Aristotle Metaphysics Δ 6, 1016b17–21

Leonardo Tarán

Chapter 6 of Metaphysics Δ is devoted to "εν." It opens with the statement that "one" is used either in an accidental sense or per se (1015b16f), and then discusses the two: first the former (1015b17–36) and then the latter (1015b36–1016b17). One result of what is said in 1015b16–1016b17 is that "one" has many different meanings. It is therefore intelligible that in the next section (1016b17–1017a2) Aristotle deals with the essence of unity. What is of concern here is the opening lines of this section, 1016b17–21, but the controversial part is the text and interpretation of 1016b17f. It will be useful to transcribe four different versions of these lines:

(I) τὸ δὲ ἐνὶ ἐλναι ἀρχὴ τινὶ ἐστὶν ἀριθμῷ ἐλναι.
(II) τὸ ἐνὶ ἐλναι ἀρχὴ τινὶ ἐστὶν ἀριθμοῦ ἐλναι.
(III) τὸ δὲ ἐνὶ ἐλναι ἀρχὴ τινὶ ἐστὶν ἀριθμὸ ἐλναι.
(IV) τὸ δὲ ἐνὶ ἐλναι ἀρχὴ (τοῦ) τινὶ ἐστὶν ἀριθμῷ ἐλναι.

(I) is the reading of E (Codex Parisinus Graecus 1853) and J (Codex Vindobonensis phil. gr. 100), which together constitute one of the two branches into which the primary manuscripts of the Metaphysics are divided; Jaeger calls it II. (II) is the text offered by A b (Codex Laurentianus 87.12), the other branch of the tradition. (III) is the text adopted by Christ and by Ross in their respective editions of the Metaphysics. They conflate the readings of the two manuscript traditions by substituting ἐνὶ for

1 I shall refer to the following editions, translations, and commentaries by the names of their authors alone: I. Bekker, Aristotelis Opera (Berlin 1831); A. Schweigler, Die Metaphysik des Aristoteles, I–IV (Tübingen 1847–48); H. Bonitz, Aristotelis Mephysica, I–II (Bonn 1848–49), and Aristoteles, Metaphysik, ed. E. Wellmann (Berlin 1890); W. Christ, Aristotelis Metaphysica 2 (Leipzig 1895); W. D. Ross, Aristotle's Metaphysics, I–II (Oxford 1924; rev. 1953), and tr., The Works of Aristotle, VIII: Metaphysica 2 (Oxford 1928); J. Tricot, Aristotle, La Métaphysique 2, I–II (Paris 1953); W. Jaeger, Aristotelis Metaphysica (Oxford 1957); G. Reale, Aristotele, Metafisica 2, I–III (Milan 1993); C. Kirwan, Aristotle, Metaphysics. Books Τ, Α and Ε 2 (Oxford 1993).
€v in the first part of the sentence. Finally, (IV) is Jaeger's text. He has adopted the version given by E and J but has inserted ⟨τού⟩ after ἀρχή.

Now (III), the text of Christ and Ross, is grammatically possible but yields a meaning that is impossible. Ross translates it as follows (in the second edition of his translation of the Metaphysics): "The essence of what is one is to be some kind of beginning of number." For Aristotle, however, "one" is not an ἀρχή of number but the ἀρχή of number. Thus to cite only two short passages, Metaphysics 1021a12 states, τὸ δ' ἐν τοῦ ἀριθμοῦ ἀρχή καὶ μέτρον, and similarly 1052b23f, διὸ τὸ ἐν ἀριθμοῦ ἀρχή ἦ ἀριθμός. The rejection of (III) implicitly shows that (II), i.e., the text of A⁶, also is impossible, for what was said against (III) applies also to (II) and, moreover, (II) has the (here) impossible reading τὸ δὲ ἐν ἐίναι: τὸ δὲ ἐν ἐναι is necessary, as Aristotle is discussing the essence of "one." Also Alexander's paraphrase (In Metaph. p.368.15f Hayduck, τὸ ἐναι τὸ ἀρχή ἀριθμοῦ ἐναι ἐστιν) shows that he had access to a text with τὸ ἐναι ἐναι, but the second part of the paraphrase cannot be right for reasons similar to those given against Christ and Ross above, and against Jaeger in what follows.

As the ἐναι of E and J is right, it is reasonable to follow these manuscripts for the rest of the text, too. This is what Jaeger (=IV) has done, but unfortunately he thought it necessary to insert ⟨τοῦ⟩ after ἀρχή. This is not merely unnecessary but in

2 Also Bekker, Schwe格尔, and Bonitz have all adopted a text that is a conflation of readings of A⁶ and E (J was not known to them), though a different one from that of Christ and Ross: τὸ δὲ ἐναι ἐναι ἀρχή τιν ἐστιν ἀριθμοῦ ἐναι, which Bonitz translates, "Das Eins-sein ist Prinzip der Zahl für etwas sein." But apart from the fact that the constitution of the text is rather arbitrary, it yields no reasonable sense as "für etwas sein" by itself shows; observe also "Prinzip der Zahl" (cf. objections against Christ and Ross).

3 The text Jaeger adopted in his edition he had argued for in Hermes 52 (1917) 504=Scripta Minora (Rome 1960) 1 236f. In my comments on Jaeger's text and interpretation I refer without distinction to both his edition and his earlier treatment.

4 Cf. also Aristotle's argument that one is not a number but the principle of number: Metaphysics 1087b33–1088a14 with my Speusippus of Athens (Leiden 1981) 35 with n.174, 36, 328. There is no need to discuss further the interpretations of Tricot, Reale, Kirwan, and others, because they have all adopted Ross' text.

5 Asclepius, In Metaph. p.316.4 Hayduck, gives the following citation or paraphrase: τὸ δὲ ἐν ἐναι ἀρχή τιν ἐστιν ἀριθμοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἐναι. This is even further removed from the transmitted text than Alexander's paraphrase and yields no reasonable meaning in the context of what Aristotle is saying.
fact gives the wrong sense for the following reasons: Jaeger's text would give τὸ ἕνι εἶναι ἔστιν ἀρχὴ (τοῦ) τινὶ ἄριθμῳ εἶναι, but (i) τὸ τινὶ ἄριθμῳ εἶναι is not (pace Jaeger) parallel to τὸ ἄνθρωπον εἶναι, (ii) the "essence of a particular number" is in itself questionable, (iii) the essence of one is not to be ἀρχή of the "essence of number," and (iv) εἶναι is wanted grammatically elsewhere (i.e., x is to be y).

We are left then with (I), τὸ δὲ ἕνι εἶναι ἀρχὴ τινὶ ἔστιν ἄριθμῳ εἶναι, which is the correct text and which means: "The essence of one is to be principle (i.e., beginning) for some number." This interpretation is supported by what follows (1016b18–21): τὸ γὰρ πρῶτον μέτρον ἀρχή, ὃ γὰρ πρῶτον γνωρίζομεν, τούτῳ πρῶτον μέτρον ἐκάστου γένους ἀρχὴ οὖν τοῦ γνωστοῦ περὶ ἐκάστον τὸ ἔν. οὐ ταῦτα δὲ εἴν πάσι τοῖς γένεσι τὸ ἔν. κτλ. And so the whole passage (1016b17–21) means: "The essence of one is to be principle (i.e., beginning) for some number, for the first measure is the beginning; for that by which we first know it is the first measure in each class. Therefore, in each class the one is the beginning of what is known; but the one is not the same in all classes, etc."

According to Aristotle, then, the primary meaning of "one" is to be a principle for some number, i.e., for any number, because for him numbers are congeries of abstract monads and "one" is therefore the first measure of such numbers. From this primary meaning of "what to be one is" depend by analogy the meanings of the different "ones" in the classes other than number; and also from the primary meaning as expressed in 1016b17f ultimately depends Aristotle's doctrine that the one is the principle of number. The great importance of the point made in 1016b17f for understanding Aristotle's doctrine of "one" and the presentation in the two standard editions of the Metaphysics used today of texts of 1016b17f that cannot be right, as well as the failure of other modern editors to adopt the text of E and J, have prompted the writing of this paper.

Columbia University
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6 Cf. the parallel passage Metaph. I.1, esp. 1052b1–7, 15–27, and n.b. that Book I begins by referring back to the discussion at Δ 6: cf. 1052a15f with Ross' note on 1052a15.