

SESSION 5  
COMPARISON OF COMMENTATORS ON *METAPHYSICS* Λ.4-5

Introduction

One of the most hotly contested passages in *Metaphysics* Lambda concerns whether Aristotle has a doctrine of “individual form.” At the heart of the controversy is the final sentence of the final passage at 1071a27-9, which is part of a wider context:

Translation of 1071a17-29

Further, it must be seen that some [causes] can be stated universally while others cannot. Indeed, the first principles of all things are this first [thing] in actuality and another which is in potentiality. Now, those things, are not the universals; for the individual is a principle of individuals. For a human being is [a principle] of a human being universally, but there is none [i.e. no universal human being]—rather, Peleus is [the principle] of Achilles, and your father is [the principle] of you, and this B is [the principle] of this BA, while in general B is the principle of the unqualified BA. In addition [there are] the forms of substances, but different things have different ones, as has been said, of things which are not in the same genus (colours, sounds, substances, quality) except by analogy. **And [the causes] of things in the same species are different, not in species but because there is a different one for different individuals: your matter and form and mover, and mine; but they are the same in universal account.**

Aristotle’s text 1071a27-9 (Jaeger OCT)

καὶ τῶν ἐν ταῦτῳ εἶδει ἕτερα, οὐκ εἶδει ἄλλ’ ὅτι τῶν καθ’ ἕκαστον ἄλλο, ἢ τε σὴ ὕλη καὶ τὸ εἶδος καὶ τὸ κινῆσαν καὶ ἡ ἐμή, τῷ καθόλου δὲ λόγῳ ταῦτά.

Questions for discussion

Does this passage imply that each individual substance has not only its own individual matter but also its own individual form and individual moving cause? If so, is the individual form of Achilles to be identified with his *soul*?

Would this make it more reasonable to take seriously the question whether any form remains after separation from the compound. “For nothing prevents it in the case of some things, for example, if the soul is of this sort—not the entire soul but rather the intellect; for that all [the soul remains afterward] is perhaps impossible.” (3.1070a24-6) On the traditional interpretation, the answer to the first question concerning individual form is “yes” so that Aristotle leaves the door open to personal immortality.

This question also bears on the interpretation of *Metaphysics* VII and Aristotle’s conception of primary substance: namely, the substance of each thing, “the cause, i.e. the form, by reason of which the matter is some definite thing” (VII.17.1041b7-9). Further, “the soul of animals . . . is the substance according to the account (*logos*), i.e. the form and essence of a body of a certain kind” (10.1035b14-16).

More to the point for our inquiry, why would Aristotle introduce the doctrine of individual forms where he does in *Metaphysics* XII? What relevance might it have for his overall argument?

TRADITIONAL COMMENTATORS

Ps.-Alexander (684,8-27)

What Aristotle is saying is that we can speak of some causes universally and some not. For we will say that the cause of the universal statue is the universal sculptor, but that the cause of this statue is this sculptor. After assuming this he mentions “the first” (that is, proximate) “principles of all things” or “this first [thing]”, that is, that which is particular. For this Sophroniscus is a principle and cause of Socrates. Therefore, the principle of all things is this [thing] in actuality and this particular [thing] in potentiality (that is, this particular matter). For the cause of individuals is an individual: for example, Peleus is [the cause] of Achilles, and this B is the cause of this syllable BA. For the universals do not exist, and if universals existed in reality and by themselves, their causes would be universal; for example, if there were a universal human being, its cause would also be a universal, and of the <general> syllable BA, [the cause would be] the universal B; but it does not exist.

In addition to the aforementioned causes, there are also other causes and other principles. And these are “the forms of substances, but different things have different ones”, as he has said. For instance, horses and human beings have different [forms]. Not only do different genera have different causes, but also things that belong to the same species are different, albeit in number. For your matter is different from mine in number, and similarly the form and efficient cause, “though [they are] the same in universal account”. That is, for in so far as all things depend on matter, form, privation, and efficient cause, the causes of all things are the same, but in a way my causes are different from your causes, not the same.

#### Themistius (11,5)

In investigating the first cause you should also keep in mind that some of the principles are universal and some of them are particular [and] individual [ones], just like “this” is the principle of “this”, and a specific person is a cause of a specific person; not the universal, since the universal does not exist—but this [man] is the father of this [man] and, for example, this water is the cause of this water\*. But if the universal is posited as a cause, it would be a cause of a universal, e.g. substance to substance and quantity to quantity. But we should seek the principles in truth in the particular things, for matter is not a person’s matter without qualification, but your matter is your matter and my matter is my matter, and similarly your form is your form, and my form is my form—not universal form, the the particular [form]—and likewise that which moves.

\*The original Greek text of Themistius’ paraphrase is lost, and what we have a Hebrew translation of an Arabic translation from the Greek. The Arabic words for ‘water’ and the letter B are similar, so that the Greek text may have had ‘B’ instead of ‘water’.

#### Aquinas (2482-3)

Further, we must note that some of these causes can be expressed universally and some not. . . . But since there is no subsisting universal man, there will be no universal principle of universal man, but only this particular man will be the principle of this particular man. For example, Peleus is the cause of Achilles, and your father is the cause of you; and *b* and *a* taken either absolutely or particularly are the causes of the syllable *ba*. . . . Further, there are different causes and elements of different things, as has been stated, and the causes of things which do not belong to the same genus, as colors, sounds, substances and quantity, are different, except in a proportional way. And the causes of things which belong to the same species are different, not in species, but in number. That is, your matter and form and moving cause are different from mine, although they are the same in their universal intelligibility. For soul and body are the form of matter of man, but this soul and this body are the form and matter of this man.

## RECENT COMMENTATORS

The controversy over individual forms is taken up by a host of recent commentators, who remain in fundamental disagreement (see references in Judson 2019, 139 n. 9).

Defenders of individual form include Frede (2000, 25-6): “Each particular sensible substance, as well as having its own matter and moving cause, also has its own form. . . I conclude that Aristotle here [at 1071a27-9] does commit himself to individual forms.” Frede with Patzig (1988) had earlier argued that primary substance in *Metaphysics* VII is the individual form of an ordinary substance, such as a human or a horse.

Opponents of the individual form point to other passages which indicate that the principle of individuation is matter rather than form, e.g. *Metaph.* XII.8.1034a5-8: “And when we have the whole, such and such a form in these flesh and bones, [this is] Callias and Socrates; and they are different due to their matter (for that is different) but the same in form (for the form is indivisible)”. Gill (1994) argues that 1071a27-9 only “appears to support a notion of proprietary matter and form—matter and form individuated with reference to the objects whose matter and form they are. Here physical objects are treated as the basic particulars.” Proponents of individual form, however, object that this does not do full justice to the clause: “**because there is a different one for different individuals**”. For this implies that things belonging to the same species differ because they have different causes, rather than the reverse.

## DISAGREEMENTS OVER THE TEXT

Note: The following two paragraphs concern how to construe the Greek text. I’ve tried to make the points intelligible to readers without Greek, but if you find “It’s Greek to me!” don’t worry about it. Our class discussion will focus on the philosophical questions: what does the doctrine of individual forms imply? Is it compatible with Aristotle’s wider philosophical views? What relevance, if any, might the doctrine have for the overall argument of *Metaphysics* XII?]

Modrak (1979, 384), another sceptic, argues that the passage does not imply that form is individuated in any sense. She contends that the common translation “**your matter and form and mover, and mine**” is misleading, because the possessive pronouns *sê* (your) and *emê* (mine) are feminine and modify only the feminine noun *hulê* (matter). The nouns *eidōs* (form) and *kinêsan* (mover) are neuter and should have neuter relative pronouns. She offers the following as a more literal translation: “And of things in the same species, these are different not by species but because the [cause] of one individual differs from that of another, as your matter and the form and the moving principle *and my matter*”. Against Modrak’s proposal Frede and Patzig object that in the context the possessive pronoun *sê* (your) refers to all three explanatory principles—matter, form, and mover—so that *emê* (mine) does so as well. The neuter relative pronouns for *eidōs* (form) and *kinêsan* (mover) are missing for merely stylistic reasons (1988,52). It is difficult to settle this issue because there are not clear parallels to this construction elsewhere in Aristotle.

Konstan and Ramelli (2006) argue that the individual form interpretation can be avoided if the possessive pronouns are understood on the basis of the immediately preceding clause: “And [the causes] of things in the same species are different, not in species but **because there is something different in each of the different individuals**: your matter and form and mover, and mine; but they are the same in universal account.” They take the term “something different” (*allo*) to refer narrowly to a specific cause, namely matter (*hulê*), which individuates the form and moving cause in the case of each individual. Judson remarks, “I do not think it can mean that”—without further explanation (171). Instead, Judson translates the clause as “**but because there is a different one for different individuals**” and takes it to support the preceding words “[the causes] of things in the same species are different” taking *allo* (a different one) to refer to an instance of each kind of the causes: namely, matter, form, and mover.

Suffice it to say that the debate over individual form is far from over.

#### REFERENCES

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