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Journal for Philosophy

ISSUE 3

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SYNTHESIS

Journal for Philosophy

3

Ancient Philosophy in Dialogue

Edited by

Erminia Di Iulio & Francesco Aronadio

December 2023

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Peripatetic Grounding

Abstract: Aristotelian ontology is often a source of inspiration for modern and contemporary ontologies. Recently, it has been used as a starting point by some exponents of the so-called ‘metaphysical grounding’, one of the most famous contemporary ontological theories. The aim of this article is to show that the version of Aristotelian ontology used by these philosophers is the one developed by Alexander of Aphrodisias, a famous Aristotelian who lived in the 2nd-3rd centuries AD.

Keywords: Aristotle; Alexander of Aphrodisias; Beings; Ontological Dependence; Grounding

Introduction

Aristotelian ontology is often a source of inspiration for modern and contemporary ontologies. Recently, it has been used as a starting point by some exponents of the so-called ‘metaphysical grounding’, one of the most famous contemporary ontological theories¹. The aim of this article is to show that the version of Aristotelian ontology used by these philosophers is the one developed by Alexander of Aphrodisias, a famous Aristotelian who lived in the 2nd-3rd centuries AD. In fact, much more than is believed (and known), modern and contemporary philosophy presents interpretations of Aristotelian thought that owe much to the elaboration and transmission of Alexander’s Aristotelianism. Alexander of Aphrodisias, a still underestimated author, exerted a great influence on the transmission of Aristotelianism, often anticipating solutions proposed by contemporary philosophers without acknowledging it.

¹ Enquiries into so-called ‘metaphysical grounding’ seek to investigate the structure of reality in terms of the concept of non-causal priority. In controversy with Quine’s position (1953), which limited the study of metaphysics to ‘what there is’, metaphysical grounding, rather than considering *what* there is, privileges *how* what there is is, investigating relationships of dependence (Schaffer 2009). For a comprehensive analysis of metaphysical grounding see Bliss/Trogdon (2014).

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The Science of Being qua Being

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* presents a relatively unified version of the so-called 'ontology'². According to this version, 'the science of being qua being' deals with primary causes and principles of all beings; now, since 'being' covers many senses, all, however, in relation to the substance (the being in a priority sense, which all the others depend on), building the theory of substance means doing the theory of the whole being and, correspondingly, looking for the principles and primary causes of beings means looking for the principles and primary causes of substances (*Metaphysics Gamma* and *Zeta*).

This has been a brief description of Aristotle's 'ontological project'. In the rest of this article, I will try to investigate two concepts that have given rise to very significant developments in contemporary ontology:

- the concept of being;
- the concept of ontological dependence.

1. The Concept of Being

Some proponents of so-called 'metaphysical grounding', such as Shaffer (2009), an eminent supporter of the grounding theory in a neo-Aristotelian key, recognise the existence not only of individual physical entities, but also of mathematical entities, fictive entities, universals, etc.³, and recognises the Aristotelian authorship of this theory⁴. This is undeniable, but I think that the

² An advocate of a strong unity of Aristotelian metaphysics is for example Reale (1994⁶); more cautious Donini (1995: 16). On the great limits of this unification see Barnes (1995: 66-69).

³ Shaffer (2009: 356-359) presents arguments that prove the existence of numbers (there are prime numbers, so there are numbers), properties (there are properties that you and I have in common, so there are properties), body parts (my body has appropriate parts (e.g., hands), so there are things with appropriate parts), fictional characters (A.C. Doyle created Sherlock Holmes).

⁴ Shaffer is an advocate of a rediscovery of an Aristotelian approach in an anti-Quinean key (see *supra*, n. 1). Indeed, Aristotle does not express himself so clearly, but it is reasonable to believe that

ontological version used by grounding theory comes directly from Alexander of Aphrodisias.

In fact, when Aristotle in *Metaphysics*'s *Gamma* 1003a33-34 states that:

Τὸ δὲ ὄν λέγεται μὲν πολλαχῶς, ἀλλὰ πρὸς ἓν καὶ μίαν τινὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐχ ὁμωνύμως.

The being is said in many senses, but with reference to one thing, one particular nature, not homonymously.

it is unclear how to understand the meaning of the expression τὸ ὄν, 'the being'. In particular, interpreters have disagreed on the meaning of the formula τὸ ὄν, because of the ambiguity of the verb to be⁵.

Now, to my knowledge, Alexander of Aphrodisias was the first to give an existential value to this formula, i.e. in the sense of 'all that exists'. Indeed, in Alexander's commentary on Aristotelian *Metaphysics* we can find three fundamental passages that allow us to establish with certainty that he interpreted the Aristotelian τὸ ὄν as ὑπαρξίς, to be understood in an existential sense.

The first passage is Alex., in *Metaph. Gamma*, 247, 18-20⁶:

κατὰ διάφορον δὲ ἐπίνοιαν τό τε ὄν καὶ τὸ ἐν κατηγοροῦμεν, διὰ μὲν τοῦ ὄν εἰπεῖν τι τὴν ὑπαρξιν σημαίνοντες αὐτοῦ, διὰ δὲ τοῦ ἐν τὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ἄλλων χωρισμὸν καὶ τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ πλήθους·

he was thinking of an existential dependence of numbers and universals on particulars (see *infra*, notes 13 and 15). However, not all scholars agree with this interpretation. See *infra*, note 5.

⁵ Some scholars, especially from the Anglo-Saxon area, have adopted the 'existentialist' interpretation of 'to be' without acknowledging that it was anticipated by Alexander of Aphrodisias. Others, however, have denied that in this passage, and in *Metaphysics Gamma* in general, the sense of 'being' is so restrictive. For a recent and incisive analysis of the meaning of 'being' in *Metaphysics Gamma* and *Epsilon*, see Berti (2015: 15-24).

⁶ Ad Aristotle, *Metaph. Gamma*, 1003b22-25 εἰ δὴ τὸ ὄν καὶ τὸ ἐν ταὐτὸν καὶ μία φύσις τῷ ἀκολουθεῖν ἀλλήλοις ὥσπερ ἀρχὴ καὶ αἷτιον, ἀλλ' οὐχ ὡς ἐνὶ λόγῳ δηλούμενα ('Suppose it is true, then, that that which is and that which is one are the same thing—i.e. one nature—in that each follows from the other as origin and cause do, not as being indicated by one formula' trans. Kirwan).

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we predicate 'being' and 'one' according to a different concept: saying 'being', we mean its ὑπαρξίς, saying something is 'one', we mean its separation from other things and from multiplicity.

The second passage is *Alex. in Metaph. Delta*, 371, 22-26. Here Alexander comments *Metaphysics Delta*, 1017a22 following, where Aristotle says that

καθ' αὐτὰ δὲ εἶναι λέγεται ὅσαπερ σημαίνει τὰ σχήματα τῆς κατηγορίας
all things which signify the figures of category are said to be in their own right⁷.

Alexander says:

τὴν γὰρ οἰκείαν ὑπαρξίν ἐκάστου σημαίνει τὸ ὄν ὁμώνυμον· εἰ δὲ δέκα αἱ κατὰ τὰ ἀνωτάτω γένη διαφοραί, δεκαχῶς καὶ τὸ ὄν τε καὶ τὸ εἶναι ῥηθήσεται. τὸ μὲν γὰρ τῇ οὐσίᾳ συντασσόμενον εἶναι τὴν οὐσιώδη ὑπαρξίν σημαίνει, τὸ δὲ τῷ ποσῷ τὴν ὡς ποσοῦ, καὶ τῷ ποιῷ τὴν ὡς ποιοῦ, καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων γενῶν ὁμοίως.

'the being, which is homonymous, means the ὑπαρξίς appropriate to each thing. But if there are ten differences according to the ten supreme genera, 'being' and 'to be' also will be said in ten ways. Indeed, 'to be' united to the substance means substantial ὑπαρξίς, 'to be' united to the quantity, the ὑπαρξίς of quantity, 'to be' united to the quality, the ὑπαρξίς of quality, and equally in the case of other genera'.

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaph. Delta*, 1017a22-30: καθ' αὐτὰ δὲ εἶναι λέγεται ὅσαπερ σημαίνει τὰ σχήματα τῆς κατηγορίας· ὅσαχῶς γὰρ λέγεται, τοσαυταχῶς τὸ εἶναι σημαίνει. ἐπεὶ οὖν τῶν κατηγορουμένων τὰ μὲν τί ἐστι σημαίνει, τὰ δὲ ποιόν, τὰ δὲ ποσόν, τὰ δὲ πρὸς τι, τὰ δὲ ποιεῖν ἢ πάσχειν, τὰ δὲ πού, τὰ δὲ ποτέ, ἐκάστῳ τούτων τὸ εἶναι ταῦτὸ σημαίνει· οὐθὲν γὰρ διαφέρει τὸ ἄνθρωπος ὑγιαίνειν ἔστιν ἢ τὸ ἄνθρωπος ὑγιαίνει, οὐδὲ τὸ ἄνθρωπος βαδίζειν ἔστιν ἢ τέμνων τοῦ ἄνθρωπος βαδίζει ἢ τέμνει, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων ('All things which signify the figures of category are said to be in their own right; for 'to be' signifies in the same number of ways as they are said. Since, therefore, among things predicated some signify what a thing is, some a qualification, some a quantity, some a relative, some doing or being affected, some where, some when, 'to be' signifies the same thing as each of these. For, there is no difference between 'a man is one that keeps-healthy' and 'a man keeps-healthy' or between 'a man is one that walks, or cuts' and 'a man walks, or cuts', and equally in the other cases' trans. Kirwan, slightly modified).

It is clear that Alexander uses ὑπαρξίς in the sense of ‘existence’⁸. So, in the first passage, Alexander says that we predicate ‘being’ when we mean the existence (ὑπαρξίς) of one thing. In the second passage Alexander explains that ‘being’ means the ὑπαρξίς appropriate to each thing, according to the ten supreme genera (namely, categories).

So, when I say ‘Socrates is’, I mean the substantial existence, when I say ‘white is’, I mean the existence of a quality, and so on for each category.

There is a further passage very important for us, in which Alexander says (in *Metaph. Delta*, 371, 29-36)⁹:

[...] δεικτικὸν δὲ τοῦ τὸ ἔστιν, ὃ ἂν συντάσσεται, ἐκείνην σημαίνει τὴν φύσιν, παρέθετο τὸ μηδὲν σημαίνει ἄλλο τὸ ἄνθρωπος ὑγιαίνων ἔστιν ἢ τὸ ἄνθρωπος ὑγιαίνει, τουτέστι τὸ ἔστιν, ὃ ἐπὶ τῇ ὑγείᾳ συντέτακται, μηδὲν ἄλλο ἢ τὴν τῆς ὑγείας ὑπαρξιν σημαίνει· ὁμοίως καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ βαδίζων τὴν τῆς βαδίσεως, καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ τέμνων τὴν τῆς τομῆς, καὶ ἐπὶ πάντων ὁμοίως. ὥς γὰρ εἶπεν ἐν τῷ Περὶ ἐρμηνείας, αὐτὸ μὲν οὐδὲν ἔστι, προσσημαίνει δὲ σύνθεσιν τινα, ἣν ἄνευ τῶν συγκειμένων οὐχ οἷόν τε εἶναι.

[...] for the purpose of showing that ‘is’ means that nature it is united to, Aristotle added that ‘a man is one that keeps-healthy’ (ἄνθρωπος ὑγιαίνων ἔστιν) means nothing but ‘a man keeps-healthy’ (ἄνθρωπος ὑγιαίνει), namely that the ‘is’ which is united with health means nothing but the existence of health (τὴν τῆς ὑγείας

⁸ See Bonelli (2001: 89-95). That Alexander uses ὑπαρξίς in an existential sense seems clear to me also from his use of ὑπόστασις, a term reserved either to controversial entities such as Platonic ideas (see for example in *Metaph.*, 83, 31-33; 92, 19; 233, 21-24), or to numbers and geometric figures (for example in *Metaph.*, 199, 19-21; 230, 19-21; 230, 34-231, 1), or to universals (for example in *Metaph.*, 234, 33-34; in *Top.*, 161, 27-30; 355, 12-16). In Bonelli *op. cit.*, 94, notes 45 and 46, I point out that ὑπαρξίς sometimes means ‘existence’ (ex. *De Anima* 90, 4; in *Metaph. Gamma*, 323, 7-10; 326, 5-9; in *Metaph. Delta*, 410, 24-25), sometimes does not, when the term is used in logical works (ex. in *Apr.*, 26, 16-18; 38, 3-5). But in these last cases we can invoke a technical usage. In the light of the passage in *Top.*, 301, 19-25 (see *infra*, 116-117), I would argue that Alexander identifies ὑπαρξίς (‘existence’) as the general meaning of ‘being’, and ὑπόστασις as the dependent mode of existence of certain beings (Platonic Ideas, numbers, universals in general). Sirkel (2011: 301-302) explains that Alexander treats universals as accidents and clearly shows (2011, p. 303) that he subordinates the existence of universals to the existence of particulars (at least more than one) that instantiate it (cf. the definition of *katholou* in *De interpretatione* 7).

⁹ Ad Aristotle, *Metaph. Delta*, 1017a22-30, see *supra*, note 7.

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ὑπαρξιν) (...) and equally for other cases as well. Indeed, as Aristotle said in *De interpretatione*, the 'is' in itself is nothing, but it means a combination that cannot exist without the components.

Alexander gives three examples in order to prove that the copula is nothing but a sign of conjunction between the subject and the predicate. The three examples are:

- 1) ἄνθρωπος ὑγιαίνων ἐστίν ≡ ἄνθρωπος ὑγιαίνει
'ἐστίν' means nothing but the ὑπαρξίς τῆς ὑγείας;
- 2) ἄνθρωπος βαδίζων ἐστίν ≡ ἄνθρωπος βαδίζει
'ἐστίν' means the ὑπαρξίς τῆς βαδίσεως;
- 3) ἄνθρωπος τέμνων ἐστίν ≡ ἄνθρωπος τέμνει
'ἐστίν' means the ὑπαρξίς τῆς τομῆς.

So, Alexander says that also in propositions such as 'S is P' (which is equivalent to the proposition noun *plus* verb) we have the introduction of the 'existence' (ὑπαρξίς), because 'is' is a sign of conjunction, expressing the existence of the property in the substance.

But what beings exist? Alexander in *in Topics*, 301, 19-25 claims that:

[...] πᾶν τὸ ἐν ὑπάρξει ὄν καὶ ὄν καὶ ἓν ἐστίν. οὕτω δεικνύοις ἂν ὅτι μὴ καλῶς τὸ τί οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Στοᾶς γένος τοῦ ὄντος τίθενται· εἰ γὰρ τί, δηλον ὅτι καὶ ὄν (...) ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνοι νομοθετήσαντες αὐτοῖς τὸ ὄν κατὰ σωμάτων μόνων λέγεσθαι διαφεύγοιεν ἂν τὸ ἡπορημένον· διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ τὸ τί γενικώτερον αὐτοῦ φασιν εἶναι, κατηγορούμενον οὐ κατὰ σωμάτων μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ κατὰ ἀσωμάτων [...].

[...] everything that is in existence (ἐν ὑπάρξει) is being and one. So, you could prove that Stoics incorrectly place 'the something' (τὸ τί) as a genus of the being: if, in fact, <there is> something (τί), it is clear that it also exists (ὅτι καὶ ὄν) (...) But those would escape the difficulty by stipulating for themselves that 'being' is said only of bodies; because of that, in fact, they affirm that the 'something' (τὸ τί), which is predicated not only of bodies, but also of incorporeals, is more general than the being [...].

The passage is extremely interesting because Alexander, as it often happens, uses an Aristotelian thesis to reject an opposing theory, in this case, that the something ($\tau\acute{o} \tau\acute{i}$) is the supreme genus. Here, invoking the Aristotelian thesis of the reciprocal implication of the being and the one¹⁰, Alexander argues against Stoics, who place an even more general genus, ‘the something’, above the being. The objection is that, since everything that exists, exists and is one being, the ‘something’ will also exist, and there will be no place for beings that are something without existence (Galluzzo 2012: 31). Alexander, therefore, repeats the Aristotelian thesis according to which $\tau\acute{o} \acute{\omicron}\nu$ is the most general category of things, and criticizes the Stoics who, thanks to a stipulation, limit the existence to bodies only, inventing another category (‘the something’) that can encompass both bodies and incorporeals, such as time, space, and the like. So, Alexander applies the category of $\tau\acute{o} \acute{\omicron}\nu$ as ‘existence’ to bodies and incorporeals. Consequently, all things exist. But how?

2. The Concept of Ontological Dependence

In *Metaphysics Gamma* Aristotle proposes a way of considering the being in a unitary manner. In fact, in the already quoted passage 1003a33-34, Aristotle claims that ‘the being ($\tau\acute{o} \acute{\omicron}\nu$) is said in many senses, but with reference to one thing, one particular nature, not homonymously’. In particular, ‘being’, says Aristotle, has different meanings, one of which is primary and the others derivative or dependent.

We will analyse how the dependence between beings can be understood in ‘Peripatetic’ terms. What we can already say is that

- 1) many and disparate things are called ‘beings’ (Aristotle) in the sense of ‘existent’ (in the Alexander’s interpretation)¹¹;
- 2) they are subsumed in few categories¹².

¹⁰ On the relationship between being and one see *supra*, 113-114 and note 6.

¹¹ See *supra*, 113-116.

¹² See *supra*, Aristotle, *Metaph. Delta*, 1017a22-30 (note 7) and Alexander in *Metaph.* 371, 22-26; 29-36.

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Another important aspect to consider is that. In Aristotle, there are primary, independent, and fundamental beings and dependent beings. Fundamental beings are the individual substances, while all the others are dependent on them, including universals and mathematical entities. Indeed, in *Categories* 2b5-2b6b Aristotle says that

[...] μὴ οὐσῶν οὖν τῶν πρώτων οὐσιῶν ἀδύνατον τῶν ἄλλων τι εἶναι· πάντα γὰρ τὰ ἄλλα ἤτοι καθ' ὑποκειμένων τούτων λέγεται ἢ ἐν ὑποκειμέναις αὐταῖς ἐστίν.

[...] if the primary substances are not, it would be impossible for any of the other things to be. For, all the other things are either said of the primary substances as subjects or are in them as subjects.

In Aristotelian jargon, ‘primary substances’ are the individual perceptible objects, ‘things that are said of primary substances as subjects’ (i.e. that are predicated) are universals, ‘things that are in primary substances as subjects’ are the individual properties. We have seen that, in the interpretation of Alexander, ‘to be’ is to be understood in an existential sense. We will therefore speak of independent existence of primary substances and dependent existence of secondary substances and properties. Now, we have also seen that the Aristotelian position has been interpreted by some contemporary metaphysicians just as a theory according to which all things do exist¹³. Schaffer (2009), for example, interprets the Aristotelian being in an existential sense¹⁴, but it should be specified that this theory is not exactly Aristotelian but certainly attributable to Alexander. According to Schaffer, it is possible to consider as

¹³ Schaffer 2009, see *supra*, nn. 3 and 4.

¹⁴ Schaffer (2009: 352) refers to *Metaphysics* My, 1076a36-37; 1077b31-34. These passages are fundamental for the ‘realist version’ of grounding theory: the first because Aristotle states that the goal of his research is not whether mathematical entities are, but how they are (ὥσθ' ἡ ἀμφισβήτησις ἡμῖν ἔσται οὐ περὶ τοῦ εἶναι ἀλλὰ περὶ τοῦ τρόπου); the second because he establishes that mathematical objects are insofar as there are both separable and inseparable things (ὥστ' ἐπεὶ ἀπλῶς λέγειν ἀληθὲς μὴ μόνον τὰ χωριστὰ εἶναι ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ μὴ χωριστὰ (...) καὶ τὰ μαθηματικὰ ὅτι ἔστιν ἀπλῶς ἀληθὲς εἰπεῖν, καὶ τοιαῦτά γε οἷα λέγουσιν). On the first passage see Corkum (2008: 73); on the second see Schaffer (2009: 352).

fundamental in the ‘Aristotelian’ ontology (and in that contemporary ontology inspired by Aristotelianism, which he shares) the hierarchy of beings, that is, the fundamentality or derivation of things that exist. And we have seen that, in Aristotelian metaphysics there is the thesis according to which substances, qualities, quantities, etc., ‘are’ in a different way. Aristotle and Alexander do not specify the question further, but it is sure, as we will also see later, that we can infer from their texts the distinction between the independent being (or existence, in the Alexander’s interpretation) of individual substances and the dependent being (or existence, always according to Alexander) of all the other things (universal substances, properties, relationships, qualities, etc.). This is the perspective that will be recovered and valued by some grounding theorists. Shaffer, for example, states that the task of metaphysics is to say what grounds what and the method consists in identifying precisely what is fundamental and founding¹⁵. The advantage of the Aristotelian position is that it presents a hierarchical and ordered ontology, able to focus on dependencies that arise in the world.

An extremely interesting aspect highlighted by Schaffer¹⁶ is that the great traditional disputes (many of them of Aristotelian origin) can be treated not as concerning the existence of entities but concerning their ‘fundamentality’. Issues such as metaphysical realism vs idealism, realism of universals vs nominalism, or the theory of substrate vs bundle for objects, do not question the existence for example of a rock, a number, a universal or an object and his properties. The question, if anything, will be to establish whether rocks, numbers, universals exist independently of my mind or not, or whether or not objects exist prior to their properties¹⁷.

¹⁵ According to Schaffer, the Aristotelian method consists of: ‘to deploy diagnostics for what is fundamental, together with diagnostics for grounding’ (2009: 351).

¹⁶ Schaffer (2009: 362–365).

¹⁷ See on that Schaffer (2009: 362–365); F. Correia/B. Schnieder (2012: 1) and in general all the volume they edited. It must be said, however, that the foundationalist approach (which authors such as Schaffer take up, inheriting it to some extent from Aristotelianism) is not the only one defended by grounding theorists. Indeed, some scholars deny that ground relations can or should be grounded in independent entities. See on this Bliss/Trogon (2014), paragraph 7: *Grounding the facts about what grounds what*.

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This approach, as we will see, is ascribable to Aristotle's reflections, but once again mediated by Alexander's exegesis.

2a. Peripatetic Grounding

According to the grounding theory, the 'grounding' is a primitive and intuitive notion such:

x is fundamental =df nothing grounds x

x is derived =df something grounds x¹⁸.

The notion of grounding is useful in analysing metaphysical structural concepts, like fundamental entities (characterized by priority, primarity, independence and foundation) and derived entities (characterized by posteriority, secondarity and dependence). As we have seen, in the perspective of the grounding, the task of the 'Aristotelian metaphysics' consists just in saying what grounds what, through a 'diagnostic' that identifies what is fundamental and founding¹⁹. Now, we can find in Aristotle and in Alexander many passages trying to identify basic and founding beings, (i.e., individual perceptible substances), called, not by chance, primary substances. The characteristics defining basic and founding beings are precisely the priority and the independence.

In *Metaphysics Gamma*, 1003b5-9 Aristotle claims that:

τὸ ὄν λέγεται πολλὰ καὶ μὲν ἅπαν πρὸς μίαν ἀρχὴν [...] τὰ μὲν γὰρ ὅτι οὐσίαι, ὄντα λέγεται, τὰ δ' ὅτι πάθη οὐσίας, τὰ δ' ὅτι ὁδὸς εἰς οὐσίαν ἢ φθοραὶ ἢ στέρησεις ἢ ποιότητες ἢ ποιητικὰ ἢ γεννητικὰ οὐσίας ἢ τῶν πρὸς τὴν οὐσίαν λεγόμενων.

The being is said in many senses, but all with reference to one principle [...]. Some are called 'beings' because they are substances; some because they are affections of a substance; some because they are a route to a substance, or destructions, or lacks, or qualities, or productive, or generative of a substance or of things called [being] with reference to substance. (trans. Kirwan)

¹⁸ See on that Correia/Schnieder (2012: 10-13); Schaffer (2009: 373).

¹⁹ See *supra*, 119 and note 15.

Aristotle claims that being is said in many senses, all in reference to a single principle (ἀρχή). We know from *Metaphysics Delta* that the common character of the different meanings of ‘principle’ is what is the first (τὸ πρῶτον), from which a thing is, derives or is known²⁰. Adopting the Alexander’s position, we consider the ‘is’ in an existential sense: in this way, the principle, in the case of beings which exist, is the individual substance, which establishes (or ‘explains’)²¹ the existence or knowledge of all the other beings. If we privilege the ‘derivation’ of things which exist from the individual substance, accepting the existential sense of ὄν and εἶναι, we will affirm that the individual substance exists in the first sense, while accidents of substances (qualities, weights, actions, etc.) exist in the secondary sense, because they depend on the substance for their existence (meaning that they do not exist if the substance does not exist).

If, on the other hand, we privilege the knowledge of beings depending on the substance, we could perhaps adopt the ‘definitional’ interpretation of ὄν and εἶναι according to which, in order to know and define a being (let’s say, the white), we will have to provide a reference to the being on which it depends for its definition (e.g., the white surface)²².

In any case, the passage in *Gamma* establishes the ontological priority of individual substances and its founding role. In fact, in *Metaphysics Zeta*, Aristotelian ‘ontology’ is explained with reference to a central question: Aristotle affirms that when we ask: ‘what is being?’ (τί τὸ ὄν), in fact we ask: ‘what is

²⁰ Arist., *Metaphysics Delta*, 1013a17–19: πασῶν μὲν οὖν κοινὸν τῶν ἀρχῶν τὸ πρῶτον εἶναι ὅθεν ἢ ἔστιν ἢ γίγνεται ἢ γιγνώσκεται.

²¹ On the ‘existential explanation’ in Aristotle see Sirkel R., *Ontological Priority and Grounding in Aristotle’s Categories*, 20ss (for the exact reference and URL, see *infra*, References). See *infra*, Conclusions.

²² On this interpretation see Owen 1960.

substance?’ (τίς ἡ οὐσία)²³. This question, in Alexander’ interpretation, should be understood as: ‘what exists primarily?’²⁴.

So, individual substances ground universals: for example, the wisdom exists (or is definable) only because there are wise substances. And the same for all kinds of categories that are not substances; for example, numbers and geometric figures, since they exist (or are definable) only because there are substances which are countable or framed in geometric shapes. Indeed, the relationship will also exist (or will be definable), because there are two substances that are in a relationship: for example, paternity exists because x and y are in a father-son relationship²⁵.

In this way we can establish an asymmetry between the existence of individual substance and the existence of accidents (individual and universal) of the substance²⁶. The dependence of categories from individual substances²⁷ and the dependence of all categories from the category of the substance legitimate an ordered structure of reality in which individual substances are basic entities, which establish both the existence of other entities (universal, substantial, and non-substantial) and their relationships²⁸.

The asymmetry of the substance is still a much-debated issue today²⁹. It is normally analysed according to characteristics of priority identified by Aristotle in the *Categories* and in *Metaphysics*: the individual substance, in fact, is first

²³ Aristotele, *Metaphysics Zeta*, 1028b2-4: καὶ δὴ καὶ τὸ πάλαι τε καὶ νῦν καὶ ἀεὶ ζητούμενον καὶ ἀεὶ ἀπορούμενον, τί τὸ ὄν, τοῦτό ἐστι τίς ἡ οὐσία.

²⁴ The beginning of *Metaphysics Zeta* (1028a10-15), in fact, establishes 1) the multiplicity of meanings of ‘being’, corresponding to the categories, and 2) the priority of the meaning of ‘being’ relative to substance.

²⁵ On the dependence of other beings on the individual substance see Arist., *Cat.* 2b5-2b6b, *supra*, note 13.

²⁶ For a very articulate discussion of the *Asymmetry Thesis*, concerning individual substances on the one hand and non-substances and universal substances on the other (especially with reference to *Categories*), see Corkum (2008: 67-72).

²⁷ The reduction of individual substances and their accidents to categories is an ‘ontological reduction’ that is not eliminative: see Barnes (1995: 81-89).

²⁸ Schaffer (2009: 354-356).

²⁹ See for example Barnes (1995: 77-101), G. Fine (1984), Corkum (2008).

(*proton*)³⁰, substrate (*hypokeimenon*)³¹ and separable (*choriston*)³². According to Alexander, all characteristics establishing the asymmetry of the substance must be considered in terms of existence. The priority of the substance is to be understood as an existential priority³³. The same kind of priority is attributed to the substance as a *hypokeimenon*³⁴, and as a *choriston*³⁵.

An even more debated question, especially by contemporary metaphysicians³⁶, is the existential dependence of all existing beings from the individual substances. Once again, the responsible for this interpretation is Alexander of Aphrodisias. Alexander, commenting Aristotle's passage seen above (1003b5-9)³⁷, accepts the Aristotelian theory of being as a *πολλαχῶς λεγόμενον*, and claims that (in *Metaph.*, 242, 10-12):

[...] ὃν γὰρ λέγεται κυρίως μὲν ἡ οὐσία, λέγεται δέ γε ὄντα καὶ τὰ τῇ οὐσίᾳ συμβεβηκότα, ἃ ἔστι τὰ ἑννέα γένη.

[...] in fact 'being' in the proper sense is said the substance, but 'beings' are said accidents of substance too, namely the nine genera.

Alexander adds that here Aristotle would be using 'the first of the divisions of the being operated in the *Categories*, thanks to which he distinguishes beings

³⁰ See for example Aristotle, *Metaph.* Delta, 1019a1-4.

³¹ See Aristotle, *Cat.* 2a11-19; *Metaph.* Delta, 1017b24.

³² See Aristotle, *Metaph.* Delta, 1017b25.

³³ Alexander in *Metaph.*, 387, 8-10: τὸ κατὰ τὸ εἶναι πρῶτον καὶ κατὰ τὴν ὑπαρξίν φησιν εἶναι τὸ πᾶσιν ὑποκείμενον τοῖς ἄλλοις, τοιοῦτον δὲ τὴν οὐσίαν εἶναι («Aristotle says that what is first respect to being, namely respect to existence (τὴν ὑπαρξίν), is the subject (ὑποκείμενον) of all other things, and substance is this kind of thing». I consider εἶναι existentially and κατὰ τὴν ὑπαρξιν as explanatory of κατὰ τὸ εἶναι.

³⁴ See supra, previous note.

³⁵ Alex., in *Metaph.* 376, 7-9: μόνον γὰρ τῶν ὄντων χωριστόν καὶ καθ' αὐτὸ ὃν ἡ οὐσία («among the things that exist, only substance is separated (χωριστόν), namely exists by itself»). Here, too, I consider ὃν existentially, and take καθ' αὐτὸ ὃν as explanatory of χωριστόν, the sense of which would then be 'existing in itself, independently'.

³⁶ See for example K. Fine (1995); Schaffer (2009); Thanko/Lowe (2015).

³⁷ See supra, 121.

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between substance and accidents'³⁸. The reference to *Categories* (although the distinction mentioned by Alexander is not in the text)³⁹ is important because it allows Alexander to introduce both the asymmetry between substance and individual accidents and the 'reduction' of individual accidents to categories⁴⁰. Recognizing the existential priority of the individual and perceptible substance, Alexander also recognizes the existential dependence of his accidents. In fact, in his commentary to *Metaphysics Delta* about the Aristotelian εἶναι καθ' αὐτό, we have seen that Alexander, in an extremely original way, states that even in the case of propositions consisting of subject and predicate, the copula expresses the ὑπαρξίς of the predicate. The theory of the role of trait-d'union of the copula is a well-known Aristotelian theory⁴¹, but Alexander's originality consists in giving it an existential meaning, which precisely expresses the existential dependence of the propriety from the substance.

Conclusions

Alexander opted for an existential dependence of accidents from individual substances⁴². Concerning universals (the Aristotelian genera and species),

³⁸ Alex. in *Metaph.*, 242, 15-17: καὶ εἴη ἂν τῇ πρώτῃ διαίρεσει τῶν ἐν Κατηγορίαις τοῦ ὄντος γεγονυῶν μᾶλλον χρώμενος, καθ' ἣν διαίρει τὰ ὄντα εἰς οὐσίαν καὶ συμβεβηκότα.

³⁹ For this reason, perhaps one should not take the formula ἐν κατηγορίαις τοῦ ὄντος as a reference to the work *Categories*, but as a simple reference to the Aristotelian distinction of beings into categories.

⁴⁰ Alexander in fact tries, admittedly with some difficulty, to fit the examples of dependent existents given by Aristotle in 1003b5-9 into categories, warning, however, that Aristotle does not attempt to give an example for every category, since many of the examples he presents actually fall under the same category (see in *Metaph.*, 242, 12-15).

⁴¹ Alexander himself refers immediately afterwards to *de int.*, 16b24-2 (see in *Metaph.* 371, 34-36). On the difficulties with the copula theory see Barnes (2012: 154-159).

⁴² It should not be concealed that Alexander, as an accurate commentator, also envisaged the other type of dependency mentioned, the definitional one (see in *Metaph.* 241, 18-21/243, 33-244, 6; Alex. in *Top.*, 301, 9-10. On these passages see Bonelli 2001: 113-118). However, the two explanations do not seem to be considered by the commentator as really alternatives: there are in fact passages in which Alexander seems to subordinate definitional dependence to existential dependence (see for example Alex. in *Metaph.* 243, 27-8: οἷς δὲ οὐ κατὰ τοῦνομα μόνον ἐστὶ κοινωνία, ἀλλ' ἡρτῆται ἢ κατὰ τοῦτο

Alexander identifies their existence in many individual substances of which they are predicated⁴³, and the same holds for mathematical objects, whose existence is found in perceptible objects⁴⁴.

Many historians of philosophy and contemporary metaphysicians have found very serious problems in the relationship between the asymmetry of substance and the existential dependence. Indeed, to consider ontological dependence in terms of existential dependence is to undermine either the independence of individual substances or the dependence of universals. For if we consider the dependence between A and B in the sense that A cannot exist without a given B, we will have the unfortunate result that universals can exist independently of individual substances: for example, generosity can exist without Callias.

If, on the other hand, we consider the dependence between A and B in the sense that A cannot exist without any B, we will solve the problem of universals (indeed, generosity cannot exist without any generous individual), but we will have the consequence that individual substances cannot exist independently of universal accidents: Callias, for example, can exist without white, but not without colour. In any case, existential dependence will be insufficient for the theory of substance asymmetry⁴⁵.

Is it possible to find in Alexander a position which avoids these problems? The question of the existence and of the status of universals in Alexander is a

κοινωνία τῆς τῶν πραγμάτων κοινωνίας, τούτων καὶ ἐπιστήμη μία («It is things whose commonality is not limited to the name, whose commonality of name depends on a commonality among the objects themselves, that belong to one science», transl. Madigan).

⁴³ On this see Barnes (2003: 47).

⁴⁴ Alex., in *Metaph.* 200, 37-38. On this see Barnes (2003: 47, n. 89).

⁴⁵ See on that Corkum (2008: 72-73), who merely makes explicit objections already raised by Burnyeat *et al.* (1979). For an overview of contemporary positions and an attempt to avoid the existential interpretation of 'being' see R. Sirkel, *Ontological Priority* cit. Sirkel in my opinion presents a very convincing solution to the problem in Aristotelian *Categories*. According to her, in fact, individual substances and accidents of substances reciprocate in existence (indeed the one cannot exist without the other) but the existence of the one explains the existence of the other, because primary substance is the subject (*hypokeimenon*) of other beings. In fact, the way of existence of other beings consists in 'be said of' (in the case of universals) or 'being in' (in the case of accidents) subjects (see Sirkel *op. cit.*, 27).

controversial issue⁴⁶. However, we have some indications of a solution of ontological dependence. In *in Top.* 355, 12-14, Alexander says that:

ἐπεὶ τὰ γένη οὔτε καθ' αὐτὰ ἐστὶν ὑφεστώτᾳ που οὔτε ἐστὶ ψιλὰ χωρὶς ὑπάρξεως νοήματα, ὥς ἱπποκένταυρος, ἀλλ' ἐστὶν ἢ ὑπόστασις αὐτῶν ἐν τούτοις ὧν κατηγορεῖται.

Genera are neither items somehow subsisting by themselves nor are they bare thoughts without existence, like a centaur. Rather, their subsistence (ὑπόστασις) is in the items of which they are predicated. (trans. Barnes)⁴⁷

Alexander supports the thesis that the genus subsists only in the items of which they are predicated. More interesting still is what Alexander states shortly afterwards:

[...] ἀπλῶς μὲν οὖν συμφθείρεται τοῦτο, ᾧ συμβέβηκεν εἶναι γένει, πάντων τῶν ὑπ' αὐτὸ φθαρέντων· ὥς δὲ γένος φθείρεται, εἰ ἐν τι μόνον ἢ κατ' ἀριθμὸν ἢ κατὰ εἶδος τῶν ὑπ' αὐτὸ σώζοιτο. (*in Top.*, 355, 18-21)

[...] a genus corrupts tout court if all things under it are corrupted; but it corrupts as a genus if one thing only is saved among those under it, either by number or by kind⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ On that see Tweedale (1984); Barnes (2003: 47, n. 89); Sharples (2005); Sirkel (2011); Militello (2017: 112-115).

⁴⁷ See also Alex. *in Metaph.* 180, 3-6: ἐκεῖνοις γὰρ ἔλεγον ταῦτα συμβεβηκέναι τό τε ἐν καὶ τὸ ὄν. ἔτι πότερον αἱ ἀρχαὶ ἐν οἰκείᾳ ὑποστάσει εἰσὶ καὶ καθ' αὐτάς ὥς τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα τῶν ὄντων, ἢ οὐ, ἀλλ' ὥς τὰ γένη καὶ τὰ καθόλου καὶ κοινά, οἷς ἐν τῷ κατηγορεῖσθαι τῶν καθ' ἕκαστα τὸ εἶναι ('Do the principles have a subsistence of their own and in their own right, like individual entities? Or is it not rather that, like genera and universals and common items, their being lies in being predicated of individuals?').

⁴⁸ See also Simplicius *in Cat.*, 85, 13-14: ἀλλὰ κοινόν, φησὶν, οὐδὲν εἶναι δύναται χωρὶς ἀτόμου, ἄτομον δὲ ἔστιν χωρὶς κοινοῦ, οἷον ἥλιος καὶ σελήνη καὶ κόσμος ('It is impossible, [Alexander] says, for there to be anything common without the particular, but there are particulars without the common, ex. the sun, the moon, the universe'). Simplicius seems to attribute to Alexander the thesis that, although there is a sun, there is no corresponding universal, since there are not many suns of which 'sun' can be predicated. On that see Sirkel (2011: 303) who reports and discusses the passage of Simplicius.

Alexander affirms that the genus corrupts either all things under it are corrupted or if at least one thing under it (either species or particulars) survives. First, this position avoids the problem of the separate existence of universals: generosity, in fact, will perish if all generous individuals perish. But the genus corrupts also if one thing under it survives. Alexander's position leads to make a distinction between the universal (which must be predicated of more particulars) and the form or nature of particulars, that remains in them even if the universal perishes or doesn't exist (as in the case of the moon⁴⁹). So, for Alexander individuals are bearers of forms, and forms, according to the commentator, are not identified with universals. In this way it must be just concluded that every property of Callias, whether essential or accidental, does not depend in any way on the existence of the universal.

In any case, the notion of contemporary grounding is strongly connected to the existential dependence and this latter is unanimously characterized in terms of priority. This characteristic is widely recognized as Aristotelian, but it must also and above all be recognised as belonging to the great commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias⁵⁰.

⁴⁹ See *supra*, previous note.

⁵⁰ Thanks to audience of 'Ancient Philosophy in Dialogue'. Special thanks to Francesco Aronadio, Erminia Di Iulio, Lorenzo Giovannetti.

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