

Aristotle at the End of Metaphysics: A Review of Pierre Aubenque's *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*

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In 1988 Paul Natorp drew scholarly attention to the question of the unity of Aristotle's metaphysical system by claiming that Aristotle's theology and ontology were incompatible.¹ Werner Jaeger's explanation for this textual discordance—Aristotle's intellectual development away from theological to ontological inquiry—guided scholarship for decades until the arbitrariness of many of its basic claims became more and more apparent.² Others, such as Joseph Owens, rejected Jaeger's developmental theory and sought to prove the philosophical accordance of the various strands of inquiry in Aristotle's texts.³ In response to both approaches, Pierre Aubenque's 1962 publication, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*, presents an interpretation of Aristotle's theology and ontology according to which their incompatibility is essential and their imperfect conflation is the very constitution of Aristotelian metaphysics.⁴ More precisely, Aubenque develops by way of historical and philological scholarship Martin Heidegger's claim that the origin of metaphysics is the obscuring of fundamental ontology by the (theological) ideal of eternal presence.⁵ A presentation and evaluation of this book is desirable

1. Paul Natorp, "Thema und Disposition der aristotelischen Metaphysik," *Philosophische Monatshefte* 24 (1988): 37–65, 540–74; idem, "Über Aristoteles' Metaphysik, K 1–8, 1065a26," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 1 (1988): 178–93.

2. Werner Jaeger, *Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Metaphysik des Aristoteles* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1912); idem, *Aristoteles: Grundlegung einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1923). For a survey of the rise and fall of Jaeger's influence, see Giovanni Reale, *The Concept of First Philosophy and the Unity of the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. John R. Catan (Albany: SUNY, 1980).

3. Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, [1951] 1978).

4. Pierre Aubenque, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*, 5th ed. (Paris: PUF, [1962] 2005). Text references are to page numbers of the fifth edition.

5. Aubenque (417 n.1) situates his project in relation to Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Bonn: Friedrich Cohen, 1929), and idem, *Identität und Differenz* (Pfullingen: G. Neske, 1957). Although Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle's philosophy is not addressed

for several reasons. Since Aubenque's interpretation of the structural unity of Aristotle's philosophy is both profound and unique, any treatment of the unity of Aristotle's philosophy must take it into account. Furthermore, while his interpretation has received only slight attention in the English-speaking world since the publication of his first book,⁶ it continues to exert a significant influence on French studies of the Aristotelian tradition.⁷ Most importantly, Aubenque's work confronts the anti-metaphysical spirit that has dominated western philosophy in the twentieth century with the historical origin of metaphysics itself, and is worth revisiting insofar as philosophy in the present day must continue to take its bearings from both.

In the first section of this paper, Aubenque's book is summarized in sufficient detail to present its central argument and method. In the subsequent sections, the difficulties of Aubenque's interpretation are examined. Aubenque claims to unlearn the Aristotelian tradition and to present two distinct sciences that constitute Aristotle's authentic thought: ontology (the emergence of discourse about the necessary condition of discourse, i.e., being), and theology (the study of the eternal, astral bodies). Aubenque's book argues that these two sciences are irreconcilable and describes how Aristotle's confusion of the two sciences produces the science of metaphysics as follows: Aristotle applies the theological ideal of eternal presence to the search for the being that unifies discourse and thereby hypostatizes or reifies that search. In other words, by preserving in language the various manifestations of inquiry into being, Aristotle and the subsequent tradition of metaphysics come to treat that inquiry itself as an eternal being, and thus obscure its fundamentally indefinite nature. I argue, however, that Aubenque's adherence to an existentialist conception of the self compels him to misinterpret the role played by final causality in Aristotle's theology and ontology, and thereby to misunderstand

to the historical Aristotelian scholarship of his day, it seems to have been influenced by its developments. For a treatment of this issue see J.-F. Courtine, "Métaphysique et onto-théologie," in *La métaphysique: son histoire, sa critique, ses enjeux*, ed. Luc Langois and J.-M. Narbonne (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval; Paris: Vrin, 1999), 137–57.

6. The one exception to this claim is also confirmation of its truth: the relatively recent treatment of Aubenque's work by the English scholar, T.H. Irwin, was published only in French. See T.H. Irwin, "Le caractère aporétique de la Métaphysique d'Aristote," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 95 (1990): 221–48.

7. See Rémi Brague, *Aristote et la question du monde* (Paris: PUF, 1988); J.-F. Courtine, *Suarez et le système de la métaphysique* (Paris: PUF, 1990). See also *Études Aristotéliennes: métaphysique et théologie*, ed. Pierre Aubenque (Paris: Vrin, 1985); *Herméneutique et ontologie: mélanges en hommage à Pierre Aubenque*, ed. Rémi Brague and J.-F. Courtine (Paris: PUF, 1990); *Ontologie et dialogue: mélanges en hommage à Pierre Aubenque*, ed. Nestor L. Cordero (Paris: Vrin, 2000). Aubenque's 1962 book is referred to as the decisive study on the problem of Aristotelian onto-theology in J.-M. Narbonne, *Hénologie, Ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin–Proclus–Heidegger)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001), 328 n.104.

the essential accordance of the two sciences. Aubenque's approach implicitly limits causality to the linguistic activity of temporal subjectivity and so, while allowing for an appreciation of the dialectical character of Aristotle's ontology, is unable to meaningfully engage with Aristotle's subordination of ontology to a higher end.

Aubenque's preface introduces his interpretation by situating it against his two main interlocutors: the ancient and medieval tradition of interpretation and commentary, and the dominant school of Aristotelian scholarship established by Werner Jaeger. The traditional commentators seek to explain the contradictions in Aristotle's texts and so, Aubenque claims, they effectively explain them away (6). Jaeger, on the other hand, embraces the apparent contradictions in Aristotle's texts and attributes their cause to Aristotle's intellectual development (8–11). Aubenque holds that Jaeger's loosening of the systematic bonds of Aristotle's system cannot be undone, though some contemporaries may try to defend the traditional approach (12–15). Aubenque points out that the developmental thesis is not the only possible explanation for the apparent contradictions in Aristotle's texts, and invites the reader to ask whether they reflect an innate difficulty in Aristotle's thought as a whole.

In the first chapter, *La science sans nom*, Aubenque makes this idea plausible by separating Aristotle's original science from its reception. That this science was not pursued by Aristotle's immediate successors is not, Aubenque suggests, by virtue of a historical accident, but because of its inherent ambiguity. The title 'metaphysics,' given by later interpreters though not employed by Aristotle himself, suggests that later interpreters were not quite able to situate it within Aristotle's divisions of the sciences: 'physics,' 'logic' and 'first philosophy' or 'theology' (21–38). Aubenque proposes that the identification of theology with ontology in Book K of *Metaphysics*, which Jaeger took to be a remnant of Aristotle's Platonism, is the work of a later, neoplatonic editor (39–43).

Aubenque proceeds from here to a more philosophical consideration of the incompatibility of ontology and theology. He subverts two traditionally Aristotelian notions: that the object of ontology is a pre-eminently intelligible, self-knowing being that is not immediately intelligible to discursive thought. This subversion is decisive for Aubenque's interpretation because it allows him to deny that a prior being can exist independently of (and as the cause of) the process of our knowing it. Aubenque argues against this traditional interpretation by showing how the Aristotelian concepts of prior and posterior are linguistic and temporal phenomena, rather than substantial realities. He claims that the priority of essence is nothing but the priority belonging to the starting-point of discursive thought, i.e., reasoning in time; if

separate substance were truly prior to generation, it would have to be without temporal change and, therefore, without priority (45–50). Aubenque then considers in this light the two forms of knowledge from *Posterior Analytics*, namely deduction and intuition (50–66). He reasons that since all knowledge is arrived at by means of deduction from prior knowledge, all knowledge must be posterior to that from which it is deduced. It follows that the first principle of deduction, since it cannot be deduced, must be unknowable. Aubenque goes on to claim that Aristotle introduces intuition, the mode of knowledge by which the first principles of deduction would be grasped, as an ideal condition of deduction only, and that Aristotle can speak of it only negatively. As a result, Aubenque severs the progression of knowing from the hierarchy of reality: Aristotle's opposition between what is more knowable *for us* and more knowable *in itself* would not be an opposition between two modes of beings, but between actual knowing and the ideal condition of actual knowing (66–68).

What then is ontology without theology? Aubenque's next chapter, *La science recherchée*, attempts to reconstruct the genesis of the ontological element of Aristotle's thought. Since, according to Aubenque, this science is radically transient on its own and stabilized only by the confusion of its ideal with the object of another science, theology, an exposition of its genesis is nothing other than a narration of that confusion. Hence Aubenque begins by arguing that in book A of *Metaphysics* Aristotle's presentation of the historical development of the inquiry into being is a dialectical confrontation of the two sciences (71–94). It is well known that Aristotle presents the history of philosophy as progressive and finding its completion in his own doctrine. Aubenque, however, claims that Aristotle mistakes the idea of achievement for the achievement itself—that he discovers but does not realize the end at which ontology aims (77). On Aubenque's premise of the indeterminacy of ontology, philosophy is pushed forth not by the solution but by the problem, and so the fault of Aristotle's predecessors is that, in arriving at a position, they lost contact with the indefiniteness of reality and its multifarious forms of expression in language (84–86). According to Aubenque, the virtue of Aristotle's metaphysics is not, as Aristotle himself believes, that he unifies the various positions of his predecessors, but, on the contrary, that he maintains an unresolved tension between idealism (which Aubenque identifies with theology) and physics (to which Aubenque ultimately reduces ontology) throughout his own philosophy.

Aubenque's interpretation of Aristotle's theory of signification is crucial for his interpretation of Aristotle's dialectical method. Aubenque traces Aristotle's dialectical method to an engagement with the sophists, whose disregard for the truth allowed them to explore fully both sides of a debate

and to bring out the powers of language (94–97). Yet, Aubenque explains, Aristotle's doctrine of language differs significantly from theirs: while the sophists assumed a total identification of language with being, Aristotle dissociates language and reality by understanding language as a function of the affectations of the soul (98–117). In Aristotle's treatises on language, one finds the idea that words are conventional signs that indicate, rather than naturally correspond to or imitate, beings. Aubenque makes this idea the basis for both the incompleteness and the possibility of dialectic as follows: a being is known not immediately through words, but mediated through the activity of combining words, i.e., of judgment and predication; although this combination—as its components—can do more than signify, the fact that an opinion is generally held suggests that a certain stable unity is signified, and that the opinion can serve as a reliable object of dialectical inquiry. Thus in Aubenque's view, while linguistic conventions preserve a certain stability in the significations of words, the radical disparity between words and their significations compels further linguistic activity.

Aubenque explains by way of Aristotle's doctrine of homonymy and synonymy that ontology is the attempt to express linguistically the unity of discourse that is caused by the imperfect resemblance of language to reality. To this end Aubenque grounds the traditional Aristotelian difference between general and particular on linguistic activity: while beings are particular and so practically infinite, words are employed to encapsulate multiple particulars at once and thus set limits to the plurality of reality through homonymy (118–24). On this view synonymy betokens the natural need to avoid paralogism by distinguishing between particular realities connected to words. Most important for Aubenque's Aristotle is that the means of distinction is intention. Aubenque interprets Aristotle's defence of the law of non-contradiction as a demonstration of this point: Aristotle's imaginary interlocutor is forced to admit a unified intention in the debate or leave the debate entirely (124–34). Dialectic seeks to find a word for the underlying unity of intention that is the necessary condition of debate, while anything that is not this unity must be considered an accident (134–43). For Aubenque, this is the framework for Aristotle's criticism of the idealists, such as the Pythagoreans and Platonists: the idealists took this aspect of dialectic too far and thus arrived at a naive unity of language and being similar to the one held by the sophists, namely the notion that each word signifies an essence (144–59). Aubenque's Aristotle avoids the trappings of idealism in the search for being itself by recognizing that "being" has more than one signification even though it is one word (157–63).

Aubenque's important claim is that Aristotle thereby commits himself to an impossible science: "being," though it tends to signify a maximum unity of

discourse, nevertheless signifies multiple unities of discourse. The search for a synonymous use of “being” among the various kinds of predications, the ways in which something is said to be, would only emphasize the very homonymy which Aristotle wishes to overcome (163–90). Being in the sense of truth has a special place in Aubenque’s interpretation, for what scholars such as Jaeger have found to be Aristotle’s inconsistent views about truth, namely truth as connection between ideas, truth as connection between things, and truth as predication of simple essence, are taken by Aubenque to express various perspectives on the activity of predication itself (165–70). Aubenque holds that various forms of predication, the categories, are irreducible to one another despite their homonymy; on the basis of Aubenque’s theory of signification, Aristotle’s inclusion of essence within the categories makes essence no more than one signification among the others, even though it may elsewhere be treated by Aristotle as the primary sense of being (170–72).

For Aubenque, the problem of the attempt to overcome homonymy by synonymy reaches its clearest expression in the notion that being, though said in many ways, is said also *πρὸς ἓν*, i.e., in relation to one thing (190–98). Aubenque extricates this notion from what he believes to be its hypostatization through the neoplatonic doctrine of the ‘analogy of being.’ He does this by arguing that the doctrine depends on an identification of “being,” “good” and “one” which is not to be found in Aristotle’s texts, and is motivated by an alien philosophical impulse to make the cause of all beings a transcendent principle (198–206). Thus Aubenque claims that it would beg the question to take this later doctrine as evidence of its existence in Aristotle’s texts, since, given the linguistic origin of ontology, it is the existence of this very doctrine that is in question (200).

Aubenque concludes his study of the ontological side of Aristotle’s original thinking by dissolving Aristotle’s universal science of being. He argues that being cannot be the principle of any science by demonstrating that being cannot be a genus: the Aristotelian universal (i.e., the genus) is a finite totality of particulars signified consistently by the synonymous use of a word; each science is composed of the body of propositions that refer to such a genus; if being were a genus, there would be nothing of the infinity of particular beings to which the genus would not apply; “being” would signify everything and so effectively signify nothing (222–31). Aubenque makes clear that he does mean to argue that there is a ‘beyond being’ or negative theology for Aristotle—it is a matter of the highest unity of signification, not of a highest being (231–36). Why, then, does Aristotle make being an ideal at the top of a hierarchy of sciences? Aubenque holds that Aristotle’s hierarchy of sciences is less evidence of his belief in a logical structure of reality than it is an implicit admission of the fact that no science knows its first principle:

because no science can deduce its primary axioms, the subordination of one science to another is necessary (236–50). He explains that, while Aristotle's notion of a universal science is supported by the the sophistic presumption to speak well about all fields of expertise, Aristotle's ontology lacks the stability required to surpass its dialectical origins (250–302).

One of Aubenque's most important claims is that Aristotle provides a false stability to the object of ontology by conflating it with the contemporary though distinct science of separate substance, theology. In the book's next major section, *La science introuvable*, Aubenque argues against their compatibility. For Aubenque, the science of theology is inherited by Aristotle from thinkers such as Plato and Parmenides, who, reflecting on the immutable, eternal, incorruptible and intelligible motion of the heavenly bodies, could not but posit a kind of existence separate from the sub-lunar realm (305–10). Aubenque claims that Aristotle, in arguing that Plato fails to separate the ideas from experience, does not depart from the spirit and intention of Platonism, but all the more affirms the separation of the divine: if the divine cannot be corrupted by the plurality of this world, and if the unity of ontology develops out of ontology as its ideal condition, then the divine cannot be the unity of ontology (312–22).

Aubenque's procedure therefore is to dismantle the traditional Aristotelian notion of a divine and intelligible first principle. He argues that Aristotle's theology, while it deals with eternal objects and therefore may be the only properly knowable science, neither teaches anything about the world which is subject of change, nor can be properly known by the thinking that properly belongs to such a world (322–35). He argues that Aristotle's descriptions of the immanence of God through composite activities are no more than metaphorical (335–55). He rejects the proof of the unmoved mover by infinite regress on the grounds that, although the movement of the astral bodies demands an unmoved mover, there is no mover that is itself not moved and, decisively, is known to us (355–65). Aristotle's apparent solution to this difficulty, that the divine is an efficient cause through being desired, is taken by Aubenque to further reveal the incongruity of the divine and the mortal: neither does God condescend nor is desire for God fulfilled (366–67). Aubenque concludes the chapter by applying to the interpretation of Aristotle's ambiguous formulations of the science of *Metaphysics* the reasoning that, since ontology has its source in discourse, and since discourse is applicable only to the sublunary world, from which it originates and to which the divine does not descend, there can be no onto-theology (368–412). Thus Aubenque argues that in Aristotle's system God effectively plays the role of neither cause, nor principle, nor model, but aspiration and ideal.

In the final section, *Physique et ontologie, ou la réalité de la philosophie*, Aubenque narrates what he believes to be the generation of metaphysics out

of Aristotle's imperfect unification of ontology and theology. For Aubenque, since motion is the fundamental difference between divine and sublunary substance, metaphysics is effectively physics. Aubenque claims to find the development of the principles of metaphysics from Aristotle's dialectical investigation within *Physics*: ontology's contribution to metaphysics is the revelation through dialectic of the various aspects of motion; theology provides the ideal of presence by which those aspects are hypostatized, that is to say, by which the essentially contingent constitution of nature is forgotten and its various ontological aspects come to be considered eternal principles (412–38). The result, Aubenque holds, is a worldview where things must always fall short of the ideal of what they are: inquiry into motion takes the form of a search for a stable unity which encompasses multiplicity; the ideal of presence applied to the movement of beings leads to the positing of a being that underlies change between contraries, i.e., substance; yet substance is thus only a being among beings elevated by thought beyond its proper domain (412–38). Because the concepts of being as actuality and as potentiality are presupposed in *Physics*, Aubenque must devote special attention to arguing that Aristotle's development of those concepts in Book Θ of *Metaphysics* is constituted by the inquiry into motion no less than is the dialectic of the physical works. He argues, on the one hand, that potentiality is a reification of the search for the unknowable origin of generated beings and, on the other hand, that actuality is a reification of search for the unknowable totality of motions (438–56). Thus the indefinite inquiry into being would be superseded by the inquiry into something definite: an actuality, essence, form, or quiddity (456–72). Aubenque traces the development of the notion of the composite substance to Aristotle's attempt to unite the definite, stable essence with its indefinite, moving existence by a duplication of the essence: essence becomes more than a mere linguistic limit, but, now as middle term in tautological syllogistic demonstration, is a 'principle and cause' of its composition and proper accidents or, to use Aubenque's expression, it is the mediator of itself with itself (472–84). According to this interpretation, the priority of form to matter—traditionally taken as justification for the existence of self-subsistent form—is undermined by the fact that each is a relative and mutually dependent moment in the thinking of motion; Aristotle's metaphysics belies its own impossibility in that it cannot arrive at simple essence but through the plurality of motion on which language depends.

Our questioning of Aubenque's interpretation should begin from where his interpretation is most decisive: in the identification of Aristotle's original thought with his method, rather than with his aim. For Aubenque, ontological inquiry creates its own objects of inquiry, and metaphysics is a subsequent

confusion of those objects of inquiry with the unattainable theological ideal of eternal presence. Therefore, Aubenque is able to treat Aristotle's development as a necessary whole instead of introducing extrinsic (e.g., biographical) explanations of the contradictions in Aristotle's thought. Aubenque even goes further than those who, trusting in Aristotle's statements of his own success, hold that Aristotle's apparent contradictions are in fact methodological or pedagogical steps in preparation for his intended doctrine. In Aubenque's view, Aristotle cannot escape the same criticisms that he himself makes against Platonism. Aubenque's interpretation of the Aristotelian distinction between universal and particular as a distinction between the finite universality of language and the infinite particularity of reality amounts to the admission of a fundamentally indefinite principle of being; but Aristotle denies such a principle on the grounds that it grants undue causality to non-being.⁸ Aubenque's claim that Aristotle unifies the composite substance by duplicating its essence follows the logic of the 'third-man' argument: an instance of X is united with the essence of X by another essence of X, with the result that yet another essence of X is necessary for the unity of the instance of X with the second essence of X, and so on ad infinitum; Aubenque's Aristotle tries to avoid this difficulty by making the duplicated essence a final cause and thereby only conceals the original problem behind a linguistic construction. This false solution is precisely that for which Aristotle faults his idealist predecessors.⁹ Now, supposing that Aubenque is correct in arguing that Aristotle's effective teachings are absolutely determined by their origin, the truth of Aubenque's interpretation relies on a correct description of those origins. It is therefore necessary to ask whether Aubenque properly understands the problems that Aristotle aims to solve.

Aubenque portrays the theological science inherited by Aristotle from Plato and the Idealists to be a science of separate substance. Aubenque seems to interpret "separate" to mean only "independent." There is, however, an additional connotation of the word that is decisively absent from Aubenque's presentation of the tradition, namely "cause." Aristotle's *Metaphysics* begins with the claim that theology's proper aim is the first cause of being and of knowing, and that this cause is the final cause, i.e., the Good.¹⁰ According to his account, Plato sought a transcendent substance, not merely because of its stable existence, but primarily because of its stable causality; his failure to find this kind of cause within the world of sensation and motion is the reason that he sought a substance independent of that world.¹¹ In this respect,

8. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.6.988a2–8; *ibid.* 12.10.1075b17–24.

9. *Ibid.* 1.6.987b11–15.

10. *Ibid.* 1.2.982a4–983a11.

11. *Ibid.* 1.6.987a29–b20; *ibid.* 1.9.990a35–991b9.

Plato's story of the introduction of the theory of the forms is in accordance with Aristotle's.¹² Furthermore, the notion of the Good as transcendent cause of the unity of being and thinking is certainly not foreign to Plato's dialogues.¹³ Aristotle's main criticism of Platonism is that it takes recourse in logical abstractions because it fails to explain how the Good can actually be a cause.¹⁴ Aristotle boasts of his own accomplishment of this goal as the culmination of his treatment of the divine first principle.¹⁵

Aubenque however seems to mistake this aspect of Aristotle's appropriation of Idealism and thereby to lose the guiding thread of Aristotle's project. Aubenque claims that Platonism contributes the ideal of presence to Aristotle's metaphysical development. On this view, Aristotle's doctrine of the final causality of substance is the result of his dialectical creation of a hierarchy of beings according to that ideal; the Good is no more than a relic of the impossible attempt to cover up the gap between speech and its intention. If, however, Aristotle's aim from the start is knowledge of the good, a reevaluation of his success or failure might be necessary.

Yet such a reevaluation is complicated by Aubenque's distinction between Aristotle's effective and intended teaching. Even though the search for causal substance may be the primary concern of Platonism, Aubenque can still claim that the reality of Platonism (at the very least for Aristotle's appropriation of it) is a search for the ideal of presence. The notion of a transcendent good would no less be, as Aubenque argues, a tentative fulfillment of the ideal of presence through dialectical constructions. Whatever Aristotle's final doctrine may be, Aubenque's privileging of the process of Aristotle's dialectical method entails that the finality of any doctrine must remain illusory.

It therefore is necessary to examine Aubenque's claim that the primacy of generation and of language is a genuinely Aristotelian idea (even if Aristotle himself might prefer to think otherwise). In the following, I argue that his claim relies on a selective misreading of Aristotle's texts determined by a denial of substantial causality. Furthermore, I argue that Aubenque's interpretation effectively affirms the causality which it seeks to deny and, for that reason, does not obtain as a legitimate criticism in its own right of the traditional (Platonic) interpretation of Aristotle.

Ostensibly, Aubenque demonstrates the priority of linguistic activity to substance in the introduction of his book, where he interprets the senses of "priority" listed in Book Δ of *Metaphysics*.¹⁶ His argument is as follows.

12. Plato, *Parmenides* 128eff.

13. Idem, *Republic* 508c–509b; idem, *Timaeus* 29dff.

14. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.9.992a25–992b1; *ibid.* 12.10.1075a25–1075b2.

15. *Ibid.* 12.10.1075a12ff.

16. *Ibid.* 5.11.1018b9–1019a14.

Aristotle's explicit teaching says that the right angle is posterior to the acute angle in time, while it is prior in definition. Yet, according to Aubenque, this is only to say that the right angle is defined before the acute angle; logical priority is thus another form of temporal priority. Aubenque further argues that priority according to substance must be reduced to logical priority and thereby to temporal: the traditional interpretation sees the substance as posterior in the order of generation and prior as final cause; yet, for Aubenque, to say that the form of the house is prior to its construction, is only to say that the house is defined before the construction is defined; in other words, substance has being in its linguistic signification alone, and language is a phenomenon that comes into being in time and space.

Aubenque's argument, however, fails to make generation prior to causal substance precisely because it makes generation itself a causal substance. Aristotle defines priority according to substance as belonging to that which can exist without other things, but on which the existence of those other things depends.¹⁷ In other words, that which is prior is the cause of the being of the thing to which it is prior. By this definition, Aubenque's argument implies that time is prior as a causal substance: because definition and substance both appear in time, time is prior to them as cause, i.e., they depend on time which is itself independent of them. This is not to eliminate priority in the causal sense, but to affirm it through the appearance of its elimination. Aubenque denies, rather than disproves the substantiality of cause. His reduction of the priority of substance to language and to time not only begs the question by putting them before substance from the start, but confirms its own falsity in its very articulation.¹⁸

In order to deny causality to beings themselves and to reduce substance to the generation of linguistic utterance, Aubenque must gloss over significant conceptual distinctions. Throughout his book he consistently translates "οὐσία" by "essence," rather than by the traditional "substance," and thereby obscures the difference between the lifeless, logical form and the actively causal form which Aristotle identifies with being in the proper sense.¹⁹ Thus

17. Ibid. 5.11.1019a2–4: τὰ δὲ κατὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐσίαν, ὅσα ἐνδέχεται εἶναι ἄνευ ἄλλων, ἐκεῖνα δὲ ἄνευ ἐκείνων μὴ.

18. Aubenque's consequent treatment of Aristotle's explanation (7.4.1029b1ff) of how knowledge proceeds from the less intelligible to the more intelligible skips over Aristotle's remark in that passage that such a process is analogous to the ascent from knowing good things to knowing the good. This passage causes trouble also for Aubenque's thesis that there is no textual evidence supporting the interpretation that the πρὸς ἔν structure of being corresponds to the structure of the good. For a criticism of Aubenque's view in this respect, see André De Muralt, "Comment dire l'être? Le problème de l'être et de ses significations chez Aristote," *Studia Philosophica* 23 (1963): 109–62.

19. Cf. Aubenque, *Le problème de l'être*, 456–57. Aubenque later recants the translation of "οὐσία" as "essence" in his earlier work, on the grounds that "essence" ignores the substrative

Aubenque misrepresents important parts of Book Z of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle's investigation of how none of the various formal aspects of being—whether substrate, universal, genus or quiddity—are by themselves substance. Aristotle concludes Book Z by showing that the final cause is the substance of a being; substance is not simply the what that is signified in definition, but primarily the why.²⁰ Aubenque, however, uses this passage as evidence that the final cause is a redundant duplication of the formal essence by which Aristotle unites essence to matter. But Aubenque thus neglects the crucial fact that substance is in this passage being considered as final cause independently of logical considerations. According to Aubenque's reading, the structure of the syllogism, traditionally taken to imitate the structure of causality, would be nothing more than a tautology. The particular syllogism, however, which Aubenque uses to illustrate this point, that of the interposition of the earth being the cause of the eclipse (though the former is simply the definition of "eclipse"), cannot be taken as exemplary. In fact Aristotle uses this very example as a case of something that is talked about but is not a substance in its own right, since it has no final cause.²¹ Aubenque does not refer to Aristotle's examination of this very problem in *Posterior Analytics*, where Aristotle argues that there is no tautology where the cause is final: 'normal digestion' and 'health,' though they can be synonyms, do not mean the same thing, since the former is a means to the latter.²² Attributes are grounded in their substance through final causality. Because Aubenque takes the universal—whose broad applicability approximates eternal presence—to be the exemplary object of science for Aristotle, he must neglect Aristotle's statements to the contrary: in fact Aristotle rejects the notion that science can consist of merely generally applicable statements and insists that knowledge is universal because it is of a cause.²³

That the structure of thinking imitates the structure of reality is an implicit presupposition of Aristotle's defense of the law of non-contradiction, but Aubenque, reversing the order of causality and knowing, reads into Aristotle's argument a foreign problematic. Aubenque takes the passage to prove that the axioms of science are a priori conditions of discourse that are

character of "οὐσία." This recantation does not go far enough, since it does not acknowledge the distinct sort of causality which Aristotle attaches to the use of the word to distinguish it both from essence and from substrate. Cf. Pierre Aubenque, "Plotin et Dexippe, exégètes des Catégories d'Aristote" in *Aristotelica. Mélanges offerts à Marcel de Corte* (Bruxelles: Editions Ousia, 1985), 7–40, 12–13 n.11.

20. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.17.1041a7ff.

21. *Ibid.* 8.4.1044b9–13.

22. *Idem*, *Posterior Analytics* 2.10.94aff; cf. *ibid.* 2.11.94b9–26.

23. *Ibid.* 71b3–13; *idem*, *Metaphysics* 1.1.981a30–b7; *ibid.* 1.2.982b2–3; *ibid.* 1.3.983a24–

produced by the activity of that discourse itself. Yet Aristotle's explicit aim is to show that contradictions, although they can be said, cannot really be meant.²⁴ To this end, he points out that what is important in debate is not the word but the being which is signified. We must recall that Aubenque's interpretation, given its separation of the original philosophy from the intended system of Aristotle, cannot be refuted simply by restating Aristotle's explicit aim: in Aubenque's view, the being that is signified in debate is not a product of an external cause but of linguistic activity itself. But this view becomes more questionable when we consider the context of Aristotle's proof of the law of non-contradiction. Aristotle writes that those who deny the law of non-contradiction do so because they identify truth with sense-perception: sense-perception, since it is caused by motion, is always subject to change; as a result, it would seem either that everything is equally true or that nothing is true.²⁵ Aristotle's method of argumentation then is to draw attention to the unchanging substance that causes the motion of sense perception.²⁶ Here the disconnect between Aubenque's theory of signification and Aristotle's psychology becomes important: while Aubenque argues that Aristotle grounds signification in the affectations of the soul, he must deny the Aristotelian notion that affectations are sensations, caused by interaction with the motion of the external objects of sensation.²⁷ Only because these objects exist as causally prior to, not as ideals of, debate, does Aristotle take the principle of the structure of motion, an unmoved substance that underlies the change between contraries, as the model of the cognitive principle of non-contradiction.²⁸

Aubenque's relocating of causality from substance to language most significantly alters Aristotle's doctrine that the first cause is self-reflective cognition. If Aubenque were correct in tracing rational order to language and language ultimately to the self-affectation of mortal subjectivity, self-reflective knowledge would amount—as it does for Aubenque—to a constant recognition of the emergence of new forms of discourse in response to the imperfect correspondence of the signifier with the signified. Aristotle, for whom what is signified preexists in a rational order, traces the affectations in the soul to external motion and finally to a first principle unmoved by anything else.²⁹ In turn, Aristotle must describe the first principle of being in terms of cognition, because knowledge of knowledge is the most self-subsisting activity.³⁰

24. *Ibid.* 4.4.1008b13–31.

25. *Ibid.* 4.5.1009a16ff.

26. *Ibid.* 4.5.1009a36–39; *ibid.* 4.5.1010b15–30.

27. *Idem*, *De Anima* 2.5.416b32–35.

28. *Idem*, *Metaphysics* 4.8.1012b23–32.

29. *Ibid.* 12.6.1071b3–12.

30. *Ibid.* 12.7.1072b14–31.

Aristotle's psychology is important here: because knowledge is the identity or assimilation of the form of the knowing mind with the form of the object of knowing, $\nu\omicron\varsigma$ becomes the form that it knows; the $\nu\omicron\varsigma$ that knows its own form, since it is always in possession of itself, is always in perfect actuality.³¹ Most important is the fact that Aristotle believes that $\nu\omicron\varsigma$ unifies being and knowing by virtue of being the final cause of both, not by virtue of its eternal presence. This is to identify the $\nu\omicron\varsigma$ of *Metaphysics* (the final cause of nature) with the $\nu\omicron\varsigma$ of *Posterior Analytics* (the final cause of knowing).³² Although none of Aristotle's extant texts explicitly does this, the Aristotelian tradition does not depart from his spirit in attempting such an explanation. Aristotle's treatment of the causal immanence of intellect for the soul in *De Anima* Γ.5 alone makes such an interpretation plausible and, perhaps for that reason, receives no mention in Aubenque's book.

It is evident that Aubenque and Aristotle hold views about the purpose of intellectual activity that are fundamentally incompatible. But are both views equally plausible? Insofar as Aubenque denies final causality to dialectic, his explanation of its generation must remain incomplete. For Aubenque holds that philosophy is driven forth by the inadequacy of the means of signification for its intended goal; further, he holds that the measure by which the means are judged to be inadequate is the ideal of eternal presence. Thus he does provide an explanation for why Aristotle would believe that there is the unity of thought and being: that which is eternally present would not admit of difference between what it is (as stabilized in language) and what it becomes (since all reality is in motion). However, Aubenque does not explain why the ideal of presence should be desired in the first place. For Aristotle, the aim of a natural desire is attainable,³³ and indeed all men desire by nature to know.³⁴ It is by virtue of the final causality of the first principle that the difference between thinking and being is experienced as privation, as a desire that compels dialectic onward. For Aubenque, the imperfection of dialectic is measured by an ideal of our own making; for Aristotle, it is measured by a perfect being, which, insofar as it is known imperfectly, is known negatively through desire. It is one thing to say—as Aristotle suggests—that this unity is unattainable by the imperfect modes of knowing belonging to our mortal capacities alone;³⁵ it is another to say—as Aubenque does—that there simply

31. Idem, *De Anima* 3.4.429a10–429b10.

32. For a criticism of Aubenque's interpretation of *Posterior Analytics* on the grounds that it privileges deduction to intuition, see Owens, *The Doctrine of Being*, xxvi.

33. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.2.1094a21–22; idem, *Politics* 2.1.1253a9; idem, *De Caelo*, 1.4.271a25.

34. Idem, *Metaphysics* 1.1.980a22.

35. Ibid. 12.7.1072b25–7; idem, *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7.1177b26ff.

is no such unity. For the standpoint from which one can judge knowledge absolutely, if not from its completion, is from relation to it through desire.

Aubenque's recovery of the dialectical element in Aristotle's thought does not entail a rejection of the commentary tradition as untrue to the Aristotelian spirit. If the first cause is self-thinking substance, then Aristotle's dialectic can be thought of as a movement through imperfect stages of the realization of the first principle, which would thereby contain its own privations.³⁶ It follows that neoplatonic interpretations of Aristotle concerned with the problems of how difference and multiplicity come from the first principle should be considered developments rather than misunderstandings of original Aristotelianism. That said, it is certainly an interpretive problem that none of the extant texts of Aristotle explicitly work out, for instance, how the divisions in nature or in predicative logic are produced from a simple principle, or, again, how forms abstracted from sensible experience subsist in a higher thinking. Yet Aristotle's silence on these questions does not necessarily entail that they are without an answer, or that Aristotle himself did not have an answer. These problems would be best solved by those who seek to answer them, and so the interpretations of the commentators, ancient and modern, should not be bypassed.

This appeal to the traditional method of Aristotelian interpretation raises the question of how it differs from Aubenque's. We have seen how Aubenque's interpretation and subversion of Aristotelian metaphysics are challenged by an interpretation that takes Aristotle's own intentions seriously. Aubenque denies from the start important premises of Aristotle's thought and derives from his texts a meaning that is fundamentally opposed to his thought. Aubenque bypasses not only the authority of the traditional commentators but also the authority of Aristotle's own self-interpretation. It is plausible that Aubenque holds his conviction that language is causally prior to being as justification for this interpretive method. Since Aubenque assumes that

36. Aubenque, since he claims that the negativity of dialectic does not originate in any meaningful object outside of dialectic, must deny that Aristotelian dialectic subsumes negative movements into a self-differentiating unity. The radical negativity of neoplatonism, in Aubenque's view, is a metaphysical construction and so only confusedly surpasses metaphysics (cf. 488). For Aubenque's role in the twentieth century's revival of neoplatonism, see W.J. Hankey, *One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History*, published with J.-M. Narbonne, *Levinas and the Greek Heritage Studies, Philosophical Theology* 32 (Leuven: Peeters, 2006). See also W.J. Hankey, "Why Heidegger's 'History' of Metaphysics is Dead," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (2004): 425–43. Hankey argues that twentieth-century French scholarship, motivated primarily by Heidegger's criticism of metaphysics to engage with neoplatonism, eventually rediscovered in neoplatonism a better solution to that criticism and thus undermined the very history that had initially motivated it.

the signified is produced by its means of signification, it might be allowed for his interpretation to deny reality to Aristotle's intentions and grant it to the written word.

Yet such an interpretive approach is highly questionable. The need for interpretation emerges from the fact that Aristotle's texts give rise to questions which are not explicitly treated in them. However, without the guidance of an author's intention it is not easy to know how to fill the silences of their texts. Aubenque betrays his need for this guidance when he claims to detect subtle admissions on Aristotle's part of the impossibility of metaphysics. Primarily, he supports these claims with a passage at the start of book Z in which Aristotle characterizes the question of being as "that which in the past, presently, and always is sought and always is puzzled over."³⁷ However, as Brunschwig shows, this evidence is too tenuous to plausibly support the extremely bold claim that Aristotle both does and does not believe in the success of his project.³⁸ Aubenque's interpretation of Aristotle's silences—an interpretation that sees them as absolutely necessary—must ultimately depend on the effective structure that he claims to find within Aristotle's texts apart from Aristotle's intentions. But if Aristotle's silences are necessary, why must they be explained? Ironically, the tradition that Aubenque criticizes for this problem is better suited to its solution. Aubenque, reducing Aristotle's authentic philosophy to his extant texts claims that the gaps in Aristotle's teachings are necessary; yet in filling these gaps with explanations contrary to Aristotle's own intentions, Aubenque must take recourse to the only remaining intentions, namely his own. In this respect, Aubenque's approach is similar to that of the traditional commentators: both must explain Aristotle's silences. Aubenque and the commentators differ in that, while they presuppose that Aristotle's philosophy is a success, he presupposes that it is a failure. For the commentators, Aristotle's success justifies the contemplation of the meaning of Aristotle's texts in view of reality. For Aubenque, Aristotle's failure can only justify an insistence on its falling short of a reality that denies successful discourse about reality. No doubt both cases are a hermeneutic circle. The problem is that Aubenque provides a complete circle while denying at every moment that such completion is possible. It cannot be proved on the basis of textual interpretation that the text itself has no core; yet Aubenque argues that this is the meaning of Aristotle's texts. Aubenque must either abandon his claim of finding in Aristotle the necessity of unachieved signification in discourse, or abandon his claim of achieving a genuine interpretation of Aristotle.

37. Ibid. 7.2.1028b2: τὸ πάλαι τε καὶ νῦν καὶ ἀεὶ ζητούμενον καὶ ἀεὶ ἀπορούμενον.

38. Jacques Brunschwig, "Dialectique et ontologie chez Aristote: à propos d'un livre récent," *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 154 (1964): 179–200, 190. Aubenque concedes to Brunschwig's criticism in the preface to the second edition of *Le problème de l'être*, viii.

The great utility of Aubenque's work lies in this great difficulty. Aubenque falls into the dilemma of Cratylus, who, by reducing his means of communication to the motion of his finger, sought to demonstrate the futility of the attempt to express with any stability the flux of reality.³⁹ Somehow silence itself does not suffice to prove his point, yet he contradicts himself by taking recourse to communication. Aubenque brings to Cratylus' aid the tools of modern scholarship and the postmodern conception of the existential self—a being that through language creates for itself a rational order against an otherwise meaningless existence. Although I do not profess to have refuted Aubenque's philosophical presuppositions, I have argued that they prevent him from accurately portraying and criticizing Aristotelian metaphysics in its own terms. Nevertheless, a critical engagement with Aubenque's book makes manifest the disparity between ancient and postmodern philosophy. From this the possibility of a dialectical encounter arises whereby we may come to appreciate what in the former is incipient, and what in the latter is the expression of a higher cause.

39. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.5.1010a10–15.