

ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF SUBSTANCE. By MICHAEL WEDIN. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 482.

Michael Wedin's *Aristotle's Theory of Substance* provides an interpretation of primary substance in *Metaphysics* Book Z that is compatible with the ontology of the *Categories*. The incompatibilist position holds that primary substance in the *Categories* is the concrete, individual substance (or c-substance), like Socrates, whereas the title of primary substance in *Metaphysics Z* goes to the *eidos*, the form or the species. Hence, the ontology of the *Categories* is incompatible with the ontology of *Metaphysics Z*. One compatibilist strategy argues that the c-substance remains primary substance in *Metaphysics Z*.¹ Wedin takes another tack. He argues that c-substances are ontologically primary in both texts, and that *Metaphysics Z* introduces a new kind of priority, explanatory priority, awarded to the form of c-substances. Since c-substances and their forms are prior in different senses, the incompatibility vanishes. Wedin's claim is stronger than mere compatibilism, however, since what forms explain are basic features of c-substances. Hence, *Metaphysics Z* is not only compatible with the *Categories*, "it is a theory about the theory of the *Categories*" (154). Wedin argues for what I call *strong compatibilism*.

Wedin's interpretations are extremely detailed and dense, and they contain many subtle points, which are worthy of admiration and thought. In this short review I can consider only two questions. First, does Aristotle introduce a new kind of priority, explanatory priority, in *Metaphysics* Book Z, chapter 4? This claim is crucial for Wedin's compatibilism. Second, does form explain the central features of c-substances, a claim of strong compatibilism?

Wedin argues convincingly that in Book Z Aristotle develops an explanatory theory of substance in which form, as primary substance, is the cause of being of c-substances. The argument culminates in chapter 17, where Aristotle says that its form causes the matter of a c-substance to constitute a unified being, which belongs to a species. I am sympathetic to the idea that Aristotle developed a causal theory of form or essence rather than a classificatory theory in Book Z, having published my own version of that interpretation a decade ago.²

Wedin's interpretation makes an important contribution to the causal understanding of form. He does a masterful job of showing how to read Book Z, chapters 1-6, 10-11, and 13-17 as developing aspects of a causal theory of form. While I have reservations on the question of whether Aristotle introduces a new sense of priority, explanatory priority, in Book Z, I was convinced by Wedin's argument that viewing form/essence as a cause is operative earlier in Book Z than chapter 17, despite that chapter's opening promise to "make a fresh start" on the question of substance. Wedin's argument that the causal role of form is at issue throughout Z from chapter 3 forward rests primarily on his interpretation of Book Z, chapters 3 and 4. For Wedin these chapters record a change in direction of Aristotle's inquiry, from the *Categories*

¹ For two recent interpretations that defend the composite substance as primary in *Metaphysics Z*, see M. L. Gill, *Aristotle on Substance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989), and Michael Loux, *Primary Ousia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

² I argued for a causal interpretation of form or essence in *Metaphysics Z* in *Substance and Essence in Aristotle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

emphasis on c-substance as subject to investigating what internal component plays the causal role of the “substance of” the c-substance. This issue concerns Aristotle for the duration of Book Z.³

Doubts about the new, explanatory priority of form begin with Wedin’s heroic attempt to tease out a non-ontological interpretation of Aristotle’s explanation of the priority of the form in relation to the matter and the compound in chapter 3. The ontological priority of form is suggested by “Therefore, if the form is prior to the matter and more real (*mallon on*), it will be prior to the compound also for the same reason” (1029a6-7), affirmed at 1029a30-32. These remarks suggest that form is prior to, because more real than, the compound; hence, form is ontologically prior to the compound.⁴

Doubts deepen as we consider the evidence for a new kind of priority. As Wedin points out, chapter 4 specifies that there will be definitions, the linguistic correlate of essences, only of primary things, and primary things “are those which do not involve one thing being said of another” (1030a10-11). For Wedin, this specification of the object of definition inaugurates “a new kind of primacy, a structural or explanatory primacy different from the ontological variety familiar from the *Categories*” (223). In order to evaluate whether there is a new kind of priority here, it is useful to review what Aristotle says in Book Z about substance and priority.

In Book Z, chapter 1, Aristotle describes the threefold primacy of substance: priority in time (standardly interpreted as ontological priority), in knowledge, and in definition. There is no hint in this text that we should expect another sense of priority attributed to substance. Indeed, Aristotle prefaces his list with “a thing can be said to be prior in many ways, and substance is prior in every sense” (1028a31-32), which suggests that the discussion that follows exhausts the topic. It is clearly preferable to interpret what Aristotle means by “primary things” in chapter 4 as compatible with the discussion of priority in chapter 1 rather than as tacitly introducing an unexpected, new kind of priority. The obvious candidate is priority in definition. The discussion of Z 4 explains what an object of definition—an essence—must be like, and concludes that only forms, and not c-substances, fully meet the new specifications.

Now, if we ask *why* substances are prior in definition to items in the other categories in Z 1, the explanation is that non-substances must mention substances in their definitions, but not vice versa. But why must a non-substance mention a substance in its definition? Because non-substances are ontologically dependent upon substances, but not vice versa. Notice that since non-substances must mention substances in their definitions they are not primary things on the criteria of Z 4. This is a useful point to keep in mind, when we try to understand why Aristotle says in Z, chapter 5 that non-substances do not have essences strictly speaking. If the priority argument holds from Z 1, then form must be mentioned in the definition of a c-substance because c-substances are ontologically dependent upon their forms, but not vice versa. This idea is explained in Z 17, where form is said to be the cause of being of c-substances; form unifies the matter to constitute a substance that is a member of a single species. On this view, the priority in Z, chapter

³ Wedin argues convincingly, on both textual and philosophical grounds, against the alternative Frede-Patzig incompatibilist thesis that Z 3 retains the subject criterion for being primary substance from the *Categories*, but changes what satisfies that criterion, from c-substance to form. For this position see M. Frede and G. Patzig, *Aristoteles ‘Metaphysics Z’ Einleitung* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1988).

⁴ It is interesting to note that for Wedin the ontological reading does not mean that the form is ontologically prior to the c-substance, because he thinks that Aristotle distinguishes between the c-substance (concrete individual with properties) and the composite of form and matter, which he understands to be an internal element of the c-substance and therefore a candidate to be the substance of the c-substance. Nonetheless, Wedin rejects the ontological reading of the priority of form to the composite of form and matter.

4 is nothing new—just priority in definition.⁵ There is reason to doubt Wedin’s compatibilism insofar as it rests on the claim that Aristotle introduces a new kind of priority in Z 4.

Strong compatibilism holds that the causal theory of form was devised in order to explain central features of c-substances. “For example, they fall into species and so are things of a certain kind, and they are able to remain one and the same while taking contraries” (5). These two features of c-substances are meant to correspond to what is explained by form in Z, chapter 17. But the match is not exact. Consider the notion of unity. In Z Aristotle contrasts unities with heaps, a house and a pile of bricks, but in the *Categories* the contrast is between a house and a color, and it pertains to substance as a subject of attributes. Both a house and a pile of bricks could be white and then black, and remain the same. C-unity is not Z-unity. There is also a significant difference between species membership in the *Categories* and *Metaphysics* Z. The latter work asserts essentialism, but the former work does not. So, the two features explained by form in *Metaphysics* Z are not the same as two central characteristics of c-substances. There are reasons to question strong compatibilism.

Wedin’s interpretations are sometimes hard to follow. It is easy to lose sight of the overall argument, and the flow of Aristotle’s text, in Wedin’s meticulous dissection of his friendly opponents. Despite these minor reservations, this is an important book on Aristotle’s theory of substance, which will be read profitably by contemporary metaphysicians and Aristotle scholars.

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⁵ This is, of course, an incompatibilist interpretation of Book Z. It accepts the explanatory/causal understanding of form. But it rejects any new kind of priority introduced in Z 4, and so awards the title of primary substance to form, which is prior to the composite ontologically, and in knowledge and definition.