

Theory and History of Ontology by Raul Corazzon | e-mail: [rc@ontology.co](mailto:rc@ontology.co)

## Theophrastus "On First Principles" (known as his *Metaphysics*): A Debate with Aristotle

### INTRODUCTION: THE OBLIVION OF METAPHYSICS IN HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

"It would not be quite accurate to claim that Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, like Hume's *Treatise*, "fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur among the zealots." First, there was no press. Second, the *Metaphysics* would not have been published as a book had there been a press. And finally, the *Metaphysics* was not completely ignored by Aristotle's school. Still, if one peruses Fritz Wehrli's monumental *Die Schule des Aristoteles* and notes the few scattered and desultory references to ontological or theological topics, one cannot resist forming the impression that the *Metaphysics* is pretty largely an academic failure. Even Aristotle's formidable disciple and colleague Theophrastus, who himself actually composed a treatise on metaphysics, seems to write with a remarkably limited understanding of the work of his predecessor in this area.

(1) Apart from a few references to book twelve, there is almost total silence regarding the central features of Aristotle's work as they are recognized today. There is nothing about the identification of first philosophy with wisdom and theology and a science of causes; nothing of the *aporai* facing the construction of such a science; nothing of the doctrine of *pros en* equivocity or of the conclusion that being in the primary sense is separate form. Nor is there a word about the dialectical treatment of sensible substance in the central books of the *Metaphysics*, which has so exercised contemporary scholars. The list of the disappearing doctrines could easily be expanded and reconfirmed by considering other philosophers both inside and outside the Lyceum. We must not be tempted to account for this extraordinary state of affairs by supposing that Aristotle's successors regarded his metaphysical doctrines as too sublime for comment, for both Theophrastus and Strato, the first and second heads of the Lyceum after Aristotle, appear actually to have rejected the argument for the existence of an unmoved mover.'

Strato's argument amounts to the claim that nature alone is sufficient to account for motion, a claim that must have been intended to recall Aristotle's own admission that if separate substance does not exist, then there is no special science of substance apart from physics (cf. *Met.* 6.1.1026a27-29). Since Aristotle adds that the putative science of separate substance is first philosophy and the science of being qua being, Strato's denial of the need for the hypothesis of an unmoved mover is nothing short of a rejection of the entire enterprise of the *Metaphysics*. And this from within the Peripatos!

If we look beyond the Lyceum to the tradition of Aristotelian commentaries, beginning with Alexander of Aphrodisias, we do indeed find something more like reverence for the words of the founder, but hardly any awareness at all of the problematic and crucial connection between the specific theological arguments in the *Metaphysics* and the science of being qua being. Though the extant corpus of Aristotelian commentaries includes four works on the *Metaphysics*, there exists not a single commentary by one hand on the entire work as preserved and edited by Andronicus of Rhodes in the first century B.C. Alexander's commentary ends at book five and is completed by an anonymous continuator; Themistius has a commentary, or more accurately a paraphrase, of book twelve alone; Syrianus comments on books three, four, thirteen, and fourteen; Asclepius halts his commentary at book seven.

In the face of this modest harvest, one might well conceive the notion that the *Metaphysics* was doomed from the beginning to bear meager fruit. (3)

The dominance of Stoicism throughout the Hellenistic period explains in part the near oblivion into which metaphysics in general and Aristotle's work in particular were cast. A central principle of Stoic theoretical philosophy is the refusal -- perhaps for methodological reasons as much as anything else -- to countenance the existence of immaterial entities. Accordingly, physics becomes Stoic first philosophy, and theology becomes a branch of physics (cf. *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 2.42; cited hereafter as SVF). Within such a system there is little conceptual space for isolating being as a subject for investigation, and, especially, for raising Aristotelian *aporiai* regarding its nature. The evidence for this claim is to be found in the corpus of Stoic fragments, where a science of being *qua* being makes no appearance at all, not even as a dragon to be slain. It is as if it had never existed. (4) Considering that Stoics, and to a lesser extent Epicureans and Academic Sceptics, were the primary purveyors of theoretical philosophy throughout the Hellenistic period, it is hardly surprising that the doctrines of the *Metaphysics* simply lay dormant. (5)" (pp. 3-5)

## Notes

(1) Theophrastus did not of course title his work *meta ta physika*, but he does describe it as dealing with first principles (Theo., *Met.* 4a 1-2) and as distinct from physics (ibid., 2-4) and mathematics (ibid., 4b6-8). The first principles are apparently reducible to a unique first principle, i.e., god (ibid., 4615). As Giovanni Reale, "The Historical Importance of the *Metaphysics* of Theophrastus in Comparison with the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle," appendix to *The Concept of First Philosophy and the Unity of the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. John Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 364-91, shows, Theophrastus closely follows *Metaphysics* 12 in many respects. But apart from these and some less convincing parallels from *Metaphysics* 2, there is little awareness shown by Theophrastus of any connection between theology and a science of being *qua* being.

(2) For Theophrastus's criticism, see his *Metaphysics* 563-10, and for Strato, see the testimony contained in Cicero, *Academica* 2.38.

(3) See Gerard Verbeke's "Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Viewed by the Ancient Greek Commentators," in D. J. O'Meara, ed., *Studies in Aristotle* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981) 114ff., for a useful summary of some of the basic interpretations in the commentators. Verbeke concludes that there is a consistent interpretation among the commentaries that may be aptly termed "Neoplatonic." We should distinguish, however, a Neoplatonic interpretation of Aristotle from a Neoplatonic refutation of Aristotle, as is to be found in Plotinus.

(4) Zeno, Chrysippus, and Antipater are all reported to have written books titled *Peri Ousias*. Of course, these Stoics all identify *ousia* with matter. The few scattered references to *tò on*, which identify it with body and make it a species of the genus *tò ti*, betray little more than a lingering memory of some Aristotelian terminology stripped of its argumentative context. The Stoic position was perhaps taken to follow immediately from the principle that immaterial entities cannot exist; hence, argument indicating the contrary can be safely ignored. F. H. Sandbach, *Aristotle and the Stoics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), has argued the revisionary case that, for the Stoics, Aristotle was not rejected but largely unknown. But the lack of hard evidence, rightly insisted upon by Sandbach, is also explicable by the hypothesis that Aristotelian arguments, in metaphysics at least, were rendered irrelevant on the above principle.

(5) Cf. Fritz Wehrli, *Die Schule des Aristoteles: Text und Kommentar* (Basel/Stuttgart: Benno Schwabe & Co., 1959), 10:95-128, who suggests in a *Rückblick* over the material he has collected that the disintegration of the Peripatetic school was owing to its undogmatic and aporetic character as compared to its Academic, Epicurean, and Stoic rivals. He also suggests that conflict in doctrine between the *Metaphysics* and the early dialogues of Aristotle might account for diffidence or confusion on the part of his disciples: "der Zerfall der Schule hatte seine tiefste Ursache im Werke des Meisters selbst" (ibid., 96). Undoubtedly, there is much in what Wehrli has to say. One may also add the instability of the Peripatetic foundation owing to political reasons.

From: Lloyd P. Gerson, "Plotinus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Metaphysics", in: Lawrence P. Schrenk (ed.), *Aristotle in Late Antiquity*,

Washington: Catholic University Press 1994, pp. 3-21.

### SUMMARY OF *On First Principles*, KNOWN AS *Theophrastus' Metaphysics*

"Chapter I. The nature of the relation between the first principles and sensible things; II. Problems about the impulse of sensible things towards the first principle; III. The importance of deducing the observed facts from the first principles; IV. Are the first principles definite or indefinite?; V. The supposed immobility of the first principles; VI. Matter and form; VII: Good and evil; VIII: The multiplicity of being and of knowledge; IX; The limits of teleological explanation."

From: *Theophrastus Metaphysics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1929. With translation, commentary and introduction by William David Ross and Francis Howard Fobes. Reprint: Hildesheim, Georg Olms 1967.

“What are first things? They are different from the world of nature, and are the objects of reason, not sense. (Here he adopts Aristotle's standard distinction, derived from Plato.) But how are these two related, and what are the objects of reason? They must either be in mathematical objects, or be something prior to these. If the latter, how many are they? He continues in an Aristotelian vein to say that they/it are the cause of motion, but themselves unmoved. They are objects of desire, and cause the rotation of the heavens. But if the prime mover is one, why do heavenly bodies move differently? If there are more than one, how is their influence harmonized? And why does love of the unmoved cause an imitation which is movement? After an interlude about the Platonists, he continues: anyhow the heavenly bodies, having desire, must also have soul, and the movement of soul, which is thought, is better than rotary movement. And what about the inferior parts of nature? And is rotation essential to the existence of heavenly bodies?

He then criticizes Plato, and some of his followers, including Speusippus (died 339 BO, for not carrying through their accounts to the end, but considers a possible reply, that metaphysics is only concerned with first principles. So are first principles definite, or indefinite, in the sense of shapeless and merely potential? At this point it is difficult to be sure whether he is talking of first things in the sense in which the hot, the cold, the wet, and the dry may be seen as first things, or about the fundamental principles (laws) which govern what exists. So when he asks if they are moving or motionless, it could be that the former are in motion but the latter, being abstract, are motionless. In any case, the universe is complex. Among particular first things are form and matter, one of Aristotle's basic dichotomies.

What is the status of matter? This problem was developed in his *De Anima*, in which he pointed out the similarities between prime matter and potential intellect, both being merely potential, and probably explained their differences in terms of how each is related to forms. Other pairs then occupy him, especially good and evil -- Why is there so much evil in the world? -- and he mentions the void as the contrary of being. But there are different types of being, and knowledge is of similarity in difference at various levels. (Here again he adopts Aristotle's distinctions.) There are different methods of knowledge for different subject.

One must stop somewhere in searching for causes. It is often difficult to assign final causes, as with floods, male breasts, the shapes of inanimate objects, and many other things. Perhaps these result automatically from the rotation of the heavens. Alternatively there is a limit to purposiveness, and the desire for what is good.

Though wide ranging, this is largely a criticism of many of the assumptions on which Aristotle's system is based, and some people believe that it

was so devastating that interest in metaphysics ceased in the Peripatos. Theophrastus's successor, Strato (died 269 BC), concentrated on natural science.” (p. 894)

From: Pamela M. Huby, "Theophrastus", in: Hans Burkhardt & Barry Smith (eds.), *Handbook of Metaphysics and Ontology*, Munchen: Philosophia Verlag 1991, vol. II.

## THE METAPHYSICS BY THEOPHRASTUS

"Theophrastus recognized the need to justify the assumption that natural science involves principles, causes, and elements. He also warned against inquiring into the cause of everything. Nevertheless, his physics is in large measure an attempt to trace observed phenomena back to principles of order and determination. He believed in the divinity of the heavens and the eternity of the universe and held that the heavenly bodies possess regularity in the highest degree. However, he denied a clean break between the heavenly and sublunary spheres, holding that the universe is a single system in which the same physical laws apply to all its parts. Theophrastus considered the possibility that the sun might be a form of fire, but the discussion is aporetic and not proof that Theophrastus rejected Aristotle's fifth element, aether, as Strato did. Theophrastus does, however, appear to depart from Aristotle by analyzing place in terms of arrangement and position with reference to the whole universe.

Academic discussion and Aristotle's postulation of an unmoved mover form the background to Theophrastus's treatise on metaphysics. Many of the views discussed are considered plausible, but often we do not know what Theophrastus accepted as part of his own theory. It is probable that Theophrastus rejected Aristotle's unmoved mover and laid greater emphasis on the limits of teleological explanation. Like both Plato and Aristotle, he held that the study of first principles is more definite and ordered than the study of nature. Intelligible and physical entities are related as prior and posterior, but further specification of the relationship is not clearly provided. Most likely Theophrastus posited an unbroken causal series, for he requires continual explanation of all phenomena." (p. 553)

From: "Theophrastus" by William W. Fortenbaugh and Josip Talanga, in: Donald J. Zeyl (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Classical Philosophy*, London; Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers,

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“The historical importance of this brief treatise on first philosophy by Theophrastus has not escaped some scholars who have been concerned with it. It is the most significant metaphysical text that we possess between the time of Aristotle and the flowering of the new philosophical schools of the Hellenistic period. The treatise has two different dimensions, one refers to Aristotle, the other, in a certain way, refers to Stoicism. A careful examination of the precise links which one aspect has to the other as well as in comparison with Aristotle and Stoicism has come only recently and is susceptible of further precisions as well as corrections and modifications.

The historical relations existing between the treatise of Theophrastus and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* has been recently studied by Jaeger, in connection with his well-known thesis on the genesis and development of Aristotle's metaphysical doctrine, as well as on the basis of his special interpretation of the development of theology and the doctrine of the immobile Mover.(1)

The other dimension of the treatise, which refers to Stoicism, has been investigated chiefly by Grumach.(2)

We intend to limit ourselves to a reexamination of the first point. To review the second point, it would be necessary to reexamine many problems concerning Stoicism, which would take us outside the limits of our subject.” (pp. 364, notes omitted)

## Notes

(1) Werner Jaeger, *Aristotle. Fundamentals of the History of His Development*, translated by Richard Robinson, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1948, pp. 349, 354-357.

(2) Ernst Grumach, *Physis und Agathon in der alten Stoa*, Berlin: Weidmann 1932

From: Giovanni Reale, *The Concept of First Philosophy and the Unity of the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1980, Appendix A. *The Historical Importance of the Metaphysics of Theophrastus in Comparison with the Metaphysics of Aristotle*.

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