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

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Through these frequent dives to the microscopic level, and despite the author’s expressed refusal to “break up the text” (22), the book is reminiscent of the type of sustained and astute commentary that might accompany a translation. Moreover, El Murr often reproduces passages (up to a Stephanus page in length) to comment on structure, vocabulary and syntax, translation alternatives, the establishment of the text, proposed interpretations of other commentators, and much else.

In addition to its scholarly virtues, one of the main strengths of this commentary is to remind the contemporary reader of the presence of many provocative elements in the Statesman, especially if one considers the historical period’s “horizon of expectations.” More than anywhere else, Plato arouses the reader’s thoughts in the Statesman by showing familiar realities in an entirely new light. This strength is particularly noticeable in the explanations devoted to the definition of man as a featherless biped, to the quasi-ethnological description of weaving, and to the very detailed examination of the analysis of the law and of existing constitutions.

The writing style is relatively clear; readers with a good command of written French should not experience any particular obstacles. However, the typical French interpretative style—consisting in subtly suggesting with esprit de finesse rather than explaining in a geometric style—is more likely to confuse the English-speaking reader. Passages where the author states that a situation or line of reasoning is “clear,” “absolutely obvious,” “evident,” or “indisputable,” almost inevitably indicate the presence of obscurity or considerable difficulty.

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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, presumable, 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 logos. These logos 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.

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Most of the essays in this excellent collection give clear and persuasive arguments about difficult topics, and several break new ground. They are demanding but accessible to the non-specialist, with all Greek transliterated and translated; footnotes send the specialist reader to other published works where the case for a point is made in more technical detail. The book’s stated aim casts a wide net: “to expose some of the ways in which the received view has underestimated the gap Aristotle sees between science and ethics and suggest some possible avenues for bridging that gap” (4), and the essays are divided into three naturally distinct sections. The essays of part 1 make the case that Aristotle’s ethics resembles, or is, a science to a greater degree than is commonly thought—and that for all Aristotle’s emphasis on the distinction between theoretical and practical inquiries, there is much to be learned about each from careful consideration of their similarities. The essays of part 2 characterize the method of ethical inquiry. They show that Aristotle employs more than one such method; and they offer several interpretations of these methods—interpretations that