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ARISTOTLE’S DISTINCTION BETWEEN CHANGE AND ACTIVITY

ABSTRACT. Aristotle’s conception of being is dynamic. He believes that a thing is most itself when engaged in its proper activities, governed by its nature. This paper explores this idea by focusing on Metaphysics Θ, a text that continues the investigation of substantial being initiated in Metaphysics Ζ. Q.1 claims that there are two potentiality-actuality distinctions, one concerned with potentiality in the strict sense, which is involved in change, the other concerned with potentiality in another sense, which he says is more useful for the present project. His present project is the investigation of substantial being, and the relevant potentiality is the potentiality for activity, the full manifestation of what a thing is. I explore Aristotle’s two potentiality-actuality distinctions AND argue that the second distinction is modeled on the first, with one crucial modification. Whereas a change is brought about by something other than the object or by the object itself considered as other (as when a doctor cures himself), an activity is brought about by the object itself considered as itself. This single modification yields an important difference: whereas a change leads to a state other than the one an object was previously in, an activity maintains or develops what an object already is.

1. THE PROBLEM OF SUBSTANCE

Why is primary substance problematic? Against Plato Aristotle insists that being is not a genus.1 On Aristotle’s view there are various sorts of beings, and substance (ὑπόστασις) is the primary sort. Other beings, such as qualities and quantities, are determined as what they are in some relation to it.2 To understand those other entities, then, one must first understand the being of substance. To judge from Aristotle’s Categories, this project seems relatively straightforward. Substances are autonomous individuals, such as a particular man or a particular horse, and they are the subjects for various properties, including qualities and quantities, which are located in one or another of the nonsubstance categories. Nonsubstances depend for their existence on the substance to which they belong. The primary substances are themselves individuated by the so-called secondary substances, the species and higher kinds that classify the individuals. Although species and genera determine the primary substances as what they are, the secondary substances, like the nonsubstances, depend for their existence on the primary substances. Remove the primary substances and everything else is

removed as well. 3 Physical objects are primary substances because they are the ultimate subjects. All other things depend on them for their existence.

The problem with this picture is that it fails to accommodate substantial change. The Presocratic philosopher Parmenides had denied the possibility of all change, arguing that change would require the emergence of something from nothing. Aristotle agreed with his predecessor that there is no absolute becoming. But he regarded the existence of change as empirically evident. His task was to account for change without admitting sheer emergence. In Physics I.7 he proposed that every change involves three principles: a form (φ), an opposed privation (¬φ), and an underlying subject (x). This account of change is known as the Replacement Model. (See Figure 1).

A change is the emergence of something new, because the form (φ) replaces the privation (¬φ). The change is not a sheer emergence, because some part (x) of the product (φx) was there all along, characterized first by the privation and then by the form. For example, when Socrates comes to be musical from being unmusical, Socrates himself survives the change and is characterized first as unmusical and later as musical. The Categories accommodates nonsubstantial changes, changes of quality, quantity, or place. In that work Aristotle claims that a distinctive feature of a primary substance is that one and the same individual can survive the replacement of opposed nonsubstantial properties. 4

But substantial generation and destruction cannot be so easily reconciled with the Categories’ scheme. In a substantial generation, a substance is the product of a change and so cannot be what persists through it. Aristotle’s Replacement Model is supposed to provide for this case too, though that provision will entail an ontological scheme more complicated than that envisaged in the Categories. A new substance emerges from something else without sheer emergence, because a part of the preexisting item survives in the product. Aristotle calls the continuant matter. Matter provides continuity between the preexisting object and the product, and guarantees that the emergence is not from nothing. When a new substance comes into being, the form, which replaces a privation, determines what the emergent substance is. Whereas substances in the Categories were treated as simple
entities, the analysis of change in the *Physics* reveals them as complex, as *composites* of matter and form.

Now that physical objects are regarded as hylomorphic complexes, what counts as primary substance and on what grounds? These questions are explored in the central books of the *Metaphysics* (ZHΘ). Is the whole complex primary? The complex consists of more basic components, the form and the matter, and so is arguably posterior to them (Z.3, 1029a30–32). Is primary substance the matter (Z.3, 1029a10–27)? Consider a bronze statue, whose matter is bronze. The shape of the statue informs the bronze, and the bronze can survive its removal. The constituent matter seems to satisfy the subject-criterion for substantiality in the *Categories*. If we accept the substantiality of the bronze on grounds of its subjectionhood, however, why stop here? The bronze is itself a composite of more basic material ingredients, copper and tin. And these metals are themselves composites of the Aristotelian elements earth and water combined in certain ratios. Why not suppose that the elements are substances, or perhaps some yet more ultimate matter that underlies them? Tradition attributes to Aristotle a belief in prime matter, an ultimate stuff that is nothing in its own right but underlies all material bodies in the sublunary realm. Is some such ultimate matter substance? In *Metaphysics* Z.3 Aristotle excludes such an entity as substance, saying that a substance must be some definite thing in its own right (α τόδε τι) and be separate (χωρίστον) from other things (1029a26–30). An ultimate bare matter satisfies neither of these two conditions. Z.3 shows that if we press the subject criterion for primary substance, we end up with an unknowable object. Such an object is disqualified as substance because it fails to meet the constraints of thisness and separation.5

Is primary substance, then, the form of the composite (Z.4–12)? Whereas matter appears to claim existential priority because the form depends for its existence on it, the form appears to claim logical and epistemic priority because it determines the composite as the thing that it is and thus accounts for its knowability. Many scholars think that in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle awards the title ‘primary substance’ to form, revising the position he advocated in the *Categories*.6 This solution too is problematic. First, if form is primary substance, what becomes of the subject criterion and the demand that substance be capable of separate existence? Form is predicated of matter and depends on matter for its existence. Second, what becomes of the demand that substance be an individual? Form is something predicable, definable, and knowable, and therefore seems to be a universal.7 It can also be shared by more than one individual (Z.8, 1034a5–8). In *Metaphysics* Z.13 Aristotle notoriously argues that no universal is a substance. Some advocates of form argue on the basis of Z.13
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