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1-1-2016

## Review of *Aristotle as Teacher: His Introduction to a Philosophical Science* by Christopher Bruell

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*Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol.54, No. 1 (January 2016): 154-155. DOI. © 2015 Journal of the History of Philosophy, Inc. Used with permission.

Christopher Bruell. *Aristotle as Teacher: His Introduction to a Philosophical Science*. South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2014. Pp. viii + 268. Cloth, \$37.50.

This commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is in a style familiar from the writings of Leo Strauss and his students. The reader is presented with a paraphrase of the whole of Aristotle's text, marked by seemingly odd omissions, emphases, and offhand remarks. One soon sees that the book is written in code. Only as the book progresses (and, presumably, the too casual reader has been shaken off) is the author (a little) more explicit concerning what he takes to be the main lines of Aristotle's esoteric teaching, which (I think, but am not sure) is as follows.

Aristotle writes the *Metaphysics* for students being initiated into philosophy. These students have already left behind a mythical world-view, but not all are ready to grasp Aristotle's deepest teachings concerning the nature of reality and how it is to be understood. Aristotle distinguishes between an *arché* (principle) and an *aition* (cause). The true principles, the realities behind all things, are particular bits of elemental material stuff in motion. These are the *ousiai*, the substances. But in order to make sense of the world, as it presents itself to us, we need to identify causes, by employing *logoi*. These *logoi* enable us to group together things on account of certain similarities. They express the *ousiai* of things. (The *ousia* of a thing is not, strictly speaking, among the *ousiai*.) These groups are the kinds discussed by the sciences. Identifying them allows us to navigate the world of "what is manifest to us" (195) and give us whatever knowledge of beings is humanly possible, though such knowledge necessarily is unable to grasp a good deal concerning the beings in question.

Bruell understands Aristotle's assertion at Z.8 1033b26–28 (that the forms as some describe them, as apart from particulars, are of no use concerning the comings-to-be of substances) not according to the usual understanding, according to which he refers to Platonic, separate Forms, but to the substantial forms he himself appeals to in his hylomorphic analyses of particular substances (150). Such forms are causes, appealed to in

explanation, but are not true principles. Bruell has Aristotle break with the Parmenidean principle that the real is the intelligible: “There is a sort of principle that makes something known or knowable, without bearing the first or fundamental responsibility for either its coming to be or its (persisting in) being” (86).

First philosophy, as Aristotle describes it, the study of being as being, is impossible. A fortiori, first philosophy considered as theology is likewise impossible. Aristotle writes his *Metaphysics* for dual audiences: those who can appreciate his deepest teachings, and those who cannot. Each sees in the text what is appropriate for it to see. The more discerning reader will see that Aristotle is not “so devout an Aristotelian as some of his followers were and are” (140).

Bruell points to familiar philosophical tensions between Aristotle’s insistence that substances are particulars and that substances are the objects of (universal) scientific knowledge. While most Aristotle scholars develop complex accounts to reconcile these tensions, for Bruell, they indicate that Aristotle rejects certain premises he explicitly advocates.

Some will find Bruell’s readings brilliant and deep, others (myself included) willfully perverse. Could such an approach ever be validated for those outside of Bruell’s own intellectual tradition? Perhaps. Bruell finds significance in the ways in which *Metaphysics* K reworks earlier material from the *Metaphysics*. On his account the book is for those students unable to fully fathom the esoteric dimension of the earlier books of the *Metaphysics*, and—oblivious to their hints and implicit arguments—think that a study of being as being is possible. This is why the book is a suitable bridge to the theological Book Λ. Here, one might be able to test Bruell’s interpretation. Of the many slight variations in expression found in K, how many can be understood as advocating the sort of metaphysics that, according to Bruell, the perceptive reader of the earlier books would see to be impossible? Suppose that the overwhelming majority of differences in Aristotle’s exposition do show him to be glossing over the sorts of difficulties and hesitations that Bruell finds in the earlier books. This would demand explanation: if not that provided by an esoteric reading, then another. I did not do this work of collating and classifying the differences, but it is there to be done.

It is itself of some philosophical interest that this sort of uncompromising “Straussian” approach to the history of philosophy has persisted for so long as a force in education and scholarship, in the face of indifference and even hostility from mainstream scholars. Such a take on the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle might seem to be a reduction *ad absurdum*, but Bruell has given us one, and has pulled it off with finesse.