

Aristotle and the Emergence of *Ousia*
PHL 415.101
M, 6-9 pm
Arts and Letters 107

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Description

Our concepts too have histories. Hidden away in their depths, as they function to render our experience intelligible, is the complex record of each given concept's historical development. If we do not strive to become aware of that potent history, if we presume that our own concepts are transparent and exhaustively present to our own intellects, then those concepts will exert their influence on our thought according to that long and complex history without our knowing it. In short, to fully understand a concept for us is impossible without understanding the history that has delivered it to us. Finally, the most vital moment in that prior but still effective historical development is often the moment of that concept's inception, its emergence and initial articulation, for that moment of emergence is usually subject to energetic contestation, contestation that a given thinker simultaneously confronts and overcomes through the inaugural articulation of the concept. This is the basic posture our class will assume with respect to the emergence of the concept *ousia*, 'substance' or more literally 'beingness,' as it is articulated and made central to the subsequent tradition in the works of Aristotle.

We will be take a 'phenomenological' approach, which means nothing terribly technical, abstruse, or mysterious. Indeed, it means simply that we will take Aristotle at his word, which is to say, as a practitioner of *dialektikē* and thus as a student of *endoxa*, these being understood as the ways a given subject matter will *dokein* or 'appear' to everyone, to most, or to the wise. Indeed, Aristotle's confidence in this philosophical method indicates that these are taken as always the appearances of *something*. In other words, there are no 'mere appearances,' and no quasi-Cartesian subject/object relation that brings with it the possibility of radical subjective deception or isolation from 'what is.' For Aristotle, the site of appearance is where we begin when we seek to understand our world, and this alone shows him to be a thinker of a (to us) unfamiliar stripe—a distinctly pre-modern thinker. As we read and attempt to think along with him, we will remind ourselves of this fact, and thus of the intellectual distance that both separates us from and (via the tradition we inherit) still binds us to Aristotle today. We will hope to avoid thereby the anachronism of those interpretations that presume to find Cartesian and post-Cartesian problems in Aristotelian philosophizing. To be sure, it is precisely by getting back to an original and emphatically ancient Aristotle that we will discover a thinker with some illuminating contributions to make to contemporary philosophical discussion.

As for the emergence of the concept of *ousia*, we will begin with Aristotle's earlier ontology in the *Categories* and then move to his later ontology in the *Metaphysics*. We will be asking, on the one hand, how does Aristotle define *ousia* in these texts and is he consistent over the course of his career? On the other hand, what is his justification or what evidence does he give for claiming a given definition of *ousia* to be true? Where and how does it appear to us so that we can say, with Aristotle, *this* is what we mean when we say '*ousia*.' We will proceed simply by reading these two texts from beginning to end.

Lastly, students will be asked to present each week on a certain stretch of text. These presentations may be individual or, some weeks (given the large number of enrolled participants), two students may need to work together (deciding among themselves how they will divide up their task).

Required Reading:

Aristotle, *Categories and De Interpretatione* (tr. J. L. Ackrill) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (tr. J. Sachs) ()

Schedule (subject to change)

9.15 : Aristotle on Method (*Topics, Physics*)
9.22: *Categories*
9.29 : *Categories* (ref. to *Physics*)
10.6 : *Metaphysics* A, α
10.13 : *Metaphysics* Γ , Δ , Ξ

10.20 : *Metaphysics* Z
10.27 : *Metaphysics* Z
11.3 : *Metaphysics* H
11.10 : *Metaphysics* Θ , I (*Physics* III)
11.17: *Metaphysics* A

Grade

Class Presentation	20%
Paper (12 pages)	60% (DUE Friday 12.1, No Late Submissions)
Attendance and Participation	20% $= 100\%$

If any student has any condition that might interfere with his or her timely completion of the assignments, please let me know and I will be happy to make arrangements.