‘Ancient’

*Routledge Handbook of Metaphysical Grounding*

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Is there grounding in ancient philosophy? To ask a related but different question: is grounding a useful tool for the scholar of ancient philosophy? These questions are difficult, and my goal in this paper is not so much to give definitive answers as to clarify the questions. I hope to direct the student of contemporary metaphysics towards passages where it may be fruitful to look for historical precedent. But I also hope to offer the student of ancient philosophy some guidance on when drawing on the contemporary discussion of grounding may be beneficial.

Both issues hinge in part on how we ought to view grounding. Some theorists view grounding as the correlate of the *in virtue of* or *because* relation. Ancient philosophy abounds with such relations. Here’s a sampler.

• The presocratic philosopher Thales claims that water is the principle of all things. Subsequent philosophers offer other candidates. For example, Anaximenes views air as the principle; and Anaximander, the indefinite. One might view these claims as the suggestion that a given thing is so-and-so because water (or air or the indefinite) is the way it is. I discuss Thales in more detail below.

• In Plato’s *Euthyphro*, the character of Socrates wonders whether a thing is pious because it is loved by the gods, or is it loved by the gods because it is pious. Plato also aims to explain the behaviour of sensible, changing particulars by appeal to intelligible, unchanging Forms. For example, in the *Republic* he claims that an act, agent or state are all called just because they participate in the Form of Justice. I discuss some of Plato’s views below.

• In his *Physics* 2.3, Aristotle discusses four kinds of causes. He writes that “we think we have knowledge of a thing only when we can answer the question about it ‘On account of what?’ and that is to grasp the primary cause.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Causes seem to be explanations why a thing is the way it is or why it changes in the way that it does. The material cause is “that out of which as a constituent a thing comes to be … for example, the bronze and the silver and their genera would be the causes respectively of a statue.” The formal cause, “the account of what the being would be,” corresponds to a definition of the thing. The efficient cause is the “source of the change” and seems to involve what initiates a process; Aristotle gives the example that the parent is a cause of the child. The final cause, “what something is for” includes the goal of purposive action, but also includes the state achieved or the product which results from an activity.

• In the *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle lays out a rubric for scientific explanation. At the beginning of the Second Book, he describes his aims:

The things we seek are equal in number to those we understand. We seek four things: the fact, the reason why, if something is, what something is.… When we know the fact we seek the reason why (e.g. knowing that it is eclipsed or that the earth moves, we seek the reason why it is eclipsed or why it moves). (APo 2.1, 89b21-31)

We seek understanding. When some fact (*to hoti*) is known to obtain, we seek the reason why (*to dioti*) it is so, or an account of the fact. Aristotle continues:

As we said, to know what something is and to know the explanation (*aition*) of whether it is are the same; and the account of the fact that something is is the explanation (*aition*). This is either the same as it or something else; and if it is something else, it is either demonstrable or indemonstrable. If it is something else and it is possible to demonstrate it, then the explanation (*aition*) must be a middle term and the proof must be in the first figure; for what is being proved is both universal and positive. (APo 2.8, 93a3-9)

Scientific understanding is through an *aition* – in the above quotation, Barnes translates this as ‘explanation’ but in other contexts, the expression is often translated as ‘cause’. For example, this is how Charlton (1970) translates *aition* when Aristotle discusses his doctrine of the four causes in *Physics* 2.3, discussed above. Aristotle’s discussion of explanations yielding scientific understanding might strike one as employing a notion akin to grounding. Correia and Schnieder (2013: 2) tentatively suggest such a reading. Sandstad (forthcoming) argues that demonstrative explanations are not groundings. And Malink [chapter 1, section 5, this volume] considers the influence of the *Posterior Analytics*.

• In the *Categories*, Aristotle views individual substances as separate from, and ontologically prior to, universals as well as individuals in nonsubstance categories. These latter entities arguably belong in Aristotle’s ontology in virtue of standing in a relation to individual substances. I discuss some aspects of Aristotle’s metaphysics below.

If grounding is viewed sufficiently thinly, then it would be uncontroversial that there is grounding in ancient philosophy.

Many contemporary metaphysicians view grounding more thickly. Although there is little that can be said about grounding that is uncontroversial, here is a picture that perhaps provides a baseline for discussion. There are a variety of determination relations among facts that underwrite explanation. Some of these relations arguably bear sufficient similarity to group them together under a genus. Wilson (2014) calls the various determination relations small-g grounding relations and the genus capital-g Grounding; I will reserve ‘grounding’ for the generic notion and ‘grounding relations’ for the various specific relations. Talk of grounding is useful when we want to discuss the similarities among the grounding relations. And talk of grounding is also useful when we want to contrast such relations with relations that do not fall under this genus.

Here’s a few features shared by at least some of the various grounding relations. Grounding is a factive relation closely related to notions of structure and fundamentality. Grounding is a strict partial ordering and so yields structure on the ontology of facts. This structure is often thought of somewhat figuratively in terms of levels. So for example some physicalists might be characterized as holding that the physical facts ground the phenomenological facts; and some moral realists, as holding the physical facts ground the moral facts. When one set of facts grounds a second, the first set is relatively fundamental and the second, relatively derivative.

And here’s some of the contrasts between grounding relations, on the one hand, and other kinds of relations on the other. Grounding is distinct from causation, partly because grounding relations are typically (although not universally) viewed as synchronic relations among facts but causation is typically (although not universally) viewed as a diachronic relation among events. For the relation between grounding and causation, see for example Wang [chapter 4, section 2, this volume]. Grounding is distinct from ontological dependence, partly because grounding is often viewed as a relation among facts but the relata for ontological dependence range over a broader variety of entities. Grounding, moreover, is closely associated with explanation, but ontological dependence need not play any explanatory role. For example, Tahko and Lowe (2015) note that the existence of water *depends* solely on the existence of hydrogen and oxygen, but the mere existence of hydrogen and oxygen does not underwrite a full *explanation* of the existence of water. For the relation between grounding and ontological dependence, see for example Schnieder [chapter 2, section 1, this volume]; and for the relation between grounding and explanation, see for example Glazier [chapter 2, section 2, this volume].

Let me flag some controversies in this picture. I have characterized grounding as a relation among facts. But some hold that entities other than facts can serve as relata in grounding; see for example, Schaffer (2009). Still others view grounding as an operator; see for example, Fine (2011). I have characterized grounding as irreflexive, asymmetric and transitive. Some disagree; for discussion see for example Raven (2013a) and Thompson [chapter 3, section 4, this volume]. I have characterized grounding as underwriting metaphysical explanations, just as causal relations back causal explanations. Some view grounding as itself explanatory; see for example, Raven (2015). Finally, I have characterized grounding as a genus grouping together a variety of grounding relations. Some are sceptical that there is a genus fruitfully grouping together these various relations. See for example Wilson (2014), Koslicki (2015 and [chapter 2, section 5, this volume]). Others view grounding as not a genus but as a relation distinct from these other determination relations. For discussion see for example Raven (2017) and Maurin (2018).

For the historian, talk of grounding may conflate the thin and thick versions, and so turn an unobjectionable ascriptive claim into a misleading anachronism. But such talk, when used judiciously, can shed light on the history of philosophy. In particular, talk of the generic notion of grounding can be fruitful when used negatively, to distinguish a view from notions such as causation or ontological dependence. It can be especially helpful when we can see that a historical figure is using some grounding relation or other, but it is difficult to offer a more specific interpretative proposal. However, grounding can be a blunt instrument. When a more specific relation can be identified, talk of grounding can bring little added value. Let’s see these observations in action by discussing in more detail some of the candidate cases of grounding in ancient philosophy from our sample above.

**Thales**

We begin with the Milesian philosopher, Thales. Thales claims that the principle of all things is water. Is this a grounding claim, on the thicker construal of grounding just sketched? On this line of interpretation, Thales is claiming not only that the water facts determine the nonwater facts, and that the nonwater facts obtain in virtue of the water facts obtaining; but moreover, that the water facts are fundamental, and the nonwater facts are derivative, within a structured factive ontology.

It is difficult to know what Thales’ own intentions were. But Aristotle reads Thales somewhat differently from the interpretation just sketched. Aristotle sees the Milesians as attempting to explain change and diversity in the perceptible world by appeal to a single, material principle. As we saw in the sampler above, Aristotle holds that matter is one of the basic kinds of causes or explanations. Aristotle appears to view matter as having several roles: an *originative* notion as that initial state out of which a thing changes, a *substrative* notion as the substratum that persists through changes, and a *constitutive* notion as those components out of which a thing is made. He goes on to develop an account of matter where its constitutive role dominates: for example, in the middle Books of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle appears to view individual substances such as you and I as composites of form and matter. Matter in the *Metaphysics* retains a restricted role in explaining change: Aristotle occasionally treats matter as the substratum of substantial change, the coming into existence or passing out of existence of a substance. But when he introduces matter in *Physics* 1.7, it arguably appears to play a broader role as the substratum of any change whatsoever, including substantial change and qualitative change.

All three roles for matter are referenced early in the following discussion of the Milesians:

Of the first philosophers, then, most thought the principles which were of the nature of matter were the only principles of all things. That of which all things that are consist, the first from which they come to be, the last into which they are resolved (the substance remaining, but changing in its modifications), this they say is the element and this the principle of things, and therefore they think nothing is either generated or destroyed, since this sort of entity is always conserved, as we say Socrates neither comes to be absolutely when he comes to be beautiful or musical, nor ceases to be when he loses these characteristics, because the substratum (*to hupokeimenon*), Socrates himself, remains. Just so they say nothing else comes to be or ceases to be; for there must be some entity—either one or more than one—from which all other things come to be, it being conserved. Yet they do not all agree as to the number and the nature of these principles. Thales, the founder of this type of philosophy, says the principle is water (for which reason he declared that the earth rests on water), getting the notion perhaps from seeing that the nutriment of all things is moist, and that heat itself is generated from the moist and kept alive by it (and that from which they come to be is a principle of all things). He got his notion from this fact and from the fact that the seeds of all things have a moist nature and that water is the origin of the nature of moist things. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*1.3, 983b6–27)

Aristotle seems to ascribe to Thales the view that water is an ürstoff, a basic substratum. There is no substantial change, since the ürstoff does not come into existence or pass away. All change is the qualitative change of water. On this theory, there are no birds or bees—that is to say, a bird is not a kind of substance, persisting through its own qualitative changes, but a quality of the underlying water which, at some times and in some places, it possesses and, at other times and places, it does not. Compare this passage with the following:

[some Presocratics] make the underlying body (*sōma to hupokeimenon*) one—either one of the three [of the four elements] or something else which is denser than fire and rarer than air—then generate everything else from this, and obtain multiplicity by condensation and rarefaction. (*Phys*. 1.4 187a12-16)

I have transliterated some of the Greek in the above two quotations to bring out that the expressions translated as ‘the substance remaining’, ‘substratum’ or ‘underlying body’ pick out the substrative role of matter: *to hupokeimenon*, ‘the underlying thing’, is traditionally translated as ‘substratum’.

We can perhaps gerrymander a grounding-based interpretation of Thales. But such an approach faces challenges. First, it is not clear that this line of interpretation would be successful. Thales, according to Aristotle, is not obviously concerned with the determination of all nonwater facts. Nor is his concern with a levels-style ontological structure. Second, the imposition of a factive ontology is arguably an anachronism. Suppose that these two challenges can be met. We may be able to describe Thales’ intentions in terms of grounding. And we may be willing to take on the cost of imposing an anachronistic framework, if the approach yielded rewards. But if we can explicate the specific role that water plays, characterizing that role in terms of a small-g relation, then there is little added value in going on to describe that relation as grounding. Readers interested in the presocratic philosophers might begin with Curd and Mckirahan (2011).

**Plato**

In the *Euthyphro*, Plato has the character of Socrates ask the question, “is that which is pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?” (*Euthyphro* 10a, my translation, based on Cooper in Hamilton and Cairns (1961)). The Euthyphro question is commonly used when illustrating grounding: for some recent examples, see Raven (2013b), Bliss and Trogdon (2016), Schaffer (2016) and Maurin (2018), among many others. The question concerns at least the thin notion of grounding. Many grounding theorists view the question as concerning the thicker notion. For example, the above mentioned authors seem to view the Euthyphro question as seeking to identify which is relatively fundamental, facts about which things are pious or facts about which things are god-loved, and which is relatively derivative.

Plato views the question somewhat differently. Socrates’ interlocutor, the character of Euthyphro, canvasses the answer that “it is because it is pious that it is loved; it is not pious because it is loved” (*Euthyphro* 10d) but Socrates rejects this answer: “Euthyphro, it looks as if you had not given me my answer—as if when you were asked to tell the nature of the pious, you did not wish to explain the essence of it. You merely tell an attribute of it, namely, that it appertains to piety to be loved by all the gods. What it is, as yet you have not said” (*Euthyphro* 11a). Socrates seeks a definitional account of piety. Being god-loved is an attribute of the pious, not the essence of what it is to be pious, and so is ill-suited for supplying a *definiens*. When further attempts in the dialogue to define piety prove fruitless, and merely circle back to the attribute of being god-loved, Euthyphro makes a quick exit, and the dialogue suddenly ends.

Plato’s concern in the *Euthyphro*, then, is to specify criteria for being a *definiens*, and arguably does not concern a thicker notion of grounding. Is there other evidence for grounding in the *Euthyphro*? Correia and Schnieder (2013: 2-4), in a brief but engaging discussion of the *Euthyphro*, note that Plato’s argument draws on features associated with grounding. For example, Euthyphro endorses the claim that if something is pious, it is pious because it is god-beloved, and Socrates concludes that it follows that if something is pious, it is pious because the gods love it. This inference is licensed by the explicitly made claim that if something is god-beloved, it is so because the gods love it, and by the tacit assumption that ‘because’-clauses chain; as Correia and Schnieder put it, Plato assumes that grounding is transitive. But this, and other features discussed by Correia and Schnieder, are logical characteristics of ‘because’-clauses, and so are features shared by thin and thick grounding. There may not be evidence for thick grounding in the *Euthyphro*.

Plato’s response in other dialogues, to the definitional problem left unresolved in the *Euthyphro*, is to posit Forms. Forms provide *definiens* for ethical and aesthetic concepts such as piety, justice and beauty. They play a variety of other roles and seem to be required for accurate perceptual judgements (as in the *Phaedo*), knowledge (*Republic* 5), causal explanation (*Phaedo*), and to provide referents for natural kind terms (*Cratylus*). And they serve some kind of explanatory role in explaining the behaviour of particulars. Where particulars are perceptible and changing, Forms are imperceptible, intelligible and unchanging. Particulars approximate the Forms, or fall short of the Forms in some other way: for discussion see, for example, Nehamas (1999). Particulars are sometimes characterized as mere likenesses of Forms and participate in them. For example, in the *Parmenides*, the character of Parmenides characterizes the Platonic position (ascribing it in the dialogue to the young Socrates): “You say you hold that there exist certain forms, of which these other things come to partake and so to be called after their names; by coming to partake of likeness or largeness or beauty or justice, they become like or large or beautiful or just” (*Parmenides* 130d-131a). By contrast with particulars, a Form is a paradigm of the feature for which it is named. And Forms appear to be universals. For example, Parmenides continues: “I imagine your ground for believing in a single form in each case is this. When it seems to you that a number of things are large, there seems, I suppose to be a certain single character which is the same when you look at them all; hence you think that largeness is a single thing” (*Parmenides* 131d-132d).

It is difficult to understand participation. One of Aristotle’s criticisms of Platonic Forms is that talk of participation is uninformative. He writes that this “is empty talk; for ‘participation’ … means nothing” (*Metaphysics* 1.9 992a28-9, my translation, based on Ross). Plato himself finds participation and other aspects of the Forms problematic. For example, in the *Parmenides* 132a-b, the character of Parmenides raises the worry that if the reason for positing a Form is a perceived commonality, and Forms are paradigms which exhibit the feature for which they are named, then the Forms fall into a regress.

Whatever participation might be, the relation between Forms and particulars occasionally looks like an explanatory relation yielding ontological structure. And the Forms themselves appear to exhibit levels-like structure. For example, consider the status of the Form of the good relative to the other Forms. In the *Republic*, Plato has the character of Socrates, speaking of the Forms of justice, piety and so on, say that these “objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence (*to einai*) and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power” (*Republic* 509b). (To this the character of Glaucon comically responds “Heaven save us, hyperbole can go no further.”) This might suggest to the reader that the Forms themselves are structured hierarchically in a structure reminiscent of the ontological levels of which grounding enthusiasts discuss.

However, there are reasons to hesitate to draw this inference. The above quotation uses the Shorey translation from Hamilton and Cairns (1961), which translates the Greek *to einai* as ‘existence’. This is a common translation, we’ll see similar translation choices when we discuss Aristotle below, and the Greek sometimes indeed carries existential force. But the Greek can also sometimes arguably carry predicative force. For discussion of the copula in ancient Greek philosophy, the reader might begin with Kahn (2009). On this alternative reading, what the Form of justice is, say, is derived from the Form of the good. As mentioned above, Forms are essentially paradigms; and Plato seems to believe that the Form of justice is itself a good exemplar of being just. As something good, the Form of justice, like any other Form, participates in the Form of the good. Although there is some sort of explanatory hierarchy among Forms, and between Forms and particulars, it is unclear whether such explanations have the characteristic marks of grounding.

Despite my wet blanketing, it may be fruitful to investigate whether there is a thick notion of grounding in Plato. Some contemporary philosophers hold that there are systematic connections between essence and ground, which could reinstate the *Euthyphro* question as relevant to grounding; for the relation between essence and ground, see Zylstra [chapter 4, section 4, this volume]. For historical work in this direction see the above mentioned Correia and Schnieder (2013) and Evans (2012), who views the character of Socrates in the *Euthyphro* as attacking the view that beliefs can ground facts. And for a sympathetic reading of grounding generally in Plato, see Thomas (2014).

**Aristotle’s metaphysics**

Notions of ontological separation and priority are central to Aristotle’s metaphysics. Aristotle characterizes ontological priority at *Metaphysics* 5.11 (1019a1-4):

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|  | Some things then are called prior and posterior … in respect of nature and substance, such as those which can be without (*einai endechetai aneu*) other things, while the others cannot be without them. |

G. Fine (1984) argues for the following connection between ontological separation and priority: one thing being separate from another and the second being inseparable from the first are jointly sufficient for the first to be prior in substance to the second. These notions play a role in a variety of issues. I will survey a few of these issues later in this section, but let me first note that notions of ontological separation and priority structure Aristotle’s ontology.

In the *Categories*, Aristotle lays out a variety of ontological categories such as substance, quality and quantity; let me call items in categories other than substance ‘nonsubstances’. Aristotle also distinguishes individuals from universals within each category. This yields a four-fold ontology with individual substances such as a particular man or horse; universal substances, which include items picked out by species terms such as ‘human’ and ‘horse’; universal nonsubstances, which include determinable qualities such as paleness; and individual nonsubstances—it is controversial what these last items are, and I will return to this controversy. Aristotle classifies these entities with two predicative ties, two ways in which an expression picking out an entity can be predicated of a subject. Universals are *said of* a subject, as when we say that Callias is human. And nonsubstances are *present in* a subject, as when we say that Callias is pale. I will also come back to this distinction momentarily.

Corkum (2008) argues that there is good reason to ascribe to Aristotle the following:

primacy

individual substances are separate from, and prior to, both non-substances and universal substances, and both non-substances and universal substances are inseparable from, and posterior to, individual substances.

For example, Aristotle holds in the *Categories* that individual substances are prior to, and so separate from, universal substances. At *Categories* 5 (2a11-19), he calls individual substances primary with respect to universal substances and universal substances secondary with respect to individual substances. And generally, Aristotle holds that the ontological status of all other kinds of entity are somehow dependent on primary substances; for example, he claims at 2a34-b7:

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|  | All the other things are either said of the primary substances as subjects or present in them as subjects.... [C]olor is present in body and therefore also present in an individual body; for were it not present in some individual body it would not be present in body at all.... So if the primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist (*einai*). |

Notice the role here of the *said of* and *present in* predicative ties. I have followed the Ackrill (1963) translation in taking the Greek *einai* existentially. Is this the right translation? To answer this question, we must turn to the interpretation of ontological separation and priority in Aristotle.

primacy suggests that ontological separation and priority concern some sort of dependency. And separation and priority in Aristotle have been standardly understood in terms of ontological dependence. One formulation of ontological dependence is expressed in terms of existence conditions. On this formulation, one entity ontologically depends on a second entity just in case necessarily, if the former exists, then the latter exists. G. Fine (1984) argues for the interpretative correlate:

existential

A is *separate* from B’s just in case A can exist without B’s.

On a corresponding condition for priority, A is *prior* to B’s just in case A can exist without B’s but B’s cannot exist without A. We can see existential at work in the translation of *einai* in 2a34-b7, above. existential has met with criticism. Corkum (2008) argues that existential fails to meet the demands imposed by the condition of adequacy, primacy. For example, individual substances are separate from any given nonsubstance, but an individual substance cannot exist without its *propria*, its necessary but inessential properties. And Peramatzis (2011: § 10) argues that existential is incompatible with the characterization of substantial priority from *Metaphysics* 5.11, quoted above.

Ontological dependence need not be cashed out in terms of existence conditions. K. Fine argues for an essentialist account of ontological dependence. On this account, one entity ontologically depends on a second entity just in case the latter is a constituent in the former’s essence—equivalently, just in case the latter is a constituent in a proposition that expresses a real definition of the former. Frede and Patzig (1988), Spellman (1995) and Peramatzis (2008, 2011) ascribe to Aristotle an essentialist account of ontological separation and priority. Here is one way of cashing out that line of interpretation:

essential

A is *separate* from B’s just in case an account of what A is makes no reference to an account of what B is.

This approach has also met with recent criticism. For example, Corkum (2013a: 51-52) argues that the account captures the tie between a nonsubstance and substances. A definition of a property such as whiteness might well make reference to the surface features of physical bodies. But it is less clear that the dependence of universal substances on individual substances is captured by essential. That is to say, essential violates priority. Those who defend essential might reject priority. And it is a deep and long-standing interpretative question whether Aristotle, in *Metaphysics* 7, rejects the fundamentality of individual substances in favor of universal substances. *Metaphysics* 7 is a dense text that rewards study; interested readers might begin to wade through the secondary literature with Burnyeat (2001). And for further discussion of essential, see also Witt (2012), Malink (2013) and Panayides (2014).

Corkum (2016) canvasses the suggestion that separation and priority in Aristotle are best characterized in terms of grounding. A way of cashing out this suggestion is as follows:

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|  | A is *separate* from B’s if, for any given B, the fact that A has its ontological status (as an item in one of the categories, and so as a substance, a quality, and so on) is not grounded in the fact that A stands in some tie to that B, |

This condition conforms to primacy. For example, individual substances exhibit the condition with respect to universals and nonsubstances. Individual substances are classified as substances independently of standing in any tie to anything else⎯independently, that is to say, of being *present in* or *said of* any other beings. Universals and nonsubstantial individuals fail to exhibit the condition. Although generosity, for example, does not depend on any particular individual, the property would not have the ontological status it enjoys were there no generous people whatsoever. Generosity falls within Aristotle’s ontology in virtue of its being present in individual substances.

To assimilate separation and priority in Aristotle to grounding has some initial plausibility. Aristotle is concerned with relations in the world that underwrite certain kinds of explanations. These relations impose structure on ontology; and where facts about individual substances are fundamental, facts about universals and nonsubstances are derivative. Moreover, the generic nature of grounding offers interpretative advantages. Grounding is a big tent. To think of ontological separation and priority in terms of grounding allows for variation from one application to another. The specific way in which individuals underwrite explanations of universals can differ from the way in which substances underwrite explanations of nonsubstances: Aristotle suggests this difference in distinguishing the *said of* and *present in* predicative ties. The generic notion of grounding also allows the historian to make a negative point—separation and priority do not concern ontological dependence—without needing to specify each variation of grounding relation in play. When a more detailed account of these various grounding relations can be given, one could kick away the prop of generic grounding. Such an approach, however, may incur costs. For example, viewing separation and priority in terms of grounding arguably imposes an anachronistic factive ontology on Aristotle. Whether the interpretative benefits outweigh the costs requires careful judgment.

Here is a selection of scholarship on these issues. For criticism of Corkum, see Koslicki (2013: 8 n. 6, 2018: 141 n.9) and Peramatzis (2011: 243 n. 11). Katz (2017) argues that ontological separation in Aristotle is asymmetric, not non-symmetric. Mahlan (2019) discusses the substantiality of secondary substances in terms of ontological fundamentality.

Let me mention a few other interpretative questions and indicate how the interpretation of separation and priority terminology in Aristotle influences these topics. Our first topic: What sort of things are nonsubstantial individuals? Aristotle’s examples, given at *Categories* 1a25-28, are a “certain item of grammatical knowledge” present in a soul and a “certain paleness” present in a body. But the exact nature of nonsubstantial individuals is not clear from these examples. Call a property recurrent if it can be found in more than one subject, and non-recurrent otherwise. What is not clear from these examples is whether nonsubstantial individuals are recurrent or non-recurrent. As we have seen, nonsubstantial individuals are present in a subject, and much of the debate on this issue has centered on the apparent definition of this notion at *Categories* 1a24-5. I will quote Ackrill’s (1963: 4) translation: “By ‘in a subject’ I mean what is in something, not as a part, and cannot exist separately from what it is in.” A commonly held assumption is that a nonsubstantial individual is nonrecurrent if it is inseparable from an individual substance. This assumption rests on an interpretation of separation along the lines of existential; and we can see this interpretation at work in translation of 1a24-5. If a given nonsubstantial individual is incapable of existing independently from an individual substance, then it seems that the nonsubstantial individual must be non-recurrent. The assumption that a property is non-recurrent if it is inseparable from an individual subject thus drives much of the dialectic of the debated reading of 1a24-5. For recent discussion, see Erginel (2004), Corkum (2009) and McPartland (2013).

A second topic. Aristotle criticizes the Platonists – for example, at *Peri Ideon* 84.23-4, *Metaphysics* 1086b30 and *De Anima* 432a14 – for separating Platonic Forms from sensible particulars. On existential, Aristotle’s criticism is that Platonic Forms are wrongly viewed as capable of existing uninstantiated. On essential, the criticism is that Platonic Forms are wrongly defined without reference to sensible particulars. It may be a promising line of interpretation to investigate whether Aristotle’s criticism is that certain facts about Platonic Forms are wrongly not grounded in certain facts about sensible particulars. Of course, the proof is in the proverbial pudding, and an interpretation along these lines would require close textual study of the above mentioned passages. Interested readers might begin with G. Fine (1993).

A third topic. Aristotle distinguishes between an active and a passive intellect. He characterizes the active intellect as separate at *De Anima* 3.5 430a17-23:

And this [active] intellect is separate, unaffected, and unmixed, being in essence

activity. For that which acts is always superior to that which is affected, and the first

principle to the matter. Actual knowledge is identical with its object; but potential

knowledge is prior in time in the individual but not prior even in time in general; and

it is not the case that it sometimes thinks and at other times not. In separation

it is just what it is, and this alone is immortal and eternal.

It is not clear what it is from which the active intellect is separate. But one option is that the active intellect is separate from the body. On existential, Aristotle may be endorsing a *post mortem* existence of the intellect apart from the body. On essential, Aristotle may be claiming that an account of the active intellect does not make reference to the body. But Aristotle holds that the active intellect is not seated in an organ, and it may be a promising line of investigation to see whether Aristotle is claiming that certain facts about the active intellect, such as facts about the nature of its activity, are not grounded in facts about the human body. For discussion of the separation of the active intellect, see Corkum (2009), Miller (2012) and Cohoe (2018).

A fourth and final topic. Aristotle characterizes the mathematician as separating in thought the mathematical object from sensible and changeable substances. For example, at *Physics* 2.2 (193b31–34) Aristotle writes that “the mathematician, though he … treats of these things [i.e. the properties of the earth and the world], . . . [he] separates (*chōrizei*) them; for in thought they are separable (*chōrista*) from motion.” And at *Metaphysics* 6.1 (1026a9–10) he writes: “it is clear that some branches of mathematics are considered as immovable and separate (*chōrista*).” On existential, Aristotle might be read as making a claim about the existential status of mathematical objects. On essential, Aristotle may be claiming that an account of a mathematical object does not make reference to sensible and changeable substances. It may be promising to investigate whether Aristotle is claiming that certain facts about mathematical objects are not grounded in facts about motion. Corkum (2012) argues that Aristotle views the mathematician as treating something derivative, properties of sensible substances, as fundamental relative to certain mathematical properties. For further general discussion of Aristotle’s philosophy of mathematics, the reader might begin with Mueller (1970) and Lear (1982); and for a recent discussion of the ontological status of mathematical objects in Aristotle, see Katz (2018).[[2]](#endnote-2)

**Related Topics**

The question of grounding in Ancient Philosophy abuts on several other issues discussed in this volume. Malink [chapter 1, section 5] considers the influence of Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*. For the relation between grounding and causation, see Wang [chapter 4, section 2]. For the relation between grounding and ontological dependence, see Schnieder [chapter 2, section 1]; for the relation between grounding and explanation, see Glazier [chapter 2, section 2, this volume]; for the characterization of grounding as irreflexive, asymmetric and transitive, see Thompson [chapter 3, section 4]; for scepticism whether there is a genus of grounding, see Koslicki [chapter 2, section 5]; and for the relation between essence and ground, see Zylstra [chapter 4, section 4].

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1. A note on the quoted primary literature. References to Plato are to the Stephanus pagination (for example, *Euthyphro* 10a). Translations are from Hamilton and Cairns 1961, except as noted. References to Aristotle are to the work and, when appropriate, book and chapter, with the Bekker pagination (for example, *Metaphysics* 6.1 1026a9–10). Translations are from the Clarendon Aristotle Series, except as noted. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Thanks to the participants of the Workshop on Metaphysical Grounding at Hamburg University and especially to Kit Fine and Mike Raven for written comments. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)