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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* Z. 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 (οὐσία) 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



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 subjecthood, 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 (χωριστόν) 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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