

## SEMANTIK UND ONTOLOGIE: DREI STUDIEN ZU ARISTOTELES<sup>1</sup>

Nicola Carraro (UNICAMP)<sup>2</sup>

carraron985@gmail.com

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The book is a collection of three independent exegetical essays on Aristotle's theoretical philosophy. The common element that unifies them is the contrast between Aristotle's own ontology, which Segalerba (S.) qualifies as a "typological ontology" ("*typologische Ontologie*"), and Aristotle's interpretation of Plato's theory of Ideas, which he labels as a "gradualist ontology" ("*stufenartige Ontologie*").

As S. declares in the preliminary remark (p. XIII), his focus lies mainly on the theory of Ideas as understood and criticized in Aristotle's writings, including *On Ideas*, a lost work on whose content we are indirectly informed thanks

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to a long digression in Alexander of Aphrodisia's *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*. However, this theory is considered not so much for its intrinsic merits, but mainly to bring into sharper focus Aristotle's own position on the ontological status of universals.

According to S., the Platonic theory that postulates the existence of eternal models that exist independently from the perceptible individuals that are their copies can be characterized as "gradualist" because it asserts that perceptible individuals are to a lesser degree what eternal models are to a higher degree. Thus, the only thing that is perfectly human according to a Platonist is the Idea of "human", while perceptible individuals like Socrates and Plato are only human to a certain degree. By contrast Aristotle's ontology is "typological" since he conceives universals as types of entities of which individuals are instantiations. In S.'s view, he thinks that being a type is incompatible with being an instantiation: therefore, it is incorrect to say that the property of being a human being is a human being. And while he admits that some types (such as hotness and coldness) can be instantiated to a higher or lower degree, he denies this of the types whose instances are "primary substances", i.e. concrete individuals like Socrates and Plato. This allows him to claim that the most basic entities are not universals, but rather individual primary substances.

The first essay ("*Aspekte der aristotelischen Theorie der zweiten Substanzen als Universalien*") contrasts the typological ontology of Aristotle's *Categories* with the gradualist ontology criticized in *On Ideas*, and particularly in the section devoted to the so-called "third-man argument". S. stresses that

Aristotle is committed to the existence of universals. He argues that, contrarily to what some interpreters have contended, the difference between Platonic Ideas and Aristotelian universals does not consist exclusively in the fact that Ideas can exist independently from perceptible individuals, but also in the fact that they are conceived as paradigmatic instantiations, while Aristotelian universals are not instantiations of themselves. He goes on to claim that the same ontology is also recognizable in a passage of *On Interpretation*, and that it lies behind Aristotle's solution of the third-man argument at *Sophistical Refutations* 22, 178b36-179a10 and his criticism of Ideas at *Metaphysics* M.9, 1086a31-b16.

In the second essay ("*Aspekte der Substanz bei Aristoteles*"), S. compares Aristotle's treatment of substance and universals in the *Categories* and in the *Metaphysics*, claiming that, for the most part, his stand on these matters is coherent between the two works. He argues against interpreters who think that, in the central books of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle gives up his commitment to the objective existence of universals, or that he abandons the idea that the most basic entities are concrete individuals living beings, in favour of an ontology in which forms play the role of basic entities. On the other hand, he individuates some claims that Aristotle makes in the *Metaphysics* and elsewhere and that are absent (or, at least, not explicit) in the *Categories*: most notably, the view that the form of each individual substance is a particular, which S. takes to be an implication of some passages in *Metaphysics* Z, and the view that universals exist only potentially unless somebody is thinking about them, which he

considers as one of the results of the treatment of thought in *On the Soul*.

The third essay (*Synonymie in der Kategorienschrift gegen Nicht-Homonymie im Argument aus den Bezüglichen*) has a more limited scope. For the most part, it consists of an analysis of Aristotle's description and criticism of the so-called "argument from the relatives" in *On Ideas* (Alexander, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 82,11–83,17). S. argues that the position of the proponent of the argument can be identified with what he calls "gradualist ontology", and that Aristotle's rejection of the argument is based on his rejection of a Platonising analysis of the notion of synonymy that he replaces with his own account from the *Categories*.

The three essays are preceded only by a very short preliminary remark, which concentrates exclusively on S.'s policy when it comes to dealing with Aristotle's interpretation of Plato (apart from bibliographical indications on translations and commentaries). Each essay consists of several chapters, many of which are devoted to the analysis of short passages from different works in the Aristotelian corpus: from the *Categories* to the *Metaphysics*, and from the *Sophistical Refutations* to *On the Soul*. A glance at the preliminary materials might therefore give the impression of a study on Aristotle's understanding of Plato, or of a miscellaneous work mainly concerned with the solution of local interpretative issues. However, these impressions could not be more misleading. S. is not writing history of reception, and (with few exceptions) he is not focusing on details. Rather he aims to solve what might well be the most contentious

among the countless exegetical problems that have inflamed interpreters of Aristotle since Antiquity: his views on universals and the exact reasons for his rejection of Plato's theory of Ideas. The main virtues and the main weaknesses of the book can all be traced back to this extremely ambitious goal.

A positive feature of the book lies in its focus on Aristotle's works and on global exegetical questions concerning his philosophy, rather than on debates in the secondary literature. Many studies on Ancient philosophy have the tendency to give too much weight to disputes among other interpreters. At times this can generate artificial questions that have little to do with the texts themselves, but rather arise from the internal dialectic of the debate. S., by contrast, always concentrates on what Aristotle thinks, rather than on what others think that he thinks. Another virtue of the book lies in its clarity: S. chooses his words carefully, and he is explicit in the definition of the terms that he uses. He also has an appreciable tendency to privilege precision over style, and he does not shy away from reiterating his point one more time when he deems it useful to make his argument more understandable. A special care is given to the translations, which are always elegant and precise. When the text can be constructed in more than one way, this is often indicated and discussed in a footnote.

The most valuable feature of the book, however, lies in the interpretation itself. S. provides a promising counter model to two traditional, diametrically opposed, and *prima facie* plausible ways to interpret Aristotle's reaction to Plato's theory of Ideas. According to the first of these readings, Aristotle sees Ideas as universals that can exist independent-

ly from concrete individuals. This interpretation stresses the continuity between Plato and Aristotle and holds that, in spite of the polemical tones of his criticism of ideas, Aristotle agrees with Plato more than he cares to admit: their disagreement concerns not so much the existence of Ideas, but rather their metaphysical status as “separate” entities. On the second interpretation, Aristotle rejects Ideas because he does not think that universals exist independently from the human mind, and he adopts a conceptualist stance on universals, while their role as essences of concrete individuals is taken over by particular forms.

S.’s most important move consists in questioning the main premise on which these interpretations are both based: the view that Aristotle regards Plato’s theory of Ideas as a theory of universals. S. claims that, when he argues against Platonists, Aristotle does not aim to either modify or reject an already existing theory of universals, but rather to “introduce” for the first time universals into western philosophy. This conclusion is based on the hypothesis that Platonic Ideas (at least as they are understood by Aristotle) are not universals, but rather paradigmatic individuals, which have a certain property to the highest degree, whereas perceptible objects are copies, which have the same property to a lower degree.

According to S., Aristotle criticizes this gradualist ontology by noticing that the talk of “degrees” is only meaningful for certain properties: while an object can be darker than another, it would be meaningless to claim that Tiger instantiates the property of being a cat to a higher degree than Felix. For this reason, he abandons the Platonic view that the primary objects of knowledge should be conceived

as ideal models that are copied by perceptible objects, and argues instead that they should be seen as types that are instantiated by the particulars. Whereas Plato's models differ from their copies mainly because of their perfection and eternity, Aristotelian universals differ from their instantiations mainly because they have a different logical status: while particulars instantiate universals, universals do not instantiate themselves. Saying that the universal "cat" is a cat would be a category mistake.

One could, of course, question whether this is a fair representation of Plato's theory of Ideas. S. recognizes this, and is careful to distinguish Aristotle's representation of the theory of Ideas and the views held by the historical Plato, on which he appropriately remains agnostic, given the focus of his study. His goal is not to argue that Aristotle's understanding of Plato is correct, but rather to show that the opposition between "gradualist" and "typological" ontology provides the framework that is needed in order to understand what Aristotle thinks of himself as doing when he criticizes Plato and other Platonists.

Establishing whether S.'s interpretation is correct is a task that would go beyond the limits of this review. However, I find it a clear and appealing reading, which has the merit of explaining both Aristotle's polemical tone when he argues against Plato and his apparent commitment to the objective existence of universals as a condition for the possibility of thought and knowledge.

While the broad and ambitious scope of S.'s book is what makes it interesting, it also threatens to make it overwhelming and, at times, perplexing in its argumentative strategy, methodology, and structure. One sometimes gets

the impression that S. is trying to cover too much ground and that, for this reason, his arguments end up being unconvincing even though his position is interesting and intrinsically plausible. My criticism will concentrate on the following five points, in decreasing order of importance. 1) S. often does not contextualize passages within the book or work in which they appear. 2) He often fails to adequately discuss possible objections against his interpretations, or to consider evidence for alternative readings. 3) He sometimes omits to highlight and discuss internal tensions in the thought of Aristotle, or in the views that he attributes him. 4) The structure of the book makes for some repetitions. 5) Some sections are inessential to the overall argument.

1) S. takes a global approach to Aristotle's text. He emphasizes the continuity between supposedly early works like the *Categories* and *On Interpretation* and supposedly mature works like the *Metaphysics*. He also stresses the affinities between the works that we possess through direct transmission and the information on the lost treatise *On Idea* that we have thanks to Alexander's commentary to the *Metaphysics*. What is often absent from the picture, however, is the role of a passage within the argumentative strategy of a work. S. tends to treat passages almost as if they were isolated fragments, without explaining their connection with what precedes or follows them.

This approach is especially questionable when dealing with books whose argumentative structure is intricate and opaque, such as *Metaphysics Z*. It is notoriously difficult to untangle what the different sections of this treatise are doing. In many cases, it is not clear whether Aristotle is argu-



ing *ad hominem* against an opponent, raising possible objections against his own position, or giving his considerate opinion on the matter. In S.'s exposition, these distinctions often get blurred, under the assumption that every passage contains Aristotle's final word on a given issue. By contrast I think that we should at least entertain the possibility that chapters such as Z. 13 (pp. 270–284) are aporetic to a certain extent, and that not all of the premises used in their arguments are unconditionally endorsed by Aristotle.

Another instance in which the lack of contextualization threatens the cogency of S.'s arguments is the analysis of Aristotle's theory of perception and thinking in *On the Soul* (pp. 285–310). One of the main upshots of this discussion for S.'s argument is to provide further corroboration for the view that universals have objective existence independently from the human mind (p. 295). S. argues that, since Aristotle holds that the intellect thinks by acquiring universals, rather than by creating them itself, these universals must have "an autonomous existence". It seems to me that Aristotle's main concern in the passages analysed by S. is not with the ontological status of universals, but rather with the way in which thinking as a psychological activity takes place. Even a philosopher who is not committed to universals as independently existent entities could agree with the idea that concepts are not freely created by the intellect. The claim that thinking happens in that the intellect is actualised by the universals could just mean that concepts are produced by extracting common elements from repeated experiences, and does not in itself commit Aristotle to universals that exist independently of the mind.

2) I have already mentioned that S.'s focus on Aristotle

rather than debates in the secondary literature can be regarded as a positive feature of the book. However, I also think that he brings this approach too far. While the bibliography runs for eleven pages and includes well over 200 titles, S. mentions the overwhelming majority of these works only as further reading. Instances in which he directly voices major disagreement with other interpreters are much more limited. The most notable examples are arguably his rejection of Gail Fine's diagnosis of Aristotle's criticism of Platonic Ideas (see esp. p. 19)<sup>3</sup> and of Michael Frede and Günther Patzig's<sup>4</sup> view that, in *Metaphysics Z*, Aristotle eliminates universals from his ontology (see esp. p. 280). Even in these instances, however, S. does not directly engage with his opponents' arguments, and he rests his case almost exclusively on textual support for his own reading. Given the importance that S.'s rejection of these interpretations has for his overall argument, a more thorough discussion would have been advisable.

3) One instance in which S. fails to highlight an internal tension within the view that he attributes to Aristotle concerns the issue of whether forms are universal or particular, which is, of course, one of the central choices that face any scholar that deals with these topics. S.'s answer is ecumenical but somewhat difficult to grasp. He thinks that, for Aristotle, forms are both universal and particular. On the one hand, he holds that the essence of an individual can only be universal (p. 282), since it is not a concrete entity, but a "biological program" that can be instantiated in sev-

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<sup>3</sup> Gail Fine, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's Theory of Forms*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Frede, and Günther Patzig, eds., *Aristoteles: Metaphysik Z*, München: Beck, 1988.

eral individuals. On the other hand, he believes that each instantiation of this biological program is a particular (p. 275). At the same time, S. also attributes to Aristotle the belief that not only concrete individuals like Socrates, but also their essences must be particulars (pp. 274–275): “Socrates’s essence cannot be common to other people, because it already constitutes a concrete instance of the essence taken generally” (p. 275).

To me, this answer sounds arbitrary: once we allow universal forms into our ontology, I do not see a compelling reason to identify the essence of Socrates with a particular rather than with the universal form: why not simply say that Socrates’s essence is the “biological program” that he has in common with Plato, etc.? And why identify instantiations of this biological program with individual forms rather than with the concrete individuals (Socrates, Plato, etc.) themselves? I should stress that I am not necessarily criticizing S. for attributing to Aristotle this position: after all Aristotle can, at times, hold strange views. Rather, I am saying that the position itself is rather weak. It seems to me that, if S. is correct in arguing that Aristotle is defending this theory, he has the responsibility of either acknowledging its awkwardness, or proposing some strategy to fix it.

4) As already mentioned, the book tends to support a single theory, but it is formally constituted by three independent essays. At times, this can produce some repetitions. For instance, the two analyses of the meaning of “substance” in the *Categories* (pp. 24–41 and pp. 124–189) contain many common elements, such as the claim that secondary substances work both as classes of individuals and as features that are common to many individuals, the

claim that the *Categories* are at least in part a response to Platonic ontology, or the contrast between Aristotle's own ontology in the *Categories* and the one he criticizes in *On Ideas*. These redundancies represent a disturbance to the general flow of the argument, and the readability of the book would have been improved had the three essays been unified into a single monograph.

5) Occasionally, the book also contains some superfluous material. The most evident example is the chapter devoted to Aristotle's views on immaterial substances in *Metaphysics*  $\Lambda$  (pp. 311–318). It is not hard to see why S. deems it appropriate to discuss this topic: after all, Plato's Ideas are immaterial entities, and it might therefore be important to stress that Aristotle's rejection of them does not translate into an overall ban on immaterial entities. However, this chapter is too short to provide an original contribution on such a heavily studied topic, and its relevance to the economy of S.'s argument is far from obvious.

In conclusion, the book offers a clear, ambitious, and convincing interpretation of a central point of Aristotle's philosophy. However, it would have highly benefitted if S. had selected a narrower corpus of texts, paid more attention to the context of the passages that he analyses, and engaged more thoroughly with his opponents' arguments.

## REFERENCE

SEGALERBA, Gianluigi. *Semantik und Ontologie: drei Studien zu Aristoteles*. Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2013.