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THE ANTISTHENEAN APORIA
IN ARISTOTLE'S *METAPHYSICS* H 3

Abstract

In *Metaphysics* H 3 (1043b4-32), Aristotle develops a unified account of definition that culminates in the so-called “Aporia of the Antistheneans.” This article offers a new interpretation of the role of that aporia within the overall argument of the chapter. It argues that Aristotle first criticizes two different conceptions of definition: on the one hand, materialist compositional theories, represented by the epistemological model known from Plato's *Theaetetus* as the “Dream Theory”; on the other, certain Academic attempts to define substance through genus and differentia. According to Aristotle, both approaches ultimately fail to account for the unity of substance and, consequently, for the unity of its definition. Against this background, the introduction of the Aporia of the Antistheneans acquires a precise philosophical function. Rather than constituting an isolated digression or an independent refutation of Antisthenes, it serves as a dialectical step that exposes the limitations of a non-essentialist epistemology while preparing Aristotle's own hylomorphic account of definition. A close analysis of the structure of the passage shows how the different philosophical positions brought into the discussion progressively converge toward Aristotle's solution, according to which the unity of matter and form is the necessary condition of scientific definition. The article thus proposes an integrated reading of *Metaphysics* H 3 in which the Aporia of the Antistheneans is not an isolated textual difficulty but a central moment in Aristotle's argumentative strategy for reformulating, through critical engagement, the principal theories of definition current in the philosophical debates of his time.

Keywords

Definition, Essence, Quality, Elements, Compound

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1. The Aporia of the Followers of Antisthenes

Chapter 3 of *Metaphysics Eta*, henceforth H 3, has often been regarded as lacking a coherent structure.¹ A closer examination, however, reveals a clear unifying thread: the problem of definition. Dividing chapter H 3 into its constituent five sections, following in Pierre Marie Morel's footsteps, makes its overall argument considerably easier to follow.² Section H 3.1 (1043a29-b4) raises the question of whether the name of a thing refers to its form or to the composite of matter and form;³ section H 3.2 (1043b4-14) examines the relation among the components of the definition of sensible entities. Section H 3.3 (1043b14-23) turns to the ontology of form, which, as essence, constitutes the proper object of definition. Section H 3.4 (1043b23-32) introduces the so-called Aporia of the Followers of Antisthenes⁴ concerning the possibility of definition. Finally, Section H 3.5 (1043b32-1044a14) compares substance and its definition with number, identifying significant structural analogies between them.

The aporia of Antisthenes' followers occupies section H 3.4. It splits accordingly in six subsections. Their Greek text reads as follows:

[i] ὥστε ἢ | ἀπορία ἦν οἱ Αντισθένειοι καὶ οἱ οὕτως ἀπαιδευτοὶ ἠπόρουσαν [25] ἔχει τινὰ καιρόν, [ii] ὅτι οὐκ ἔστι τὸ τί ἔστιν ὁρίσασθαι, τὸν | γὰρ ὅρον λόγον εἶναι μακρόν, [iii] ἀλλὰ ποῖον μὲν τί ἔστιν | ἐνδέχεται καὶ διδάξαι, ὥσπερ ἄργυρον, τί μὲν ἔστιν οὐ, | ὅτι δ' οἶον καττίτερος. [iv] ὥστ' οὐσίας [v] ἔστι μὲν ἧς ἐνδέχεται | εἶναι ὅρον καὶ λόγον, οἶον τῆς συνθέτου, ἐάν τε αἰσθητὴ [30] ἐάν τε νοητὴ ἦ. [v] ἐξ ὧν δ' αὕτη πρώτων, οὐκέτι, [vi] εἴπερ τί | κατὰ τινὸς σημαίνει ὁ λόγος ὁ ὁριστικὸς καὶ δεῖ τὸ μὲν | ὥσπερ ὕλην εἶναι τὸ δὲ ὡς μορφήν (H 3.1043b23).

¹ Ross (1924) p. 231.

² The present division of the chapter follows Morel (2015) p. 127. The critical edition is by Ross (1924). Translations are from Barnes, ROT, slightly modified.

³ “[...] whether the name ‘house’ signifies the composite, that is, ‘a shelter made of bricks and stones arranged in this particular way’, or rather signifies the actuality and the form” (*Metaph.* H 3.1043a29-33). Strictly speaking, the proper object of definition is the form.

⁴ On Antisthenes as a pupil of Socrates and an opponent of Plato's metaphysical position, see Brancacci (1990). His anti-metaphysical outlook led him to reject the Platonic Ideas, which he regarded as mere products of thought (*ibid.*, p. 183). Although he wrote extensively, only a limited number of fragments and testimonia have survived. For a long time, historians of ancient philosophy tended to interpret Antisthenes from a predominantly skeptical perspective; more recent scholarship has substantially revised this view. For a comprehensive and fundamental discussion of Antisthenes, see Giannantoni (1990) pp. 195-411.

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[i] Therefore [ὥστε] the difficulty which was raised by the school of Antisthenes and other such uneducated people has a certain appropriateness [ἔχει τινὰ καιρόν]. [ii] They stated that the 'what' [*ti esti*] cannot be defined (for the definition so called is a long formula); [iii] but of what *sort* a thing [*poion ti esti*], e.g. silver, is, they thought it possible to explain [*didaxai*], not saying what it is but that it is like tin. [iv] Therefore one kind of substance can be defined and formulated, i.e. the composite kind, whether it be the object of sense or of reason; [v] but the primary parts of which this consists cannot be defined, [vi] since a definitory formula predicates something of something, and one part of the definition must play the part of matter and the other that of form.⁵

2. Sources

A testimony preserved by Diogenes Laertius states that "Antisthenes was the first to define definition itself, maintaining that a definition is an account revealing what a thing was or is", τὸ τί ἦν ἢ ἔστι.⁶ This way of conceiving definition by Antisthenes bears a striking resemblance to Aristotle's celebrated τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι.⁷ Yet the relationship between the two is not altogether clear.

Among the many testimonies that Aristotle preserves concerning Antisthenes and his followers, one passage in *Metaphysics* Δ 29 appears especially relevant to the present inquiry:

διὸ Αντισθένης ᾤετο εὐήθως μὴθὲν ἀξιῶν λέγεσθαι πλὴν τῷ οἰκείῳ λόγῳ, ἐν ἐφ' ἐνός· ἐξ ὧν συνέβαινε μὴ εἶναι ἀντιλέγειν, σχεδὸν δὲ μὴδὲ ψεύδεσθαι. ἔστι 35 δ' ἑκαστον λέγειν οὐ μόνον τῷ αὐτοῦ λόγῳ ἀλλὰ καὶ τῷ ἐτέρου, ψευδῶς μὲν καὶ παντελῶς, ἔστι δ' ὡς καὶ ἀληθῶς, ὥσπερ τὰ ὀκτώ διπλάσια τῷ τῆς δυάδος λόγῳ (*Metaph.* Δ 29.1024b32-37).

Hence Antisthenes foolishly claimed that nothing could be described except by its own formula (*oikeios logos*), – one formula to one thing; from which it followed that there could be

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* are those of Barnes's Oxford Revised Text, vol. 2, pp. 1-205. In a number of passages, however, I introduce slight modifications where required by the interpretation defended in the present article.

⁶ Diog. Laert. VI 3: πρῶτός τε ὠρίσατο λόγον εἰπῶν· λόγος ἐστὶν ὁ τὸ τί ἦν ἢ ἔστι δηλῶν ("He was the first to define definition itself, saying that a definition is an account revealing what a thing was or is").

⁷ This testimony of Diogene Laertio does not coincide with Aristotle's report in *Metaphysics* H 3. There Aristotle attributes to the Antistheneans the claim that "They stated that the 'what' [*ti esti*] cannot be defined (for the definition so called is a long formula); but of what *sort* a thing [*poion ti esti*], e.g. silver, is, they thought it possible to explain [*didaxai*], not saying what it is but that it is like tin" (1043b25-27). The contrast is evident: a logos of the *poion ti esti* is the very opposite of a logos of the *ti ēn ē esti*.

no contradiction, and almost (*schodon*) that there could be no error. But it is also possible to describe each thing not only by its own formula, but also by that of something else. This may be done altogether falsely indeed, but in some ways it may be done truly, e.g. eight may be described as a double number by the use of the formula of two.

It should be noted that the chapter of *Metaphysics* Δ from which this passage is taken is devoted to the notion of falsehood rather than to the problem of definition. Nevertheless, it allows us to infer that Antisthenes maintained that each thing admits only its own *oikeios logos*, the only account appropriate to the object under consideration. Indeed, Antisthenes's *oikeios logos* fits very well with the teaching of the *poion ti esti* which Aristotle attributes to Antisthenes's followers when recording their aporia in H 3, section [iii].

The expression *hen eph' henos* (1024b33), means precisely that each thing possesses only one proper *logos*. Because it is both unique and appropriate, such a *logos* cannot be contradicted and, as Aristotle cautiously remarks (*schodon*), can scarcely be false. From the adversative particle onward, however, Aristotle is speaking in his own voice, exposing what he regards as the naivety of the Antisthenian thesis (1024b34-37).⁸ He refutes it by observing that the account proper to the dyad can also be predicated truly of eight.

3. *The Structure of the Aporia*

For the sake of clarity, we have distinguished the six stages into which the argument is articulated:⁹

[i] Therefore the difficulty which was raised by the school of Antisthenes and other such uneducated people has a certain appropriateness.

[ii] They stated that the 'what' cannot be defined (for the definition so called is a long formula);

⁸ Berti (2017) p. 253 n. 158: "Se si attribuisce a una cosa la definizione di una cosa diversa, si è completamente nel falso; ma se si usa la definizione di una cosa diversa, per esempio del due, non come definizione, ma come indicazione di una sua affezione, per esempio dire che otto è un numero doppio, si può essere nel vero."

⁹ This division of the aporia is also adopted by Malink (2024) p. 33.

[iii] but of what *sort* a thing, e.g. silver, is, they thought it possible to explain, not saying what it is but that it is like tin.

[iv] Therefore one kind of substance can be defined and formulated, i.e. the composite kind, whether it be the object of sense or of reason;

[v] but the primary parts of which this consists cannot be defined,

[vi] since a definitory formula predicates something of something, and one part of the definition must play the part of matter and the other that of form.

A question that has long occupied interpreters is the following. Apart from point [i], which clearly constitutes Aristotle's introduction to the problem, which of the remaining statements express the position of the Antisthenians, and which instead represent Aristotle's own view?¹⁰

Several preliminary observations arise from a first reading.

The aporia is introduced in [i] as the consequence of something previously established. I shall return to this point in §4.1.

If [ii] is taken literally, the statement that "it is impossible to define what a thing is" appears to deny the possibility of definition altogether, as most interpreters have assumed. Should it indeed be understood as a universal denial of definition, it would express an extremely skeptical position that is difficult both to sustain and to reconcile with the remainder of the passage.

¹⁰ Bostock, Morel, Malink, Brancacci, and Giannantoni offer different interpretations of the passage. In fact, the disagreement concerns only the attribution of points [iv], [v], and [vi], that is, the second half of the so-called aporia (1043b28-32), since points [ii] and [iii] clearly express the Antisthenean position. Bostock (1994) p. 266 observes: "But then Aristotle apparently resumes in his own person at b28." Malink (2024) pp. 34 ff. likewise argues that "it seems unlikely that points [iv]–[vi] constitute a direct report of Antisthenes' position. Nevertheless, the presence of *hōste* in point [iv] makes it clear that the discussion in [iv]–[vi] is closely related to the Antisthenean difficulty." Brancacci (1990) p. 237, referring to 1043b28-32, maintains instead: "Non può certo essere riferita ad Aristotele la tesi enunciata in questo passo." Giannantoni (1990) p. 385 writes: "non pare dubbio che agli Antistheneioi debba essere riferito quanto Aristotele dice da *hōste hē aporia* di 1043b23-24 fino a *kattiteros* di b28." He therefore attributes to the Antisthenians the entire first part of the aporia, including point [i] – an attribution that cannot be accepted, since point [i] is clearly Aristotle's own introduction – and thereby implicitly suggests that the second half reflects Aristotle's position, although he never states this explicitly. Morel (2015) p. 152, finally, argues that the Antisthenean position extends at least through point [v], while allowing that point [vi] may express Aristotle's own view. As these interpretations show, no scholarly consensus has yet emerged.

This radical claim is justified by the parenthetical remark that “a definition is a lengthy account” (“long formula”), a phrase that has itself received widely differing interpretations.¹¹

Point [iii] seems to mitigate the sweeping denial expressed in [ii]. If the *what-it-is* of a thing cannot be known, one may at least teach what sort of thing it is (*poion ti esti*). Yet the example of silver raises an immediate difficulty, since silver appears to be an element rather than an ordinary object; the point therefore will require closer examination.

If the literal interpretation of [ii] is correct, point [iv] becomes difficult to accommodate. Aristotle now states that composite substances do admit of definition, a claim seemingly incompatible with the preceding assertion that definition is impossible.¹² The same tension extends to [vi]. Taken in this way, [ii] introduces a serious inconsistency into the argument.

The only apparent solution would be to attribute the second half of the passage – points [iv], [v], and [vi] – to Aristotle himself. The aporia would then be confined to [ii] and [iii], which would express the Antisthenean position, while the remaining lines would present Aristotle’s own solution. More precisely, [ii] and [iii] would constitute the thesis, whereas [iv]–[vi] would form Aristotle’s antithesis. This interpretation, however, cannot be maintained. If the second half were intended as an antithesis, one would expect it to be introduced by an adversative particle such as “or” or “rather.”

¹¹ Bostock (1994) p. 265 writes: “The only hint we are given as to why the Antistheneans supposed that definition was altogether impossible is in the words ‘since a definition is a long formula’ [...] the source of Antisthenes’ problem must be that a definition is supposed to contain several words. Here it is relevant to recall that in Delta 29 Antisthenes is described as holding the view that ‘nothing can be spoken of except by its own formula, one to one’ (1024b32-33). If we understand this as intended to imply that nothing can be spoken of except by means of its own name, then we may perhaps elucidate the thought in this way.” Malink (2024) pp. 38 ff., by contrast, argues that the expression “a long account” should be understood as an excessively long account, one that inevitably generates an infinite regress.

¹² Malink (2024) explicitly acknowledges that point [iv] is difficult to reconcile with point [ii]: “Moreover, Aristotle’s statement in [iv] that there is a definition of composite substances seems to contradict the skeptical position attributed to Antisthenes in [ii] that ‘it is not possible to define what a thing is.’” See also Grube (1950) p. 23 and Hicken (1958) p. 134.

Instead, Aristotle introduces it with a second *hōste*, a consecutive conjunction meaning “hence,” “therefore,” or “consequently.” The latter part of the passage is explicitly presented as following from the former and therefore cannot stand in simple opposition to it.

Everything therefore depends on the interpretation of [ii], which determines the coherence of the entire sequence. At the same time, the Antisthenean aporia differs markedly from the aporiai familiar from *Metaphysics* B. The interpretation of the text thus appears to reach an impasse. To overcome it, I suggest that one must first understand why Aristotle says that the Antisthenean aporia is, “in a certain sense,” timely and appropriate (*echei tina kairon*).

4. Why Is This Aporia Appropriate?

4.1 Against Whom Is Aristotle's Criticism in 1043b4-14 Directed?

Most interpreters agree that the *hōste* introducing the discussion of the aporia at the beginning of our H 3.4 [i], 1043b23, does not draw its conclusion from the immediately preceding lines (H 3.1043b14-23), which editors have often enclosed in parentheses for precisely this reason. Rather, it refers back to the earlier passage at H 3.2 (1043b4-14). It is therefore useful to consider that passage:

οὐ φαίνεται [5] δὴ ζητοῦσιν ἢ συλλαβὴ ἐκ τῶν στοιχείων οὕσα καὶ συνθέσεως, οὐδ' ἡ οἰκία πλίνθοι τε καὶ σύνθεσις. καὶ τοῦτο ὀρθῶς· οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν ἡ σύνθεσις οὐδ' ἡ μίξις ἐκ τούτων ὧν ἐστὶ σύνθεσις ἢ μίξις. ὁμοίως δὲ οὐδὲ τῶν ἄλλων οὐθέν, οἷον εἰ ὁ οὐδὸς θέσει, οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ οὐδοῦ ἡ θέσις ἀλλὰ μάλλον [10] οὗτος ἐξ ἐκείνης. οὐδὲ δὴ ὁ ἀνθρωπός ἐστι τὸ ζῶον καὶ δίπουν, ἀλλὰ τι δεῖ εἶναι ὁ παρὰ ταῦτά ἐστιν, εἰ ταῦθ' ὕλη, οὔτε δὲ στοιχεῖον οὔτ' ἐκ στοιχείου, ἀλλ' ἡ οὐσία· ὁ ἐξαίρουντες τὴν ὕλην λέγουσιν. εἰ οὖν τοῦτ' αἴτιον τοῦ εἶναι, καὶ οὐσία τοῦτο, αὐτὴν ἂν τὴν οὐσίαν οὐ λέγοιεν (1043b4-14).

If we consider we find that the syllable is not produced by the letters and juxtaposition, nor is the house bricks and juxtaposition. And this is right; for the juxtaposition or mixing is not produced by those things of which it is the juxtaposition or mixing. And the same is true in the other cases, e.g. if the threshold is characterized by its position, the position is not produced by the threshold, but rather the latter is produced by the former. Nor is man animal and biped, but there must be something besides these, if these are matter – something which is neither an element in the whole nor produced by an element, but is the substance, which people eliminate and state the matter. If then this is the cause of the thing's being, and if the cause of its being is its substance, they cannot be stating the substance itself.

The target of Aristotle's criticism is immediately apparent. He is attacking a compositional conception of substance that, on the one hand, considers only the material constituents while ignoring the formal component and, on the other, fails to explain the unity of what is defined, as shown by the example "animal and biped" (1043b10).

Who are the thinkers Aristotle has in mind?

Many scholars have argued that the passage is directed against certain Platonists¹³, and they are certainly right. Yet they are not Aristotle's only target. The argument is in fact divided into two distinct parts.

The first part employs the examples of letters and syllables (1043b4-6), as well as bricks and the house, examples already familiar from *Metaphysics* Z 17 (1041b5-6, 11-17). It then introduces the example of the threshold and its position (1043b8-10), which had been discussed at length in H 2 (1042b26-28). All these examples concern entirely material entities. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Aristotle is here criticizing thinkers whom we may broadly describe as "materialists," that is, philosophers who explain reality exclusively in terms of material constituents.

The second part of the passage (1043b10-14), by contrast, examines genus and differentia as the constituents of substance and of its definition. These are obviously not material components in the strict sense. Here Aristotle is directing his criticism toward Academic attempts to construct definitions. Since principles are indispensable for definition, the two groups appeal to different kinds of principles. Material elements serve as the principles of the materialists, whereas the Academics make genus their fundamental principle.

¹³ Malink (2024) p. 33 writes: "Against this, Menn and others argue that this passage is not meant to describe Aristotle's own position, but an account of definition by genus and differentia which was maintained by some Platonists." Similarly, Brancacci (1990) p. 227 remarks: "elemento comune ai vari momenti di tale analisi è il riferimento, polemico in punto di diritto, alla posizione assunta dai Platonici relativamente alla questione dell'ousia." Bosstock, Morel, and Giannantonio likewise interpret Aristotle's criticism in this direction.

4.2 Aristotle's Criticism of the "Materialists"

Who are these "materialists" whom Aristotle criticizes alongside the Academics? I believe they are philosophers contemporary with Aristotle, who probably took part in the debates conducted within, or in the intellectual milieu surrounding, the Academy, much like the "earth-born giants" (*gēge-neis*) who appear in Plato's *Sophist*.

Further evidence is provided by a passage of Plato's *Theaetetus* containing what appears to be a theory of knowledge. Because of the circumstances in which Socrates introduces it, modern scholars have come to refer to it as the "Dream Theory."¹⁴ The relevant passage is *Theaetetus* 201d8-202c5¹⁵, where Socrates recounts a dream in which someone expounds this theory to him.

The theory may be analyzed into seven principal theses. First, composite things possess a *logos*, which consists in the enumeration of their constituents, whereas simple elements are devoid of *logos*, since what is genuinely elementary cannot be analyzed any further. Second, elements may nevertheless be named. Third, nothing can be said of an element beyond its name;

¹⁴ On the attribution of the Dream Theory, as well as on the constructive or positive suggestions that Plato leaves undeveloped at the end of the dialogue, see Ferrari (2011) p. 107.

¹⁵ *Theaet.* 201d8-202c5: "If you have had a dream, let me tell you mine in return. I seem to have heard some people say that what might be called the first elements of which we and all other things consist are such that no account can be given of them. Each of them just by itself can only be name; we cannot attribute to it anything further or say that it exists or does not exist, for we should at once be attaching to it existence or nonexistence, whereas we ought to add nothing if we are to express just it alone. We ought not even to add 'just' or 'it' or 'each' or 'alone' or 'this' or any other of a host of such terms. These terms, running loose about the place, are attached to everything, and they are distinct from the things to which they are applied. If it were possible for an element to be expressed in any formula exclusively belonging to it, no other terms ought to enter into that expression. But in fact there is no formula in which any element can be expressed; it can only be named, for a name is all there is that belongs to it. But when we come to things composed of these elements, then, just as these things are complex, so the names are combined to make a description (*λόγος*), a description being precisely a combination of names. Accordingly, elements are inexplicable and unknowable, but they can be perceived, while complexes ('syllables') are knowable and explicable, and you can have a true notion of them. So when a man gets hold of the true notion of something without an account, his mind does think truly of it, but he does not know it, for if one cannot give and receive an account of a thing, one has no knowledge of that thing. But when he has also got hold of an account, all this becomes possible to him and he is fully equipped with knowledge." (Engl. transl. Cornford 1961, pp. 908-9).

not even being can properly be predicated of it. Fourth, elements are unknowable, whereas compounds are knowable. Fifth, elements are perceptible. Sixth, everything, including we ourselves, is composed of elements. Finally, the relation between letters and syllables serves as the paradigm of the relation between elements and compounds.¹⁶

At the end of the *Theaetetus*, Plato rejects this theory as inadequate, and the dialogue concludes without offering any positive solution to the problem of knowledge. A considerable number of scholars have argued that Dream Theory reflects the views of Antisthenes, or at least of philosophers belonging to the Antisthenean tradition.¹⁷ This is certainly possible. I would nevertheless prefer to regard it as Plato's presentation of a standard non-essentialist theory of knowledge, representative of his materialist opponents rather than a direct exposition of Antisthenes's own doctrine. Although it shares important features with Antisthenean epistemology, decisive differences remain, and these will become apparent in the following pages (see [ii] in §6).

The Dream Theory corresponds remarkably well to the conception criticized by Aristotle in the first part of H 3 (1043b4-10). According to that theory, everything is composed of elements. Each element is perceptible and can be named, yet none is knowable because none possesses a *logos*. Only the compound can be known, since only it possesses a *logos*, understood as the combination or interweaving of the names of its constituent elements.

Nothing in this account corresponds to a formal principle. The relationship between letters and syllables is explicitly presented in the *Theaetetus* as the paradigmatic example of the relationship between elements and compounds. Significantly, Aristotle challenges precisely this conception at *Metaphysics* H 3.1043b5, where he rejects the idea that the *logos* of the syllable is merely the aggregate of its *stoicheia*. This parallel provides, in my view, the decisive clue.

¹⁶ Sedley (2004) p. 154.

¹⁷ Burnyeat (1990) maintains that if the Dream Theory “does derive – in whole or in part – from an actual historical thinker, the most likely candidate is Antisthenes”, even though he admits that “Socrates in the *Theaetetus* is not restating Antisthenes but making creative use of some Antisthenean materials” (pp. 165-6). See also Malink (2024) p. 44, Schwegler (1848) p. 144, Zeller (1875) p. 253 n. 1.

There are therefore good reasons for concluding that, in the first part of H 3 (1043b4-10), Aristotle is primarily engaging with theories of the type represented by the Dream Theory. His criticism is directed against their inability to account for the formal principle that alone explains the unity of the compound. At the same time, however, he accepts one of their central insights: that *logos* belongs properly only to composite entities. This point, far from being rejected, will become one of the foundations of Aristotle's own theory of definition.

Thus, the theory fails because it cannot account for the unity required by scientific definition.

4.3 Aristotle's Criticism of the Academics

We have seen that, for the Academics, the definition of composite substance takes genus as its fundamental principle. The opposition between material elements, regarded as the principles of the "materialists," and genus, regarded as the principle of the Academics, had already been formulated in the sixth aporia of *Metaphysics* B,¹⁸ where Aristotle asks whether the true principles are genera rather than the primary constituents from which each thing is composed. The "primary constituents" are the elements; in contexts such as this, the term *stoicheia* invariably refers to the material constituents of a thing.

Genus, together with differentia, had already been examined extensively in *Metaphysics* Z 12.¹⁹ There too the relationship between genus

¹⁸ 998a20-b13: "Apart from the difficulty of stating the case truly with regard to these matters, it is hard to say, with regard to the first principles, whether it is the genera that should be taken as elements and principles, or rather the primary constituents of a thing; e.g. it is the primary parts of which all articulate sounds consist that are thought to be elements and principles of articulate sound, not the common genus – articulate sound; [...] (b4) but in so far as we know each thing by its definition, and the genera are the principles of definitions, the genera must also be the principles of definable things [...] (b11) But, again, it is not possible to describe the principles in *both* ways. For the formula of the substance is one; but definition by genera will be different from that which states the constituent parts of a thing." It is evident that the elements and the genus are opposed here.

¹⁹ Z 12.1037b11-14: "I mean this problem: – wherein consists the unity of that, the formula of which we call a definition, as for instance in the case of man, twofooted animal; for let this be the formula of man. Why, then, is this one, and not many, viz. animal *and* two-footed?"

and differentia gives rise to an aporia for which Aristotle appears to offer a solution.²⁰

A close reading of Z 12 shows that, in Aristotle's view, the reason for the failure of Platonic definitions is that genus and species are conceived as existing separately from one another. Since both are substances existing in actuality, and since both are simple, they cannot constitute a genuine unity; they can only coexist side by side. Consequently, they are incapable of yielding a truly unified definition of substance.

The problem is therefore always the same: explaining the unity of substance that makes definition possible.

4.4 Aristotle Levels the Same Charge against the Materialists and the Academics

Despite the profound differences between these two approaches to knowledge, Aristotle concludes the passage (1043b13-14) by directing exactly the same criticism against both groups. In their respective definitions, he says, they only "state the matter" (*tēn hulēn legousin*).

This accusation is unsurprising when directed against the materialists. It is far more striking when applied to the Platonists. Yet Aristotle makes a

²⁰ In Z 12.1037b18-19 says: "In the present case, on the other hand, one does not share in the other; the genus is not thought to share in its differentiae." And at lines 1037b24-28: "But surely all the attributes in the definition *must* be one; for the definition is a single formula and a formula of substance, so that it must be a formula of some one thing; for substance means a 'one' and a 'this', as we maintain. [...]" As can be seen, Aristotle emphasizes that the unity of substance and its definition was a major problem for the Platonists. Indeed, Aristotle continues as follows: "We must first inquire about definitions arising out of division [...] and of the two the one is differentia and the other genus, e.g. in 'two-footed animal' 'animal' is genus, and the other is differentia. If then the genus absolutely does not exist apart from the species which it as genus includes, or if it exists but exists as matter (for the voice is genus and matter, but its differentiae make the species, i.e. the letters, out of it), clearly the definition is the formula which comprises the differentiae." (1037b27-29, 1038a3-9). Berti (2017) p. 340 n. 130, says: "Qui Aristotele è polemico nei confronti dei Platonici, i quali ammettevano generi esistenti oltre le specie, considerando tutti, generi e specie, come Idee separate. Dire che il genere è materia della specie equivale a dire che esso non esiste oltre la specie; quindi, genere e specie formano un'unità come materia e forma, e questa è la soluzione dell'aporia sul perché l'oggetto della definizione sia uno, pur essendo la definizione composta da più parti." It seems, from this passage and from Berti's commentary, that already in Z 12 this difficulty concerning the Platonic definitions is being directed by Aristotle toward a solution – and, moreover, toward one of a hylomorphic kind.

similar point elsewhere. In *Metaphysics* N²¹ he reproaches the Academics for treating every *archē* as though it were a *stoicheion*. Stephen Menn has also argued that *Metaphysics* Z 13-16 criticizes both the materialists and the Platonists for attempting to analyze things into *stoicheia* in order to arrive at first principles.²² If Aristotle regards the Academic principles themselves as functioning like elements, it becomes easier to understand why he accuses both schools alike of reducing substance to matter.

This raises an intriguing possibility. It is conceivable that, within the Academy or in its immediate intellectual environment, an extensive debate took place concerning the proper objects and methods of knowledge, comparable to the discussion reflected in the *Theaetetus*. Platonists, Antistheneans, proponents of the Dream Theory, and Aristotle himself may all have participated in that debate, either directly or indirectly.

Aristotle repeatedly agrees that only composite entities admit of a *logos*, a point that is abundantly documented and explicitly reaffirmed in point [iv] of the Antisthenean aporia. What distinguishes him from the other participants is not this principle itself but his conviction that none of the existing theories could explain the unity of the composite substance. This explains why the Antisthenean aporia occupies such an important place at this stage of the argument. Aristotle introduces it not as an isolated doxography but as a decisive moment in the reformulation of earlier theories of definition.

One final observation may be added. In the Dream Theory as presented in the *Theaetetus*, the elements occupy center stage. The Dream Theory begins with the assertion that “the elements of which we and all other things consist are such that no account (*logos*) can be given of them” (201e1-3), thus making the elements appear philosophically prior to the compounds they constitute, even though only the latter possess a *logos*. Aristotle reverses this perspective. For him, the compound is primary because the whole is not identical with the mere sum of its elements; it is constituted as a unity

²¹ N 4.1092a5-9: ταῦτα δὲ πάντα συμβαίνει, τὸ μὲν ὅτι ἀρχὴν πᾶσαν στοιχείον ποιοῦσι.

²² Menn (2011) p. 186 and Menn, *The Aims and the Argument of Aristotle's Metaphysics* (draft).

through form. The Dream Theory adopts precisely the opposite position, since no formal principle enters into its account of composition.

Does Plato himself offer an alternative conception of the relation between whole and parts? In fact, he does, and it is found in the *Theaetetus* itself.²³ Yet, after being briefly suggested and discussed, this alternative is abandoned by the dramatic Socrates. The issue deserves a much fuller treatment than can be offered here, and I shall therefore leave it aside.

5. Criticizing in Order to Reform

If the interpretation proposed above is correct, Aristotle did not merely criticize compositional theories of definition such as the Dream Theory. He also appropriated one of their central insights and transformed it into a fundamental component of his own theory of definition. This raises an obvious question: why does Aristotle subject these theories to such a careful and systematic critique in H 3.1043b4-14?

His procedure differs significantly from Plato's treatment of the Dream Theory in the *Theaetetus*. Plato introduces the theory, examines it briefly, and ultimately rejects it as inadequate. Aristotle adopts a different strategy. He criticizes this kind of theory not in order to discard it, but in order to reform it and incorporate what he regards as its valid insights into his own philosophical framework.

The principal weakness of the Dream Theory lies in its inability to explain the unity of composite substance. A definition becomes nothing more than a list or aggregation of constituent elements, all of which are material and all of which stand on the same level. No internal hierarchy or organizing principle emerges from such an account. Consequently, the unity of the composite is either entirely absent, like that of a heap, or exceedingly weak, like the unity of the *Iliad*, understood merely as a succession of books (H 6.1045a12-14).

²³ 204b2-3; see Ferrari (2011) p. 112; he also adds, pp. 112-3, that: "l'intero argomento con cui Socrate respinge la distinzione tra *pan* e *holon* appare problematica e non dovrebbe rispecchiare il punto di vista filosofico dell'autore." Ferrari, in addition, cites the section of the *Parmenides* which examines the consequences that affect "the others from the one" in the hypothesis that "the one is" (157b6-159b1).

Yet this very theory also possesses features that Aristotle considers philosophically valuable. By locating the *logos* in composite entities rather than in separate Forms, it distances itself from an ontology restricted to intelligible realities and makes it possible to recover sensible things as genuine objects of scientific knowledge. Aristotle therefore does not seek to abandon this approach but instead to transform it. The Antisthenean aporia provides the dialectical instrument through which this transformation is achieved.

The same strategy may also characterize Aristotle's treatment of the Platonists. He criticizes them, not simply to refute them, but to reformulate their insights within a new conceptual framework. Aristotle owed an immense philosophical debt to Plato, and his own metaphysics may in many respects be understood as a profound reform of Platonism. The sustained criticism of Platonic doctrines throughout the *Metaphysics* should therefore be interpreted not merely as polemical opposition but as the means through which Aristotle develops his own philosophical alternative.

6. Reading the Antisthenean Aporia

Now that all this has been clarified, we may return to the text of the Antisthenean aporia (*Metaphysics* H 3.1043b23-32).

[i] Therefore [*hōste*] the aporia in which the followers of Antisthenes [*ēporoun*]²⁴ and other such uneducated people struggled has a certain appropriateness.

The first *hōste* introduces the entire first movement of the passage, comprising points [i], [ii], and [iii]. Now that its antecedent (in 1043b4-14) has been examined, we are in a position to understand why Aristotle says that this aporia “has a certain appropriateness” (*echei tina kairon*). His point is the following: if we fail to grasp the *what-it-is* of a thing – as, in Aristotle's view, both the materialists and the Platonists have failed to do – then we cannot formulate an adequate definition. The inevitable consequence is that we are not able to produce scientific level knowledge, as happened to the Antisthenians.

²⁴ Barnes translates the imperfect *ēporoun* as “was raised”, like Berti (“sollevavano”). I depart from both, because, as I shall explain below, they overlook that, according to Aristotle, the Antisthenians found no way out.

Why, however, does Aristotle describe their position as an *aporia*? It is unlikely that he means an *aporia* deliberately posed by the Antistheneans to challenge their opponents. Rather, he presents it as a difficulty from which they themselves are unable to escape.

Points [ii] and [iii] unquestionably report the Antisthenean position and therefore constitute a valuable Aristotelian testimony concerning their epistemology. For this reason, we will have to dwell on it longer.

[ii] when they stated that the ‘what’ cannot be defined [*horisasthai*] (for the definition so called is a long formula) (1043b25-26).

For the Antistheneans, essence – the *what-it-is* or the ‘what’ – is merely a mental conception (*noēma en psychais*) and possesses no independent reality. Knowledge therefore cannot be grounded upon it. This alone would suffice to explain why essence cannot be defined. Yet Aristotle reports a different justification: “for definition is a long formula.”

The reason, I suggest, is that essence, understood as the Platonic Form, is itself simple. Precisely because it is simple, it lacks a *logos*.²⁵ It can therefore possess only a name. This supports the interpretation advanced by Bostock and others: any predication, which is necessarily a combination of words, is already “too long” for what can only be named. At the same time, since a simple entity cannot itself be demonstrated, any attempt to define it inevitably generates an infinite regress, an explanation that accords with Malink’s interpretation²⁶.

[iii] but of what *sort* a thing [*poion ti esti*], e.g. silver, is, they thought it possible to teach [*didaxai*],²⁷ not saying what it is, but that it is like tin (1043b26-28).

²⁵ Berti (2017) p. 363 n. 23, says: “Come ha mostrato Brancacci, 1990, p. 228, Antistene sosteneva contro i Platonici che, se le Forme sono Idee, non è possibile definirle, ma solo indicarle col proprio nome, perché la definizione è composta da più parole, mentre le Idee sono semplici (così riferisce anche Platone in *Theaet.* 201e-202c. Qui Aristotele dà ragione ad Antistene contro i Platonici, pur ritenendo che la definizione sia possibile, a condizione di non intenderla come enumerazione di una serie di componenti materiali.”

²⁶ For the position of Bostock and Malink see *supra*, n. 11.

²⁷ Textual problems have been noted in this passage; see Brancacci (1990) p. 232 n. 12.

If point [ii] tells us what Antisthenean doctrine rejects, point [iii] tells us what it accepts. What can be taught is not the *ti esti* of a thing but only its *poion ti esti*.

An immediate question arises. Is Aristotle himself replacing *horisasthai* ("to define") with *didaxai* ("to teach"), or is he faithfully reproducing Antisthenean terminology? Did the Antistheneans themselves regard this kind of account as a definition?²⁸ The text does not enable us to answer this question with certainty. What is clear is that Aristotle himself does not regard it as a genuine definition, since for him only an account expressing essence deserves that designation.

The contrast between *ti esti* and *poion ti esti* is, however, highly significant. It suggests an epistemological position in which qualitative characterization takes the place of essential definition. This interpretation may be illuminated by another Aristotelian testimony. In *Metaphysics* Δ 29 Aristotle reports that Antisthenes held that each thing possesses its own *oikeios logos*, its proper account. Aristotle does not explicitly identify this *oikeios logos* with the kind of account implied by the ποῖον μὲν τί ἐστίν in H 3. Nevertheless, the two passages appear closely related, and Brancacci has argued that they should be read in connection with one another.²⁹ Whether they ultimately refer to exactly the same notion need not be decided here. For the purposes of the present argument, it is sufficient that they point in the same epistemological direction.

Such an account is consistent with an anti-essentialist conception of knowledge. The Antistheneans reject the abstract entities presupposed by Platonic essentialism and therefore also reject definitions grounded upon them.³⁰

²⁸ The surviving evidence does not allow us to determine whether the Antistheneans themselves regarded such accounts as *horismoi* or reserved another designation for them. Aristotle's terminology may reflect either his own reformulation or that of his opponents.

²⁹ For the relationship between *Metaphysics* H 3 and Δ 29, see especially Brancacci, who interprets the two passages as complementary evidence for Antisthenes's conception of *logos*. The present argument adopts this connection as a working hypothesis, while recognizing that Aristotle nowhere explicitly identifies the *oikeios logos* of Δ 29 with the account answering the question *poion ti esti* in H 3.

³⁰ Thus, Antisthenes appears to prefer concrete qualitative expressions such as *leukos*, *simos*, or *koilos* rather than abstract formations such as *leukotēs*, *simotēs*, or *koilotēs*. Whether this

Aristotle illustrates this with the example of silver. One cannot say what silver is, but only that it is like tin. The account therefore takes the form of a comparison rather than of an essential definition.³¹ From Aristotle's point of view this immediately reveals its limitation.³² A comparison may help us recognize something, but it cannot explain essence or provide the basis for scientific knowledge.

This example should probably not be taken as representative of the whole of Antisthenean epistemology. Aristotle's purpose is dialectical rather than historical.³³ He selects the simplest possible illustration because it best serves his argument against non-essentialist theories of definition. Other evidence, particularly Xenophon's testimony,³⁴ suggests that Antisthenes also employed accounts of virtues and social functions that possess genuine explanatory and educational value, even though they remain independent of essential definitions.³⁵

preference reflects an explicit linguistic program or simply the anti-essentialist orientation of early Socratic philosophy remains debated.

³¹ Comparison constitutes one of the oldest cognitive devices in Greek culture, abundantly represented already in Homeric poetry and later retained in rhetorical and poetic discourse. Aristotle's choice of this example may therefore be deliberate: it illustrates a mode of cognition that precedes philosophical definition.

³² Brancacci (1990) appears to find the example of silver somewhat problematic, since he expresses doubts about its specifically Antisthenean origin. As he observes (p. 231 n. 9), "one cannot be certain that the example of silver at 1043b27-28 derives from a work of Antisthenes or is specifically attributable to him. The fact that Aristotle refers here to a group of philosophers (this being the only passage in which he speaks of Antistheneioi, who are moreover associated with other οὕτως ἀπαίδευτοι) rather suggests the opposite." In effect, Brancacci's remarks invite us either to attach little evidential weight to the example or even to regard it as a candidate for athetesis.

³³ If we attempt to reconstruct how an Antisthenean account answering the question *poion ti esti* might have been applied to composite entities, we can imagine formulations quite different from Aristotle's example of silver. Such reconstructions, however, necessarily remain speculative, since no explicit examples survive. They are therefore omitted from the main argument.

³⁴ Xen. *Mem.* IV 6, 10-11: "Courageous are those who know how to handle dangerous and frightening situations properly" (οἱ ἐπιστάμενοι τοῖς δεινοῖς τε καὶ ἐπικινδύνοις καλῶς χρῆσθαι ἀνδρείοι εἰσιν).

³⁵ The surviving Socratic literature suggests that Antisthenes's primary concern was ethical education rather than the scientific classification of nature. This broader context helps explain why the extant examples of his *logoi* concern virtues, practical conduct, and social functions rather than natural kinds).

This conclusion cannot be drawn from Aristotle's brief remarks alone. It emerges only when his testimony is supplemented by evidence from other sources. In this respect, Aristotle does not say enough. My reconstruction allows us to recognize that the *logos* of the *poion* fulfilled a genuine function within Antisthenean philosophy. By rejecting Platonic essences, the Antistheneans did not abandon knowledge itself. They maintained instead that knowledge is acquired through the perception of *poia*, that is, of the various perceptible characteristics distinguishing one entity from another. A given object possesses certain characteristics, other objects possess different ones, and these perceptible differences suffice to distinguish the various constituents of the sensible world.

Measured against an essentialist conception of science, such knowledge is undoubtedly inferior. Yet there is every reason to believe that, for the Antistheneans themselves, it was perfectly adequate for its intended purpose. Once essences have been abandoned, the notion of substance likewise disappears. The different characteristics of things – what Aristotle would later classify under the remaining categories – are all treated simply as *poia*. None of these implications, however, receives further attention in Aristotle's discussion.

With this, the first – and properly aporetic – part of the Antisthenean aporia has been completed. We may now turn to its second movement.

7. *The Second Movement of the Aporia*

From this point onward, the discussion becomes increasingly constructive. Aristotle no longer dwells on criticism but progressively develops his own account.

[iv] Therefore [host'] one kind of substance can be defined and formulated, i.e. the composite kind, whether it be the object of sense or of reason (1043b28-30).

The second *hōste* introduces the second movement of the argument. Some interpreters maintain that the whole sequence comprising points [iv], [v], and [vi] cannot express Aristotle's own position³⁶. I find this view difficult

³⁶ Brancacci (1990) p. 237: "Non può certo essere riferita ad Aristotele la tesi enunciata in questo passo, posto che, come già è stato osservato, la sostanza di cui qui si parla 'non è quella che altrove

to sustain for these reasons: 1) here [iv], Aristotle explicitly states that only composite substance admits of definition. The very use of the term “substance” (*ousia*) shows that the discussion has returned to the definition of the *what-it-is*. By contrast, the immediately preceding Antisthenean position admitted only a teaching of the *poion ti esti*, illustrated by the example of silver, which is certainly not a composite substance. 2) The conceptual vocabulary of the passage is unmistakably Aristotelian. 3) Anyone who attributes the whole second movement of the passage to the Antistheneans would be forced to assume that they possessed the notion of form, which will be introduced below in [vi]; but this assumption is incompatible with their explicit rejection of it, in [ii] e [iii]. The second part of the *aporia* therefore cannot be understood from an exclusively Antisthenean perspective.

Burnyeat regarded this second *hōste* as obscure.³⁷ In my view, however, its logical function is entirely clear. Having presented the aporetic Antisthenean position, Aristotle resumes his own argument and carries it to its conclusion by resolving the difficulty that puzzled the Antistheneans.

Point [iv] formulates a proposition capable of accommodating several different philosophical perspectives.

Composite entities thus possess a *logos*. The discussion has now reached a point on which several of the competing theories – the Platonists, the proponents of the Dream Theory, possibly the Antistheneans, and Aristotle himself – can converge, although they understand both composition and *logos* in very different ways. For this reason, the inferential force of the second *hōste* creates no difficulty. Its implicit meaning is: once the preceding discussion has been completed, we may conclude that composite substances admit of a definitional account, regardless of whether that account is conceived in essentialist or non-essentialist terms.

[v] but the primary constituents of which this consists cannot be defined (1043b30).

On this point, virtually all the participants in the debate could agree, with the possible exception of the Antistheneans. Aristotle has just reported that even

egli indica come composta di materia e forma, ma ogni sostanza genericamente composta di elementi”, v. anche Caizzi (1964) p. 51, who accepts the Aristotelian terminology.

³⁷ Burnyeat (1970) pp. 113–4.

silver, conceived as an irreducible element, admits of a qualitative *logos*. The “primary constituents” mentioned here are the ultimate components of composite substance. Depending on the philosophical theory in question, these may be material elements or, in the case of the Academics, genus and differentia understood as fundamental, though indivisible, constituents of definition.

Aristotle himself is perhaps more strongly committed than anyone else to this conclusion, since he repeatedly maintains that simple entities, whatever their nature, do not admit of definition. This principle is clearly affirmed both in *Metaphysics* Z 13 (1039a14-19) and in Θ 10 (1051b2-17).

Taken together, the two discussions in H 3 – Aristotle's criticism of the materialists and the Platonists (1043b4-14), and the Antisthenean aporia (1043b23-32) – create the impression of a genuine philosophical debate involving four interlocutors: two essentialists, Plato and Aristotle, and two non-essentialists, the proponents of the Dream Theory and the Antistheneans. Some criticize, while others are criticized. Aristotle criticizes both the Dream Theory and the Platonists in the earlier passage. At the beginning of the aporia, he allows the Antistheneans to attack the Platonists. He does not explicitly refute the Antistheneans but instead presents them in a deliberately unfavorable light. In the second movement of the aporia, he formulates two propositions that almost all the participants can accept, before arriving at the conclusion that constitutes his own solution.

The remarkable result is that all the participants in the debate, despite their profound disagreements, contribute dialectically to the emergence of Aristotle's own theory. In this sense, each position plays a necessary role within the overall argumentative strategy of the chapter.

[vi] since a definitory formula predicates something of something, and one part of the definition must play the part of matter and the other that of form (1043b30-32).

This final statement belongs exclusively to Aristotle. Here the argument reaches the mature formulation of hylomorphism: the doctrine that matter and form are mutually dependent principles of substance. Only through their relationship can both the unity of substance and the unity required of scientific definition be satisfactorily explained. The solution announced

here will not be fully developed until H 6, where Aristotle completes the account merely outlined at the end of the present chapter.

The Antisthenean aporia thus proves to be “timely” in a very precise sense. Aristotle requires an ally capable of exposing the inadequacy of the Platonic Forms as independent objects of knowledge, and the Antistheneans perform precisely this function. Once that criticism has served its purpose, however, Aristotle redirects the discussion toward composite substances, the only entities that genuinely admit of a *logos*, a point on which almost all the parties involved can agree.

Agreement ends there. For Aristotle, the decisive question is not whether composite substances possess a *logos*, but what kind of *logos* they possess. A genuine definitional account must be a predication, that is, it must signify something of something. Yet this predication cannot be merely qualitative, as in the Antisthenean account answering the question *poion ti esti*. It must instead be essential. Within that essential predication, one constituent functions as matter – the determinable and potential component – while the other functions as form (*morphē*), the determining and ultimately differentiating principle.

Aristotle’s originality lies precisely in the way he transforms the competing theories of definition inherited from his predecessors. From the Dream Theory he retains the insight that only composite entities admit of a *logos*; from the Platonic tradition, the conviction that scientific knowledge requires an account of essence. Neither position, however, is accepted unchanged. Rather, Aristotle integrates what he considers to be philosophically sound in both into his hylomorphic conception of substance, which explains both the unity of the composite and the possibility of a genuinely scientific definition.

The Antisthenean aporia is not simply one more source on Antisthenes. It is the point at which Aristotle brings together the principal contemporary theories of definition, appropriates what each can contribute, and transforms them into the hylomorphic conception of substance. Read in this way, H 3 emerges not as a loosely connected chapter but as one of the most carefully constructed arguments of Books Z-H.

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