considers procreation as an imitation of the eternity of the heavens (*De Gen. Corr.* II 10, 336 b 32–337 a 7; *De an.* II 4, 415 a 26–b 2), but Aristotle never says that the circular motion of the heavens is an imitation of the immobility of the unmoved mover. This is only a particular interpretation of his thought, one whose Platonizing character was already denounced by Theophrastus, who attributed the conception of celestial desire as an imitation of the unmovable mover to “people who admit the One and the numbers,” i.e. the Platonists.³⁷ Aristotle, on the contrary, sharply criticizes the exemplaristic, i.e. “paradigmatic,” causality of those separate substances which are Platonic Ideas, and therefore also their utility for understanding the sensible substances, claiming for instance that the cause of Achilles is not the universal man, who does not exist, but Peleus, i.e. his efficient cause, and “of you, your father” (*Metaph.* XII 5, 1071 a 21–22).

Frede's interpretation, with its tendency to consider the causality of unmovable substances in terms not only of ontological, but also of logical pri-

³⁶ This has been noted also by an Italian scholar who shares Frede's interpretation: P. Donini, *La Metafisica di Aristotele. Introduzione alla lettura*, Rome: La nuova Italia scientifica, 1995, p. 101.

³⁷ Theophrastus, *Metaph.* 7, 5 a 25–27.

ority, ultimately depends on analytical philosophy, that is to say, on the analysis of ontological relations exclusively in terms of logico-linguistical relations, the model for which is Owen's analysis of "focal meaning." At least in this case it converges remarkably with Platonism. The results of Frede's interpretation are exactly the same as those obtained, 50 years ago, by a well known Thomist interpreter of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Father J. Owens, who was a pupil of E. Gilson in the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto and belonged to that current of thought which emphasises the Platonic and Neoplatonic elements of Thomism. In his book of 1951, on *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, Owens claimed that between the sensible and the separate substance there is the same relation of *pros hen legesthai* which exists between the other categories and the substance, and that this latter (which he calls "entity"), in its primary instance, is the form, which can be the form of a compound or a pure, i.e. separate, form.³⁸ Owens too, like most of the Platonizing interpreters, considered the causality of the unmovable mover as an exemplaristic causality, implying that the heavens move circularly in order to imitate the immobility of the unmovable mover.³⁹

What is doubtful about the interpretation proposed by Frede, at least to my mind, is that the unmovable substance is logically prior to the other kinds of substance. I do not see how the definition of the movable substance can contain the notion of the unmovable substance. There is only one passage which might point in this direction. In *Metaph.* L 7, 1072 a 27-32, Aristotle claims that "the primary (*ta prôta*) object of desire and thought are the same," and that they are "the substance which is simple and exists actually." This substance, Aristotle adds, like all the terms of the positive series, is intelligible by itself (*noêtê kath'hautên*). This surely means that the notion of the unmovable substance does not contain other notions, i.e. that it belongs to the things better known by nature, rather than in relation to us, because it is the farthest from perception. Does this imply that the notion of the unmovable substance is contained in the definition of the other substances? The notion of form, or the notion of actuality, is certainly contained in the definition of all the other substances. But this does not entitle us to conclude that the definition of separate form, or pure actuality, is contained in the definition of the other substances. It does not seem to me that these notions are understood without qualification, as Frede claims. Separateness and purity are important qualifications, which we discover only at the end of the philosophical research,

³⁸ J. Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978, pp. 395 and 457.

³⁹ See also J. Owens, *The Relation of God to the World in the Metaphysics*, in P. Aubenque (ed.), *Études sur la Métaphysique d'Aristote*, Paris: J.Vrin, 1978, pp. 207-228.

that is to say, only after having demonstrated the existence of the unmovable mover.

I can endorse Frede's claim that "nothing is intelligible unless it is understood in its dependence on God," but only if by dependence here we mean ontological rather than logical dependence, and ontological in the sense of causal dependence, not in the sense of the Platonic dependence of the species on the genus. I can also endorse the claim that God is the being "in terms of which all other ways of being have to be explained," but only if "in terms of which" means "in dependence on which," and the dependence in question is ontological in the specified sense. I cannot support the claim that God is being "in a paradigmatic way." In fact I do not believe that Aristotle admits a relation of exemplarity, i.e. of imitation, between God and the other substances. This seems to me to belong to the Platonic tradition rather than to Aristotle. What I want to emphasise is that, for Aristotle, to be the "first" does not mean necessarily to be a model, a perfect exemplar, the highest degree, the purest instance, but can also mean principle, or cause, or moving cause.

In conclusion, then, we may affirm that all the branches of Aristotelian philosophy - logic and physics, biology and psychology, metaphysics, ethics, politics and rhetoric - continue to occupy the centre of attention for contemporary philosophers and to provide a genuine arsenal of conceptual tools, i.e. definitions, distinctions, connections, classifications, for the philosophy of today. This is true even if nobody today would wish to define themselves as Aristotelians and if it is better not to trust any form of "neo-aristotelianism," precisely because such approaches are usually only partial and tendentious utilizations of Aristotelian theories developed in support of particular ideologies.

Enrico Berti
University of Padua
enrico.berti@unipd.it

