

Aristotle and the Definition of Man

“To be, or not to be: that is the question.” This phrase has passed from literature and the stage into everyday parlance: it has become a commonplace. Yet, while the phrase is endlessly repeated, few stop to reflect upon its true meaning. For this simple phrase reflects the dilemma that is at the heart of Aristotle’s teachings: what does it mean “to be.” Moreover, what does it mean to be a man?

The opening sentence of the *Metaphysics* hints at Aristotle’s intention in defining being: “All men by nature desire to know” (Aristotle 499). Yet, even for one of the greatest minds in history, this journey toward knowledge and being is plagued with difficulties. Aristotle does not arrive at his destination without making false starts and undertaking several diversions. The true nature of being must be stitched together, like one of the tapestries weaved by the goddess Athena in *The Odyssey*.

Aristotle notes that the highest science, the science which has knowledge of being, is a divine science, “one that deals with divine objects,” and that God is the first principle (Aristotle 501). Similarly, he intimates that the philosopher who studies the universal has the greatest knowledge for “he knows in a sense all the instances that fall under the universal” (Aristotle 500).

Yet the question remains, how can we apprehend the universal, since in everyday existence we deal with individual sense perceptions? For Aristotle, the search for knowledge must be found by undertaking the study of first causes. He goes on to define first causes by stating “In one of these we mean the substance, i.e. the essence. . .in another the matter or

substratum, in a third the source of the change, and in the fourth the cause opposed to this, the purpose and the good” (Aristotle 501).

After having identified the difficulty of the search for knowledge, and the goal of understanding universals, Aristotle posits that the search involves the concepts of being and unity.

The inquiry that is both the hardest of all and the most necessary for knowledge of the truth is whether being and unity are the substances of things, and whether each of them, without being anything else, is being or unity respectively, *or* we must inquire what being and unity are, with the implication that they may have some other underlying nature. (Aristotle 519)

How then, to begin the search for being and unity? In characteristic fashion, Aristotle begins by definition. For definition, as he says in the *Posterior Analytics* “is a ‘thesis’ or a ‘laying something down,’” (Aristotle 98).

So too, there are many senses in which a thing is said to be, but all refer to one starting point; some things are said to be because they are substances, others because they are affections of substance, others because they are a process towards substance, or destructions or privations or qualities of substance, or productive or generative of substance, or of things which are relative to substance, or negations of one of these things or of substance itself. (Aristotle 522)

All things refer to one starting point: the definition of substance. What is substance? The first clue we have about the nature of substance is given in *The Categories*, when Aristotle states that “Substance, in the truest and primary and most definite sense of the word, is that

which is neither predicable of a subject, nor present in a subject; for instance, the individual man or horse” (Aristotle 6). Later, he refines his definition: “Moreover, primary substances are most properly called substances in virtue of the fact that they are the entities which underlie everything else, and that everything else is either predicated of them or present in them” (Aristotle 6). Finally, in *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says that “We call substance (1) the simple bodies, i.e. earth, and fire and water and everything of this sort. . .The essence, the formula of which is a definition, is also called the substance of the thing” (Aristotle 538).

Substance, then, is somehow tied to the essence or essential nature of a thing, and is the starting point in the discovery of the meaning of being. Yet substance, by itself, cannot produce an entity that is said “to be.” Substance is the underlying substratum or the essence of the thing. There must be something which shapes the thing, which gives the substance something to adhere to, as it were. For Aristotle, this entity which provides a shape for the substance to adhere to is matter. Aristotle’s concept of matter is not the same as the modern concept which states that matter is composed of atomic particles which underlie every portion of material existence. Aristotle’s definition of matter is somewhat more general, and almost posits that matter is an undifferentiated almost plastic entity: “By matter I mean that which in itself is neither a particular thing nor of a certain quantity nor assigned to any other of the categories by which being is determined” (Aristotle 551). Later in *Metaphysics*, Aristotle states that matter is essential for things which come to be: “. . .all things produced either by nature or by art have matter; for each of them is capable both of being and of not being, and this capacity is the matter in each. . .” (Aristotle 355).

It appears that substance and matter are essential for being. How do these two relate, one to the other? Before answering this question, Aristotle makes another deduction regarding

substance, or essence. If essence is defined as the essential nature of a thing, the soul must be the essential nature of animals.

And since the soul of animals (for this is the substance of a living being) is their substance according to the formula, i.e. the form and the essence of a body of a certain kind. . .so that the parts of the soul are prior, either all or some of them to the concrete ‘animal,’ and so too with each individual animal. . . . (Aristotle 558)

For Aristotle, it is the union of substance (that which is essential), with matter (that which provides a form) which combine to make up a being: “It is clear also that the soul is the primary substance and the body is matter, and man or animal is a compound of both taken universally” (Aristotle 560).

The definition of that which is necessary for an animal, soul and body, would seem to conclude the discussion of being. Yet being can either fully exist or potentially exist as Aristotle points out in the following statement: “Again ‘being’ and ‘that which is’ mean that some of the things we have mentioned ‘are’ potentially, others in complete reality” (Aristotle 538). Perhaps the distinction between potentially being and actually being might seem to be splitting hairs; yet a detailed examination of Aristotle’s contention is worth undertaking.

In order to understand potential being, we must understand Aristotle’s definition of potential. According to Aristotle,

The fulfillment of what exists potentially, in so far as it exists potentially, is motion. .

.Examples will elucidate this definition of motion. When the buildable, in so far as it is just *that*, is fully real, it is being built, and this is *building*. Similarly, learning, doctoring,

rolling, leaping, ripening, aging. . . .It is the fulfillment of what is potential when it is already fully real and operates not as itself but as *movable*, that is motion. (Aristotle 278).

Potential is transformed from a state that is possible to a state that is actual through motion. It is the transformation that concerns Aristotle. Being is not fully realized until it is transformed by some motion into an actual state. To emphasize this point, we turn to the *Physics*, where Aristotle makes clear the relationship of potential to actual: “. . . for a thing is more properly said to be what it is when it has attained to fulfillment than when it exists potentially” (Aristotle 269).

How then, does potential being transform into actual being? Aristotle posits that potential transforms into actuality through movement. But what type of movement is that which produces the highest actuality? Aristotle provides a hint of the highest actuality in his short treatise *On the Soul*: “And, in general, we may object that it is not in this way [through movement of small particles, or atoms, postulated by Democritus] that the soul appears to originate movement in animals—it is through intention or process of thinking” (Aristotle 636).

It appears that thinking is a form of movement which actualizes animals. Indeed, it is thought which moves in a nature similar to that of the divine: “. . . there is something which moves without being moved, being eternal, substance and actuality. And the object of desire and the object of thought move in this way; they move without being moved” (Aristotle 602). For God is the ultimate “unmoved mover,” and in thinking, we approach that which is most like God “. . . for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God’s self-dependent actuality is life most good an eternal” (Aristotle 603).

And what does God think? “Therefore it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking” (Aristotle 605).

Does Aristotle truly answer the question of being? He talks of substance and form, motion and potential, reality and the soul. Finally, he talks about God and ultimate reality, but leaves the question of being unanswered. Or at least, it appears that way. To give the answer would be too cheap, too easy; the answer has to be earned.

Put together the pieces. Man is an animal combining a soul (essence) in a body (matter). Man has the potential to become, but must rely on motion to become fully real. The highest form of motion in mankind is thought. Man, through applied thought (knowledge combined with reason) achieves the motion which makes him fully real. Man’s highest goal is to transform his potential being into actual being through thought. In doing so, man approaches the highest actuality, the divinity, which is at the same time the highest good in life.

“To be, or not to be” is an apt metaphor for man’s condition. By choosing to reflect, to wonder, to search, man transform from that which is a potential to that which is reality, and in doing so, answers the second part of the famous quotation; it is no longer a question, man is.

Works Cited

1. Aristotle. *Aristotle I*. Various Translators. *Great Books of the Western World*. Ed. Mortimer J. Adler. 2 ed. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica. 726. Vol. 7 of 60 vols. 2007.