

ristotelica

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ARISTOTELICA

Aristotelica is a peer-reviewed journal devoted to Aristotle and Aristotelianism through the centuries with a special focus on the texts and textual traditions of Aristotle as a common intellectual background for European and Mediterranean cultures. Filling a substantial gap in existing academic journals, *Aristotelica* covers the works of Aristotle, with particular attention to his theoretical treatises, their textual constitution, and the entire exegetical tradition, and with an emphasis on philology as an appropriate scholarly approach to philosophical texts. The time span is from Aristotle's contemporaries and Greek philosophical literature in Roman times, through the medieval period (Byzantine, Arabic, Latin) and Renaissance, going up to the twentieth century. The journal also considers submissions on the relevance of Aristotelianism to theoretical, epistemological, and ethical debates, as well as to fundamental questions about the establishment, definition, and development of ancient philosophy and science.

Submissions, which can be very short or long (there is no word limit), and written in any of the main European languages, must meet the highest scholarly standards and be based on sound methodology. They should contribute significantly to the field by asking innovative questions and reaching well-argued and ground-breaking conclusions.

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EDITORIAL

The present issue of *Aristotelica* brings together contributions that range from philosophical interpretation to textual criticism, from the transmission of manuscripts to the reception of Aristotle in late antiquity and the early modern period. Considered together, they offer a picture of the diversity and vitality of contemporary Aristotelian studies.

One feature of the volume is the prominence of research on the Neoplatonic tradition. Three contributions examine Aristotle's reception in different contexts, from the Greek commentators to the Armenian world, continuing a line of research that has already been explored in previous issues of the journal and in the annual panel "Aristotle among the Neoplatonists" at the annual conference of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies (ISNS). The geographical horizon thus extends beyond the better-known centers of the Greek and Latin traditions, drawing attention to intellectual landscapes that deserve an increasingly prominent place in the history of Aristotelianism.

The same widening of perspective characterizes other contributions. Medieval translations, Renaissance printed editions, and newly identified manuscript witnesses are approached not simply as documents of textual history but as part of the intellectual environments through which Aristotle continued to be read, discussed, and appropriated in different languages and cultures. The Aristotelian tradition appears here not as a single line of transmission, but as a network of texts, readers, translators, commentators, and scholars extending across the Mediterranean and beyond.

In particular, the study devoted to the Giunta edition of the *Metaphysica Nova* illustrates how a well-known Renaissance printed text may still yield new evidence for the history of the Aristotelian textual tradition, well beyond its significance for the history of printing.

Documentary evidence is also emphasized in the volume. Beyond presenting new interpretations, it offers direct access to a newly identified manuscript witness through the analytical discussion of selected readings and the publication of the complete photographic plates of its *Historia animalium*

Book X, making this primary source immediately available for further research. This documentary dimension is intended to become an increasingly important feature of the journal.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue reflect several of the directions currently shaping Aristotelian studies: renewed attention to textual transmission and documentary evidence, growing interest in the multilingual history of the tradition, and continuing dialogue between philosophical interpretation and philological research.

LUIGI FERRARI

THE ANTISTHENEAN APORIA
IN ARISTOTLE'S *METAPHYSICS* H 3

Abstract

In *Metaphysics* H 3 (1043b4-32), Aristotle develops a unified account of definition that culminates in the so-called “Aporia of the Antistheneans.” This article offers a new interpretation of the role of that aporia within the overall argument of the chapter. It argues that Aristotle first criticizes two different conceptions of definition: on the one hand, materialist compositional theories, represented by the epistemological model known from Plato's *Theaetetus* as the “Dream Theory”; on the other, certain Academic attempts to define substance through genus and differentia. According to Aristotle, both approaches ultimately fail to account for the unity of substance and, consequently, for the unity of its definition. Against this background, the introduction of the Aporia of the Antistheneans acquires a precise philosophical function. Rather than constituting an isolated digression or an independent refutation of Antisthenes, it serves as a dialectical step that exposes the limitations of a non-essentialist epistemology while preparing Aristotle's own hylomorphic account of definition. A close analysis of the structure of the passage shows how the different philosophical positions brought into the discussion progressively converge toward Aristotle's solution, according to which the unity of matter and form is the necessary condition of scientific definition. The article thus proposes an integrated reading of *Metaphysics* H 3 in which the Aporia of the Antistheneans is not an isolated textual difficulty but a central moment in Aristotle's argumentative strategy for reformulating, through critical engagement, the principal theories of definition current in the philosophical debates of his time.

Keywords

Definition, Essence, Quality, Elements, Compound

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1. The Aporia of the Followers of Antisthenes

Chapter 3 of *Metaphysics Eta*, henceforth H 3, has often been regarded as lacking a coherent structure.¹ A closer examination, however, reveals a clear unifying thread: the problem of definition. Dividing chapter H 3 into its constituent five sections, following in Pierre Marie Morel's footsteps, makes its overall argument considerably easier to follow.² Section H 3.1 (1043a29-b4) raises the question of whether the name of a thing refers to its form or to the composite of matter and form;³ section H 3.2 (1043b4-14) examines the relation among the components of the definition of sensible entities. Section H 3.3 (1043b14-23) turns to the ontology of form, which, as essence, constitutes the proper object of definition. Section H 3.4 (1043b23-32) introduces the so-called Aporia of the Followers of Antisthenes⁴ concerning the possibility of definition. Finally, Section H 3.5 (1043b32-1044a14) compares substance and its definition with number, identifying significant structural analogies between them.

The aporia of Antisthenes' followers occupies section H 3.4. It splits accordingly in six subsections. Their Greek text reads as follows:

[i] ὥστε ἢ | ἀπορία ἦν οἱ Αντισθένειοι καὶ οἱ οὕτως ἀπαιδευτοὶ ἠπόρουν [25] ἔχει τινὰ καιρόν, [ii] ὅτι οὐκ ἔστι τὸ τί ἔστιν ὁρίσασθαι, τὸν | γὰρ ὅρον λόγον εἶναι μακρόν, [iii] ἀλλὰ ποῖον μὲν τί ἔστιν | ἐνδέχεται καὶ διδάξαι, ὥσπερ ἄργυρον, τί μὲν ἔστιν οὗ, | ὅτι δ' οἶον καττίτερος. [iv] ὥστ' οὐσίας [v] ἔστι μὲν ἧς ἐνδέχεται | εἶναι ὅρον καὶ λόγον, οἶον τῆς συνθέτου, ἐάν τε αἰσθητὴ [30] ἐάν τε νοητὴ ἦ. [v] ἐξ ὧν δ' αὕτη πρώτων, οὐκέτι, [vi] εἴπερ τί | κατὰ τινὸς σημαίνει ὁ λόγος ὁ ὁριστικὸς καὶ δεῖ τὸ μὲν | ὥσπερ ὕλην εἶναι τὸ δὲ ὡς μορφήν (H 3.1043b23).

¹ Ross (1924) p. 231.

² The present division of the chapter follows Morel (2015) p. 127. The critical edition is by Ross (1924). Translations are from Barnes, ROT, slightly modified.

³ “[...] whether the name ‘house’ signifies the composite, that is, ‘a shelter made of bricks and stones arranged in this particular way’, or rather signifies the actuality and the form” (*Metaph.* H 3.1043a29-33). Strictly speaking, the proper object of definition is the form.

⁴ On Antisthenes as a pupil of Socrates and an opponent of Plato's metaphysical position, see Brancacci (1990). His anti-metaphysical outlook led him to reject the Platonic Ideas, which he regarded as mere products of thought (*ibid.*, p. 183). Although he wrote extensively, only a limited number of fragments and testimonia have survived. For a long time, historians of ancient philosophy tended to interpret Antisthenes from a predominantly skeptical perspective; more recent scholarship has substantially revised this view. For a comprehensive and fundamental discussion of Antisthenes, see Giannantoni (1990) pp. 195-411.

Luigi Ferrari, The Antisthenean Aporia in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* H 3

[i] Therefore [ὥστε] the difficulty which was raised by the school of Antisthenes and other such uneducated people has a certain appropriateness [ἔχει τινὰ καιρόν]. [ii] They stated that the 'what' [*ti esti*] cannot be defined (for the definition so called is a long formula); [iii] but of what *sort* a thing [*poion ti esti*], e.g. silver, is, they thought it possible to explain [*didaxai*], not saying what it is but that it is like tin. [iv] Therefore one kind of substance can be defined and formulated, i.e. the composite kind, whether it be the object of sense or of reason; [v] but the primary parts of which this consists cannot be defined, [vi] since a definitory formula predicates something of something, and one part of the definition must play the part of matter and the other that of form.⁵

2. Sources

A testimony preserved by Diogenes Laertius states that "Antisthenes was the first to define definition itself, maintaining that a definition is an account revealing what a thing was or is", τὸ τί ἦν ἢ ἔστι.⁶ This way of conceiving definition by Antisthenes bears a striking resemblance to Aristotle's celebrated τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι.⁷ Yet the relationship between the two is not altogether clear.

Among the many testimonies that Aristotle preserves concerning Antisthenes and his followers, one passage in *Metaphysics* Δ 29 appears especially relevant to the present inquiry:

διὸ Αντισθένης ᾤετο εὐήθως μὴθὲν ἀξιῶν λέγεσθαι πλὴν τῷ οἰκείῳ λόγῳ, ἐν ἐφ' ἐνός· ἐξ ὧν συνέβαινε μὴ εἶναι ἀντιλέγειν, σχεδὸν δὲ μὴδὲ ψεύδεσθαι. ἔστι 35 δ' ἑκαστον λέγειν οὐ μόνον τῷ αὐτοῦ λόγῳ ἀλλὰ καὶ τῷ ἐτέρου, ψευδῶς μὲν καὶ παντελῶς, ἔστι δ' ὡς καὶ ἀληθῶς, ὥσπερ τὰ ὀκτώ διπλάσια τῷ τῆς δυάδος λόγῳ (*Metaph.* Δ 29.1024b32-37).

Hence Antisthenes foolishly claimed that nothing could be described except by its own formula (*oikeios logos*), – one formula to one thing; from which it followed that there could be

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* are those of Barnes's Oxford Revised Text, vol. 2, pp. 1-205. In a number of passages, however, I introduce slight modifications where required by the interpretation defended in the present article.

⁶ Diog. Laert. VI 3: πρῶτος τε ὠρίσατο λόγον εἰπῶν· λόγος ἐστὶν ὁ τὸ τί ἦν ἢ ἔστι δηλῶν ("He was the first to define definition itself, saying that a definition is an account revealing what a thing was or is").

⁷ This testimony of Diogene Laertio does not coincide with Aristotle's report in *Metaphysics* H 3. There Aristotle attributes to the Antistheneans the claim that "They stated that the 'what' [*ti esti*] cannot be defined (for the definition so called is a long formula); but of what *sort* a thing [*poion ti esti*], e.g. silver, is, they thought it possible to explain [*didaxai*], not saying what it is but that it is like tin" (1043b25-27). The contrast is evident: a logos of the *poion ti esti* is the very opposite of a logos of the *ti en ē esti*.

no contradiction, and almost (*schodon*) that there could be no error. But it is also possible to describe each thing not only by its own formula, but also by that of something else. This may be done altogether falsely indeed, but in some ways it may be done truly, e.g. eight may be described as a double number by the use of the formula of two.

It should be noted that the chapter of *Metaphysics* Δ from which this passage is taken is devoted to the notion of falsehood rather than to the problem of definition. Nevertheless, it allows us to infer that Antisthenes maintained that each thing admits only its own *oikeios logos*, the only account appropriate to the object under consideration. Indeed, Antisthenes's *oikeios logos* fits very well with the teaching of the *poion ti esti* which Aristotle attributes to Antisthenes's followers when recording their aporia in H 3, section [iii].

The expression *hen eph' henos* (1024b33), means precisely that each thing possesses only one proper *logos*. Because it is both unique and appropriate, such a *logos* cannot be contradicted and, as Aristotle cautiously remarks (*schodon*), can scarcely be false. From the adversative particle onward, however, Aristotle is speaking in his own voice, exposing what he regards as the naivety of the Antisthenian thesis (1024b34-37).⁸ He refutes it by observing that the account proper to the dyad can also be predicated truly of eight.

3. *The Structure of the Aporia*

For the sake of clarity, we have distinguished the six stages into which the argument is articulated:⁹

[i] Therefore the difficulty which was raised by the school of Antisthenes and other such uneducated people has a certain appropriateness.

[ii] They stated that the 'what' cannot be defined (for the definition so called is a long formula);

⁸ Berti (2017) p. 253 n. 158: "Se si attribuisce a una cosa la definizione di una cosa diversa, si è completamente nel falso; ma se si usa la definizione di una cosa diversa, per esempio del due, non come definizione, ma come indicazione di una sua affezione, per esempio dire che otto è un numero doppio, si può essere nel vero."

⁹ This division of the aporia is also adopted by Malink (2024) p. 33.

[iii] but of what *sort* a thing, e.g. silver, is, they thought it possible to explain, not saying what it is but that it is like tin.

[iv] Therefore one kind of substance can be defined and formulated, i.e. the composite kind, whether it be the object of sense or of reason;

[v] but the primary parts of which this consists cannot be defined,

[vi] since a definitory formula predicates something of something, and one part of the definition must play the part of matter and the other that of form.

A question that has long occupied interpreters is the following. Apart from point [i], which clearly constitutes Aristotle's introduction to the problem, which of the remaining statements express the position of the Antisthenians, and which instead represent Aristotle's own view?¹⁰

Several preliminary observations arise from a first reading.

The aporia is introduced in [i] as the consequence of something previously established. I shall return to this point in §4.1.

If [ii] is taken literally, the statement that "it is impossible to define what a thing is" appears to deny the possibility of definition altogether, as most interpreters have assumed. Should it indeed be understood as a universal denial of definition, it would express an extremely skeptical position that is difficult both to sustain and to reconcile with the remainder of the passage.

¹⁰ Bostock, Morel, Malink, Brancacci, and Giannantoni offer different interpretations of the passage. In fact, the disagreement concerns only the attribution of points [iv], [v], and [vi], that is, the second half of the so-called aporia (1043b28-32), since points [ii] and [iii] clearly express the Antisthenean position. Bostock (1994) p. 266 observes: "But then Aristotle apparently resumes in his own person at b28." Malink (2024) pp. 34 ff. likewise argues that "it seems unlikely that points [iv]–[vi] constitute a direct report of Antisthenes' position. Nevertheless, the presence of *hōste* in point [iv] makes it clear that the discussion in [iv]–[vi] is closely related to the Antisthenean difficulty." Brancacci (1990) p. 237, referring to 1043b28-32, maintains instead: "Non può certo essere riferita ad Aristotele la tesi enunciata in questo passo." Giannantoni (1990) p. 385 writes: "non pare dubbio che agli Antistheneioi debba essere riferito quanto Aristotele dice da *hōste hē aporia* di 1043b23-24 fino a *kattiteros* di b28." He therefore attributes to the Antisthenians the entire first part of the aporia, including point [i] – an attribution that cannot be accepted, since point [i] is clearly Aristotle's own introduction – and thereby implicitly suggests that the second half reflects Aristotle's position, although he never states this explicitly. Morel (2015) p. 152, finally, argues that the Antisthenean position extends at least through point [v], while allowing that point [vi] may express Aristotle's own view. As these interpretations show, no scholarly consensus has yet emerged.

This radical claim is justified by the parenthetical remark that “a definition is a lengthy account” (“long formula”), a phrase that has itself received widely differing interpretations.¹¹

Point [iii] seems to mitigate the sweeping denial expressed in [ii]. If the *what-it-is* of a thing cannot be known, one may at least teach what sort of thing it is (*poion ti esti*). Yet the example of silver raises an immediate difficulty, since silver appears to be an element rather than an ordinary object; the point therefore will require closer examination.

If the literal interpretation of [ii] is correct, point [iv] becomes difficult to accommodate. Aristotle now states that composite substances do admit of definition, a claim seemingly incompatible with the preceding assertion that definition is impossible.¹² The same tension extends to [vi]. Taken in this way, [ii] introduces a serious inconsistency into the argument.

The only apparent solution would be to attribute the second half of the passage – points [iv], [v], and [vi] – to Aristotle himself. The aporia would then be confined to [ii] and [iii], which would express the Antisthenean position, while the remaining lines would present Aristotle’s own solution. More precisely, [ii] and [iii] would constitute the thesis, whereas [iv]–[vi] would form Aristotle’s antithesis. This interpretation, however, cannot be maintained. If the second half were intended as an antithesis, one would expect it to be introduced by an adversative particle such as “or” or “rather.”

¹¹ Bostock (1994) p. 265 writes: “The only hint we are given as to why the Antisthenians supposed that definition was altogether impossible is in the words ‘since a definition is a long formula’ [...] the source of Antisthenes’ problem must be that a definition is supposed to contain several words. Here it is relevant to recall that in Delta 29 Antisthenes is described as holding the view that ‘nothing can be spoken of except by its own formula, one to one’ (1024b32-33). If we understand this as intended to imply that nothing can be spoken of except by means of its own name, then we may perhaps elucidate the thought in this way.” Malink (2024) pp. 38 ff., by contrast, argues that the expression “a long account” should be understood as an excessively long account, one that inevitably generates an infinite regress.

¹² Malink (2024) explicitly acknowledges that point [iv] is difficult to reconcile with point [ii]: “Moreover, Aristotle’s statement in [iv] that there is a definition of composite substances seems to contradict the skeptical position attributed to Antisthenes in [ii] that ‘it is not possible to define what a thing is’.” See also Grube (1950) p. 23 and Hicken (1958) p. 134.

Instead, Aristotle introduces it with a second *hōste*, a consecutive conjunction meaning “hence,” “therefore,” or “consequently.” The latter part of the passage is explicitly presented as following from the former and therefore cannot stand in simple opposition to it.

Everything therefore depends on the interpretation of [ii], which determines the coherence of the entire sequence. At the same time, the Antisthenean aporia differs markedly from the aporiai familiar from *Metaphysics* B. The interpretation of the text thus appears to reach an impasse. To overcome it, I suggest that one must first understand why Aristotle says that the Antisthenean aporia is, “in a certain sense,” timely and appropriate (*echei tina kairon*).

4. Why Is This Aporia Appropriate?

4.1 Against Whom Is Aristotle's Criticism in 1043b4-14 Directed?

Most interpreters agree that the *hōste* introducing the discussion of the aporia at the beginning of our H 3.4 [i], 1043b23, does not draw its conclusion from the immediately preceding lines (H 3.1043b14-23), which editors have often enclosed in parentheses for precisely this reason. Rather, it refers back to the earlier passage at H 3.2 (1043b4-14). It is therefore useful to consider that passage:

οὐ φαίνεται [5] δὴ ζητοῦσιν ἢ συλλαβὴ ἐκ τῶν στοιχείων οὐσα καὶ συνθέσεως, οὐδ' ἡ οἰκία πλίνθοι τε καὶ σύνθεσις. καὶ τοῦτο ὀρθῶς· οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν ἡ σύνθεσις οὐδ' ἡ μῆξις ἐκ τούτων ὧν ἐστὶ σύνθεσις ἢ μῆξις. ὁμοίως δὲ οὐδὲ τῶν ἄλλων οὐθέν, οἷον εἰ ὁ οὐδὸς θέσει, οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ οὐδοῦ ἢ θέσις ἀλλὰ μάλλον [10] οὗτος ἐξ ἐκείνης. οὐδὲ δὴ ὁ ἀνθρωπός ἐστι τὸ ζῶον καὶ δίπουν, ἀλλὰ τι δεῖ εἶναι ὁ παρὰ ταῦτα ἐστὶν, εἰ ταῦθ' ὕλη, οὔτε δὲ στοιχεῖον οὔτ' ἐκ στοιχείου, ἀλλ' ἢ οὐσία· ὁ ἐξαίρουντες τὴν ὕλην λέγουσιν. εἰ οὖν τοῦτ' αἴτιον τοῦ εἶναι, καὶ οὐσία τοῦτο, αὐτὴν ἂν τὴν οὐσίαν οὐ λέγοιεν (1043b4-14).

If we consider we find that the syllable is not produced by the letters and juxtaposition, nor is the house bricks and juxtaposition. And this is right; for the juxtaposition or mixing is not produced by those things of which it is the juxtaposition or mixing. And the same is true in the other cases, e.g. if the threshold is characterized by its position, the position is not produced by the threshold, but rather the latter is produced by the former. Nor is man animal and biped, but there must be something besides these, if these are matter – something which is neither an element in the whole nor produced by an element, but is the substance, which people eliminate and state the matter. If then this is the cause of the thing's being, and if the cause of its being is its substance, they cannot be stating the substance itself.