

BOOK REVIEW

How Aristotle gets by in Metaphysics Zeta. By FRANK A. LEWIS. (Oxford: OUP, 2013. Pp. xvi + 324. Price £ 55.00.)

Aristotle's *Metaphysics Zeta* contains his considered views on primary substances. It is difficult and obscure, and it has generated a vast amount of literature. If I had to compile a list of books to read along with *Zeta*, *How Aristotle gets by in Metaphysics Zeta* by Frank Lewis would currently be among the top five.

How does Aristotle get by in *Zeta*? With a little help from his friends (p. i). Lewis' basic idea is that for the most part of *Zeta*, Aristotle seeks common ground with friends and enemies, in order to prepare the stage for his 'partisan' view, which he finally presents in Z 17. In a book about Aristotle's engagement with others, one might expect a fair deal of independent discussion of these other people. This, however, is not quite what Lewis delivers. For one thing, most of Aristotle's friends actually turn out to be 'other selves' of Aristotle (p. 18). Lewis distinguishes Aristotle *qua* author of *Zeta* from his other selves as follows: as long as Aristotle does not rely on the distinction between matter and form, he is not quite himself. This makes the division between Aristotle and his friends seem somewhat artificial. Further, the only writings of other ancient philosophers that Lewis addresses are four passages from Plato. After all, Aristotle turns out to be mostly talking to himself—his other selves and his versions of others.

Since the dividing line between Aristotle and his other selves is in terms of the distinction between form and matter, one might further expect some more detailed discussion of this distinction. One of Lewis' virtues is of course that he explains as much of the content of *Zeta* as he can in the absence of hylomorphism. Take, for instance, Z 3. The standard account is that in this chapter, Aristotle rejects his own earlier account of substance as ultimate subject of predication because he has come to adopt hylomorphism in the meantime. Lewis, in contrast, argues that Aristotle sets up the problem with the subject criterion without relying on the distinction between form and matter (p. 51), which he then brings in only by way of an afterthought (pp. 54–5). I like this interpretation, but it leaves us in the dark about Aristotle's conception of matter.

One result of Z 3 that we should keep in mind is the following picture of two stage predication (pp. 56–7). In one sense, accidents are predicated of substances. In a different sense, substances are predicated of a further underlying subject (which, in the partisan view, turns out to be matter). The key points are that the accidents of a substance do not end up being predicated of its matter (p. 58), and that the substance of a thing is not an accident of its matter (p. 61). It is predicated of its matter in a way that remains to be specified.

Lewis' discussion of Z 5 is helpful. Aristotle raises puzzles concerning accidents that are by definition found in a certain kind of subject. His example is 'the snub'. One might think, for instance, that 'snub' really means 'hollow nose', and conclude that 'snub nose' really mean 'hollow nose nose'. Lewis argues that Aristotle treats this as a fallacy (p. 108), and that he uses this fallacy to motivate the idea that something (a nose) can be part of a form (the snub) in a weak sense. In this sense, 'snub' does not quite mean 'hollow nose'; it means something more like 'hollow (as found in a nose)'. This will be important for Z 11, where Aristotle needs to steer a middle path between two claims: that the form of natural things includes their matter and that its form and matter are entirely separate. His answer is, I take it, that the form of natural things comes with implicit constraints on the kind of matter that may realize them.

In Z 6, targeted at Plato, Aristotle argues that primary substances are identical with their essences. The reason for this is simple: essences are prior to what they are essences of, and nothing is prior to what is primary. Therefore, if primary things have an essence, this essence cannot be distinct from them (p. 129). The resulting identity thesis will motivate one of the main arguments in Z 13: if the essence of a primary thing is identical with this thing, it cannot be shared among several distinct primary things, and thus cannot be universal (p. 205).

Z 13 has thrown off many readers. If substances are not universals, how can they possibly be defined, or predicated of matter? Lewis offers the following resolution: the substance of a thing is not universal with respect to this thing, but it may be universal with respect to its matter (p. 215). As Lewis notes, Plato might agree with Aristotle up to a certain point (p. 206). At least some versions of Plato's theory of forms involve two assumptions. (1) Only forms *are* exactly what they are, other things merely *participate* in them. (2) Forms do not participate in other forms. In Aristotle's terms, forms are substances only of themselves, and they are universal only with respect to their participants. However, Plato's forms also seem to be universal with respect to other forms (p. 208). For instance, both the human itself and the cat itself are animals. Now if forms do not participate in forms, we need some relation among them that is not quite the same as identity, but also not the same as participation.

We have seen a similar issue before: in Z 3's two stage picture of predication, substances are not accidents of their matter; they are predicated of it in a way

that remains to be understood. There are in fact two relations that we need to understand: Aristotle's relation of a substance to its matter and Plato's relation of a species to its genus. As I understand *Metaphysics* H 6, the solution will be the same in both cases.

Lewis, however, stops short of discussing H 6 in detail. His account of Aristotle's discussion of primary substance ends with Z 17. Also, Lewis' chapters on Z 17 are relatively short. The main innovation in Z 17 is the suggestion that substances are 'causes of being' (1041b28; p. 272). This puts considerable weight on the notion of a cause (*aition*; cf. p. 291 n. 46). Like the distinction between form and matter, however, this notion remains somewhat underdeveloped. Lewis assumes that causes (*aitia*) are 'things we cite in answer to Why? Questions' (p. 274), so that it looks as though the substance of a thing is the answer to the question 'Why does it exist?' I do not think that this is how we should understand the question. First, when Aristotle speaks of causes of *being*, he does so in order to contrast them with causes of *becoming*. That is, rather than explaining why things *exist*, substances explain what things *are*, as opposed to how they come to be. Second and more importantly, Aristotle says that causes are answers to the question *dia ti* (1041a10–1), and this is a quite general request for explanation. One can explain what a thing is, what it is for, or how it works. These are not answers to Why-questions. So the question to which substances answer need not be *why* a thing is what it is; the question might simply be *what* the thing is.

Aristotle emphasizes that one cannot explain a thing by itself. Rather, he says, to explain something is to show how one thing belongs to another thing (1041a10–1). For instance, we explain what thunder is by saying that it is noise (A) in the clouds (B), caused by the extinction of fire (C) (p. 277). This explanation involves three terms, and the explanation of what a thing is should follow a similar pattern. Aristotle suggests that we explain what a thing is as follows: its form (A) is present in its matter (B) by virtue of its substance (C) (1041b8–9).

I suspect that this is a point where a more detailed discussion of the H 6 conception of matter would sharpen our vision. Let me try to give a rough impression of what I think is missing. I have noted above that Z 3, 6, and 13 raise two questions: (1) How does a substance relate to its matter? (2) How does a species relate to its genus? In H 6, Aristotle takes up both questions and argues that we can understand how a genus and a differentia combine to yield a unified definition if we think of the genus as matter. He further suggests that the (proximate) matter of a substance is potentially this substance (1045b17–9). Aristotle's general idea seems to be that the matter of a substance is potentially many substances, and each substance is a way of realizing this potential. Likewise, a genus is potentially many species, and each species is one way of realizing this potential. This review is not the place to go into more detail, but two things might have become clear enough. First, more needs to be said about Aristotle's conception of matter. Secondly, the idea that matter

is potentially many substances might be difficult to square with Lewis' claim that substances are universal with respect to their matter. It looks like in the contrary, matter is universal with respect to substances. (In other writings, Lewis suggests a teleological view of matter and form that brings more light into this issue.)

So how does Lewis get by? His distinction between Aristotle and his friends may seem artificial, but it yields highly valuable results. It lead to a clear picture of Z, in which all pieces fit. This is a major achievement. On the downside, the distinction between matter and form and the notion of a cause, which are crucial in many respects, remain somewhat underdeveloped. But it is easy to gesture at what *could* have been better. It would certainly be very hard to actually write a better book on *Metaphysics Zeta*.

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