

Two dogmas that many readers of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* share

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Abstract

Our everyday knowledge and the knowledge of the sciences are based on presuppositions of different fundamentality. The most general framework includes opinions about being, then the way a particular language sorts reality, precepts of logic, what Husserl called the natural attitude. Furthermore, specific content-related prerequisites and convictions are decisive in the individual sciences. Also modern readers of Aristotelian texts share some such specific convictions. I would like to speak of two of them here, since they are evidently false and considerably hindering the understanding of the texts. The first conviction is that Aristotle developed a metaphysics of substance, the second that he thereby founded a theology with an 'unmoved mover' as its center, which can be identified with God.

Since this text is a kind of pamphlet, I have summarized the remarks in endnotes.

No knowledge can be acquired without another knowledge that precedes it.¹ The foregoing knowledge can be of very different nature and can be more or less fundamental. The most fundamental antecedent knowledge, sought again and again by philosophers of all times and worlds, is probably that about being. It is embedded in the languages we speak, by which the reality is structured, in the fundamental beliefs we ever have. In reflection, this knowledge can be uncovered and made explicit. History shows us that in different eras, in different worlds, the answer to the question of being was different.

However, there is also less fundamental knowledge, which is still prior to the acquisition of a concrete knowledge and which controls this acquisition. This applies not only to our everyday life, but also to scientific knowledge. What Thomas S. Kuhn called the paradigm is an example. Convictions that are shared by an entire community of scholars at a certain time belong to this type of prior knowledge. They are rarely or never reflected because they belong to the framework of scientific action. With teaching, peer reviews, textbooks etc. the scientific community itself ensures that these convictions are preserved. Nevertheless, there are also changes in this area, but only at longer intervals. However, these changes hardly ever come about through conscious or deliberate decision, a change of paradigm cannot be produced consciously, it happens or simply occurs. The changes arise from the inadequacy of the explanatory power of the old theories and from changes in the world in which they are asserted. After all, reflection can promote them.

Also in the modern understanding of Aristotle's texts there are such fundamental convictions, two of them I would like to mention. Of course, such convictions are not formed by the layman himself, he usually takes over what the experts say. Aristotelian studies, then, has some responsibility in this regard. The first conviction is that Aristotle developed a metaphysics of substance, the second that he founded a theology with an 'unmoved mover' as center, who can be identified with God.

1 Substance

It is taken for granted that οὐσία is both correctly translated with substance and adequately reproduced in its content.² But, 'substance' translates ὑπόστασις, not οὐσία, and, it is ὑποκείμενον, subject, that has the function of being the foundation, of being and saying.³

The translation of Aristotle's οὐσία as 'substance' is not only a wrong translation of the word, but moreover substance does not correspond to what οὐσία means in terms of content either.

The term 'substance' is, as probably all terms, also the first ones, not absolutely given but has a genesis, a history which can be reconstructed. However, the origin of this concept does not lie with Aristotle, even if many think so. I can only give some hints on important stations of the origin of the concept of substance, to go into the details would need much more space.⁴ The period of its origin reaches very far, from Hippocrates to the Church Fathers, and influences of quite different kind and origin can be found in it. For the emergence of the concept of substance is in particular the use of ὑπόστασις in texts of Hippocrates, Aristotle, Theophrast in biological and medical context relevant, the Stoa has established the identification of οὐσία with ὑπόστασις. Initially, ὑπόστασις denotes the sediment in a liquid, e. g. in the case of fruit juice or urine. Since the materialistically oriented Stoa identified οὐσία with ὑπόστασις, οὐσία came close to the realistically understood thing, the real. It denotes the real as opposed to the appearance or the mere thought. The religious tradition with Philo of Alexandria also takes influence on its origin. He often uses the word οὐσία, mostly in material meaning, often as the first category, but in particular also as *dei substantia*; in the meaning "being" or "essence" I do not find it with him.

In the Latin tradition, the first evidence of *substantia* is found in Seneca in a Stoic quotation;⁵ the first Stoic category is *quid*, which means that which really is; besides the real things we can imagine a giant in certain form, *quamvis non habeat substantiam*, "although he has no real existence." Of particular interest in this letter is that Seneca uses *substantia* at this point without further explanation, whereas previously, in § 6, awkwardly introduces the word *essentia* as a translation of οὐσία, and, apologizing, says that Cicero had already used the word.⁶ But Seneca also uses *substantia* in several other places. Often it means "factuality" or "fact," the same applies to Tacitus and Quintillian in the context of the stasis doctrine of rhetoric; among the jurists it means also possession (corresponding to an old colloquial use of οὐσία). In quite a few places *substantia* stands as a translation of the first category.

A decisive and explicit discussion of how οὐσία, ὑπόστασις, and πρόσωπον should be translated took place in the time of the Church Fathers. Augustine, Marius Victorinus and Boethius are the most important authors for this discussion. The Greek terms mentioned were used to address theological problems of the Trinity, the person of Christ, and the existence of God. In the Council of Nicaea in 325 A. D. this development finds a certain dogmatic conclusion. There-

after, reflection on this outcome sets in. In the Middle Ages, the question of transubstantiation is added, which makes the concept of substance indispensable once again.

Augustine and Boethius considered *essentia* and *substantia* as variants for the translation of οὐσία. Augustine explains the formation of *essentia*: as *sapientia* is derived from *sapere*, *scientia* from *scire*, so *essentia* is derived from *esse*.⁷ This is a typical case of a reclassification, according to today's linguistic knowledge words of the type *scientia* etc. are not derived from the infinitive, but from the participle *sapiens*. Now, however, there is no participle **essens*, so the inhibitions in its formation are perhaps understandable.⁸ Augustine considers the translation of οὐσία with *essentia* more correct, but that with *substantia* more usual, which is why he – as well as all others until today – sticks to this translation.⁹ Finally, as Boethius reports in the *Theological Treatises*, the *ecclesiasticus usus loquendi* decided for the translation of οὐσία with *substantia*.¹⁰ And so it has remained until today. Recently, however, the incorrectness of the translation and understanding has occasionally been pointed out, but, in the absence of alternatives, it is still maintained.¹¹

The most important and lasting determinations of substance for modern times come from F. Suarez and Descartes. Summarizing the scholastic tradition, F. Suarez names as the main characteristics of substance permanence and the ability to carry other determinations and thus to be the basis of something.¹²

The definition of substance as *esse a se* in Descartes goes back to the Church Fathers who tried to prove that God has no reason apart from himself. Marius Victorinus says about God: *Etenim prima causa et sibi causa est ...*¹³

In the period of the Church Fathers and in the Middle Ages the topic of God's groundlessness was often treated, the expressions *causa sui* and *esse a se* (in contrast to *esse ab alio*) arose, which prove the independence of the divine substance. At the end of this development is Descartes' definition of substance as *esse a se*.¹⁴ Since the strict concept of substance applies only to God, a milder concept of substance, as it were, must be applied to things, the other things must be distinguished from him, they are of a different kind of substance, which Boethius also already recognized and said.¹⁵ Through this ambiguity, however, the concept loses its punch.

In Descartes' definition of substance, existence becomes its basic condition. Pure existence, however, is not perceptible, only the attributes of the existent affect us. If the substance can be inferred only on the basis of the attributes, as Descartes remarks on this in the next paragraph,¹⁶ then a knowledge of the substance itself is impossible, only such of the attributes. Thus, the

substance has lost its function as basis of being and knowing. The two most important attributes of the substance are thought and extension, thus the physical substances differ from the mental substances.¹⁷ This definition of substance as *res extensa* and *res cogitans* has had the greatest impact. This is still today an often chosen point of attack and starting point for considerations which should lead to a unified view of the world. Descartes is blamed for this dichotomy of the world and solutions are searched to overcome this dichotomy, because obviously a connection between the two can hardly be established. With Spinoza, the expression *causa sui* has become central. In Kant's thought the substance has lost its fundamental role, together with the accidentals it stands only in the category of relation for subsistence of and inherence; since the philosophy of the 19th century it is, with exceptions of course, only of historical interest.

This shall suffice for the history of the expression substance, as it were, as *lectio brevis*. Now to the Greek beginnings of the word οὐσία. To begin with, it is important to note that οὐσία, like ὕλη for example, is a word of everyday use. It means fortune and possessions. It becomes a philosophical term by shifting its meaning, which can first be grasped in Plato. Plato still uses the word in the meaning of property,¹⁸ but more often in the meaning of nature or essence of a thing. With him, the word is not yet the central concept, that is the idea and the idea of the good.

With Aristotle οὐσία moves in the center of interest. Like many, if not almost all, concepts, οὐσία is a πολλαχῶς λεγόμενον. In *Metaphysics* Δ 8 and Ζ 3, Aristotle distinguishes philosophic uses of the term; there is no mention of everyday use. The two lists do not exactly coincide, since they are drawn up for different purposes.

Metaphysics Ζ 3 seeks to introduce and circumscribe the question of being. Aristotle presents the prevailing opinions about what is regarded as the actual being and seeks to work out from these the criteria on the basis of which something can be called οὐσία. "There are at least four ways, if not more, to use οὐσία": the τί ἦν εἶναι, the general and the genus, and finally, fourthly, the underlying.¹⁹

The yield of the chapter consists in verifying the correctness and completeness of the criteria for whether something is οὐσία or not: καθ' αὐτὸ λεγόμενον, χωριστόν, τόδε τι. The last of these is later restricted in its validity as a criterion. In the further course of the *Metaphysics* ἐνέργεια and ἀλήθεια are added. All these together are the criteria for speaking of οὐσία in a certain case. That is now clearly too much (I mean too restrictive) for substance, whose essence is supposed to consist in subsistence and being foundation for other determinations.

In Δ 8 Aristotle lists four ways of using οὐσία. Οὐσία is called the underlying, it is that about which everything else is said, but it itself is not said about another. As examples for this he mentions the elements earth, fire, water, generally bodies and their parts, but also living beings and their parts. In another way, the ground of being (ἄττιον τοῦ εἶναι) is called οὐσία, example of a οὐσία in this function is the soul for the living being. Third, οὐσία is what the fundamental of a thing is; it is that whose removal (or abstraction) results in nothing else being either. Example of this is the function of the body for the surface. Finally, fourthly, the τί ἦν εἶναι of each is also called οὐσία.

The standard interpretation has turned the questions about οὐσία into a theory that asserts something about οὐσία, but in Aristotle the word is a keyword for a question and not at all the title of an answer. In two places this is particularly clear, in the first chapters of *Metaphysics* Λ and *Metaphysics* Ζ. The introductory sentence of *Metaphysics* Λ: Περὶ οὐσίας ἢ θεωρία, states that in what follows it is to be asked what being means, in the first chapter of *Metaphysics* Ζ Aristotle says it explicitly: Always already and also now and ever further it is asked because it is unclear: What is being? i. e.: What means being?" At the heart of the matter is the question of being, first drafted in *Met.* Λ, in *Met.* Ζ carried out in detail, asked in the *Physics* with respect to the being of the natural being, in the *Ethics* with respect to the being of man.

2 Theology

A second firm conviction claims that Aristotle advocates a theology whose core consists in a πρῶτον or ἀκίνητον κινούν, the "First" or "Unmoved Mover" (with preference in capitals), as the expression is consistently mistranslated masculine. According to the standard interpretation, Aristotle develops a concept of God in *Metaphysics* Λ with the essential provisions of νόησις νοήσεως and *actus purus*, and that the proof of his existence is given. Aristotle asks, one says, in this text for God as the first substance and he wants to give an existence proof of this primary substance.

Two assertions can be distinguished, the falsity of which can be demonstrated individually. first, that Aristotle speaks of an 'Unmoved Mover,' second, that theology is the subject of *Metaphysics* Λ. Let us turn briefly to the expression 'First Mover' then to the theology-claim itself.

2.1 The “Unmoved Mover”

Ingemar Düring has explicitly pointed out the simple but momentous fact that τὸ ἀκίνητον κινῶν is a neutral, not a masculine expression. Unfortunately, this realization did not prevail; the inert mass of tradition has far too great a force.²⁰ Michael Bordt has pointed out again in the *Aristoteles-Handbuch*: “The expression ‘unbewegter Beweger’ does not exist in Aristotle,”²¹ nevertheless, in the Jewish-Christian tradition the masculine is held (370). Neither the authors of the *Handbuch* nor the authors of the *New Essays* edited by C. Horn, 2016, want to change this. Recently, A. Aichele also holds again explicitly to the neutral form, however, he finally understands it as “the divine.”²² In his *History of Philosophy*, Eduard Zeller had placed the chapter on Aristotle’s theology under the correct title “The First Moving,” but theology and substance have of course remained.²³

The error of this translation is even worse, more obvious, and of even greater consequence than the first. Nowhere in the *Corpus Aristotelicum* there is to be found an expression in this masculine form, the corresponding expression, τὸ πρῶτον κινῶν is always neutral. Τὸ κινῶν is nothing but one of four items in a list, to find reasons. That fact that now is asked for the first moving cause, is the consequence of the fact that the philosopher must ask just everywhere for the first, not only for the moving, but also for the first for-the-sake-of, the first What is that? etc.

The masculine translation is based on the fact that philosophers understood God at certain times by the ‘first moving cause,’ and God was, at those times, masculine. Not even the most serious commentator, W. D. Ross, could escape that false translation. He considers the theology allegedly contained in *Metaphysics* Λ as the “coping stone” of the Aristotelian philosophy.²⁴ In his commentary on *Metaphysics* he speaks of an unmoved mover without any further remark, so it has remained until the latest commentaries on *Metaphysics* Λ.

It is true that the number of those who reject or more or less doubt the theological interpretation of *Metaphysics* Λ is growing. But even these retain the expression in masculine form,²⁵ and the concept of substance anyway. Even Thomas Aquinas was more cautious in this case, who did not consistently use the masculine form, but often left it at the neutral one.

2.2 Theology

Objections against the theological conception of *Metaphysics* XII from modern times come, among others, from R. Bodéüs and H. Lang.²⁶ In particular, H. Lang very rightly pointed out that for chapters 9 and 10 one must simply assume that it is about God here, because the word does not occur at all (258). Further arguments can be found in W. Schneider and E. Sonderegger.²⁷

For Lindsay Judson the theological content is self-evident, Silvia Fazzo is more cautious, Fabienne Baghdassarian discusses at length the different possibilities “Théologie, ousiologie ou archéologie?” (p. 11). But, since all interpreters understand οὐσία as substance, they cannot get out of the theological trap in the end. One can then conveniently pin this on Aristotle himself, as Fabienne Baghdassarian does (“...l’ambiguïté de la philosophie aristotélicienne elle-même...”) The theological interpretation of *Metaphysics* Λ must presuppose that chapters 1–5 are meant to be preparation for a theology; it is not clear from the text itself.

Already at the end of the 19th century there was resistance to the understanding of *Metaphysics* Λ as theology. A. Ritschl, 1888, wanted to clearly separate theology and metaphysics in order to keep theology pure, for reasons of textual analysis P. Natorp, also 1888, for compositional reasons vehemently opposed that *Metaphysics* Λ should be read as theology, but both found no successors.

With the theology even more than with the metaphysics of substance, it is noticeable that although Aristotle is credited with a theology, this is regarded as deficient or inconclusive in quite different respects. The nature and conclusiveness of the alleged proof of God is also discussed in very different ways.²⁸ If we read the text in Greek and without the prejudices of tradition, we find that God in *Met.* Λ does not play the required role at all; he simply does not occur with sufficient frequency, as should be expected in a doctrine about God, H. Lang or Silvia Fazzo have confirmed this observation. In *Met.* Λ 7 we count five occurrences of θεός or θεῖος and two in chapter 9 (besides 5 occurrences in chapter 8, which refer to the traditional Greek gods and must be left aside). The translations (e.g. Tricot, Reale) often fill in ‘God’ where the word is not written at all, without marking that. J. Tricot has 14 appearances of ‘Dieu,’ or ‘divine’ to which we have to add some words in uppercase letters like ‘le Bien’ or ‘l’intelligence’ or ‘l’Être premier,’ ‘le Premier Moteur’ etc., In *Met.* Λ god is an example from the realm of ruling opinions on the subjects of knowledge and way of life. Whoever wanted to see a theology in *Metaphysics* Λ would have to compare it with the texts that actually contain a theology. In doing so, one could perhaps already look to Hesiod, but certainly to

Epicurus, to the Stoa, to Philodem, Περὶ θεῶν, to Cicero, *De natura deorum*, to *De Mundo*, to the *Theologia Aristotelis* and various Neoplatonists. It will then be seen that here we are speaking of something different from that in *Met. A*.

J. Mansfeld has compiled a small list of relevant questions of a possible theology:²⁹

1. questions about the existence and attributes of God.
2. questions about divine providence, the relationship between the gods and humans,
3. questions about our knowledge of the gods.

In *Met. A* there is nothing to be found from this list.

3 Conclusion

From what has just been stated two demands can rightly be made:

1. Who still wants to put οὐσία in Aristotelian context over substance, is asked to give reasons for it. That substance played a great role elsewhere is undisputed.
2. Who still wants to translate τὸ πρῶτον κινουῶν masculin and understand God by it, is asked to give reasons.³⁰

and a question about an alternative can be asked:

How would it be to see in *Metaphysics* Λ instead of an ineffectual metaphysics of substance and a poorly founded theology the successful development of the question of being?

Translated from German with the help of www.DeepL.com/Translator

Notes

¹ Aristotle begins the *Analytica Posteriora* with the sentence: Πᾶσα διδασκαλία καὶ πᾶσα μάθησις διανοητικὴ ἐκ προϋπαρχούσης γίνεται γνώσεως, “All cognitive teaching and learning results from a prior knowledge.”

² See the article ‘Substanz’ by Rapp in the *Aristoteles-Handbuch* he edited with Corcilius, 2011.

³ *Categories* 2–3 und *Metaphysics* Z 3.

⁴ Discussing the use of the word in antiquity J. Halfwassen fills in the article ‘Substanz’ in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* thirteen columns; of course, he also attributes the use of this term to Aristotle.

⁵ *Epistulae morales*, 58,15.

⁶ Just as Cicero had apologized for the formation of the word *quantitas*, *Academica* I, 25.

⁷ Augustinus, *De Trinitate*, V, II, 3 (p. 207, ed. Mountain, Tournhout, 1968): *Est tamen sine dubitatione substantia vel si melius hoc appellatur essentia, quam graeci οὐσίαν vocant. Sicut enim ab eo quod est sapere dicta est sapientia et ab eo quod est scire dicta est scientia, ita ob eo quod est esse dicta est essentia.*

⁸ **ens* supposedly suggested by Caesar; used by Quintillian and Boethius as a translation of ὄν.

⁹ Augustinus, *De trinitate* V, VIII, 9, p. 216: *Essentiam dico quae οὐσία graece dicitur, quam usitatius substantiam vocamus.*

¹⁰ *Treatise* 5, cap. 3, line 96, cf. cap. 4, line 4.

¹¹ With and among others Th. A. Szlezàk in his translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.

¹² Francisco Suarez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, Disputatio XXXIII, Sectio 1 (vol. 2, 330): *Duplex est etymologia huius vocis substantia, nimirum, vel a subsistendo, vel a substando [...]*

He explains the first expression like this: *derivatum est hoc verbum ad significandum idem, quod existere, seu supermanere in esse,*

the second: *significat rem ita esse in se firmam et constantem ut possit aliam sustinere*

¹³ Marius Victorinus, In Candidum, 3, 11.

¹⁴ Descartes, *Principia Philosophiae* I, 51: *Per substantiam nihil aliud intelligere possumus quam rem quae ita existit, ut nulla alia re indiget ad existendum. Et quidem substantia quae nulla plane re indigeat, unica tantum potest intelligi, nempe Deus.*

¹⁵ *ibidem*: *nomen substantiae non convenit Deo & illis univoce.*

¹⁶ *Principia Philosophiae* I, 52: *Ex hoc enim quod aliquod attributum adesse percipiamus concludimus aliquam rem existentem, sive substantiam, cui illud tribui possit, necessario etiam adesse.*

¹⁷ *Principia Philosophiae*, I 48: *substantia cogitans* as opposed to *substantia extensa*; I, 53 and other places.

¹⁸ F. Astius, *Lexicon Platonicum*, Leipzig 1836.

NOTES

¹⁹Discussion of this in my commentary on *Metaphysics Z*, 2012.

²⁰Düring, Ingemar, *Aristoteles, Darstellung und Interpretation seines Denkens*, Heidelberg 1966, 209; idem, „Von Aristoteles bis Leibniz. Einige Hauptlinien der Geschichte des Aristotelismus,“ in: Moraux, Paul (Hrsg.), *Aristoteles in der neueren Forschung*, Darmstadt 1968, 253.

²¹C. Rapp und K. Corcilius (Hrsg.), 2011, 367.

²²Aichele, Alexander, *Ontologie des Nicht-Seienden*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2009, 341.

²³*Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung, Zweiter Teil, Zweite Abteilung, Aristoteles und die Alten Peripatetiker*, Leipzig 1921, 358, (reprint der Wissenschaftlichen Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1963).

²⁴W. D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Oxford 1924, I, CXXX.

²⁵See the commentaries on Lambda that appeared after my commentary (2008; this is now replaced by the new version in English: *Aristotle, Metaphysics A, Introduction, Translation, Commentary, A Speculative Sketch devoid of God*, philpapers.org, 2020): Silvia Fazzo, 2012; Alexandru, 2014; Fabienne Baghdassarian, 2019; Lindsay Judson, 2019, of course also Stephen Menn, *Metaphysics Commentary*, in progress but well advanced, see his homepage.

²⁶Lang, Helen, „The Structure and Subject of Metaphysics Λ“, in: *Phronesis*, 38, 1993, 257-280; Bodéüs, Richard, *Aristote et la théologie des vivants immortels*, Paris 1992.

²⁷Schneider, Wolfgang, ΟΥΣΙΑ und ΕΥΔΑΙΜΟΝΙΑ. Die Verflechtung von Metaphysik und Ethik bei Aristoteles, Berlin/New York 2001, 245; Sonderegger, Erwin, „Aristoteles, Met. XII – eine Theologie?“ in: *Methexis*, 9, 1996, 58-83, especially 76ff., and the commentary, see note. 25.

²⁸See the corresponding chapter in my commentary on *Metaphysics Λ* mentioned in note 25.

²⁹Mansfeld, Jaap, „Sources“, in: Algra, Kempe, Barnes, Jonathan, Mansfeld, Jaap, Schofield, Malcolm (Hrsg.), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, Cambridge 1999, 3-30.

³⁰The often used reference to Λ 7, 1072b30 τοῦτο γὰρ ὁ θεός does not suffice, for even this sentence only quotes common opinion, as even Thomas affirms *et hoc dicimus deum*.