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The Legacy of *Ousia*

To speak once again, and at this late date, of *ousia* is surely anachronistic. To once again take up this ancient concept, this foundational principle, here, now, in the wake of the twentieth century, when so many have suffered in the name of ultimates, when the seductive aura of the Archimedean dream has finally begun to wane, this is surely perverse. Yet the decay of the aura of the modern project to seek security in absolute principles gives rise to a new and an equally dangerous delusion: that an epoch of anarchy has dawned in which all appeals to principle are indicted as hegemonic, totalizing, and violent. If the modern mind-set succumbs to the alluring aura of apodeictic absolutes, then the postmodern mood attempts to disrupt the violence allegedly endemic to the very deployment of principles by positing a radical rupture in history itself, a rupture after which every appeal to principles, particularly one so heavily laden as *ousia*, is deemed naïve, outdated, and perilous.

The recognition that principles always already include a dangerous dimension of domination emerges only as the legitimacy of a certain economy of principles begins to wither. At such times, it becomes possible to rethink the meaning and function of principles themselves. The appeal to *ousia* here recalls the long history of efficacy determined by the unification of the two basic meanings of the Greek word *archē*, principle. Prior to Plato and Aristotle, two distinct senses of *archē* remained separate: on the one hand, *archē* designated the beginning, the first, incipience; on the other hand, it designated the supreme commander, that which holds dominion and power.[1] Aristotle seems to have brought these two determinations of *archē* together into a single philosophical concept, and in his ontological engagement with finite sensible being—*ousia*—inception and domination continually compete with one another for preeminence. The interplay between these two dimensions of *archē* is the legacy of *ousia*.

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Although the dimension of domination, which finds a powerful expression in the modern obsession with absolute ultimates, has dominated (from) the beginning, the attempt to think through the legacy of *ousia* cannot simply posit a rupture in history on the far side of which principles no longer function violently. There is no stepping back behind the determination of *archē* established by Aristotle: principles function hegemonically, but the hegemonic functioning of principles cannot be permitted to eclipse the equally important dimension of incipience. The appeal again to *ousia,* here, now, is an intentional provocation—it at once *calls forth* this other, eclipsed dimension of *archē* and *challenges* the attempt to leave history behind. If, however, we do not join in the rush toward rupture, neither do we attempt to rejuvenate the self-deception of modernity by appealing, once again, to the aura of absolute ultimates. No, it is too late for that, and we too wise.

Yet even at this late hour, the promise of an ultimate, authoritative *archē* remains seductive. The Archimedean dream still haunts us, for there remains the desire for an ultimate measure, for an end to the questioning, for a last court of appeal where disputes are *once and for all* decided—it is the desire for security in an uncertain world. Although Descartes situates the Archimedean ideal at the center of the modern philosophical project,[2] the obsession with certainty and order does not begin with him. It is as ancient as philosophy itself. In fact, Aristotle suggests that something similar was already at stake when the Platonists, convinced by the Heraclitean contention that all sensible things are in a state of flux, posited Forms existing in separation from the sensible things, which themselves were not subject to change.[3] Thus the Platonists and the Cartesians,[4] like the rest of us, immediately respond to the experience of flux, instability, and uncertainty in the same manner: by grasping for something fixed, by positing a principle according to which order may once again be secured. As long as this immediate reflex in the face of uncertainty motivates the deployment of principles, then the dimension of domination will continue to eclipse that of incipience and an ever-new ultimate *archē* will seek to subvert all that dares to challenge its authority.

However, at least since Kant, this impulse toward foundational ultimates and the assumptions underlying it have been increasingly called into question. If the uncritical affirmation of the Archimedean ideal is recognized as one dimension of "modernism," then a profound skepticism about the feasibility of this ideal may be identified as one dimension of what has come to be loosely called "postmodernism."[5] Yet there is also a discernable postmodern tendency not only to call into question the legitimacy of foundational ultimates but also to be suspicious of all appeals to principles. In order to segregate itself from the modern obsession with foundational ultimates, the postmodern mood posits a radical rupture in history. The impetus behind this is a heightened sensitivity to the very real dangers of what may be called "totalizing thinking." Thinking becomes totalizing when it convinces itself that the

concepts with which it necessarily operates are capable of comprehending all it encounters without remainder; it becomes totalitarian when this self-deception turns dogmatic and loses the capacity to critically consider the contingency of the principles it deploys. In one sense, the entire history of Western philosophy has been haunted by a totalizing tendency that all too frequently runs the risk of turning genuinely totalitarian. The postmodern rejection of hegemonic principles, when seen against the backdrop of the totalizing tendencies of Western philosophy, is as understandable as it is laudable. However, because the outright rejection of principles also involves the renunciation of the possibility of responsibility, the price that postmodernism pays for its critique is too high, for it runs the risk of trading the totalizing tendencies of modernity for an equally dangerous sort of anarchism.

There is a twofold irony in this situation. First, arising out of a genuine ethical concern to do justice to that which escapes determination by the concept and to reconsider the manner in which we think and act as finite beings in a contingent world, the outright rejection of principles in fact undermines the very possibility of ethics. The postmodern renunciation of absolute ultimates affirms both the situated finitude of worldly existence that philosophy has for so long sought to escape and the inherent limitations of conceptual thinking. The affirmation of anarchy, however, annihilates the possibility of ethics by undermining the legitimacy of the very deployment of principles that serves as the condition for the possibility of justice. Without principles, justice is impossible, for justice requires judgment, and judgment, the deployment of principles. The ethical impulse to do justice to otherness by rejecting principles destroys the only context within which justice is possible.

The second irony of the postmodern critique is that the rupture of history that serves to segregate it from the modern epoch is nothing more than a repetition of the Cartesian abandonment of the "study of letters," though the impetus is different.[6] Whereas Descartes abandons the history of philosophy because its indefinite pluralism undermines his quest for certainty, postmodernism rejects the same history because it seeks to secure certainty and order by positing ultimate principles as absolute. Surely at this late date a return to the philosophy of ultimates would be misguided. Yet it remains possible to recover Descartes' recognition of the diversity of the history of philosophy without endorsing his thematization of this diversity as a detriment. Despite the radical indictment of philosophy leveled by such great twentieth-century thinkers as Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, and Emmanuel Levinas, the diversity of the tradition still stands as its greatest resource. This diversity can be of great assistance in the attempt to think a way between the totalizing tendencies of modernism and the anarchy of postmodernism, the delusional dream of objectivism and the cynical affirmation of relativism. Rethinking the legacy of *ousia* allows us to retrieve the meaning of *archē* as incipience that has remained obscured by philosophy's obsession with ultimate absolutes.

The term *ousia*—which is often translated as "substance," but which will remain untranslated here and throughout to undermine the foundational connotations associated with that term—names the first principle of Western philosophy. Aristotle himself set the framework for any future ontology: "And indeed, in early times, now and always, the inquiry, indeed always the perplexity concerning what being is *(ti to on)* is just this: 'what is *ousia*?'"[7] By shifting the focus of the question of being from *to on* to *hē ousia,* Aristotle determines the trajectory of Western ontology. However, the significance of this determination remains, 2,400 years later, a matter still in need of questioning.

To think being in terms of *ousia,* it has been said, is to reify being, to understand it as an entity rather than as a dynamic process. Heidegger has suggested that this determination of being is a result of the general Greek infatuation with *poiēsis,* the capacity to make or produce, and betrays what he calls a "productive comportment" toward beings.[8] If such a productive comportment determines the so-called "history of metaphysics," then perhaps the very beginning of "metaphysics" may be traced to this sentence in Aristotle. Aristotle himself would then be responsible for the "forgetfulness of being."[9] However, Aristotle's insistence that the general, and far too abstract, question "What is being?" must always be guided by the question "What is *ousia*?" may not have the negative impact that Heidegger ascribes to it. Perhaps it is the result of Aristotle's deep conviction that the question concerning the meaning of being must always be directed toward some definite, determinate being, a being that is eclipsed each time ontology allows itself to be directed toward *to on* itself. If this is the case—and the extent to which Aristotle's conception of sensible *ousia* remains assiduously directed toward the concrete individual will occupy a good portion of this work—there then emerges another possibility lurking in the very beginnings of the "history of metaphysics." Precisely such a possibility emerges in the wake of the radical critiques of this history leveled by Theodor Adorno and Emmanuel Levinas.

CRITIQUE AS RESOURCE: ADORNO AND LEVINAS

In response to the horrendous atrocities of the twentieth century, both Adorno and Levinas denounce the totalizing tendencies of Western philosophy. In his *Negative Dialectics,* Adorno writes: "The proposition common to all emphatic philosophy—as opposed to skeptical philosophy, which refuses such emphasis—was that it could only be possible as system. . . . The system, a form of representation of a totality to which nothing remains external, absolutely sets thought over each of its contents and vaporizes the content in thoughts: idealistic before all argumentation for idealism."[10] With the possible exception of Hegel—with respect to whom Adorno develops this line of critique—there is perhaps no better model for the sort of emphatic philosophy

of which Adorno speaks than Aristotle, or so traditional interpretations of Aristotle's *thought* would have us believe. At least since Aquinas, Aristotle has been held up as the Philosopher *par excellence*. His is thought to be an emphatic philosophy that forms a coherent and cohesive system designed to offer a rational account of all that exists. The widely held belief that the *Metaphysics* is a unified whole culminating in the speculative heights of Book XII in which Aristotle posits God as pure act, the ultimate principle of being, embraces this vision of Aristotle as emphatic philosopher.[11] However, every attempt to render Aristotle's thought consistent and complete fails to do justice to the dynamic nature of his *thinking,* to the elasticity of his mind, and to his willingness to risk failure rather than to establish certainty by stealth.[12]

There is more to Aristotle than emphatic philosophy. To reject his thinking as one more philosophy of totality is not much better than joining in with the traditional praise it has so often received as the greatest example of systematic philosophical thought. Adorno is surely right to be suspicious of all systems of identity, and if the traditional interpretation of Aristotle's thought is correct in reading it as the highest expression of such a system, then he is justified in calling it to account along with the rest of the history of Western philosophy. Yet Adorno too recognizes in Aristotle the tension that undermines his tendency toward totality; it is the tension actualized by Aristotle's attention to the individual. Adorno anticipates much of what we will have to say about this tension when he writes: "no plea for the blessings of order removes the difficulties that the relationship between *tode ti* and *prōtē ousia* in the Aristotelian metaphysics prepares."[13] If, as will be argued later, the term *tode ti,* in its most straightforward sense, designates the concrete individual, and *prōtē ousia* names the ultimate, hegemonic principle of being, then the difficulties to which Adorno refers already point to the tension that animates this investigation—the tension between the individual and the principle according to which it first becomes accessible. This tension, endemic to all ontological encounter, is the site from which ontology first becomes possible and to which it must remain ultimately accountable.

Traditional ontology has sought to resolve this tension by seeking refuge in hegemonic principles. Hypnotized by the plea for the blessings of order and confident in the certainty of the principles that it already possesses, traditional ontology attempts to secure stability by determining the being of the individual according to principles firmly established prior to the encounter with the individual itself. Thus the being of the individual is reduced to the concepts according to which emphatic ontology seeks to establish order; justice is exchanged for the illusion, at least, of freedom and stability. Yet however confident emphatic ontology may be in the certainty of its principles, the tension remains, for the individual never goes cleanly into the concepts according to which it is determined. This remainder, which ironically emerges only as principles are deployed, undermines the quest for absolute order and reveals the

conceit of emphatic ontology's confidence in the capacity of its concepts to completely capture the being of the individual. To do justice to this remainder, and thus to the being of the individual itself, the deployment of principles must be infused with an openness that refuses to succumb to the delusional desire for absolute certainty. This need not involve the renunciation of principles altogether; indeed, it cannot, for it is only through the deployment of principles that the individual emerges *as* a being for whom a claim to justice may be recognized. Required, rather, is a retrieval of the dimension of incipience latent in the original meaning of the word *archē*, an incipience that remains riveted to the direct encounter with the individual. To emphasize direct ontological encounter as first principle in this sense, however, is to shift the focus of ontology away from a purely theoretical obsession with Truth toward an ethical concern for justice.

Aristotle's insistence that the question concerning the meaning of being—ontology—can only be properly posed when it is directed not toward the abstract *to on* but to the concrete *ousia* opens up another possibility for ontology. This other ontology is neither guided by the quest for certainty and order nor deluded by the false belief in the capacity of its concepts to comprehend the being of the individual; rather, it is directed toward the concrete encounter with the individual itself, dedicated to doing justice to the being of that with which it is concerned. This other ontology is the ontology of the Other. As such, it is inherently ethical. If Adorno's critique anticipates the ethics of ontology by insisting on both the need for and the limitations of principles, then it is Emmanuel Levinas who in emphasizing the priority of the encounter with the Other gives the ethics of ontology its concrete determination.

For the most part, Levinas situates Aristotle within what he thematizes as the totalizing tradition of Western philosophy.[14] This tradition, which Levinas often simply names "ontology" but which might more appropriately be dubbed "emphatic ontology," is understood in the following terms: "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being."[15] Although this conception of Western philosophy in general and ontology in particular emerges out of Levinas's intense critical engagement with Heideggerian thinking, it could just as easily be developed out of a traditional reading of Aristotle's onto-theology.

From this perspective, it would not be hyperbolic to say that Aristotle is the *archē* of Western philosophy as emphatic ontology. Again, one need look no further than *Metaphysics* XII to find precisely the neutral term that ensures the comprehension of all being: God as unmoved mover, thought thinking itself. This is the ultimate principle of order in Aristotle, the foundation upon which the entire universe rests. When this idea is maximized and the entirety of Aristotle's thinking is interpreted in its shadow, then Aristotle emerges clearly

as the father of totalizing ontology, one of the earliest and most successful thinkers to reduce all otherness to the hegemony of the Same. It is no accident that Hegel, probing the history of philosophy for a model by which to develop a conception of free subjectivity suited to his own idealism, came to recognize Aristotle's thematization of God as thought thinking itself as the highest expression of pure subjectivity.[16] While it is perhaps an inexcusable misreading of Hegel to characterize his thinking as dedicated to a reduction of all otherness to the Same—as Levinas himself sometimes seems to suggest—it is nevertheless true that subjective idealism's preoccupation with the freedom of the subject, its tendency to see a neutral Spirit behind all historical happenings, and its bold presumption that the concepts of the thinking subject are capable of completely comprehending the world are elements of the modern mind-set that may fairly be characterized as totalizing. Given this genealogy, it is possible to trace this tradition of totalizing back to the heart of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

But this is only one possible story that might be told. Indeed, Levinas's powerful critique of Western thinking and his insistence that "ethics precedes ontology" together serve as an invitation not to abandon the entire history of philosophy but to rethink it as something other than a history of totalizing ontologies, searching all the while for the trace of that ethical impulse that is eclipsed by the traditional preoccupation with systematic totality. The ethical impulse sought here is decidedly not grounded in yet another foundational ultimate. It does not seek to establish a set of eternal precepts that would serve as an infallible guide to action. There is a difference between morality and ethics. Morality seeks security in firm foundational principles, and in so doing it annihilates the very possibility of ethics; for ethics always involves more than the simple imposition of predetermined principles upon each new situation. Levinas suggests the more complex vision of ethics that guides this investigation when he writes: "critique does not reduce the other to the same as does ontology, but calls into question the exercise of the same. A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics."[17] Ethics and critique are intertwined: the condition for the possibility of critique is the presence of the Other; ethics is the attempt to do justice to the claim concomitant with this presence. The otherness of the Other always escapes conceptualization. Its irreducibility calls into question the authority of the spontaneity of the Same. To assert that "ethics precedes ontology," as Levinas does, is to call into question the self-indulgent assumption on which emphatic ontology is based: the thinking subject has absolute access to the Other; what exists is capable of being completely captured by the free exercise of thought. Yet however radical Levinas's suggestion may be, it has in fact always been the case that ethics precedes ontology, though ontology has forever sought to deny this

its ethical heritage.[18] Ethics always already precedes ontology because, at its core, ontology is grounded in the actual encounter with an Other. Prior to all claims of knowledge, to all systems of totality according to which the world is set in order, to all appeals to some neutral term that comprehends being, ontology finds itself faced with the Other. This is where ontology begins; this is its *archē* and the *telos* toward which it must always be directed. This is what renders ontology ethical, and ethics ontological.

Levinas's indictment of the history of Western philosophy as "ontology" opens up the possibility of rethinking the traditional understanding of ontology itself. Such a project, however, is historically conditioned and cannot proceed without engaging the tradition in which it is embedded. Levinas himself recognizes that certain dimensions of the history of philosophy cannot be characterized as totalizing. Infinity seeps through the fissures in the totality that is the history of Western philosophy. In Descartes' perception of God in the Third Meditation, in Plato's conception of the Good beyond being, and even in Aristotle's conception of the active intellect, Levinas finds traces of non-totalizing thinking.[19] Thus Levinas seems to endorse what has already been suggested: the very history of philosophy can be a resource for attempts to undermine and move beyond the tradition of totalizing thinking.

Aristotle occupies a unique position in this tradition. On the one hand, he may be understood as the father of the totalizing tendencies that have haunted the history of Western philosophy for millennia. On the other hand, one of the deepest convictions of his ontology—the insistence that the question of being, *to on,* must always be asked as the question of *ousia*—seems to suggest a concern for the concrete being that disrupts the consolidation of being into a totality. Indeed, one way to read the difficult middle books of the *Metaphysics,* in which Aristotle diligently pursues the being of finite *ousia,* is as an attempt to do justice to the individual even as a general account of the order of being is developed. Aristotle's unwillingness to sacrifice the individual to the universal generates, as he himself recognizes, the greatest difficulties for his attempt to establish ontology as a science. These difficulties themselves serve as heuristic devices for the present attempt to develop a non-totalizing ontology grounded in the relation to the concrete individual.

Central to this investigation will be a reconsideration of the meaning of the Aristotelian *tode ti,* an equivocal term used most often to designate the concrete *ousia* with which ontology must be concerned. The term will, for the most part, remain untranslated, for all translations are doomed to be just as awkward as the insertion of the Greek term itself. For Levinas, and for many Aristotle scholars, the term designates the concrete particular as an instantiation of some universal essence. Levinas writes: "The particularity of the *tode ti* does not prevent the singular beings from being integrated into a whole, from existing in function of the totality, in which this singularity vanishes."[20] Here the *tode ti* is already situated on the side of totality—it names one way, per-

haps the first way, in which the singular is integrated into the totality, reduced to the concepts of the Same. There is, however, a more subtle gradation here, one that will prove to be of great significance for the reinterpretation of Aristotle's ontology offered later. We may follow Levinas in his affirmation of the singularity of the Other and in his insistence that the Other, as singular, is unknowable for it escapes the concept. However, Levinas's move from singularity directly to particularity—from the Other as completely recalcitrant to the concept, to the completely conceptualized Other—blurs an important moment that must be maintained. Before the singular is integrated into the totality, before it becomes particular, it manifests itself as individual. The individual is encountered on the frontier between the utter darkness of its own singularity and the pure light of particularity; it hovers in the shadows, so to speak, both accessible to the concepts of the Same and never completely captured by them. The individual, like Adorno's *Gegenstand*, does not go into its concept without remainder.[21] The term *tode ti* designates this individual emerging out of its isolated singularity, prior to its being reduced to particularity, the mere instantiation of a dominating concept.

For Levinas, the *tode ti* is already an expression of the concept.[22] This is, in part, correct, for as individual, the Other has already entered into the conceptual framework of the Same. The singularity of the Other is sacrificed as it enters the sphere of meaningful relation, for there is no meaning for human-beings without concepts. To the extent, however, that the Same is so duped by an infatuation with its own concepts that it believes itself to be in full possession of the Other through them, the individuality of the Other dissolves into particularity, its singularity completely eclipsed by the hegemony of the concept. The Same consolidates the delusion of its own absolute authority by rendering the singular particular; whatever "knowledge" it convinces itself it has gained is nothing more than a narcissistic confirmation of its own prejudice. Genuine knowledge is possible only where the deployment of concepts necessary to establish an encounter with the Other as individual is tempered by the conscientious recognition of and respect for the singularity of the Other that escapes all conceptualization. If the Other sacrifices its singularity for the sake of relation, then the Same must relinquish its delusions and be prepared to be taught. Only then, when grace and will converge, is genuine ontological knowledge possible.

If one side of the legacy of *ousia* is to reduce the singularity of the individual to particularity by appealing to absolute principles, then the other side of this legacy is the attempt to do justice to the individual as such. This latter side of the legacy has always lurked just under the surface of the totalizing tradition, though it finds itself being obfuscated each time the ambiguities endemic to the encounter with the individual are sacrificed for security.[23] Levinas and Adorno, each in his own way, retrieve this lost legacy of *ousia* and offer the conceptual apparatus according to which another sort of ontology can be

developed, one that conscientiously confirms the singularity of the Other by seeking to do justice to individuality. To further develop this other, ethical ontology is the impetus behind the following interpretation of Aristotle and the rather bold suggestion that the ontology developed in the *Metaphysics* ultimately culminates not in Book XII, where Aristotle affirms the grand purity of God's self-thinking, but in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* where he develops a conception of contingent knowledge, *phronēsis,* capable of doing justice to the finite individual.

THE HERMENEUTIC APPROACH

The claim that the *Metaphysics* culminates in the *Nicomachean Ethics* undercuts the orthodox reading of Aristotle. The orthodox Aristotle is the emphatic philosopher wedded to a stable vision of the universe teleologically guided by God as the ultimate principle of order. The orthodox Aristotle is the systematic thinker *par excellence,* a philosopher of totality. This Aristotle is no chimera; indeed, he has dominated the history of Western ontology from its inception. This book does not intend to reject the orthodox Aristotle outright; rather, it seeks to delineate other, less totalizing dimensions of Aristotle's thinking in order to develop a conception of ontology that is neither totalizing nor anarchic.

　　Aristotle's thinking offers a unique site from which to develop such a conception of ontology. His intense interest in order and his firm belief in the efficacy and necessity of principles situate him in direct opposition to the postmodern tendency to eschew principles altogether. In this, Aristotle serves as a bastion against anarchism. On the other hand, Aristotle is equally concerned to "save the phenomena," to do justice to the appearance of the individual. This dimension of his thinking, when set against the former recognition of the importance of principles, generates a fundamental tension in Aristotle's thinking. This tension, never fully reconciled, renders Aristotle's thinking recalcitrant to unequivocal interpretation. This recalcitrance is itself, however, fecund, for it forces each new generation to come to grips on its own terms with the thinking expressed in the inherited writing.

　　Here, of course, a distinction is made between Aristotle's thinking and his thought. We will be concerned exclusively with his thinking, resisting the temptation to reify it by attempting to explain away all contradictions in order to render it complete, systematic, and consistent. The hermeneutics of modernity has taught us to value systematic completeness over all else, to presume that genius lies in clarity and consistency; it has perpetuated the illusion that thinkers, if they are great, give birth spontaneously to complete, robust philosophical systems, as Athena, in full armor, leaps from the head of Zeus. Yet great thinkers are engaged with the world, and their thinking reflects the

uncertainty of this engagement. What makes Aristotle so difficult to read is also what makes his thinking inexhaustibly abundant: the elasticity of his mind and his willingness to constantly reconsider and revise his previous positions. What we encounter in the writing that we have inherited from Aristotle is a thinking on the way, a dynamic thinking, not a complete system of thought. All hermeneutic approaches guided by the attempt to delineate the systematic completeness of Aristotle's thought run the risk of missing the fecund surplus of his thinking.

Because this book is animated by the tensions of Aristotle's *thinking*, its hermeneutic intention differs from the many excellent classical studies of Aristotle that remain intent on offering an immanently consistent reconstruction of his thought. The present work has benefited greatly from the many insights to be found in such excellent studies, but its interest lies elsewhere. We return to Aristotle not as an exercise in philology, though philological techniques are often used, but as a resource for the attempt to rethink the meaning of principles in the face of the failure of modernism and the inadequacy of the postmodern critique.

Here we are guided not by the modern hermeneutics of reconstruction but by the Gademerian hermeneutics of application. The basic insight of Gademer's hermeneutics is that understanding and interpretation are intimately bound up with application, that the interpreter, historically situated, can only properly understand the truth of the historical text by bringing a concrete question to bear upon it, a question determined by the present situation in which the interpreter is embedded. Gadamer writes: "Now, our reflections have led us to the insight that in understanding there always involves something like an application of the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation."[24] For Gadamer, understanding is part of a unified process that always includes interpretation and application. In delineating the importance of application as a guide for understanding, Gadamer looks to Aristotle's conception of *phronēsis,* for in *phronēsis,* Gadamer recognizes a conception of knowledge that takes seriously the radical embeddedness of the knower: "Ethical knowledge, as Aristotle describes it, is obviously not objective knowledge. The knower does not stand over against a situation that he merely establishes, rather he is directly confronted by what he perceives."[25] There is no abstract neutral position, no God's eye view, from which the true meaning of the text may be divined. Rather, the text and the interpreter are always involved in a historically conditioned relationship in which new meaning emerges as a result of their direct encounter. For Gadamer, this takes the form of a sort of questioning. He writes: "He who desires to think must himself question. . . . This is the reason why understanding is always more than the mere reconstruction of another's meaning. Questioning lays open possibilities of meaning and thus what is meaningful passes into one's own thinking."[26] The truth of any text only emerges in the dialogical relation

between it and its interpreter. This relationship, however, is always historically conditioned; indeed, history itself is the unfolding of the process set in motion by such questioning encounters. Application is an integral dimension of understanding and interpretation, because it highlights the fact that each interpretation of the text is set forth from within a particular context that serves as the very condition for the possibility of understanding itself.

Here, then, we take up the Aristotelian text not as something to be reconstructed and rendered consistent and complete but as a genuine "Thou," a partner—albeit impersonal—from which there is much to learn about the issues with which we are concerned. The orthodox objection, of course, will be that we are reading too much of ourselves back into the text, that the text has an objective independence and an authority that thwarts every attempt to render it relevant to the present situation. The response to this is twofold. First, despite the modern prejudice against prejudice, there is no way to segregate ourselves from the prejudgments that condition us and through which understanding first becomes possible. Gadamer has recognized this in his attempts to delineate the conditions for the possibility of understanding. Understanding always involves prejudice. This is no endorsement of the sort of "blind prejudice" that is so often the source of great violence. Rather, it is the recognition of a basic fact of human finitude, to be neither forgotten nor denied, that all understanding involves some prejudice, because not only are we always already situated in the world, but our thinking is necessarily discursive, requiring concepts to produce meaning.[27] This sort of prejudice, following Richard Bernstein's elucidation of Gadamer's text, may be called "enabling" to distinguish it from the sort of "blind" prejudice that always serves to limit the possibility of genuine understanding.[28] The only way to ensure that enabling prejudices do not calcify into blind prejudices is to risk our prejudices by entering into a dialogical encounter with that which we seek to understand; for it is here, in the encounter with the Other, that genuine understanding first becomes possible.

The second response to the orthodox objection is that the text itself is always already relevant to the present situation, because it is by nature historically effective. This is particularly true of the Aristotelian texts whose historical impact can hardly be overrated. Here again, Gadamer's hermeneutics is germane. He writes: "we should learn to understand ourselves more properly and recognize that in all understanding, whether one is conscious of it or not, the efficacy of effective history is at work."[29] He continues:

> In fact the horizon of the present is constantly in the process of being formed because we must continually test our own prejudices. To this sort of testing belongs not least the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we come. Thus, the horizon of the present does not form itself without the past.

> There is no more [a] horizon of the present in itself than there are
> historical horizons that have to be acquired. Rather, understanding
> is always the process of the fusion of such horizons allegedly exist-
> ing for themselves.[30]

This conception of history, as a constant mediation between past and present
manifesting itself as a "fusion of horizons," recognizes the efficacy of the past
and its impact on the present. It thus implicitly justifies every attempt to
reconsider, requestion, and rethink the texts that have determined the think-
ing of the present. Gadamer's appeal to a "fusion of horizons," however, must
be handled with care, for there is in the term *fusion* the connotation of an ulti-
mate reconciliation, a consolidation of the horizons into something stable, rei-
fied, and closed. This, however, is anathema to the very conception of "hori-
zon" in Gadamer, which is fundamentally distorted whenever it is rendered
closed and self-contained. For Gadamer, a horizon names the fluid and situ-
ated standpoint within which beings are encountered. A horizon both sets the
framework within which this relation happens—is the condition for its possi-
bility—and remains always open to new encounters.[31] The "fusion of hori-
zons" gives rise to new horizons, which themselves both frame and open new
possibilities of encounter. In taking up Aristotle's texts again, in approaching
them as a "Thou" from which we can learn, we need not infuse them with an
aura of authority that they do not have. Rather, they must be approached with
respect, as one would approach any Other from whom one hopes to learn, rec-
ognizing that this very process of questioning accomplishes the "fusion of
horizons" that constitutes the present and opens us up to new possibilities for
the future. This is the approach to Aristotle taken here.

The Itinerary

To trace the trajectory of Aristotle's engagement with finite, sensible *ousia* in
order to develop a conception of ontology that is fundamentally ethical is to
follow Aristotle in two ways. First, it is to follow the spirit of Aristotle's own
approach to his predecessors. Aristotle was the first to explicitly engage his
predecessors in such a way as to situate his own thinking in relation to theirs.
However, he rarely addresses his predecessors with the intent of merely
reconstructing their original ideas. Rather, he brings their thinking to bear on
the philosophical questions with which he himself was most concerned. His
own thinking is therefore both indebted to them and something creatively
new. To put this in Gadamerian terms, Aristotle's thinking is itself the
expression of a fusion of horizons that emerges as he applies the thinking of
his philosophical ancestors to the concrete question toward which he is
directed. Aristotle has often been criticized for not having done justice to the

thought of his predecessors; indeed, his readings are often so closely connected to his own philosophical insights that it is difficult to determine the original thinking behind the interpretation. This difficulty is, however, attenuated by Aristotle's precision. As Guthrie has convincingly argued, Aristotle is careful to modulate his explicit verbal expressions to distinguish his own interpretive insertions from what his predecessors wrote or were said to have held.[32] In dealing with Empedocles, for example, Aristotle explicitly alerts readers that he does not follow Empedocles' indistinct expressions but rather the direction of his thought.[33] Similarly with Thales, Aristotle is careful to distinguish what Thales is thought to have said—that the *archē* is water—from his own conjecture as to why he might have held such a view—"getting his idea perhaps *(isōs)* from seeing that the nourishment of all things is moist."[34] If there is any doubt here that this is Aristotle's own conjecture, the *isōs,* or "perhaps," renders it unambiguous. Such signifiers suggest that Aristotle responsibly distinguishes attempted reconstruction from interpretive conjecture. The interpretation of Aristotle offered here will attempt to be at least as careful to delineate where it diverges from anything that might reasonably be ascribed to Aristotle as Aristotle himself is with respect to his predecessors.

Second, to trace the trajectory of Aristotle's engagement with finite sensible *ousia* is to become genuinely peripatetic: it is to follow the paths of Aristotle's ontological thinking itself.[35] These paths of thinking ought not be confused with the development of Aristotle's thought. Although the so-called developmentalist readings of Aristotle are surely correct in approaching him as a dynamic thinker whose thought changed and matured as he aged, such approaches are inadequate insofar as they remain, first, directed ultimately to the thought, not the thinking, and second, guided by an almost obsessive concern to dissolve contradiction. By speaking of the "paths of Aristotle's thinking" and not the "development of his thought," the suggestive possibilities latent in Aristotle's thinking may be traced without endorsing either a specific story about his biography or the modern hermeneutic obsession with internal consistency.

There are three discernible, though intimately intertwined, paths in Aristotle's thinking concerning finite *ousia*. Each path is governed by its own economy of principles, that is, by a distinct set of concepts designed to capture the being of finite, sensible *ousia*. Although the three paths of Aristotle's thinking often merge into one another and proceed for a distance in the same direction—for Aristotle himself seems unwilling to unequivocally reject any of them because each answers some deep concern regarding finite *ousia* itself—they remain nevertheless clearly identifiable. As long as they are not reified and posited as mutually exclusive, the distinction between them is heuristically helpful, for it elucidates the limitations of each economy of principles and brings the underlying concerns of Aristotle's ontological engagement with finite *ousia* into sharp relief.

The first path, found primarily in the *Categories*, is governed by what may be designated as a foundational economy of principles. This economy, which is the focus of the next chapter, posits an identifiable individual like this horse or this human-being as the foundation of accidental alteration. By establishing *ousia* as the *hypokeimenon*, or subject, that underlies and remains constantly present through change, Aristotle objectifies being by determining it, perhaps for the first time in the history of Western thinking, as a thing. The foundational economy of principles is governed by what may be called a "logic of things" that generates a number of difficulties for the ontology of finite *ousia*. The most pressing of these is the incapacity of the logic of things to account for generation. This forces a deepening of the theory and points in the direction of the economy of ontological principles introduced in *Physics* I.7.

There, the foundational economy, which cannot account for substantial generation, merges with a second economy of principles, one decisively determined by both the distinction between form and matter and the model of motion. Delineating the dimensions of this the "hylomorphic economy of kinetic principles" is the focus of chapter 3. However, even here the foundational economy is not simply rejected; rather, it remains effective on a number of different levels. First, the basic intuition that individual natural beings, like this horse or this human-being, deserve to be called *ousiai* because they have their principle of being in themselves and not in some separate entity remains decisive for Aristotle throughout. Second, as the meaning of the *hypokeimenon* is transformed in the hylomorphic economy, its function—to secure order through change—is transferred to the substantial form. Thus there is not only a retention of vocabulary in the transition from the foundational to the hylomorphic economy, there is also a commonality of concern, namely, how to account for order in a world of change. The hylomorphic economy of kinetic principles addresses this concern for continuity by ascribing a powerful new ontological role to the form, which emerges as the dominating principle of being. This economy, with its penchant for causal analysis and its tendency to think being in terms of production, has had a long history of efficacy in the Western philosophical tradition.

Finally, however, the hylomorphic economy of kinetic principles itself gives rise to a number of intractable ontological puzzles that require the introduction of yet another economy designed to account for the being of finite sensible *ousia*. Chief among these puzzles is the so-called universal/singular *aporia*, which concerns the nature of the ontological principles themselves. Briefly stated, in order to account for both the continuity of substantial change and the possibility of knowledge, it seems necessary to posit the principle as being in some sense permanent and universal, applying to a plurality of beings in the same way. On the other hand, because each individual has its principle of being in itself, it seems that the principle must itself be singular, unique in each individual. In order to address this problem, the path of Aristotle's ontological

thinking wends its way toward another economy of principles that finds its full expression at the end of the middle books of the *Metaphysics*, specifically in Books VIII and IX.[36] This will be called the "dynamic economy of ontological principles" in order to highlight the important role that the concepts of *energeia*, activity, and *dunamis*, potency, play in it.

Thus chapter 4 sets the framework for the introduction of this new dynamic economy of principles by clarifying the precise nature of the *aporiae* that animate Aristotle's engagement with finite, sensible *ousia* in the middle books of the *Metaphysics*. Chapter 5 traces the rather difficult path leading to the dynamic economy by elucidating the failure of the attempt in *Metaphysics* VII to account for *ousia* purely in terms of form. This failure—intimated already in Aristotle's biological writings—is not merely negative; it is also pregnant with suggestions that are taken up and developed in *Metaphysics* VIII and IX. In chapter 6, the dynamic economy of principles is shown to be a natural outgrowth of the suggestive limitations of the investigation of *Metaphysics* VII. Here Aristotle's response to the ontological implications of the universal/singular *aporia* culminates: *ousia* is itself the activity that expresses the identity of *energeia* and *dunamis*. The model according to which this is thought is neither that of *kinēsis*, motion, nor of *poiēsis*, production, but of *praxis*, or action. With the introduction of *praxis* in *Metaphysics* IX, Aristotle reaffirms the dimension of incipience in his conception of the *archē* of being that had been eclipsed by the hylomorphic economy of kinetic principles predicated as it is on the domination of form. In so doing, Aristotle suggests the possibility of developing an economy of ontological principles dynamic enough to do justice to individuality yet firm enough to account for order and stability.

The dynamic economy of principles thematizes *ousia* in terms of *praxis*. This opens up the possibility of reading a more intimate link between ontology and ethics into Aristotle than Aristotle's explicit statements would seem to allow. Here, however, Montaigne's suggestion that "no powerful mind stops within itself: it is always stretching out and exceeding its capacities" may be taken to heart.[37] Aristotle's thinking exceeds itself; we have inherited from him a surplus of thinking. The final three chapters take up this surplus and develop it in a direction that Aristotle himself would not likely have endorsed. Nevertheless, the text that he has left us offers significant signposts leading in the direction that will be suggested.

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle seems to affirm individuality over universality, so that the epistemological side of the universal/singular *aporia* remains undischarged. The problem that then emerges is, how is ontological *knowledge* at all possible? If, as the middle books of the *Metaphysics* suggest, finite, sensible *ousia* is understood as *praxis*, then perhaps the nature of ontological knowledge lies not in *epistēmē* but in *phronēsis*, the sort of practical knowledge that Aristotle develops in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to cope with the more dynamic and contingent principles endemic to human *praxis*. Taking up this suggestion

in chapter 7, we turn to the discussion of actual knowledge in *Metaphysics* XIII.10, where Aristotle seems to suggest the possibility that there may be a sort of knowledge directed toward the individual itself. The discussion of the *Metaphysics* is then linked to the *Nicomachean Ethics* by drawing out the similarities in vocabulary between the *Metaphysics* and *Ethics* and by emphasizing the parallel distinctions they establish between *praxis* and motion and *praxis* and production, respectively. This is designed to support the bold suggestion that the *Ethics* may be read as the natural, albeit unrecognized, culmination of the ontological analysis of sensible *ousia* found in the *Metaphysics*.

Once this is accomplished, chapter 8 develops and further draws out the implications of this reading for ontology by outlining the basic structure of Aristotle's conception of *phronēsis* as developed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Here a detailed discussion of the specifically ethical significance of *phronēsis* is presented within the framework of Aristotle's own ethical theory. The analysis is guided by the suggestion that in this text Aristotle points to a form of knowledge that is neither totalizing nor anarchic. The ontological significance of Aristotle's understanding of *phronēsis* is developed in the final chapter, which again moves beyond what is explicitly found in Aristotle. The significance of *phronēsis* as an ontological form of knowledge is its recognition that any account of the being of an individual must take into consideration the rich nexus of relations in which that being appears, including the relation between the individual and the one making the ontological judgment. Once the central importance of the ontological encounter is appreciated, the intimate connection between ontology and ethics may be discerned, and an economy of ontological principles will emerge that is capable of critically considering the conditions of its own deployment.