

COMMENTATORS ON *METAPHYSICS* Λ.1

To: Participants of “Aristotle’s Philosophical Theology”
From: Fred Miller

Our discussion on January 27 will focus on a central passage in *Metaphysics* Λ.1. For your convenience the English translations of this passage and of the interpretations of five commentators are provided below. Please study these passages and be prepared to discuss the following questions:

What are the different interpretations?

Where do the commentators agree, and where do they disagree? (In particular, to what extent do Alexander of Aphrodisias and ps.-Alexander converge or diverge?)

When one commentator criticizes another, how cogent is the criticism? (Is the criticism at times based on a misunderstanding?)

Which interpretation seems most correct all things considered?

Aristotle’s text

Λ.1.1069a18-21 Περὶ τῆς οὐσίας ἢ θεωρίας· τῶν γὰρ οὐσιῶν αἱ ἀρχαὶ καὶ τὰ αἴτια ζητοῦνται. καὶ γὰρ εἰ ὡς ὅλον τι τὸ πᾶν, ἢ οὐσία πρῶτον μέρος· καὶ εἰ τῷ ἐφεξῆς, κἂν οὕτως πρῶτον ἢ οὐσία, εἶτα τὸ ποιόν, εἶτα τὸ ποσόν.

Translation

The investigation is about substance; for it is to substances that the principles and causes inquired about belong. For both, if the universe exists as a whole of some sort, substance is its first part; and, even if it exists through succession, substance is in this way also what is first, then quality, and then quantity.

Alexander of Aphrodisias (fr 3 ap. Averroes *Tafsīr* 1408)

Alexander says: [Aristotle] uses here ‘universe’ instead of ‘existent’ as if he were saying: we say that the inquiry is concerned with substance because if somebody believes that being is as it were a single continuous totality, then he believes that substance is its first part; if he thinks that some parts of it are prior in existence to others and that it has a first and a second, then he is even more inclined to believe that substance is the true existent.

Alexander says: this kind of priority possessed by substance is the doctrine of Aristotle; it is what he has expounded before; he mentions the two views as a precaution, not because he believes in the first kind of priority. Since it has been shown that being has a first which is substance and a second [i.e. the non-substantial categories], anyone who investigates the principles of being *qua* being must necessarily inquire into the principles of substance. This is the meaning of what Alexander has to say in this section and his interpretation is correct.

Themistius (ap. Averroes *Tafsīr* 1410-11)

As for Themistius, we find that he interprets the passage in the following terms: the whole, be it unified like the unity of the organs in the human body and the parts in the body of plants, or be it composed of elements in contact with one another, like the composition of a house and a boat, or

be it composed of discrete elements, like the composition of an army and a city, the first of all its parts is substance, whose position in the whole is like the position of the heart in the totality of the animal's body. But if its order is not according to one of these kinds, but rather like the existence in numbers of the one, then the two, then the three, or like the existence in figures made up of straight lines of the triangle first, then the square, then, in the same way, substance comes first, then condition [i.e. quality], then amount [i.e. quantity] and the likes, because the existence of substance is prior to everything that follows it, just as the one is prior to all the other numbers and the triangle to all the figures. This is what this man has to say in summarizing this passage.

His commentary on the first section is close to Alexander, I mean when the Sage [i.e. Aristotle] says: "if this universe is like a totality". However, he understands by "totality" three species: either the totality composed of dissimilar parts united one to another, or in contact like manufactured objects, or discrete like the parts of an army and the parts of a city. But this addition is meaningless, because nobody supposed that the parts of being which are the ten categories are in contact or spatially discrete. As for his commentary on the second section: "it is like a sequence of things", as numbers follow one another and surfaces follow one another, it is a bad commentary, for the priority found in numbers and surfaces is the priority existing within one genus, whereas the priority of substance to the other categories is not the priority of things belonging to one single genus, but it belongs to the genus of the priority of one thing to the other things related to it. So Alexander's commentary on this section is the correct one.

Averroes (Tafsīr 1409-10, 1413)

[Alexander] says: it is possible to understand by "like a totality", "genus" and by "its first part", "species". It is as though he were saying: for if being is a genus, its first species is substance. But this interpretation is weak for in a true genus, some of its species are not prior to others, but the species of the genus are all in the same rank.

I say: in my view, Aristotle means by this statement that being must denote one genus and one nature or several genera; however it may be, one will immediately understand that substance is prior to the rest; for many of the things which are in one genus are prior to the rest; for many of the things which are in one genus are prior to others in that genus just as some substances are prior to others. Priority and posteriority may be found in one and the same genus and in the different genera which are predicable in relation to one thing, as is the case with the term "being" applied to the ten categories. Accordingly, one can understand by "totality" the compound whole, I mean the individual and universal [sc. being?] composed of the species in which there is priority and posteriority.

. . . Aristotle here uses "totality" instead of "genus" only to avoid the difficulty which seized Alexander, since in "genus" there is what is predicated by synonymy and what is predicated according to priority and posteriority. This is why he prefers the term "totality" instead of "genus"; if, therefore, somebody understands in this passage in the sense of that [i.e. latter] kind of genus, it is a correct interpretation.

But Themistius did not understand this passage and interpreted it in the wrong way. He transferred the meaning of the first section to that of the second section and gave of the first an interpretation which does not correspond to the position of substance with reference to the other categories, but he understands one of the two relations, namely that which is in one genus, and rejects the true relation of the substance to the other categories. The commentary of Alexander on that section aims at completeness but is not complete, and the commentary of Themistius is a

pure error. The reason for that is the deficiency of Alexander's commentary, for that man, I mean Themistius, seems merely to be intent on epitomizing Alexander's commentary.

Aquinas (Commentary 2416-18)

[2416]First [Aristotle] states his thesis. He says that in this science "the study," i.e., the principal inquiry, has to do with substances. . . . [2417] He proves his thesis in four ways. The first proof runs thus. Since substance is prior to the other kinds of beings, the first science should be one that is chiefly concerned with the primary kind of being. He shows that substance is the primary kind of being by using an analogous case in the realm of sensible things, among which order is found in two ways. One kind of order is found among sensible things inasmuch as the parts of any whole have a certain natural arrangement: for example, the first part of an animal is the heart, and the first part of a house the foundation. Another kind of order is found among sensible things inasmuch as some follow others and one thing is not constituted from them either by continuity or by contact. It is in this sense that one speaks of the first and second lines of an army. Hence, just as there is some first part in any whole, and also some first entity among things that follow one another, so too substance is the first of all other beings. This is what he means when he says "For if the totality." i.e., the universe of beings, is a kind of whole, substance is its first part, just as the found is the first part of a house. And if beings are like the things that follow one another, substance again will be first, and then quantity, and then the other categories.

[2418] But Averroes, failing to consider that this statement is analogical because he considered it impossible for anyone to think that all the other genera of beings should be parts of one continuous whole, departs from the obvious sense of the text and explains it in a different way. He says that by these two orders Aristotle meant the twofold relationship which can be conceived between things. The first is that beings are related as things having one nature and one genus, which would be true if being were their common genus, or in whatever way it might be common to them. He says that this is Aristotle's meaning when he says "If the totality of things is a kind of whole." The second is that beings are related as things that have nothing in common. He says that this is Aristotle's meaning when he says "And if things constitute a whole by reason in succession"; for in either case it follows that substance is prior to the other kinds of being.

Ps.-Alexander (669,1-21)

First, then, Aristotle distinguishes the ways in which it is possible to think of substance among the ten categories, saying, 'for both if the universe exists as a whole of some sort, substance is its first part' (1069a19-20), that is, substance will be the first part whether we understand all perceptible substance together with the accidents as a sort of unity, or we think of the ten categories as broken up and separated from each other and lying in succession, such that, say, quantity is first, then quality, then substance, and then the rest. And in the latter case substance will be prior to the others, then quantity, then quality, and the rest similarly; for the latter alternative is indicated by "even if [the universe exists] /10/ through succession", that is, if we think of the categories as existing not as a unity but in succession and not existing within substance.

But since the statement is still in a way rather unclear, let us make it clearer with an example. Socrates is a substance, but he is also white as well as philosophical and musical. Therefore, of the whole that is composed of the substance of Socrates and the white /15/ and philosophical and musical, the musical is a part; similarly, Socrates is also a part of the compound whole that is composed of the white and musical and philosophical and Socrates.

And just as in the case of these things, so it is also with the entire perceptible substance and the nine [other] categories. For in the case of these things, too, the substance will be a part of the whole composed of perceptible substance and quantity and quality and the remaining categories; /20/ and similarly quantity will also be a part of what is generated from substance and quantity and the other categories.