

On the Priority of the Aristotelian Polis over the Individual

The Polis as a Hylomorphic Whole

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Abstract. In *Politics I 2* (1253a18–27), Aristotle makes a controversial claim that the polis is prior in nature to the individual. The aim of this article is to reconstruct this thesis. According to recent scholarship, there are two main ways to understand priority in nature in Aristotle. It may be construed as ‘existential priority, or as ‘priority in being’. It is argued that: (a) The first option is problematic; it cannot give us a viable reading of the thesis in *Politics I 2*, whereas (b) The second option provides us with a sound approach to the puzzle at hand. Furthermore, it is argued that the exegetical plausibility of the suggested reading of the thesis in *Politics I 2* (1253a18–27) may be bolstered if we note that, for Aristotle, the polis is a particular kind of hylomorphic whole.

Keywords: Aristotle, Polis, Existential Priority, Priority in Being, Hylomorphism

Apie aristoteliškojo polio pirmumą prieš individą: polis kaip hilomorfinė visuma

Santrauka. *Politikoje I 2* Aristotelis pateikia kontroversišką teiginį, kad polis pagal prigimtį turi pirmumą prieš individą. Straipsnyje siekiama rekonstruoti šį teiginį. Pastarojo meto tyrimai siūlo du būdus suprasti prigimtinį pirmenybiškumą Aristotelio veikaluose. Jį galima interpretuoti kaip „egzistencinį pirmumą“ arba kaip „pirmumą būtyje“. Teigiama, kad pirmasis variantas kelia problemų; jis neatveria priimtinos šio teiginio skaitymo *Politikoje I 2* perspektyvos. Antroji alternatyva teikia patikimą prieigą prie šios mįslės. Taip pat teigiama, kad šios siūlomos teiginio iš *Politikos I 2* (1253a18–27) interpretacijos egzistencinis tikėtumas dar labiau išauga, jei atkreipiame dėmesį į tai, kad Aristoteliumi polis yra tam tikra hilomorfinės visumos rūšis.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: Aristotelis, polis, egzistencinė pirmenybė, pirmenybiškumas būtyje, hilomorfizmas

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Introduction

In *Politics* (*Pol.*) I 2, 1253a18–19, Aristotle makes what has been characterized as the “most provocative assertion” in the entire book (Keyt 1991: 139). He tells us that the polis (πόλις) is ‘prior in nature’ (τῆ φύσει πρότερον) to the individual.¹ To a modern reader, this statement may seem to readily support K. Popper’s position that Aristotle endorses totalitarianism. Whether this thesis actually commits Aristotle to totalitarianism, and whether it thus has any of the expected normative implications, are issues that are worth pursuing. Before one embarks on such an inquiry, however, it is imperative that one provides an exegetically correct reading of the claim at *Pol.* I 2, 1253a18–19. The objective of the ensuing discussion is to reconstruct this controversial claim. The question of whether Aristotle’s thesis, when it is properly construed, does in fact have any of the implications that are oftentimes associated with it will be considered elsewhere.²

There have been several efforts to interpret the claim at *Pol.* I 2, 1253a18–19 which resulted in competing readings of the text.³ I do not think that any one of these interpretations is satisfactory. Yet, due to space limitations, I will not attempt to scrutinize any of them. What I propose to do is to focus on determining what could be an exegetically viable reading of Aristotle’s position, and I will refer to other interpretations only where this is required.

As it is well known, there are many places in the corpus, e.g., *Metaphysics* (*Metaph.*) © 8 and *Categories* 12, where Aristotle states that an entity *X* is prior to another entity *Y* in a number of different ways. For instance, he holds that one thing is prior to another in time, or that one thing is prior to another in definition. Yet, it is fair to assume that there is one type of priority, the priority of *X* over *Y* ‘in substance’ (κατὰ οὐσίαν), or ‘in nature’ (κατὰ φύσιν),⁴ which features prominently in his work on metaphysics.⁵ According to recent scholarship, there are two main ways to understand this thesis. The first one supposes that it is to be construed as a claim for the existential priority of one entity over another.⁶ In the next section, I shall examine whether this sense of priority may provide us with a plausible reading of the claim of *Pol.* I 2, 1253a18–19. We will see that the particular

¹ I agree with Shields (2014: 414) that the Aristotelian πόλις “comprises both state and civil society.” Hence, I avoid the translation of the term ‘πόλις’ as ‘state’. As it has become common practice, I adopt the transliterated form of this Greek term, ‘polis’.

² To address this issue, it will not suffice to examine just the claim defended in *Pol.* I 2, 1253a18–27. Other parts of the *Politics*, e.g., *Pol.* VIII 1, will also have to be taken into account.

³ D. Keyt (1991) has argued that, in *Pol.* I 2, Aristotle adopts the thesis that the polis is existentially prior to the individual. Arguably, the rest of the available (recent) interpretations are reactions to this proposal. To give a sample of the alternative interpretations: R. Kraut (2002: 240–276) takes it that, to resolve the puzzle of *Pol.* I 2 (1253a18–19), we need to appeal to the sense of priority introduced in *Categories* 12 (14b4–8); F.D. Miller (1994: 45–61) proposes what he labels as the ‘completeness’ reading of our text; and C. Shields (2014: 416–427) suggests that, in *Pol.* I 2, Aristotle maintains that the polis is ‘teleologically’ prior to the individual.

⁴ The textual evidence, see, e.g., *Metaph.* Δ 11, 1019a1–4 and *Physics* VIII 7, 261a13–20, shows that Aristotle uses these two expressions, ‘in nature’ and ‘in substance’, interchangeably. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to this kind of priority as simply ‘priority in nature’.

⁵ M. Peramatzis (2011) makes a compelling case for this claim.

⁶ For a defense of this position, see Witt 1994.

proposal faces a well-known irresolvable problem. I then consider the other important construal of the concept of natural priority, whereby it is assumed that Aristotle holds that *X* is prior in nature to *Y* in the sense that *X* is prior in being to *Y*.⁷ It will be argued that this rendering of natural priority yields a viable reconstruction of the claim at *Pol. I 2*, 1253a18–19. Finally, it will be argued that Aristotle’s commitment to hylomorphism, along with his view that the polis is a certain kind of hylomorphic whole, bolsters the exegetical credibility of the suggested approach to the puzzle at hand.

The Argument in *Pol. I 2*, 1253a18–27

To proceed with our discussion, we need to take a look at how Aristotle argues for the priority of the polis over the individual. In *Pol. I 2*, 1253a18–27, we are told that:

Further, the polis is prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually (ἕκαστος ἡμῶν), since the whole (ὅλον) is necessarily prior to its part (μέρους). For example, if the whole body has perished, there will be no foot or hand, except homonymously (ὁμωνύμως), as one might speak of a stone hand, for a destroyed hand will be like that. But things are defined by their function and capacity (πάντα δὲ τῷ ἔργῳ ὄρισται καὶ τῇ δυνάμει). And in such conditions, they should not be said to be the same things, but homonymously so. Hence, that the polis is by nature prior to the individual is clear. For if an individual is not self-sufficient (αὐτάρκης) when isolated (χωρισθείς), he will be like (ὁμοίως) all other parts in relation to the whole.⁸

The argument here seems to be the following:

1. Everything is defined by its function and capacity. Hence, if an item loses the function of *F*, then it is no longer an *F* except homonymously.
2. A part of a whole has its defining function only for as long as it remains part of the functioning/thriving whole.
3. For instance, if a living human body perishes, then there is no longer a hand or a foot, except homonymously.
4. Therefore, a whole is of necessity prior in nature to its parts.
5. The polis, like a human body, is a whole.
6. The individual is part of this whole.
7. If the individual is ‘isolated’/‘separated’ (χωρισθείς) from the corresponding whole, the polis, then he will no longer be ‘self-sufficient’ (αὐτάρκης). He will be in a state ‘similar to’/‘like’ (ὁμοίως) that of a body part which has been separated/severed from the body.
8. Therefore, the polis is prior in nature to the individual.

Some comments on this argument are in order.⁹

⁷ This claim has been argued for by Peramatzis (2011). For a similar view, see Beere (2009).

⁸ The translation of the text is based on that provided by Shields (2014: 417).

⁹ In what follows I do not address the issue of how the argument of 1253a18–27 fits into the wider context of Aristotle’s overall project in *Pol. I 2*. For such a discussion, see Miller 1995: Ch. 2.

At Step (1), Aristotle refers to a familiar thesis in his thought that all things are defined by their function. This is a thesis intended to state the necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being a member of a certain kind *F*: all and only *F* things have the characteristic function of the particular kind.¹⁰ At Step (2), he supposes that a part of a whole can have its characteristic function only for as long as it remains part of the functioning/thriving whole. Step (3) provides an illustration of the point made at Step (2) by appealing to the example of the living human body and its parts. Consider the case where Socrates' hand is severed. The severed hand is no longer a hand, except homonymously. It is still called 'a hand', but it can no longer perform the function characteristic of a hand. It is more like the hand of a statue.¹¹ Step (4) is an interim conclusion. From (1)-(3), as Aristotle contends, it follows that a whole is prior in nature to its parts. Steps (5) and (6) are unstated premises. They tell us that the polis is a whole, and that the individual is a part of the particular whole, respectively. Step (7) presupposes some theoretical background from *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) I and *Pol.* I 2. Very briefly, in *NE* I, Aristotle argues that: there is a final or ultimate good which every human being strives for; this is 'happiness' (εὐδαιμονία); for a human being to be happy or to live well, in an objective conception of what the good life is, it is for a human being to exercise his characteristic function; to exercise the human function is to be involved in an activity of the soul expressing reason in a virtuous or excellent manner; it is by doing so that a human being may realize his nature and thus lead the good or happy life. In *Pol.* I 2, 1052b29–30, Aristotle asserts that the polis "comes into existence for the sake of life, but it continues in existence for the sake of the good life (γινόμενη μὲν τοῦ ζῆν ἕνεκεν, οὐσα δὲ τοῦ εὖ ζῆν)." He takes it that the polis serves a specific goal: it promotes or facilitates the good life. It is fair then to suppose that Aristotle's view is that the polis is necessary for the fulfilment of the human nature. In fact, one of the main theses of the *Politics* as a whole is that a human being can properly perform his function only within the ideal polis, namely, a polis with the best sort of constitution.¹² If this is the case, then it transpires that, at Step 7, Aristotle assumes that a human being who is separated from the polis is not self-sufficient in the sense that he is deprived of the conditions required for him to perform his function, and thus he cannot lead the good or happy life.¹³ Therefore, Aristotle concludes at Step 8, the polis is prior in nature to the individual human being in a way which is similar to/like that in which the human body is prior in nature to its parts.

In light of the above, we may assume that Aristotle's view is that the polis is prior in nature to the individual because, without the polis, the individual cannot perform his function. Apparently, it is within the polis that a human being is provided with the con-

¹⁰ This thesis is clearly presented in, e.g., *Meteorologica* IV 2, 390a10–15 and *Generation of Animals* II 1, 734b24–31.

¹¹ Aristotle deals with homonymy in *De Anima* II 1 (412b4–25).

¹² For some useful ways of treatment of the points roughly sketched out above, regarding the overall argument in *NE* I and its connections to Aristotle's project in the *Politics*, see Miller 1995: 27–61, Reeve 2009: 512–522, and Shields 2014: 362–393, 412–427.

¹³ For Aristotle's use of the term 'self-sufficiency' (αὐτάρκεια), see Miller 1995: 35–36 and Shields 2014: 365–367.

ditions required to properly exercise his function.¹⁴ At the same time, it should be noted that there is no point in the *Politics* where Aristotle attempts to clearly analyze the notion of priority in nature in its most general form. As mentioned above, though, it has been suggested that the textual evidence indicates that Aristotle's concept of priority in nature is to be construed as existential priority. Furthermore, some scholars have argued that the priority of the polis over the individual is to be understood along these lines, i.e., as priority in existence.¹⁵

In *Metaphysics* (*Metaph.*) Δ 11, 1019a2–4, Aristotle states that: “[...] a thing is prior in respect of its nature and substance (κατὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐσίαν) when it is possible for it to be (εἶναι) without other things but not them without it.” Interpreters such as Witt (1994: 216) suppose that Aristotle's claim is the following:

X is prior to *Y* in nature = *X* can exist without *Y* existing, but *Y* cannot exist without *X* existing.

What one ought to concede is that, at least at first sight, this reading of the thesis in *Metaph.* Δ 11, 1019a2–4 seems to accommodate examples such as that of the living body and its parts. Putatively, one could argue as follows: suppose that we sever a hand from a living human body, or that the body perishes;¹⁶ under such circumstances, the hand can no longer exist; it will no longer be a hand, except homonymously; yet, the body may continue in existence without the hand; hence, the body can exist without the hand existing, but the hand cannot exist without the body existing; therefore, the body is prior in nature to the hand.

Some commentators have noted that this reading of *Metaph.* Δ 11, 1019a2–4 faces a number of grave difficulties. For instance, it would seem that such a construal of the text is at odds with Aristotle's views on natural or substantial priority in *Metaphysics* Θ 8.¹⁷ Irrespective of these objections, though, and whether they are in fact effective, what we need to consider here is whether the priority of the polis may be plausibly understood as priority in existence. As was pointed out earlier on, it has been suggested that this is a credible approach to the puzzle of *Pol.* I 2 (1253a18–27). It has been proposed that Aristotle's intended argument in our passage is roughly the following: the whole can exist without one of its parts existing, whereas the part cannot exist when it is separated from the whole; hence, the whole is prior in existence (or in nature) to the part; likewise, the polis, a whole, can exist without any one individual human being existing, whereas the individual cannot exist apart from the polis; hence, the polis is prior in existence (or in nature) to the individual.

¹⁴ For a treatment of this complex issue, of how the (ideal) polis provides the conditions required for a human being to exercise his function, see Miller 1995: 27–61. See also Shields 2014: 424–425.

¹⁵ This kind of interpretation is defended by Keyt (1991).

¹⁶ I take it to be clear enough that, in *Pol.* I 2 (1253a18–27), Aristotle is concerned with both of these possibilities: the fate of a body part (a) when the body perishes, and (b) when it, the body part, is separated/severed from the living body. I take it to be also evident, see *Pol.* I 2, 1253a25–27, that his primary concern in the case of the polis and the individual is the situation where the individual is separated from the polis.

¹⁷ For two detailed critiques of this reading of *Metaph.* Δ 11, 1019a2–4, see Panayides 1999 and Peramatzis 2011: 278–286.

If we accept this suggestion, then, as Keyt (1991: 136) has urged us to note, we have to acknowledge that Aristotle's argument is vulnerable to what has come to be known as the 'Philoctetes Objection'. Suppose that a man, Philoctetes, who has been an active member of an ideal polis is now shipwrecked on a desert island. If we admit that the thesis defended in *Pol. I 2* (1253a18–27) is to be construed in the existential sense, then it follows that, upon his isolation from the polis, Philoctetes ceases to be a human being. But, is this true? Isn't it fair to assume that the isolated Philoctetes remains a human being, and that one day he may re-enter the polis and thus resume performing his function? To illustrate the point, consider a parallel case. Let us suppose that Critias is a trained cobbler. Suppose also that Critias is presently out of work. The fact of the matter is that, despite being out of work Critias remains a cobbler. He still retains the capacity to exercise his craft. Similarly, Philoctetes does not cease to be a human being when he is isolated from the polis. It is only reasonable to assume that he still retains the capacity to perform the function characteristic of human beings, the function that renders him a member of the kind human.¹⁸

The textual evidence appears to suggest that Aristotle is prepared to concede that the 'isolated Philoctetes' does cease to be a human being. This seems to follow from the statements he makes in *Pol. I 2*, 1253a18–27. As we have seen, he supposes that, when a body part, e.g., a hand, is severed from a living body, it ceases to be a hand. The severed hand is a hand only homonymously. Moreover, Aristotle takes it that the individual who is separated from the polis is very much like the body part which has been severed from the body. Thus, it would appear that he endorses the view that the individual ceases to be a human being when he is separated from the polis. Such an individual would be a human being only homonymously.

Is Aristotle's argument in *Pol. I 2*, 1253a18–27 subject to a fatal objection? The fact of the matter is that, even by Aristotle's lights, Philoctetes does not cease to be a human being when he is separated from the polis. In *De Anima (DA) II 5*, 417a21–b2, he distinguishes different levels at which a capacity may be actualized. To do so, he appeals to the example of knowledge. A human child, Socrates, has the capacity to learn grammar because human beings have by nature the particular epistemic capacity. Socrates, as an adult human being, has actualized/developed his capacity to learn grammar. Yet, although he has acquired knowledge of grammar, he is not presently using it, perhaps because he is asleep. This would be a case of a first-level actualization of the relevant capacity. And, finally, Socrates as an adult human being may be presently using his acquired knowledge of grammar. This would be a case of a second-level actualization of Socrates' epistemic capacity.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle in effect supposes that the good or happy life for a human being is the life of noble action where this requires the possession of ethical virtue.¹⁹ Furthermore, in *Pol. I 2*, 1253a7–18, in the context of his argument for the thesis that man is by nature a political animal, he suggests that man has the natural capacity to

¹⁸ The story of Philoctetes is based on one of Sophocles' works which Aristotle was familiar with. For further details on this story, see Shields 2014: 421–422.

¹⁹ For a concise discussion of this Aristotelian thesis, see Shields 2014: 381–388.

acquire ethical virtue.²⁰ Thus, in the light of the thesis in *DA II 5* (417a21–b2), one may agree with Miller (1995: 52) that Aristotle’s view is that human nature involves successive stages of potentialities and actualizations:

1. Philoctetes as a young child has the capacity to acquire ethical virtue because human beings have the natural capacity to do so.
2. Philoctetes as a man has the developed capacity for noble action because he has acquired ethical virtue. Yet, it may be the case that, for a variety of reasons, he is presently not involved in such activity.
3. Philoctetes is presently engaging in noble action.

If this much is accepted, then it would appear that, for Aristotle, Philoctetes does not cease to be a human being when he is isolated on the desert island. He retains the capacity to perform the function characteristic of human beings, which is to lead a life of noble action, and he may still do so if the right circumstances arise. If he retains the capacity to perform the function characteristic of human beings, then it is fair to conclude that he remains a human being.

The construal of the natural priority of the polis as existential priority has consequences which would be unacceptable to Aristotle. To admit such a reading of *Pol.* I 2, 1253a18-27 would be to impute to him a position he seems to reject: that a person such as the isolated Philoctetes is no longer a human being. Therefore, we will need to turn to a different reconstruction of the Aristotelian thesis that some things are prior in nature to others.

Such an interpretation was proposed by Peramatzis (2011). Peramatzis (2011: 204-205) supposes that in *Metaph.* Δ 11, 1019a2-4 Aristotle explicates priority in nature in terms of asymmetric ontological independence.²¹ He assumes that in our text Aristotle makes the following assertion:

X is ontologically prior to *Y* just in case *X* can be (εἶναι) without *Y*, but *Y* cannot be (εἶναι) without *X*.

This statement, however, does not clarify the ontological relation between *X* and *Y*. The term ‘to be’ (εἶναι) “may be taken either existentially or as meaning ‘to be what something is’” (Peramatzis 2011: 204). It follows that the statement of *Metaph.* Δ 11, 1019a2-4 may be read in two different ways:

- (1) *X* is ontologically prior to *Y* if and only if *X* can exist without *Y* existing, but *Y* cannot exist without *X* existing.
- (2) *X* is ontologically prior to *Y* if and only if *X* can be what it is independently of *Y* being what it is, whereas *Y* cannot be what it is without *X* being what it is.

Furthermore, Peramatzis (2011: 270-300) argues that (2), what he labels as ‘priority in being’, is the most plausible reconstruction of priority in nature as it readily fits the contexts

²⁰ For an interesting analysis of this difficult argument, see Miller 1995: 30-36.

²¹ I am not here trying to do proper justice to Peramatzis’ subtle view. The modest aim is to roughly outline its elements which are directly relevant to our discussion.

where Aristotle employs this notion. Although I believe this claim is a fair one, I don't intend to scrutinize it. Rather, I propose to examine whether priority in nature construed as priority in being may provide us with a viable reading of *Pol. I 2*, 1253a18-27.²²

I take it that the notion of priority in nature Aristotle utilizes in *Pol. I 2* may be readily understood as priority in being. In fact, as we are about to see, this seems to be the most natural way to read our text. Let us consider the case of the living body and its parts. We may suppose that Aristotle's position is the following: a hand cannot be what it is, i.e., a functioning hand, when it is severed from the living/functioning body; yet, the body can be what it is, i.e., the body of a living human being, even without the (severed) hand; the body, then, can be what it is without the hand being what it is, whereas the hand cannot be what it is without the body being what it is; therefore, the body is prior in nature to the hand.

But, what about the case of the polis and the individual? In *Pol. I 2*, 1253a18-27, Aristotle argues that the polis is prior in nature to the individual in a way which is similar to that in which the body is prior in nature to its parts. How are we to parse this statement? It seems that the point Aristotle is trying to make is the following. The polis can be what it (essentially) is, where this is a 'perfect community' (κοινωνία τέλειος), a kind of community within which an individual may perform his function and thus fulfill his nature, even when one of its members is removed from it. On the other hand, an individual cannot be what he is, that is to say, he cannot perform his human function, without the polis being what it is. If the polis perishes, then the individual is deprived of the conditions required for him to perform the function characteristic of human beings. Likewise, the individual cannot exercise his function when he is separated from the polis. It turns out then that the polis can be what it is without one of its individual members being what he is, whereas the individual cannot be what he is without the polis being what it is. Therefore, the polis is prior in nature to the individual.

What we need to acknowledge at this juncture is that this interpretation seems to encounter the same problem as the existential rendering of natural priority. As we have just seen, Aristotle takes it that the body is prior in nature to the hand in the sense that it can be what it is without the hand being what it is, whereas the converse is not the case. Furthermore, he supposes that the severed hand is no longer a hand, except homonymously. At the same time, Aristotle tells us that the polis is prior in nature to the individual in a way which is like that in which the body is prior in nature to the (severed) hand. Does this mean that he takes it that the man who is separated from the polis is no longer a man, except homonymously? If this is the case, then the proposed interpretation runs into the Philoctetes objection.

I would like to submit that the Philoctetes problem does not pose a threat for the suggested interpretation. In *Pol. I 2*, 1253a18-27 Aristotle does in fact state that the polis is prior in nature to the individual in a way which is similar to that in which a (living) body is prior in

²² Notably, Peramatzis (2011) never considers whether the priority of the polis over the individual may be construed as priority in being.

nature to its parts. Yet, he never claims that the individual who is separated from the polis is a human being only homonymously. What he does assert is that such an individual is not self-sufficient. That is to say, the isolated individual does not have the conditions required for him to exercise his function, and thus he cannot be happy/lead the good life.

Given the discussion above, we may assume that Aristotle's view is the following. The polis can be what it is without the individual being what he is, but the individual cannot be what he is without the polis being what it is. Hence, the polis is prior in nature to the individual in a way similar to that in which a body is prior in nature to its parts. At the same time, it should be noted that there are some subtle differences between the two cases. When the hand is severed from the body it is no longer a hand, except homonymously. It can no longer perform the function characteristic of a hand tout court. The individual cannot be what he is when he is separated from the polis, but not in the sense that he ceases to be a human being. Rather, the individual cannot be what he is when he is separated from the polis only in the sense that, due to certain specific circumstances, he cannot exercise his capacity for noble action. He remains a human being though, insofar as he still has the capacity to engage in noble action. In other words, the individual human being who is isolated from the polis cannot exercise his function, and thus he cannot fully realize his nature, or, if you prefer, he cannot fully be what he (essentially) is. Yet, he still retains the capacity to perform his characteristic function, and thus he is still a human being. This is in contrast to the hand which when it is severed from the living body it is no longer what it is, i.e., a hand, except in name.

If the suggestions made above are accepted, then we have a plausible construal of the thesis for the natural priority of the polis over the individual. Moreover, this way of reading Aristotle's notion of priority in nature allows us to show how he may evade the Philoctetes objection. The residual worry though, is whether the proposed reconstruction of the text is too strained. Specifically, the question here is whether our interpretation utilizes an unwarranted or arbitrary understanding of the similarity between the case of a whole such as a human body and the polis. I would like to suggest that if we can find some independent support for this element in our interpretation, then we may bolster its exegetical credibility. This is the task I turn to in the next part of the article.

Hylomorphism and the Priority of the Polis Over the Individual

Aristotle adopts hylomorphism where this is the thesis that an object (or a kind of object) is the 'compound' (σύνθετον/σύνολον) of 'matter' (ύλη) and 'form' (εἶδος). There are a number of places, e.g., *Metaph.* Z 10, 17 and H 2, 6, where he supposes that: when some pre-existing matter comes to be enformed in a particular way, it gives rise to a numerically distinct composite whole, a matter-form compound. As J. Skrzypek (2017: 379) has recently noted, one issue that every hylomorphist needs to deal with is the question of 'diachronic composition'. This is the question of what happens to matter when it comes to be enformed.

Skrzypek (2017: 380) points out that the hylomorphists have different theories of diachronic composition available to them. For instance, one may adopt *alterationism* whereby

the pre-existing matter that comes to compose a numerically distinct hylomorphic item continues to exist upon being enformed, but it undergoes some changes in its intrinsic nature or its external behavior. Or, one may adopt *annihilationism* whereby the pre-existing matter that comes to compose a numerically distinct hylomorphic item ceases to exist upon being enformed and is replaced by a new object, the one created by the union of matter and form. Finally, Skrzypek (2017: 380) supposes that a hylomorphist may adopt different diachronic theories of composition for different kinds of hylomorphic wholes. Thus, one may assume that alterationism applies to some objects and annihilationism to others.

It has been argued elsewhere that the collective textual evidence suggests that Aristotle applies annihilationism to substances, whereas he applies alterationism to non-substances.²³ Let us begin with the first part of this claim, that, for Aristotle, substances are the outcome of annihilationist processes of coming to be. This is a thesis that cannot be properly analyzed and defended here. Nonetheless, we can point to some of Aristotle's theoretical commitments that seem to support it. The first thing to note is that in the central books of the *Metaphysics*, see e.g., *Metaph. Z* 16, 1040b5-16, *Z* 17, 1041b28-33, and *H* 3, 1043b18-23, Aristotle claims that, strictly speaking, it is only things which are 'naturally formed' (φύσει συνεστήκασι) that are substances. More specifically, he supposes that only living things, namely, human beings, non-human animals and plants, are substances. Furthermore, in *Metaph. H* 4, 1044a34-35 we are told that the pre-existing matter from which a substance such as a man comes to be is menstrual fluid. And, in *Generation and Corruption I* 2, 4 it is explicitly stated that the underlying matter from which a substance comes to be does not survive this process of change. It is transformed into an entirely different entity. As we are told in the biological works, in e.g., *Generation of Animals I*, menstrual fluid is transformed into a primitive embryo which gradually develops into an adult human being.

What is important to note for our purposes is that Aristotle assumes that a substance, i.e., a hylomorphic item which comes to be *via* an annihilationist process, has specific characteristics. In *DA II* 1 (412b4-25) he argues that the body of a human being is essentially enformed. The body of Socrates cannot lose its form or soul and remain in existence.²⁴ This is the case because to be a human body is to be capable of engaging in the life functions characteristic of human beings, e.g., thinking, eating and perceiving. That is to say, to be a human body is to have the form or the soul of a human being. Hence, when Socrates dies his (soulless) corpse is a body in name but not in definition. It is no longer a body, except homonymously. Similarly, Aristotle states in *DA II* 1 (412b17-25), a severed body part, let us say a hand, can no longer perform its function. It is no longer a hand, except homonymously. Moreover, there are places, e.g., *Metaph. Z* 10 (1035b18-27) and *Z* 11 (1036b30-32), where Aristotle makes the same point as in *Pol. I* 2 (1253a18-27): a hand which is severed from the living body can no longer be what it (essentially) is; it can no

²³ I argue for this claim in Panayides 2023 and 2024. For another view along these lines, see Henry 2019: chs 1-3.

²⁴ For this thesis, of the identity of the form of a living thing with its soul, see e.g., *Metaph. Z* 7, 1032b1-2, *Z* 10, 1035b14-16 and *Z* 11, 1037a5-8.

longer perform its characteristic function; it is a hand only in name; hence, the living body is prior (in nature) to the severed hand.

To sum up, the textual evidence suggests that some hylomorphic entities, namely, substances, come to be from some pre-existing matter which does not survive the process of being enformed. And, substances are such that their parts cannot be what they (essentially) are unless they remain part of the functioning/thriving whole. If such a part is removed from the whole, then it can no longer be what it is, except homonymously. On the other hand, the whole can be what it is without the part being what it is. Therefore, the whole is prior (in nature) to the part.

There are places, most notably *Metaph. Z 17*, 1041b11-33, where Aristotle suggests that non-substances, e.g., artefacts such as a clay statue or a house, are quite different from substances. These hylomorphic items, which are ‘not formed by nature’ (μη φύσει συνεσθήκασι), are the outcome of alterationist processes of coming to be. Let us consider the case of a house. A house comes to be from some pre-existing material objects, e.g., bricks. When these objects are appropriately enformed there arises a new hylomorphic entity, a house. In this case, Aristotle suggests in *Metaph. Z 17*, 1041b11-28, unlike that of a substance, the initial matter survives being enformed, and it also survives the dissolution of the whole as well as its partial removal from the whole. If the house is demolished, the bricks survive. Likewise, an individual brick remains what it is, a brick, when it is removed from the house.

There are various ways to spell out what happens to matter when it comes to be an Aristotelian non-substantial hylomorphic entity. One straightforward way to do so, however, is the one suggested by D. Charles (2021: 244-246) who appeals to the conceptual apparatus of determinables, determinants and determinates. Bricks have the capacity to be formed into a house, a monument, or a number of any other structures. Hence, the causal powers of bricks are determinable, and they are made determinate by the action of the craftsman who imposes a specific form upon them, that of a house, where this is the relevant determinant. In such a case, the bricks are not annihilated but they are only altered in the sense that their determinable causal powers are made determinate by the action of the craftsman. Through the action of the craftsman the bricks actualize one of their many capacities, that of being shaped into a house. Since the bricks are not annihilated but are simply altered when they are enformed explains why Aristotle supposes that upon the demise of the whole, or the removal of individual bricks from the whole, these return to their pre-enformed state of being.

The obvious question here is this: How is the discussion above related to our interpretation of Aristotle’s thesis that the polis is prior in nature to the individual? *Pol. III 3*, 1276b1ff suggests that a polis is a hylomorphic compound, where the citizens are its matter and the constitution is its form. Moreover, in *Pol. I 2*, 1253a30-31 Aristotle clearly states that the polis is a human artefact or product.²⁵ In light of these two statements, I would

²⁵ There are two things to note. First, Aristotle makes this same assumption at several points in the *Politics*. And second, there is tension between this claim and his statement in *Pol. I 2*, 1253a1-2 that the polis exists by nature. For a useful discussion of this problem, see Miller 1995: 37-45.

like to submit that we have some additional and independent support for our proposed reading of *Pol.* I 2, 1253a18-27.

The evidence in *Pol.* I 2 (1253a30-31) and III 3 (1276b1ff) allows us to plausibly assume that the polis is quite similar to those Aristotelian hylomorphic objects which are non-substances. The suggestion here is the following. As we have just seen, a house, a hylomorphic compound, comes to be from some pre-existing matter, e.g., bricks, which has certain determinable causal powers. It may be formed into any of a number of different structures. Similarly, a polis comes to be from some pre-existing entities, some human beings, who have a particular capacity. Roughly speaking, this is the capacity to perform the function characteristic of man. The material objects from which a house comes to be, the bricks, do survive the process of being enformed. Moreover, these objects survive their removal from the hylomorphic whole. If a brick is removed from the house, then it returns to its pre-enformed state of being, as a material object which has a number of different (determinable) causal powers. Likewise, an individual man does survive his integration into a polis, as well as his removal from the particular hylomorphic whole. If an individual is separated from the ideal polis, as in the case of Philoctetes, then this individual does not lose his capacity to perform his characteristic function. He does not cease to be a human being. He is only deprived of the conditions required for him to actually exercise his function.

If this proposal is accepted, then it seems that our assertion for the limited similarity between the polis and a whole such a human body gains further exegetical credibility. A human being and the polis belong to different types of hylomorphic entities. A human being is a substance. Hence, as Aristotle assumes at different places in the corpus, if a body part of a man such as a hand is removed from the whole, then it can no longer be what it is. It is a hand only homonymously. As we have just seen, however, the polis is more like an artefact. The human beings from which it comes to be, where these stand for its matter, do survive being enformed. They are only appropriately altered so that they may be able to exercise their function. Moreover, they survive their removal from the whole. When they are isolated from the hylomorphic item which is a polis, they don't lose the capacity to perform their function. They do remain human beings. They only lose the conditions required for them to exercise their characteristic function, and thus they cannot fully realize their nature.

The polis, then, is a hylomorphic whole which resembles Aristotelian non-substances. And, the suggested reading of the thesis at *Pol.* I 2 (1253a18-27), where it is assumed that the similarity between a body and a polis is only a limited one, seems to be aligned with Aristotle's overall views on hylomorphism.

Before we conclude our discussion, we need to acknowledge that there are a number of discrepancies in the analogy between an artefact and the polis. For instance, the matter from which a house comes to be does survive in the whole despite being altered. When it is separated from it though, it does not retain just the capacity to be part of a house. It returns to its prior state where it has a number of different capacities, one of which is to be shaped into a house. In the case of the polis though, the isolated individual simply

retains his capacity to perform the human function. The response to this potential difficulty is that a house and a polis are not items from the same category. Moreover, it should be noted that Aristotle has issued fair warning for such issues. In *NE* II 3 (1094b11-14) he explicitly tells us that in the human sciences, including politics, we should not expect the same kind of precision or exactness as in other more abstract fields of inquiry.

Conclusion

This article claims to have done two things. First, it has been argued that the controversial thesis of *Pol.* I 2 (1253a18-27), that the polis is prior in nature to the individual, is best understood as a case of priority in being. That is to say, it has been suggested that the polis is prior in nature to the individual in the sense that the polis can be what it is without the individual being what he is, whereas the converse is not the case. And second, it has been argued that if there are any lingering doubts about the credibility of the way this reading of the text deflects the Philoctetes objection, these may be alleviated by acknowledging that, for Aristotle, the polis is a hylomorphic whole. In particular, it is a hylomorphic item which most resembles Aristotelian non-substances.

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