

Chapter 1 Introduction

How this book came to be written

Metaphysics Zeta has been aptly described as the Mount Everest of ancient philosophy. Many are deterred by its difficulty. For others, the difficulty is a challenge they cannot resist. This map is designed to help all parties find their way. It is written out of a conviction that the difficulty of *Zeta* is not always the notorious difficulty of its individual arguments. One may struggle to make sense of an argument, and believe one has succeeded, yet still be at a loss to know what function it serves and how it bears on the big questions of Aristotle's metaphysics. Conversely, an overview of the larger strategy of *Zeta* can help one decide when it is safe to give up on an intractable argument and proceed to the next chapter.

This conviction is the product of a series of encounters with *Zeta* over the years. When I first read it, as an undergraduate, I found the difficulty exhilarating, but it was exhilaration without understanding. The first glimmers of understanding came under the guidance of G.E.L. Owen, leader of the seminars in London whose 'minutes' were eventually published as *Notes on Zeta* (1979). As chief minute-taker for the monthly gathering, I had to do my best to present in a good light each of the bewildering variety of interpretations (and indeed translations) that a single Aristotelian sentence can inspire, even before you put several sentences together to find an argument. A useful exercise in neutrality. I was content at that stage just to explore the possibilities in the open-minded, collegial atmosphere that Owen created. As a young apprentice, I had few firm ideas of my own about *Zeta*. Still less could I grasp the overall strategy of the book, because we went so slowly. It took us four years, sentence by sentence, to get to the end. Much too long to make overall sense of so difficult a text.

The next important encounter was much too short. In June 1985 Michael Frede and Günther Patzig presented a draft of their forthcoming commentary on *Zeta* to a week-long seminar in Berlin. More exhilaration, this time with better understanding, thanks both to past experience and to the many insights of the new commentary. The challenge was that throughout the commentary Frede and Patzig define their position by reference to views expressed by the 'Londinenses' in *Notes on Zeta* (see their Vol. I, p. 11). I found myself ready to start making up my own mind on some of the issues in debate.

So in 1992 I gave a graduate seminar on *Zeta* in Cambridge, where I

imposed the rule that we keep moving even if there is lots we do not understand. At the end of a fruitful term, I wrote the first (12-page) draft of this map in an attempt to sum up for the seminar what we had learned about Zeta by reading it all the way through in eight weeks. The map expanded during a seminar in 1994 at Princeton, where the university term is longer. The next year it grew to 84 pages during the even longer 16-week term at Pittsburgh, where we read all of Zeta, Eta, Theta at a cracking pace. This, the penultimate version, went into circulation and received helpful comments from the members of a workshop at the University of Virginia in 1997, including a lengthy written commentary from Dan Devereux and a stimulating discussion with Alan Code. Others who gave useful criticisms and reflections on the penultimate draft were David Charles, John Ellis, Frank Lewis, Stephen Menn, Ronald Polansky, Michael Wedin, Francis Wolff.¹ But my greatest debt is to the members, both senior and junior, of my seminars in Cambridge, Princeton, and Pittsburgh. It was they who helped me work out the main ideas.

The circulated draft has now been revised in the light of criticisms and suggestions received, and considerably expanded. To this I have added two new chapters, rather different in character from the map as originally conceived. Chapter 5 is an attempt to re-invent the *Organon* as a set of treatises that belong together in Aristotle's mind, not just in the school-rooms of later antiquity; it was much improved by discussion with Michael Frede, who also stimulated improvements elsewhere. Chapter 6 sketches the place of Zeta in the larger context of the never completed masterpiece we know as Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, developing some ideas I first presented to the 14th Symposium Aristotelicum (1996) on *Metaphysics Lambda*; the encouragement and criticisms of that audience helped me take them forward. The two chapters together aim to relate Zeta to the rest of Aristotle's philosophy by elaborating on some of the recurrent themes of chapters 1-4.

¹ Lewis and Wedin have already published their criticisms: Frank Lewis, 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to *Metaphysics Zeta*', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 15 (1999), 101-128, with a reply by Mary Louise Gill, *ibid.* 129-135; Michael V. Wedin, *Aristotle's Theory of Substance: The Categories and Metaphysics Zeta* (Oxford 2000). They kindly kept me informed of their work in progress, but their final, published versions only arrived on my desk when this book was in its final form. I respond to what I take to be their chief complaint in chap. 4, n7. In fact, Wedin and I are allies on many issues. The main point of dissension, as will emerge, is about the overall argumentative structure of Zeta.

Thus a reader whose interests are confined to Zeta can stop at the end of chapter 4. But I hope that no-one will. For in my view too narrow a focus on Zeta can lead, and in some cases has led, to misguided interpretations that are even more difficult than the original. One hope behind this book is that I may convince students and scholars that Zeta is better read, and more easily read, when it is taken as part of an ever-widening context. First, as part of a larger treatise consisting of Books Zeta, Eta and Theta; then as part of the ongoing project of the *Metaphysics*; finally, as one of many contributions to a system of philosophy that Aristotle always aimed to build, however much his conception of the whole may have evolved through the years.

The purpose of the map

A map is for travellers to use in their own explorations of the text. They may well want to redraw the lines as they journey.² For the difficulty of the terrain makes it impossible to keep the survey completely neutral on major issues of philosophical interpretation, such as whether Aristotelian form is individual or general. Still less can I avoid decisions on contested points of detail. That said, my aim is not to defend my own substantive views against rival interpretations, but to open up questions about how this text should be read. Zeta deals with central issues of metaphysics, which Aristotle calls 'first philosophy'. My claim is that to understand *what* it is saying we must first attend to *how* these issues are addressed, and *why* they are addressed that way.

Some have read Zeta as an exercise in pure dialectic, inconclusive and aporetic. The map indicates, on the contrary, that the book has a single positive purpose, to which all its dialectical ingenuity is directed: to show that substantial being is form. Others have looked to Zeta for Aristotle's most mature thoughts on metaphysics. The map indicates that this too is one-sided: the conclusion that substantial being is form is preliminary to the didactic, expository account of form and matter, actuality and potentiality, in Books Eta and Theta. That Zeta is preliminary becomes clear once we have a correct, unambiguous translation of the first sentence of Eta. Readers will find, I hope, numerous other small details of the map whose wider philosophical implications are worth pondering. For the point of trying to help people read this text is to encourage fresh thought

² For comparison, a rival map—different both in scale and in other ways—may be found in Michael Loux, 'Ousia: A Prolegomenon to *Metaphysics Z* and *H*', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 1 (1984), 241-265.

about its philosophical content.

Where I do venture views of my own on Zeta is at the end, in chapter 4, a retrospective search for reasons why Aristotle chose to give it the contours I claim to have mapped. But these are thoughts about Aristotle's methodology in Zeta, not about the central issues of first philosophy.

This leads to a second precautionary note. Since a map deals with form rather than content, and form for an Aristotelian has a certain priority, I shall not make much reference to the rich and sophisticated secondary literature on Zeta. A clear view of how we get to a particular conclusion is a prerequisite for interpreting its philosophical significance. It is commentaries, rather than monographs, that concern themselves with the detailed step by step proceedings of a text and give the writers of monographs their sense of its structure. Accordingly, my annotation pays most attention to the two major Zeta commentaries of the 20th century: that of Sir David Ross, which everyone knows and uses, and the more recent work of Michael Frede and Günther Patzig, the lessons of which (as opposed to their controversial interpretation of substantial form) have not yet been fully absorbed. I have in mind here both their exemplary analysis of individual arguments and their innovative approach to establishing the Greek text. In addition, I hope to revive interest in Werner Jaeger's pioneering, but nowadays neglected, masterpiece *Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Metaphysik des Aristoteles*.

So much for the preliminaries. I shall start by highlighting two features of Zeta which have been little noticed in the scholarly literature. The first is the *non-linearity* of the discussion. The second is its *two-level procedure*.

Non-linearity

By this I mean it is not the case that the successive chapters build continuously upon the results of their predecessors. Reading Z is not like reading *Metaphysics* Θ or Λ, still less like reading *Physics* II or *Physics* VIII. The introductory chapters Z1-2 are followed by four independent sections (Z3, Z4 ff., Z13 ff., Z17), each starting from a different account of what substantial being is. That means there are no less than three fresh starts (at Z4, at Z13, and then, more radically, at Z17), where the discussion begins anew, setting aside the results achieved so far. This is not to say that those earlier results are rejected, only that they must not be presupposed. For the aim of Aristotle's procedure is to show that each of his