Chapter 1

APPROACH TO THE *CORPUS* AS A WHOLE

1.1 The Systematic, the Chronological, the Aporetic Approach

One's approach to any individual treatise presupposes an approach to the *corpus* as a whole, which should be made clear at the beginning. For scholars have understood Aristotle's works, and so have understood what "Aristotelian" means, in different ways. The three main approaches have been the systematic, the chronological, and the *aporetic*. The systematic approach holds that all parts of the whole stand in ascertainable doctrinal relationships, which consist of pervasive substantive-methodological conceptual constants. The latter enable one to understand the works as a body of positive Aristotelian philosophy, which is not a mere aggregate of unconnected treatises but an understandable doctrinal plurality in unity. Scholars differ, however, on what those pervasive conceptual constants are, and so on what the positive philosophy is. The chronological approach holds that all parts of the whole stand in ascertainable chronological relationships of simultaneity and of earlier and later date. Chronology is usually linked with the notion of development, thus enabling one to understand the works as the record of Aristotle's philosophical development. The works are not a mere aggregate of unconnected treatises but an understandable developmental plurality in unity. Scholars differ, however, as to the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of

this development, and so as to what its nature and dynamics are. The *aporetic* approach has not been developed for the *corpus* as a whole but rather for individual treatises or parts of such treatises, particularly the *Metaphysics*. It is therefore not a holistic approach comparable to the other two, but it is distinct from them because it interprets treatises or parts of treatises considered *aporetic* not in terms of a positive doctrinal content or of a positive developmental stage. Whether it is capable of understanding the *corpus* as more than a mere aggregate of unconnected treatises seems doubtful.[1]

A choice among these three basic approaches cannot be avoided. They specify the most general parameters within which scholars must try to ascertain the meaning of the *corpus* as a whole and so of any individual treatise. Within each of these parameters, further choices must be made as to the nature of the doctrinal content, the nature and stages of Aristotle's philosophical development, and the nature and function of *aporiai*. These choices must of course be argued. They normally grow out of and become explicit as a crystallization of a scholar's personal engagement with the text. For the purposes of this study, I should like to present my own choices with a minimum of supporting argument. They can perhaps be accepted as hypotheses to be tested in terms of both their power and their limitations in illumining the *Poetics*.

My basic choice among the three main approaches is the systematic. This does not mean that I reject the other two in the sense of holding that individual treatises do not stand in chronological and developmental relationships, or that no parts of treatises are *aporetic*. It means rather that I consider the systematic approach to be presupposed by the other two. For the notion of development is not purely chronological but involves a substantive, indeed a doctrinal, content. The *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* are not mere dates but positive philosophical positions. One needs a positive doctrinal notion of Aristotelian philosophy before one can map out its developmental direction and stages. Likewise, the *aporetic* approach presupposes a doctrinal context within which *aporiai* have significance and function. Aristotle makes this clear when he argues for an important but limited and preliminary function of *aporiai* at *Met*. III. 995a24–b4. Scholars have acknowledged this, and nobody to my knowledge has ever argued that his works are nothing but *aporetic,* or that *aporiai* are stated purely for their own sake. I suspect that such a notion would not only conflict with Aristotle's own assessment of the role of *aporiai* in his philosophy, but would be inherently senseless. A*poriai* cannot arise in a vacuum; they are prompted by specific difficulties that are embedded in a doctrinal context from which they derive their significance and possibility of resolution.

1.2 The Pervasive Substantive-Methodological Conceptual Constants

My basic choice therefore is to approach the *corpus* systematically in terms of an ascertainable doctrinal content, which is common to all the treatises but whose different aspects are developed in individual ones. The common core consists of pervasive substantive-methodological conceptual constants which, however, function somewhat differently in different treatises. It is this common core that specifies what "Aristotelian" means to me. Yet the systematic plurality in unity of his works is unlike modern models. The constants are both substantive and methodological at once, since Aristotle does not have our notion of a mere method nor that of the priority of method to subject matter. Method is not only adapted to, but determined by, the nature of the subject matter. Aristotle's word *method (methodos)* contains the noun *path (hodos)* and so suggests one's walking along a path that takes one from somewhere definite to somewhere else definite and is shaped by the contours of the landscape over which it winds. Cognition is both systematic *(hodoi)* and veridical *(alethes)*, because method is adapted to subject matter rather than the other way round. That is why Aristotle most generally characterizes method as a progression from what is better known to us to what is more knowable by nature, where both *termini* are aspects of the objective being of things. For things are both perceptible *(aistheta)* and intelligible *(noeta)* in their own being. At *E.N.* I. 3, Aristotle excoriates the inappropriate transfer of method from one subject matter to another as a want of culture. The priority of subject matter to method is one aspect of the ontological and cognitive priority *(proteron)* of the object to the subject.[2] As a result, Aristotle's technical vocabulary is flexible rather than rigidly univocal, so that the conceptual constants can function somewhat differently in different treatises while yet preserving a distinctively Aristotelian texture and meaning.

Within the systematic approach, my choice of the pervasive substantive-methodological conceptual constants comprises those which I hold to be explicitly or implicitly present and foundational in all his treatises. They are explicitly present when they are stated in so many words in a text, implicitly when they are not so stated but used. They are explicitly foundational when they are said to be so, implicitly when they are not said to be so but used. Their presence and importance cannot be explicit in every treatise, since each has a distinctive subject matter of its own and since the *corpus* would otherwise largely consist of endless repetition. The constants must therefore be ascertained by reference to completely general statements, which identify them as common to, and foundational for, all things. Their implicit presence and importance in a

given treatise must be confirmed by indications of their use. One's choice of constants on this dual basis is always open to debate.

I choose the following conceptual constants (again with a minimum of supporting argument), by reference to completely general statements in the *Metaphysics,* while postponing until chapter 3 their confirmation by reference to indications of their use in the *Poetics:* the concept of being, the categories of being, the categorial priority of *ousia,* immanent causal form-matter constitution in the category of *ousia,* and the ontological and cognitive priority of the object.[3]

1.2.1 The Concept of Being

The concept of being is common to and foundational for all things, because Aristotle understands philosophy to have the question "What is being?" at its core: "And indeed the question which was raised of old and is raised now and always and is always the subject of doubt, 'What is being?'" (*Met*. VII. 1028b2–4). The deliberate combination of "of old" *(palai),* "now" *(nyn),* and "always" *(aei)* indicates that Aristotle not only ranks himself as a philosopher of being in the tradition of Parmenides and Plato, but that he considers philosophy's central concern with being ("what is being?" *ti to on*) as holding true for all time. The "always" goes in its assertion of unchangeable core importance far beyond Homer's formula, which combines past, present, and future tense *(en, estin, estai).* While Aristotle realizes that the earliest philosophers were concerned more with becoming than with being, he does not interpret this as meaning that philosophy of becoming is an alternative to philosophy of being, but rather that early philosophy must be forgiven for its as yet inadequate grasp of its subject: "For the earliest philosophy is, on all subjects, like one who lisps, since it is young and in its beginnings" (*Met*. I. 993a15–16). Aristotle explicitly restates that being is a truly pervasive conceptual constant, e.g., "and being is common to all things" (*koinon de pasi to on estin*; *Met*. IV. 1004b20). The "common" *(koinon)* echoes Heraclitus's earlier statement: "But the *logos* is common" (*tou logou d'eontos xynou*; Diels-Kranz, Frg. 2, lns. 2–3) and, like it, is unrestricted in its generality. Being pertains to all things without exception *(pasi).* Its equally unrestricted foundational importance is reflected in Aristotle's technical vocabulary, which designates all things as beings *(onta),* collectively as all beings *(panta ta onta)* and individually as a being *(on).* From an earlier colloquial meaning as things in general and as property or possessions in particular, beings *(onta)* was elevated to the role of the core technical philosophical concept by Parmenides (in the singular *to on*) and by Plato (in the singular and plural *to on* and *ta onta*). It is so retained by Aristotle. Philo-

sophical conceptualization attains a proper grasp on reality only on the ground of being, for the concept of being comprises all things in its extension. To fall outside that extension is not to be at all, to have no mode of being whatsoever.

1.2.2 The Categories of Being

But being is not a univocal concept. It is common to all things not univocally *(kath hen)* but in categorially differentiated focal meaning *(pros hen)*.[4] This distinctively Aristotelian understanding of being is not only his first line of defense against the undifferentiated unity of Parmenidean being but, even more importantly, enables him to preserve the richly differentiated yet ordered being of things while conceptualizing them in terms of one pervasive core concept. The understanding of being in terms of the *pros hen* focused categories of being is inseparable from that pervasive core concept itself. The categorial *pros hen* structure is as unrestrictedly general and foundational as being itself. "Being is spoken in many senses" *(to on legetai pollachos)* is Aristotle's metaphysical *Leitmotif,* repeated in many treatises explicitly or implicitly. In a rare display of one-upmanship over his colleagues in the Academy, who still rely on Plato's *Sophist* to counter the threat of the Parmenidean univocity of being, he sets his understanding of being off against their antiquated *(archaïkos)* views:

> [T]hey framed the difficulty in an obsolete form. For they thought that all things that are would be one (*viz.* Being itself), if one did not join issue with and refute the saying of Parmenides: "For never will this be proved, that things that are not are." They thought it necessary to prove that that which is not is; for only thus—of that which is and something else—could the things that are be composed, if they are many. . . . But it is absurd, or rather impossible, that the coming into play of a single thing should bring it about that part of that which is is a this *(tode),* part a such *(toionde),* part a so much *(tosonde),* part a here *(pou).* (*Met*. XIV. 1089a1–15)

The strong language of "absurd" *(atopon)* and "impossible" *(adynaton)* is echoed in many other places, where Aristotle argues that the categorial understanding of being must precede the quest for the causal *archai* and elements of being. To give but one example: "In general, if we search for the elements of beings without distinguishing the many senses in which

things are said to be, we cannot find them . . . but if the elements can be discovered at all, it is only the elements of *ousiai*" (*Met*. I. 992b18–22).[5]

1.2.3 The Categorial Priority of Ousia

The ontological and cognitive priority of *ousia* is implicit in this structure, for *ousia* is the focal meaning, the *pros hen* reference, of all the other categories. In the same context in which Aristotle identifies being as the perennially valid core concept of philosophy, he immediately, actually in the same sentence, goes on to reformulate the question "What is being?" *(ti to on)* as paradigmatically meaning "What is *ousia*?" *(tis he ousia):* "And indeed the question which was raised of old and is raised now and always and is always the subject of doubt, 'What is being?' is the question 'What is *ousia*?' " (*Met*. VII. 1028b2–4). He credits his predecessors with having had at least an inkling of this truth, since all of them really sought the causal *archai* and elements of *ousiai,* however vaguely: "For it is this that some assert to be one, others more than one, and that some assert to be limited in number, others unlimited" (*Met*. VII. 1028b4–6). He places himself within this tradition: "And so we also must consider chiefly and primarily and so to say exclusively what that is which is in this sense" (*Met*. VII. 1028b6–7).

The reformulation of the question is carefully modified in the text, so as to make clear that it is not meant to be reductive. Reformulating the question "What is being?" as "What is *ousia?*" does not reduce being to *ousia* or shrink the extension of being; nor does it deny the legitimacy of conceptualizing all things in all categories as being. Indeed, reduction would destroy the status of the categories as categories of being *(kategoriai tou ontos)* together with their *pros hen* structure. *Ousia* enjoys categorial priority in the sense that it functions as *pros hen* focus, not in the sense that it absorbs all being into itself. All other categories are understood as different secondary categorial modes of the being of individual *ousiai*.[6]

The different dimensions of the functioning of *ousia* as *pros hen* focus are carefully set out: "Now there are several senses in which a thing is said to be first, yet *ousia* is first in every sense, in definition *(logoi),* in knowledge *(gnosei),* in time *(chronoi)*" (*Met*. VII. 1028a31–33). Translating *logoi* as "in definition" seems defensible, since the priority of *ousia* in definition *(horismos, horos, horos tes ousias)* is a central concern of the *Metaphysics*. The priority of *ousia* in definition means that definition pertains to *ousia* primarily, to the other categorial modes only secondarily: "But this is evident, that definition *(horismos)* and essence *(to ti en einai)* in the primary *(protos)* and unqualified *(haplos)* sense belong to *ousiai*; still they belong to the others as well but not in the primary sense" (*Met*. VII. 1030b4–7). Definition follows the categorial *pros hen* structure of being,

because it is the formula *(logos)* of the essence *(to ti en einai)* and of the what a thing is *(to ti estin),* and these too follow that structure: "[E]ssence will likewise belong in the primary and unqualified sense to *ousia* and in a secondary sense *(eita)* to the other categories, as will the what a thing is, not essence in the unqualified sense but essence as belonging to quality or quantity . . . by virtue of reference *(pros)* to one and the same thing . . . not with a single meaning *(kath hen)* but by focal reference *(pros hen)*" (*Met*. VII. 1030a29–b3). Focal reference means that "in the definition of each secondary categorial mode that of its *ousia* must be present *(ananke enyparchein)*" (*Met*. VII. 1028a35–36; cf. IX. 1045b26–32). *Ousia,* then, functions as a component in the definition of each one of its secondary categorial modes of being.

This entails that it is prior in knowledge *(gnosei)* because "we think that we know *(eidenai)* each thing most *(malista)* when we know *(gnomen)* what a man or fire is *(ti estin),* rather than its quality, its quantity, or its place" (*Met*. VII. 1028a36–b1). Since the definition of an *ousia* must be present in that of each of its secondary categorial modes, only *ousia* can be understood independently and intrinsically in its own category (intracategorially), while each of the other categories must be understood dependently by *pros hen* reference to *ousia* (intercategorially).

The lack of cognitive independence of the secondary categorial modes of being is due to their lack of ontological independence. *Ousia* is prior in time *(chronoi),* which entails its separate being: "For of the other categories none is separate *(choriston)* but only *ousia*" (*Met*. VII. 1028a33–34). Since cognition is for Aristotle veridical and grasps being as it is, "as each thing is in respect of being, so it is in respect of truth" (*Met*. II. 993b30–31), a categorial mode that cannot be separately on its own, can also not be so understood. The most fundamental and most often repeated contrast between *ousia* and the secondary categories is that only the former has independent being while the latter are hung up on it *(eretai).* E.g., "The substratum *(hypokeimenon)* is *ousia,* and this is in one sense the matter *(hyle)* . . . and in another sense the definition and form *(logos kai morphe)* . . . and in a third sense the compound of these, which alone . . . is unqualifiedly separate *(choriston haplos)*" (*Met*. VIII. 1042a26–31). Priority in *ousia* means surpassing *(hyperballein)* the other categorial modes in being when separated *(chorizomena toi einai)* (*Met*. XIII. 1077b2–3). Being *choriston* or *chorizomenon* means priority in respect of nature and *ousia (kata physin kai ousian)* such that *ousia* "can be without the others, while they cannot be without *(aneu)* it" (*Met*. V. 1019a2–4). For each of the other categorial modes is dependent on *ousia* for its very being: "Clearly then it is through *(dia)* this category that each of the others also is" (*Met*. VII. 1028a29–30). This real dependence is linguistically reflected in the adjectival form of properties in the secondary categories *(paronymy),* for which

Aristotle argues and which he justifies in *Met*. IX. 7, even coining a new technical term, "thaten" *(ekeininon).* It emphasizes the dependent being and intelligibility of all the secondary categorial modes, even if a verb rather than an adjective with *esti* is used (cf. *Met*. VII. 1028a20–31).

1.2.4 Immanent Causal Form-Matter Constitution in the Category of Ousia

The reason for this real and cognitive priority of *ousia* is that it alone is causally constituted by form and matter. The secondary categorial modes have form but no matter, since the composite *ousia* serves as their real and predicative substratum and subject: "Nor does matter *(hyle)* belong to all those things which are by nature *(physei)* but are not *ousiai,* but their substratum *(hypokeimenon)* is the *ousia*" (*Met*. VIII. 1044b8–9; I. 992b21–22). Only an *ousia* is intracategorially (in its own category) constituted by form and matter, which are themselves *ousiai*, e.g., "There are three kinds of *ousia*—the matter *(hyle)* . . . the nature *(physis)* . . . and thirdly the individual *ousia* which is constituted out of these *(he ek touton),* for example, Socrates or Callias" (*Met*. XII. 1070a9–13; cf. VII. 1034b34–5a9). Self-constituting in its own category, an individual *ousia* is actualized and so defined by its immanent form: "[F]or the *ousia* is the indwelling form *(to eidos to enon),* from which and the matter the compound is called *ousia*" (*Met*. VII. 1037a29–30). Therefore, properties in the secondary categorial modes cannot enter constitutively and hence not definitionally into substantial being:

> And further it is impossible *(adynaton)* and absurd *(atopon)* for a this *(tode)* and *ousia*, if it is constituted of some things, not to be constituted of *ousiai* or of a definite this *(ek tou tode ti)* but of quality *(ek poiou).* For in that case what is not *ousia* but quality will be prior to the *ousia* and to the this. But this is impossible, for neither in definition nor in time nor in coming to be can the properties be prior to the *ousia,* for they will then also be separate. (*Met*. VII. 1038b23–29; cf. XIV. 1088b2–4)

Pros hen categorial structure is asymmetrical, grounded in the intracategorial immanent form-matter constitution of *ousia*.

That constitution accounts for the unity of substantial being. Aristotle's tone is nearly jubilant when he resolves the *aporia,* how a composite *ousia* can be one, by understanding form as actuality *(energeia)* and matter as potentiality *(dynamis):* "But, as has been said, the proximate matter and the form are one and the same thing, the one potentially and the other actually . . . for each thing is a definite unity *(hen gar ti),* and the potential and the actual are somehow one *(hen pos estin)* so that there is no other

cause" (*Met*. VIII. 1045b17–22). *Met*. IX. 7 extends *paronymy* from properties in the secondary categories to the constitutive matter in the category of *ousia,* based on its relative (not absolute) indeterminacy *(aorista),* which enables it to be determinable to the actualizing power of form as determinant. A determinate individual *ousia* results from this immanent causally constitutive functioning of determinable and determinant as *archai*. Since Aristotle announces this as his own solution to the *aporia* of substantial unity at the end of Book VIII, while IX. 7 simply works it out further, these passages can be accepted as doctrinal (unlike the more *aporetic* VII.7).[7]

The asymmetrical *pros hen* structure of the categories of being and the priority of *ousia* (which is grounded in its intracategorial form-matter constitution) are as general as being itself and inseparable from Aristotle's understanding of being:

> But the senses of being itself *(kath hauta de einai legetai)* are precisely as many as the figures of predication *(ta schemata tes kategorias)* signify; for the senses of being are just as many as they. Since then some of these signify what a thing is, some its quality, some its quantity, some relation, some doing or being affected, some place, some time, being in each of these signifies the same. (*Met*. V. 1017a22–27; cf. XII. 1070a31–b2; *Physics* III. 200b32–1a9)

This entire complex can, I believe, be accepted as a core conceptual constant. For not only has Aristotle equated being with it, at *Met.* IV. 1, 2, and 3 he also maps out the domains of all sciences *(epistemai)* within it. Metaphysical *episteme* investigates all beings *(panta ta onta),* so that the unrestricted extension of being is its subject matter, which means that its method must be investigation *qua* being *(hei on).* Each special *episteme* cuts off from *panta ta onta* a part *(meros)* and hence is partial *(en merei).* Its subject matter is then a part of the extension of being, either a substantial genus such as the animal kingdom or a secondary categorial aspect of the being of things such as the quantitative. This determines its method to be investigation either *qua* a substantial generic nature such as animality or *qua* a secondary categorial what it is *(ti esti)* such as quantity.

1.2.5 The Ontological and Cognitive Priority of the Object

The ontological and cognitive priority of the object to the subject is clear in many contexts. Nowhere does Aristotle allow any subjective contribution to enter constitutively into the being of things. Truth is defined as correspondence: "It is not because we think that you are pale, that you

are pale, but because you are pale we who say this have the truth" (*Met*. IX. 1051b6–9; cf. IV. 1011b23–29). Aristotle makes fun of the Protagorean priority of the subject to the object:

> We call both knowledge and perception the measure of things for the same reason, because we know something by them—while as a matter of fact they are measured rather than measure. . . . Protagoras says "man is the measure of all things". . . . Such thinkers are saying nothing while they seem to say something remarkable. (*Met*. X. 1053a31–b3)

Things are not measured by our knowledge—our knowledge is measured by things. Aristotle is an epistemological realist. That is why *De Anima* II.5–III.8 understands all modes of knowledge as deriving their cognitional content from the things themselves, so that the perceptible and intelligible forms in things and as received in the soul are the same. Thus the soul of man is cognitionally all things.[8]

The here chosen pervasive conceptual constants constitute Aristotle's distinctive philosophy of being and so the systematic framework within which I propose to approach the *Poetics*.