

DISCUSSION NOTES

The Editors of the Metaphysics

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Christopher Kirwan writes as follows in his introductory note to *Metaphysics* Γ :

We are told that the fourteen books of *Metaphysics* were brought into their present arrangement by editors after Aristotle's death. Book A, which they set at the beginning, describes the aim of philosophy as the removal of surprise and perplexity by supplying "knowledge of original causes," and assesses the work of Aristotle's predecessors in that field. After the short book designated α , B outlines a set of "perplexities," most of which get examined, more or less directly, in the rest of the treatise. Γ thus stands, by the traditional ordering, at the start of Aristotle's main discussion of metaphysics; it announces its subject-matter in the first chapter; and its argument is hardly more dependent on what has preceded than on other parts of Aristotle's works.¹

Kirwan thus claims that the *Metaphysics* as we have it has been heavily processed by post-Aristotelian editors, whose work extended even to placing Book A at the head of the treatise: presumably they had found it as an independent treatise, and decided that it would make best sense as an introduction to a collection of Aristotle's writings on metaphysical topics. This claim is important for Kirwan's interpretation of *Metaphysics* Γ , since it justifies him in taking Γ as effectively the beginning of Aristotle's discussion of metaphysics: so Kirwan takes Γ as defining this science in its opening chapter, and then as addressing problems in the science so defined, rather than as adding further specifications to a science described in A or α or B. This issue is important because, on Kirwan's interpretation, metaphysics would have to be *by definition* the science of being as being and its *per se* attributes. By contrast, if Aristotle himself intended A α B to be read before Γ , then since these earlier books describe σοφία or ἡ ἐπιστήμη ἢ ζητούμενη not as a science of being but as a science of first principles, we

¹ *Aristotle's Metaphysics, Books Γ , Δ , and E*, translated with notes by Christopher Kirwan (Oxford, 1971), p.75. The second edition (Oxford, 1993) reproduces the original edition with new supplementary material. The passage here cited is not modified by anything added in the second edition.

would more naturally read $\Gamma 1$ as making a new statement about the science already described: the statement, namely, that the first principles will be principles of being as such (and of its *per se* attributes such as unity and plurality), and that therefore the desired knowledge of principles will be found by a scientific investigation into being, i.e. by a search for causes of being as such (and of unity and plurality).² Since the claim (which is by no means Kirwan's alone)³ that the arrangement of the *Metaphysics* is post-Aristotelian has implications for the interpretation of Γ and subsequent books, it would be worth investigating the basis for this claim.

Kirwan says, "we are told that the fourteen books of the *Metaphysics* were brought into their present arrangement by editors after Aristotle's death." He does not say who told us. A reader might easily draw the conclusion that there was some extant ancient source that said this. But there is not.⁴

We have in fact very few ancient testimonies about the history of the text of the *Metaphysics*: and the majority are merely attempts to explain why the

² For Kirwan, since metaphysics is defined as the science of being *qua* being, the question of the object of metaphysics is simply a matter of interpreting the restrictive phrase "*qua* being"; and it is easy enough to dispose of Philip Merlan's view that this restricts the object of metaphysics to certain special beings, those separate from matter (Kirwan, pp.77-8, together with pp.201-3 in the second edition). But the real problem for the ontological interpretation of metaphysics is that the majority of texts, including all those outside the *Metaphysics* and all those in the *Metaphysics* before Γ , describe "wisdom" or "first philosophy" (or the like), not as a science of being, but either as a science of first causes or as a science of a special kind of beings (divine or eternal or immaterial); see the texts collected in Vianney Décarie, *L'objet de la métaphysique selon Aristote* (Montreal-Paris, 1961). If $\Gamma 1$ does not define metaphysics, but merely adds a specification to what has already been defined, then metaphysics need not deal with everything that can be said about being as such, or even with all of its causes, but only with those causes of being that fall into the desired class.

³ So, for instance, J.L. Ackrill says that the *Metaphysics* "consists of a number of treatises ... which were brought together by a later editor" (*Aristotle the Philosopher*, Oxford, 1981, p.116); for a similar view see now also Jonathan Barnes, "Metaphysics," in his *Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (Cambridge, 1995).

⁴ It is sometimes thought that Werner Jaeger's researches, in his *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development* (English translation by Richard Robinson, second edition, Oxford, 1948), had the effect of showing that the *Metaphysics* as we have it was the result of post-Aristotelian editors, who put together a number of originally independent Aristotelian treatises (and perhaps even some non-Aristotelian treatises, since the authenticity of α and K is controversial). But Jaeger himself did not believe this, except inasmuch as he thought that α , Δ , K and Λ had been added by later editors: he thought that the other books had been written at different times, and as parts of different projects, but that they had been sewn together (not wholly successfully) by Aristotle himself. Certainly Jaeger cannot be cited as an authority for the claim that the work of the editors went as far as putting A in its current position.

Metaphysics contains a book called A and a book called α .⁵ But there are two texts of Asclepius (circa 500 AD) and one of the pseudo-Alexander (probably Michael of Ephesus, circa 1100 AD), which seem to promise more. As far as I have been able to tell, it is the two texts of Asclepius – as misinterpreted, or so I shall argue, by scholars including Ross – that have led to the impression that we have authentic testimony about the editors of the *Metaphysics*.⁶

Ross says, in the introduction to his edition of the *Metaphysics*, that “with regard to the time at which the various treatises were put together to form the *Metaphysics* we have very little to go upon.”⁷ He then cites, without endorsing, one testimonium of the pseudo-Alexander and one of Asclepius:

Alexander (515.20) expresses the opinion that two particular passages were “placed together by Aristotle but separated by Eudemus.” Asclepius (4.9) has a different story, that Aristotle sent the whole work to Eudemus, who thought it unfitting “that so great a work should be published”; and that after his death, and the loss of parts of the book, later scholars filled up the gaps by drawing upon Aristotle’s other works and piecing the whole together as best they could.⁸

In the body of his commentary, Ross cites the other testimonium of Asclepius. Commenting on $\Delta 2$, Ross notes that the chapter is “almost word for word identical with *Physics* 194b23-195b21.” He then adds that “Asclepius 305.19 tells us that ‘they’ (the editors of the *Metaphysics*) ‘said that some parts of Δ had been lost, and they supplied the deficiency out of Aristotle’s own writings” – i.e. that they restored the missing passage by simply copying a passage from the *Physics*.⁹

⁵ These texts report a tradition that either A or α is not by Aristotle but by a nephew of Aristotle’s disciple Eudemus of Rhodes, named either Pasicles or Pasirates; see discussion below, with references in n.10. None of the extant ancient writers who transmit this story endorse it themselves.

⁶ Kirwan and others may also have been influenced by Porphyry’s comparison of his own work in editing Plotinus to Andronicus’ work on Aristotle and Theophrastus (*Vita Plotini* 24), although Porphyry does not mention the *Metaphysics* in particular. But there is no sign that Porphyry thinks Andronicus’ work involved creating new large treatises by stitching small ones together. Porphyry says that Andronicus “collected” or brought together different works of Aristotle, as Porphyry collected Plotinus’ treatises into the six topically linked Enneads: this is quite different from what an editor would have had to do in constituting the *Metaphysics* out of smaller treatises, which would at a minimum involve inserting a great many forward and backward references, especially between *Metaphysics* B and subsequent books (there is nothing like this in any of Porphyry’s Enneads).

⁷ *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, a revised text with introduction and commentary by W.D. Ross, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1924), v.1, p.xxxi.

⁸ *Ibid.* Ross cites the Alexander and Asclepius commentaries on the *Metaphysics* by page and line from the editions in the *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (in vols. 1

These two passages of Asclepius are the only texts that offer any hope of giving us an authentic chain of testimony going back to the original post-Aristotelian editors of the *Metaphysics*. The second passage is particularly suggestive, because (as Ross interprets it) it seems to imply that Asclepius knew (at first or second hand) of a declaration by the editors themselves, made perhaps in a preface to their edition. Unfortunately, Ross has misinterpreted Asclepius. The verb “they said” [ἔλεγον] at Asclepius 305.20 has no antecedent, and Ross supplies the deficiency by supposing that the unnamed subjects of ἔλεγον are the same as the unnamed subjects of “supplied the deficiency” [ἐφήρμοσαν] at 305.21, who must be the editors of the *Metaphysics*. This is initially plausible; but a closer examination will show that Asclepius is not claiming any knowledge of anything the editors of the *Metaphysics* may have said, and that he is simply reporting a school-tradition designed to exculpate Aristotle from the apparent faults of the received text of the *Metaphysics*.

This becomes clear if we look first at the passage from Asclepius’ prolegomena to the *Metaphysics*, which includes the story of Aristotle’s sending the work to Eudemus. Among the various topics to be discussed before beginning his line-by-line exposition of the text, Asclepius notes “the manner of composition” of the work (Asclepius 4.4). He says:

The present treatise has not been fitted together in the same way as Aristotle’s others, nor does it seem well-ordered and continuous; rather, it seems that some things are missing for the continuity of the argument, that others have been brought in [μετενηνέχθαι] bodily from other treatises, and that he says the same things several times. But they say in his defense, defending him nicely [ἀπολογούνται δὲ ὑπὲρ τούτου καὶ καλῶς ἀπολογούνται], that after he wrote the present treatise he sent it to his companion Eudemus of Rhodes, but then, as it turned out, he [Eudemus] decided that it would not be right to publish to the many so great [so exalted? so long?] a treatise. Meanwhile he [Eudemus] died, and some parts of the book were destroyed; and the men of later generations, not daring to add anything of their own, since they fell far short of that man’s [Aristotle’s] thought, supplied the missing parts [ἀρμόσαντες τὰ λείποντα] by bringing them in [μετήγαγον] from his other treatises, as far as was possible. Nonetheless you will find that the sequence of the argument is preserved in these [parts of the text] too. (4.4-16)

Asclepius does not suggest that there is any direct evidence for this story: it is simply one story that has been proposed in the school, whose attraction is that it explains the current state of the text in such a way as to deny Aristotle’s responsibility for its objectionable features. But what does As-

and 6 respectively), and so will I. As Ross knows, the passage cited from the Alexander commentary is from the spurious part.

⁹ Ross, v.1, p.292. Ross himself does not accept this explanation, and thinks (surely correctly) that Aristotle himself used the same passage in two different contexts.

Asclepius find objectionable? I am not sure exactly where he thinks things are “missing for the continuity of the argument,” but the other objections correspond to specific features of the text: the objection that some things “have been brought in bodily from other treatises” refers to the duplications between *Metaphysics* Δ2 and *Physics* II,3, and between *Metaphysics* K8-12 and a series of chapters from the *Physics*; and the objection that “he says the same thing several times” within the bounds of the present treatise refers, similarly, to the duplications between *Metaphysics* K1-7 and *Metaphysics* BΓE, and between *Metaphysics* M4-5 and *Metaphysics* A9. For let us look back at the later passage from Asclepius, the one Ross took as referring to a declaration by the editors of the *Metaphysics*:

These remarks [i.e., *Metaphysics* Δ2] have been brought in [μετενήνεκται] here from the *Physics* [ἐκ τῆς φυσικῆς ἀκροάσεως]; for they said [ἔλεγον] that some things had been lost, and being unable to imitate them, they supplied them [ἐφῆρ-μοσαν] out of his own works. Anyway [ἀμέλει τοι], the whole letter K as well [as the present text] is from his other lectures [ἀκροάσεων]. (305.19-22)

This interprets the first passage, by making it clear that the evidence for editorial intervention, in the form of copying other Aristotelian texts into the *Metaphysics*, comes from *Metaphysics* Δ2 and *Metaphysics* K: a Greek commentator’s “X, ἀμέλει τοι Y” is a sure-fire sign that Y is his only evidence for X. When Asclepius says that “the whole letter K is from his other lectures,” it seems that he must be thinking not only of K8-12, which are from *another* Aristotelian treatise, but also of K1-7, which are from another part of the *same* treatise. So this passage explains not only the complaint that “some things have been brought in bodily from other treatises,” but also the complaint that “he says the same thing several times” within the *Metaphysics*; and both of these complaints can be answered by saying that the original *Metaphysics* did not have these faults, and that the editors introduced them by copying, whether from the *Physics* or from the *Metaphysics*, to replace parts of the manuscript that had been destroyed. (And wherever Asclepius thinks some things are missing for the continuity of the argument, this can be explained the same way: a part of the manuscript was missing, and the editors could not find any other Aristotelian text to patch it up with.) The subject of “they said” is not any historical witness, certainly not the editors of the *Metaphysics*, but the same anonymous “they” who offered the “nice defense” of Aristotle in the earlier passage; and their only evidence is the fact of duplication in the text.

What is perhaps surprising is not that Asclepius has no direct evidence about the editors of the *Metaphysics*, but that he imagines their work as simply filling in holes in the text: he assumes that there was an original Δ2, and an original K (and presumably either an original A9 or an original

M4-5 different from the present ones), and that the editors were forced to patch them up with other Aristotelian texts because the original chapters were lost. If it has occurred to Asclepius that Aristotle himself might have left the text in an unfinished state, with repetitions and perhaps with older and newer treatments of the same material, then he rejects the attribution of such human weakness to Aristotle. And it has never occurred to him that the editors might be responsible for such structural features as the order of the books of the *Metaphysics* (beyond possibly inserting a spurious A or α , a charge Asclepius rejects); or what could lead him to assume a lost Ur-K?

There is one point, though, on which Asclepius gives us some valuable evidence, at least about the school-tradition of his day. The “nice defense” involved Aristotle’s sending the *Metaphysics* to Eudemus, Eudemus’ refusing to publish it (it is apparently implied that he had the only copy), and the subsequent corruption of the text while in the custody of Eudemus’ school. This fits well with the comment of the pseudo-Alexander alluded to above: commenting on Z11 1036b32-1037b5, and pointing out that it treats the same subject as Z10 1034b24-1035a17, he says “and I think that these [words] ought to be put next to those, and most likely [$\tau\omega\omega\varsigma$] they *were* put together by Aristotle (for in none of his other treatises will you find him doing the kind of thing that appears here [i.e. writing in such a disorderly way]), but they were separated by Eudemus” (515.19-22). It is not clear what exactly Eudemus is supposed to have done (if he was not motivated by sheer malice to mutilate the text, perhaps a piece of the manuscript fell out and he put it back in the wrong place); what is clear is that the pseudo-Alexander, like Asclepius, thinks that the *Metaphysics* is more disorderly than Aristotle’s usual writing, and knows the scholastic tradition that whatever is wrong with the current text of the *Metaphysics* can be blamed on a time when it was in the custody of Eudemus and his school. This same tradition must underlie the stories reported (by Asclepius immediately after the “nice defense” passage, by the pseudo-Philoponus, and in two anonymous scholia) to explain the embarrassing fact of a book called A and a book called α , by attributing either α or (as Asclepius has it) A to a nephew of Eudemus called either Pasicles or (as the pseudo-Philoponus has it) Pasicrates:¹⁰ it is unclear how such a book would have been slipped into the

¹⁰ Asclepius discusses the problem about A at 4.17-35 (Pasicles); the pseudo-Philoponus briefly mentions the controversy about α (Pasicrates) at *Ioannis Philoponi enarratio in omnes Aristotelis libros quos metaphysicos appellant*, Latin translation by Francesco Patrizi (Ferrara, 1583; the Greek original is lost), p.7, reprinted in *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca, versiones Latinae temporis resuscitarum litterarum*, v.2 (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1991). The scholia are cited by Paul Moraux, *Der Aristotelismus bei den Griechen*, v.1 (Berlin-New York, 1973), p.83, n.89.

Metaphysics, but it must have been done by Eudemus' school at a time when no copies of the text were available elsewhere.

The tradition, then, that the text of the *Metaphysics* comes to us, edited and in some way damaged, from Eudemus and his school, is widespread among the Byzantine commentators and must go back at least to Ammonius the son of Hermias (whose lectures were the main source for Asclepius' commentary); it may be much older. This tradition is likely to be connected with whatever lies behind the title "Eudemian Ethics," and it is possible that it reflects some historical reality, but also possible that it reflects nothing more than school-polemics.

To conclude: we have not been "told," as Kirwan says we have, that editors after Aristotle's death brought the fourteen books of the *Metaphysics* into their present arrangement. We have been told that the editors received from Aristotle fourteen books of *Metaphysics* in their current order (except possibly for α or A), and that, perhaps to repair some damage, they made local changes which did not affect the overall structure (although we might consider it a major change if the original K has been completely replaced). Apart from the possibly correct general tradition that the present text comes from the school of Eudemus, those who "tell" us about the history of the text know no more than what we know, namely, that there are doublets, and that sometimes we have difficulty construing the argument. Of course, we may very well conclude that the order of the text as we have it fails in some major way to reflect Aristotle's intentions; we might even conclude that we have before us fourteen independent treatises on metaphysical topics; but we cannot draw such conclusions from authority. We can only draw them if, after serious effort, we are unable to make sense of the text as we have it. Kirwan may possibly be right that *Metaphysics* Γ "announces its subject-matter in the first chapter" and that it and later books of the *Metaphysics* proceed to explore the science first defined there, "hardly more dependent on what has preceded than on other parts of Aristotle's works," rather than specifying further the science of first principles described in $A\alpha B$ and resolving problems in that science; but the claim cannot be allowed to pass without argument.

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