Metaphysics Λ 1

The Inquiry is about Substance

Structure and Purpose of *Metaphysics* Λ 1

- The chapter divides reasonably cleanly into four sections, excluding the end (1069b3-7), which we will treat with Λ 2, to which it plainly belongs.

- The question of purpose is more complex, but, arguably, Λ 1 provides a template for the whole of *Metaphysics* Λ.

  - Not so much an introduction, but an imposition of a division which structures the book:

    - *Met*. Λ 1-5 deal with substance subject to change.

    - *Met*. Λ 6-10 deal with substance not subject to change.

Structure

- 1069a18-19: The inquiry (θεωρία) is about substance (οὐσία)

- 1069a19-30: Four (?) arguments for the priority of substance (οὐσία)

- 1069a30-36: Three types of substance: (i) perceptible and perishable; (ii) perceptible and eternal; and (iii) imperceptible

  - So, one might as well group them into one of two types: the perceptible and the imperceptible, or, if you prefer, the eternal and the temporary

    - The distinction which turns on the perceptible and the imperceptible is, however, Aristotle's main hinge: Λ 1-5 deal with perceptible substances, because they are subject to change, while Λ 6-10 turn to the topic of the imperceptible, changeless domain.

- 1069a36-b2: The suitable science for the study of these kinds of substance

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1069a18-19: What is being sought?

- The opening sentence:

  - 'The inquiry is about substance [or, being; οὐσία]; for the principles and causes of substances are being sought' (Met. Λ 1, 1069a18-19)

  - Περὶ τῆς οὐσίας ἡ θεωρία· τῶν γὰρ οὐσιῶν αἱ ἀρχαὶ καὶ τὰ αἴτια ζητοῦνται).

- Two observations:

  - The 'for' (γάρ) here appears appositional, such that the proper paraphrase would be, roughly, 'The inquiry is about substance—which is to say the principles and causes of substances are being sought.'

    - In any event the second clause does not seem to be given as a ground for the first.

  - More importantly, we observe a shift in the *Metaphysics* from:

    - The principles and causes of being just in so far as it is beings (τὸ ὂν ᾗ ὄν) are being sought (*Met*. Γ 1 1003α30-31, E 1 1025b1-2)

  - to

    - The principles and causes of substance (οὐσία) are being sought (*Met*. Γ 2 1003b17-19, Λ 1 1069a18-19).

Nested Principles?

- Two possibilities:

  - The principles of beings *qua* beings (ὄντα . . . ᾗ ὄντα; cf. *Met*. Γ 2, 1003b15-16) are the same principles as the principles of substances (οὐσίαι).

  - The principles of substances (οὐσίαι) are the principles of beings *qua* beings (ὄντα . . . ᾗ ὄντα), or of being *qua* being (τὸ ὂν ᾗ ὄν), because substances *are* the principles of beings in so far as they are beings (ὄντα . . . ᾗ ὄντα), with the result that we have first principles when we have the principles of the principles being *qua* being (τὸ ὂν ᾗ ὄν).

    - Principles would in this sense be nested.

    - This would in effect cast *Met*. Λ in the role of determining the ultimate or final principles of being *qua* being (τὸ ὂν ᾗ ὄν), namely the principles of substance (οὐσία).

1069a19-30: Four arguments for the priority of substance (οὐσία)

- 1069a19-21: An argument from the totality of things

- 1069a21-24: Being without qualification

- 1069a24: Separation

- 1069a24-30: Endoxic consensus (?)

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- 1069a24-30: Endoxic consensus (?)

Approaching Privileged Ontology

- A *flat* ontology:

    - accepts being as binary and non-scalar

    - draws no MLI-categorial distinctions at the general level of being

        - As an example: universal mereological aggregation coupled with identity by aggregation

            - Basically Quinean in temperament: the first and last question of ontology for the flat ontologist is refreshingly brief and direct: what exists?

                - The answer, to the delight of Quine, the maximal proponent of his own temperament, is briefer and more direct still: 'Everything.'

- A *privileged* ontology:

    - may or may not accept the scalarity of being

    - accepts MLI-categorial distinctions at the level of being

        - As an example: Aristotle's categorialism

            - So, basically Aristotelian in temperament

Aristotelian in Temperament

- Privileged ontology offers the ontologist a far wider remit.

  - If not the first, then the dominant question for the privileged ontologist is neither brief nor immediately refreshing: which kinds of things are basic relative to other kinds of things—because there are kinds of of things and of some of them are basic relative to others—and wherein does their basicness reside?

    - Already the privileged ontologist is engaged in a much more complex and multifarious task than the flat ontologist.

      - She is implicated in addressing a question whose answer demands high-level taxonomizing.

      - Plainly, in any event, her question will not admit of the Anglo-Saxon brevity so prized by Quine.

Two Approaches to Privilege

- Scalar Version: Some things exist more—or more fully—than other things.

  - e.g. The *ens perfectissimum* exists more—or more fully—than some pond scum.

- Binary Version: Being is binary, but some beings are categorially primary relative other beings.

  - Some beings *metaphysically depend* upon other beings, where this dependence may, crucially, be non-causal.

Priority

- Aristotle's two most common way of speaking of priority is to appeal to twin notions of:

  - existing *unqualifiedly* (or simply or absolutely; ἁπλῶς—this is a word known mainly by its contrasts: opposed to *in some respect* (κατά τι; *Top.* 115b12); opposed to *in relation to something* (πρός τι, *APr.* 41a5)

    - Cf. *Met.* Z 1 1028a30-31: '. . . so that what is primarily and not <merely> in some respect but rather unqualifiedly would be substance' (. . . ὥστε τὸ πρώτως ὂν καὶ οὐ τὶ ὂν ἀλλ' ὂν ἁπλῶς ἡ οὐσία ἂν εἴη.

    - *separation* (χωριστόν; *Met.* Z 1, 1028a34): 'for none of the other categories is separate, but substance alone' (τῶν μὲν γὰρ ἄλλων κατηγορημάτων οὐθὲν χωριστόν, αὕτη δὲ μόνη)

  - He appeals to a form of asymmetry which serves to designate some beings as *prior* to other beings.

  - This provides the context for the second and third arguments for substance in Λ 1.

Second Argument:
Being without Qualification

- At the same time, these are not, in a word, beings without qualification, but are qualities and movements <of beings>; otherwise even the not-pale and the not-straight <would be beings without qualification>. We do say, at any rate, that even these things are, that there is the not-pale. (*Met.* Λ 1, 1069a21-24)

- *ἅμα δὲ οὐδ᾽ ὄντα ὡς εἰπεῖν ἁπλῶς ταῦτα, ἀλλὰ ποιότητες καὶ κινήσεις, ἢ καὶ τὸ οὐ λευκὸν καὶ τὸ οὐκ εὐθύ· λέγομεν γοῦν εἶναι καὶ ταῦτα, οἷον ἔστιν οὐ λευκόν.*

The Argument

(1) A being is primary if and only if it exists unqualifiedly.

(2) We can say that qualities and movements (and by extension other categories and changes) exist unqualifiedly only if we can equally say that not-pale and not-straight exist unqualifiedly.

(3) We surely cannot say that such things exist unqualifiedly.

(4) So, we cannot say that qualities and movements exist unqualifiedly.

(5) We can, by contrast, say this about substance.

(6) So, substance alone is primary.

Starting with (3)

- (3) We surely cannot say that such things [as not-pale and not-straight] exist unqualifiedly.

  - These might be *privations,* that is, lacks keyed to some positive trait, like *being blind.*

  - Or they might be flat negations, where, e.g. the not-pale could be anything at all which is not pale, whether categorially suited to being pale or not (suited: someone just leaving the beach; unsuited: a woebegone gaze across a crowded ballroom in the direction of a lost love).

- In either case: we cannot say that such things are unqualifiedly, because they are manifestly keyed to other things in the very specification of what they are.

  - This will seem initially plausible if we are prepared to take the locution extensionally rather than intensionally.

We do say. . .

- We do?

- This depends in part on how much freight 'There are. . .' is made to carry:

  - If it means, there is such a thing as the not-pale, then it seems an odd and unsustainable suggestion

  - If it means, we say that some things are not pale, then it seems unobjectionable, but it is not obvious that the sort of referential parity presumed in (2) is sustainable.

    - *Met*. Δ 7, 1017a18-19: 'In this sense, too, the not-pale is said to be, because that with which it co-incides is' (οὕτω δὲ λέγεται καὶ τὸ μὴ λευκὸν εἶναι, ὅτι ᾧ συμβέβηκεν ἐκεινο ἔστιν; cf. *Met*. Α 4, 985a6-7, Α 5 986b28, Γ2, *1003b10, Ζ 4, *1030a25, Κ 11, 1067b24, Ν 1089a4-15).

So, to (2)

(2) We can say that qualities and movements (and by extension other categories and changes) exist unqualifiedly only if we can equally say that not-pale and not-straight exist unqualifiedly.

- The suggestion here is that just as designating something as not-φ perforce constrains us to deny the thing so designated as not spoken of unqualifiedly, so designating something as a quality or a change implicates us in affirming that the thing so designated is not spoken of unqualifiedly:

    - Necessarily, even change is a change *of* something.

    - Necessarily, every quality is a quality *of* something.

        - Or, if you like, whenever we say that something qualifies, we say there is something qualified.

            - To take a case initially favourable to Aristotle's way of thinking here: whenever we speak of a conscious state, we speak, finally, of a state *of* someone. Conscious states do not flitter about unmoored.

                - Qualities and changes, like conscious states, may be spoken of abstractly (consciousness, pallor), finally we are speaking of a conscious or pale someone.

Assessment

- Although the argument is too brief to be probative, it does not seem implicated in:

    - Any confusion between existential and predictive uses of the verb *to be* (cf. Bostock on *Met.* Z 4 1030a17-27), or in complete and incomplete uses of the verb to be, if those are meant to be different distinctions (cf. Brown, 1986)

    - Any question-begging rejection of the thought that the not-ϕ exists in its own right.

    - It does, however, rely on the thought that items in the category of substance are such that the following schema does not apply to them:

        - If x exists, then there is some y such that x's being-ϕ requires y's being-ψ

            - So, e.g., a motion requires something which is in motion; a quality requires something's being qualified, and so forth.

            - Does this delivery the wanted priority? Including the necessary asymmetry?

Third Argument: Separation

- 'Further, none of the others [*scil.* of the other categories] is separate' (*Met.* Λ 1, 1069a24; ἔτι οὐδὲν τῶν ἄλλων χωριστόν.).

- A short argument, we can agree.

The Argument

(1) A being is primary if and only if it is separate.

(2) Substance alone is separate.

(3) Hence, substance alone is primary.

Separation

- Separation is a two-place predicate: if *x* is separate, then there is some *y* from which *x* is separate.

  - Separation is not only a two-place predicate, but one expressing priority in the form of an *asymmetry* between substances and other categories of being.

  - If substances enjoy this manner of asymmetry, they have a legitimate claim to privilege.

Two Relevant Passages

- *Cat.* 5, 2b2-6: 'Accordingly, other things are either said of primary substances as subjects or in them as subjects. Hence, if the primary substances did not exist, it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist.'

- ὥστε τὰ ἄλλα πάντα ἤτοι καθ᾽ ὑποκειμένων τῶν πρώτων οὐσιῶν λέγεται ἢ ἐν ὑποκειμέναις αὐταῖς ἐστίν. μὴ οὐσῶν οὖν τῶν πρώτων οὐσιῶν ἀδύνατον τῶν ἄλλων τι εἶναι·

- *Met.* Z 1 2018a31-36: '*Primary* is meant in several ways, but substance is primary in all ways—in account, in knowledge, and in time. For none of the other categories is separate, but substance alone. And this is primary in account—for it is necessary the account of substance be present in each of them.

- πολλαχῶς μὲν οὖν λέγεται τὸ πρῶτον· ὅμως δὲ πάντως ἡ οὐσία πρῶτον, καὶ λόγῳ καὶ γνώσει καὶ χρόνῳ. τῶν μὲν γὰρ ἄλλων κατηγορημάτων οὐθὲν χωριστόν, αὕτη δὲ μόνη· καὶ τῷ λόγῳ δὲ τοῦτο πρῶτον (ἀνάγκη γὰρ ἐν τῷ ἑκάστου λόγῳ τὸν τῆς οὐσίας ἐνυπάρχειν)

Three Forms of Asymmetry

- *x* is *existentially* prior to *y iff* (i) *x* and can exist without *y*, but (i) *y* cannot exist without *x*

- *x* is *prior in account* to *y iff* (i) necessarily, an account of *y* makes reference to the account of *x*; and (ii) it is not the case that an account of *x* makes reference to an account of *y*

- *x* is *unqualifiedly prior* to *y iff* (i) what it is to be *y* depends on what it is to be *x* in some respect; and (ii) what it is to be *x* does not depend on *y* in any respect

Difficulties for Consideration

- *Existential priority* is too course-grained: substances cannot exist without their having some qualities or other, and so forth.

    - So, we do not have the wanted asymmetry.

- *Priority in account* (in λογῷ) (so, e.g. *Met.* H 1, 1042a26-31): is more fine grained, but, to begin, seems possibly derivable from categorialism but not a principle capable of generating or undergirding categorialism.

    - That said, it does seem to deliver the wanted asymmetry.

- *Unqualified priority* threatens to collapse into a form of priority in account.

    - Same again for Aristotle's suggestion that x can be separate in *being* (in οὐσίᾳ) (so, e.g. *Met.* θ 8, 1050a4-1051a2), where this seems either a notional variant on unqualified priority (and so ultimately a kind of priority in account) or simply a primitive notion not to be explicated, in which case the priority of substance would be a brute fact.

- These questions we need to keep alive, because separation comes back in *Met.* Λ 3, 5, and 7.