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On an Interpretive Difficulty and its Solution in *Metaphysics Z*

An interpretive difficulty appears with Aristotle's reconsideration of primary substance in *Metaphysics Z*: he seem to come to a different conclusion from that of the *Categories* regarding what primary substance is, while at the same time *appearing* to hold to the same criterion as that of the *Categories* for determining primary substance is. Hence, Jerry Green's "The Underlying Argument of Aristotle's *Metaphysics Z.3*," in which he argues that Aristotle's goal in the eponymous chapter is not to exclude the possibility of matter as subject, but rather to invalidate the criterion for substance from the *Categories*, would seem to have bearing on how this interpretive aporia is to be allayed. I will argue that Green convincingly demonstrates that in *Metaphysics Z* Aristotle no longer holds to the subject criterion from the *Categories*, and thus Aristotle does not come to different conclusions about what primary substance is from the same premise about what primary substance is.

In demonstrating this, I will first justify and elaborate upon the interpretive difficulty which I have suggested at above. Then, I will present Green's interpretation of *Z.3*, and defend it inasmuch as he argues for Aristotle's rejection of the criterion of substance from the *Categories*; however, inasmuch as Green argues that there is still a place for the compound to be substance — and does so without clarifying whether he means "primary substance or some other sense of the word — I will provide a critique, since the compound still being primary substance would put into question that validity of my interpretive difficulty. Finally, I will use his insight regarding the rejection of that criterion to solve the interpretive difficulty.

There is development in Aristotle's understanding of primary substance, and it is not of the tidy sort. In the *Categories* Aristotle asserts that what are "primarily and most of all called substance"¹

¹ Aristotle, *Categories*, trans. S.M. Cohen & G.B. Matthews, in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle*, 5th ed., ed. S.M Cohen, Patricia Curd, & C.D.C Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), 2a10-15.

are those things which “are neither said of nor in any subject”² and which “all other things are said of or in as subjects”³ He asserts that what fulfills these criteria are individual things, *a* man or *a* horse, which are compounds of matter and form.⁴ In *Metaphysics Z* Aristotle is not as explicit that what he is looking for is primary substance as he is in the *Categories*, but it is still the case. He is investigating what substance is in its absolute, unqualified sense,⁵ and the purpose of the investigation is to find a “substance” that is primary in all the ways something can be primary.⁶ But now he seems to reject compound as primary substance and instead give that status to essence,⁷ which before in the *Categories* had been relegated to the status of secondary substance.⁸

A philosopher simply changing his view on something does not deserve the title of interpretive difficulty. Rather, the difficulty is that Aristotle *appears* to have come to this different conclusion while operating with the same premise: he writes “the underlying subject [which he is considering as the best candidate for primary substance] is that of which the other things are said, but which is itself never said of any other thing.”⁹ This is a criterion nearly identical to that of the *Categories* save for its “said of or in” in contrast to the mere “said of” in the *Metaphysics*, but this should not be taken to be a substantial difference, since both of these are still forms of predication.¹⁰ Thus, in both works the subject criterion (SC) takes the same basic form: substance is that of which all other things are predicated but is not itself predicated of anything. Having established that

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 2a35-2b0.

⁴ Ibid, 2a10-15

⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. C.D.C Reeve, in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle*, 5th ed., ed. S.M Cohen, Patricia Curd, & C.D.C Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), 1028b1-5.

⁶ Ibid, 1028a30-35.

⁷ Ibid, 1031b15-25, *ibid*, 1037a20-30.

⁸ Aristotle, *Categories*, 2a15-20.

⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1028b35-1028a0

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Categories*, 2a25-35. Admittedly, Aristotle’s claim that the name of an accident (what is in a subject) is usually not predicated of a subject is a little problematic for my point. But I take him not to be saying that something like “the dog is brown” could ever be anything but predication, but rather that we don’t bother to predicate accidents most of the time: I don’t usually “say” what is in a subject, but if I am saying it, I am predicating.

Aristotle *appears* to come to different conclusion from the same premise, the SC, it remains to be seen how Green's treatment of the SC in Z.3 provides a solution.

Green's basic goal is to offer a counter-reading against what he conceives to be the common one of Z.3, which states that Aristotle's goal in the chapter is to reject matter as substance. He instead proposes that Z.3 is a *reductio ad absurdum* as follows: if the SC determines what a subject is (and therefore what substance is,) then only a particular sort of matter could be a subject; but that particular sort of matter cannot be substance, thus the SC does not determine what a subject is (and therefore not what substance is.) In light of this, and because the SC causes other issues, the purpose of Z.3 should be taken as the rejection of the SC.¹¹

Having established the outline of his argument, we can provide a more detailed summary. Green begins by noting that Aristotle is not simply looking for what a subject is or even only what a subject is in terms of the SC, rather he is asking what could be *primary* in terms of the SC.¹² Thus, Green insists, Aristotle's rejection of the SC should not be taken to necessarily entail rejection of substance being subject, but rather a particular sort of subject.¹³ Next, Green turns to Aristotle's assertion that, under the SC, matter seems to be the only thing that could be substance.¹⁴ In Green's reading, Aristotle's justification for this is as follows: investigating what is primary in terms of the SC involves conceptually stripping away *all* predicates, qualitative and quantitative, from a subject; having done this, one is left with something entirely indeterminate, that was before determined by those predicates; that which is of the sort that it was determined by those predicates is matter; thus the sort of thing that can be entirely indeterminate as a primary subject in terms of the SC is matter.

¹¹ Jerry Green, "The Underlying Argument of Aristotle's 'Metaphysics' Z.3." *Phronesis* 59, no. 4 (2014): 322.

¹² *Ibid*, 325.

¹³ *Ibid*, 325.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 326.

Aristotle's investigation is concerned with that subject inasmuch as it is a candidate for substance, so this indeterminate sort of matter is substance.¹⁵

At this point, Green brings out Aristotle's contradiction, the basis on which he considers Z.3 to be a *reductio*. He mentions how Aristotle, having apparently proven that matter is substance, now asserts that this is impossible,¹⁶ on the grounds that substance has separability and "thisness,"¹⁷ but such a sort of matter does not.¹⁸ We receive little clarification about what these terms mean, but sufficient for Green's argument is that they invalidate this sort of matter as substance. Thus the force of the *reductio* is seen: if the SC determines what substance is, and the only thing that fulfills it cannot be substance, then the SC must not in fact determine what substance is, unless we wish to say there is no such thing as substance.

This interpretation on its own has a certain tidiness that makes it compelling, but when considering arguments, one should look for reasons to be convinced beyond their mere aesthetic appeal. I find the fundamental point of Green's argument — that the main concern of Z.3 is to reject the SC by a *reductio* — to be convincing because it makes the best sense of both Z.3 alone and in Z as a whole's broader context. If Z.3 is intended to argue against matter as such being substance, then why the entire argumentative apparatus with reference to the SC in the first half of the chapter, if Aristotle is clear that the criteria of separability and "thisness" are sufficient to reject matter as substance? In this respect Green's interpretation makes better sense of the Z.3 itself than the common one for the simple reason that it actually provides a purpose for the majority of the words of the chapter. More importantly, as Green himself points out,¹⁹ his interpretation prevents a terrible interpretive difficulty from arising within Z as a whole: if the SC is not being rejected, then how can

¹⁵ Ibid, 326.

¹⁶ Ibid, 331.

¹⁷ Ibid, 331.

¹⁸ Ibid, 332.

¹⁹ Ibid, 330.

essence be substance, as Aristotle later claims? For essence is surely a predicate.²⁰ If rejection of the SC allows us not to accuse Aristotle of this contradiction, then it stands as a strong point in favor thereof. Thus, there is reason to be convinced that Green's claim about the SC in Z.3 is valid, and so we are justified in bringing it to bear on the interpretive difficulty.

But Aristotle's rejection of the SC is not Green's only claim; he also asserts "substances do underlie and matter, form, and compound all count as substances for this reason."²¹ He is speaking with reference to Z, and if he means to say that compound is substance *for the purposes of Z* which is an investigation of what *primary* substance is, then — were he correct — my present investigation would be put into question, since I have based it on the notion that for Aristotle the compound *no longer* counts as primary substance. However, I do not think that Green is really saying that the compound remains primary substance, because he does not seem to be aware that it is what is under investigation in Z. At no point in his investigation does he use "primary substance" and his calling three things "substance" indicates that he is not looking for the *primary* sense of substance, since that is not a status that can be shared by three fundamentally different things. Thus, even though Green calls the compound "substance," I am not in the awkward position of trying to use an argument to solve my interpretive difficulty that invalidates it as a real difficulty, because by "substance" Green does not mean "primary substance."

Moreover, Green's own demonstration that the SC is invalidated suggests against the compound still being primary substance. The original reason for the compound to be primary substance, from the *Categories*, was that it fulfilled the SC, but now that premise is invalidated. If the basis on which the compound was primary substance no longer applies, we are left bereft of any *reason* for it to still be so. Thus we arrive at a tidy solution to our original difficulty: the problem was how it is that Aristotle can come to two completely different sense of primary substance in the

²⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1043b25-35.

²¹ Green, "The Underlying Argument of Aristotle's 'Metaphysics' Z.3," 341.

Categories and *Metaphysics* while working with the same premise, the SC. But the SC is rejected in Z.3, so Aristotle is not working with the same premise as from the *Categories* when he concludes that essence is primary substance later in Z.

My claim was that I would use Green's interpretation of Z.3 and Aristotle's rejection of the SC therein to argue that Aristotle does not come to different conclusions about primary substance while working with the same premise. This, however, was not entirely true: Green does not, in fact, present all of Z.3. He leaves out from his consideration its final, rather opaque paragraph, in which Aristotle reflects on how, in the acquisition of knowledge, we begin with consideration of perceptible substances²² "to proceed toward what is more knowable."²³ But let us consider that Aristotle has just rejected the grounds on which he determined that perceptible substances were primary substances and will go on to determine that primary substance is actually essence, the more knowable thing. In this light, the paragraph almost appears as an apologia: in his continued search to understand substance as such/primary substance, which he says is really just to understand being²⁴ (which for Aristotle is inherently knowable!), he must cast aside his past conclusions about perceptible substances being primary substances, useful as such considerations were earlier on in his Philosophy, in order to proceed to an understand of primary substance which is more knowable, and therefore better reaches being, the object of the entire enquiry of the *Metaphysics*.

²² On the grounds of my prior argument I take this to be substance in a secondary sense.

²³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1029b3-5.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 2a15-20.

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