

ARISTOTLE, *METAPHYSICS* A 10, 993A13–15: A NEW READING AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR THE UNITY OF BOOK ALPHA

ABSTRACT

*This article argues for an emendation in Aristotle's Metaphysics A 10, 993a13–15. The emendation is based on a hitherto overlooked reading preserved in Alexander of Aphrodisias' commentary on A 7. First, the article problematizes the reading of the Metaphysics manuscripts in terms of syntax, diction and content. Second, it shows that Alexander's reading is free of all three problems. Third, it argues for the originality of Alexander's reading according to the principle *utrum in alterum abiturum erat?* and based on the fact that the new reading reveals a subtle didactic link between A 7 and A 10 that sheds new light on the argumentative architecture of Metaphysics Book A.*

Keywords: Aristotle; *Metaphysics*; Alexander of Aphrodisias; emendation; textual criticism; transmission

The tenth and final chapter of the first book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is short, comprising sixteen Bekker-lines, from 993a11 to 993a27.¹ Yet, it is not short enough to be free of textual puzzles. In the first six lines (993a11–17), the divergences between the two branches of the direct manuscript tradition (α and β)² can be resolved relatively easily or are of minor significance.³ There are two textual phenomena, however, that are trickier. These two instances do not come in the form of a disagreement between α and β . Indeed, all our manuscripts read the same flawed text. The section that contains these instances—the first six lines of A 10—is the following:

Arist. *Metaph.* A 10, 993a11–17

ὅτι μὲν οὖν τὰς εἰρημένους ἐν τοῖς
φυσικοῖς αἰτίας [12] ζητεῖν εἰκόσσι
πάντες, καὶ τούτων ἐκτὸς οὐδεμίαν
ἔχομεν ἄν [13] εἰπεῖν, δῆλον καὶ ἐκ

That then all [that is, thinkers]⁴ seem to
seek the causes mentioned in the
Physics, and that we are unable to name
a cause outside of these, is clear also

Continued

¹ J.M. Cooper, 'Conclusion – and retrospect', in C. Steel (ed.), *Aristotle's Metaphysics Alpha* (Oxford, 2012), 335–64 provides the most thorough analysis of A 10 available.

² On the transmission of the text, see D. Harlfinger, 'Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der *Metaphysik*', in P. Aubenque (ed.), *Études sur la Métaphysique d'Aristote. Actes du VIe Symposium Aristotelicum* (Paris, 1979), 7–33 and O. Primavesi, 'Introduction: the transmission of the text and the riddle of the two versions', in C. Steel (ed.), *Aristotle's Metaphysics Alpha* (Oxford, 2012), 388–464.

³ See the text in the recent edition of *Metaphysics* Book A: O. Primavesi, 'Text of *Metaphysics A*', in C. Steel (ed.), *Aristotle's Metaphysics Alpha* (Oxford, 2012), 465–516, at 515.

⁴ Cooper (n. 1), 336 translates 'all [these people]' and specifies 'i.e. the people whose views on the causes of being are critically discussed in the immediately preceding chs. 8 and 9 ... together with others, as discussed in chs. 3–6.'

Continued

Arist. *Metaph.* A 10, 993a11–17

τῶν πρότερον εἰρημένων· ἀλλ’
ἀμυδρῶς [14] ταύτας, καὶ τρόπον μὲν
τινα πάσαι πρότερον εἴρηνται τρό- [15]
πον δέ τινα οὐδαμῶς, ψελλιζομένη γὰρ
ἔοικεν ἢ πρώτη [16] φιλοσοφία περὶ
πάντων, ἅτε νέα τε καὶ κατ’ ἀρχὰς
οὕσα [καὶ [17] τὸ πρῶτον].

from what has been said before.⁵ But
[sc. they seek] these unclearly, and in
one way they [that is, the causes] have all
been said before, but in another way not
at all. For early philosophy seemed to
speak like a child about everything,
because it was new and at the beginning.

12 ἔχομεν ὅν α Bekker Bonitz Christ Ross Jaeger Primavesi : ἔχομεν β Al.^c 63.28 || 16 τε καὶ γ
Ross Jaeger Primavesi : τε EE⁸ Ascl.^c 111.25 Bekker Bonitz : καὶ Al.^c 63.31 : om. β Christ ||
16–17 καὶ τὸ πρῶτον] del. Ross Jaeger Primavesi om. Al.^c 63.31

The first textual problem concerns the words καὶ τὸ πρῶτον in lines 993a16–17. As Ross⁶ and Jaeger,⁷ following Diels,⁸ have indicated, these words should be deleted as a gloss. The evidence in Alexander of Aphrodisias’ commentary supports this deletion.⁹ The second textual problem, on which I will focus, shares with the first problem the feature that Alexander’s text provides a better reading than our manuscript tradition (α and β). This second problem, however, has not even been identified as a problem. It is the purpose of this note to diagnose the problem and then to provide a solution for it.

This problem concerns the sentence in lines 993a13–15, which contains three oddities: one in syntax, one in diction and one in content. First, the syntax. In the first clause of the sentence (ἀλλ’ ἀμυδρῶς ταύτας), neither the verb nor the subject is stated. Both, verb and subject, need to be supplied. They can be supplied easily, because the object (ταύτας ‘these’, that is, the causes) makes it clear that an active verb such as ‘speak’ or ‘seek’ (cf. ζητεῖν εὐόικασι in a12) with the subject ‘they’, namely Aristotle’s predecessors who featured in the previous sentence, is needed. However, in the second clause of the sentence, connected to the first with a καί, we suddenly have a new construction consisting of a verb in the passive voice (namely εἴρηνται ‘have been said’) and a new, expressed subject (namely πάσαι ‘all, sc. the causes’), which was the *object* in the first clause. This sudden and seemingly unjustified switch in construction is odd. This is so not only because the second clause does not provide the verb and the subject that are needed in the first clause but also and especially because the second clause continues with a completely different syntactical construction. This switch is quite impractical. The first clause’s object (‘the causes’) turns into the second clause’s new subject and the verb turns from an implied but

⁵ The words ‘also ... said before’ make clear that Aristotle here refers to his discussion in chapters 3–6, with the summary in chapter 7. See Cooper (n. 1), 337–9 and below.

⁶ W.D. Ross (ed.), *Aristotle’s Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1924), 212: ‘omitted by Al. ... probably a gloss on καὶ κατ’ ἀρχὰς’.

⁷ Jaeger takes καὶ τὸ πρῶτον to be a variant reading to the preceding expression κατ’ ἀρχὰς. See W. Jaeger (ed.), *Aristotelis Metaphysica* (Oxford, 1957), apparatus criticus on 993a16.

⁸ H. Diels, ‘Aristotelica’, *Hermes* 40 (1905), 301–16, at 303 n. 1.

⁹ Alex. Aphr. *In Metaph.* 63.31 Hayduck. On the relation of Alexander’s commentary to the *Metaphysics* text, see M.E. Kotwick, *Alexander of Aphrodisias and the Text of Aristotle’s Metaphysics* (Berkeley, 2016).

unexpressed active form into an explicitly stated passive form. Meanwhile, the implied but unexpressed subject of the first clause ('the predecessors') has completely disappeared in the second clause. There seems no good reason for this switch.

Second, the diction. The phrase *πρότερον εἴρηγται* meaning 'they [that is, all causes] have been (generally) said before' is odd, first, because the phrase 'said before' (*τῶν πρότερον εἰρημένων*) has just been used (line 13) for the quite different purpose of referring back to something *Aristotle* said earlier and, second, because it is typically used for such back references to *Aristotle's* own words.¹⁰ Here, however, it appears to express in general terms the fact that 'all' of *Aristotle's* four causes have been said or named by some of his predecessors some time before. It is difficult to find parallels for this use of the verb in *Aristotle*.¹¹ Specifically, according to a *TLG* search, the form *εἴρηγται* (third-person plural perfect passive, 'they have been said', implying a non-neuter subject) occurs only seven other times in the entire corpus. By contrast, the third-person singular form *εἴρηται* ('it has been said'), to which I come back below, appears 1,006 times. In six of the seven occurrences of *εἴρηγται*, *Aristotle* is the agent of the verb, that is, the place where things 'have been said' is *Aristotle's* own writings;¹² in one of the seven occurrences, the subject of 'have been said' are proverbs and the agent of the verb is any Greek speaker.¹³ Hence, the use of the form *εἴρηγται* with an agent that is explicitly *not Aristotle* (but his predecessors instead) is without parallel in the *Aristotelian* corpus.

Third, the content. The two clauses that make up our sentence seem unbalanced in what they convey. The switch from an implied active to an expressly stated passive construction that happens between the first clause and the second clause results in odd content. For, the syntactical switch causes a strange shift in the sentence's focus. In the first clause, *Aristotle* focusses on his *predecessors* and that *they* speak unclearly about the causes (he delineated in the *Physics*); in the second clause of the sentence, he states how the causes generally have and have not been named or said before. Whereas in the first clause the focus is on the predecessors, this focus is strangely blurred in the second clause.

I suggest that the reading in our text (α and β) is faulty. Alexander of Aphrodisias' commentary gives us access to an older version of the *Metaphysics*,¹⁴ and in the given case this older version has a different and, so I want to show, better text. Surprisingly, no

¹⁰ H. Bonitz, *Index Aristotelicum* (Berlin, 1853), s.v. εἰπεῖν (pages 221b–222a) indicates that *Aristotle* uses the perfect passive forms of εἰπεῖν (i.e. εἴρημαι) standardly and predominantly to refer back to his own exposition.

¹¹ There is only one parallel in the corpus (*Rh.* 1419b27; see next note), where *πρότερον* is used within a ten-word proximity to *εἴρηγται*. And even there *πρότερον* refers to what was stated earlier in *Aristotle's* text.

¹² These are: *An. pr.* 46a11 (οἱ δ' ἄρχαὶ τῶν συλλογισμῶν καθόλου μὲν εἴρηγται, 'the principles of deductions have been stated in general terms'), *Aristotle* is the agent; *De an.* 403a2 (διαλεκτικῶς εἴρηγται καὶ κενῶς ἅπαντες, 'they [i.e. the formulas] have been spoken only for the sake of the argument and vacuously'), the agent is *Aristotle*; *Eth. Nic.* 1117a28 (οἱ τε δὴ ἀνδρείοι εἴρηγται, 'the brave have been described'), the agent is *Aristotle*; *Eth. Nic.* 1127a18–19 (οἱ μὲν πρὸς ἡδονὴν καὶ λύπην ὀμιλοῦντες εἴρηγται, 'after those who are in company with people for pleasure and pain have been described'), the agent is *Aristotle*; *Rh.* 1419b18 (εἴρηγται οἱ τόποι, 'the commonplaces have been stated'), the agent is *Aristotle*; *Rh.* 1419b27 (εἴρηγται δὲ καὶ τούτων οἱ τόποι πρότερον, 'the commonplaces of these too have been stated before'), the agent is *Aristotle*.

¹³ In *Rh.* 1371b16 (ὅθεν καὶ αἱ παροιμίαι εἴρηγται, 'hence the proverbs are said') the agent is any Greek speaker.

¹⁴ Kotwick (n. 9), 99–177.

Metaphysics editor¹⁵ or scholar has recognized that Alexander's *Metaphysics* text differs from ours in line 993a14. This oversight may at least in part be due to the fact that Alexander quotes lines 993a11–16 not in the section where he comments on A 10 but at an earlier point, specifically in his commentary on A 7.¹⁶ According to Alexander's testimony,¹⁷ his *Metaphysics* exemplar read in lines 13–15:

Arist. *Metaph.* A 10, 993a13–15 (according to Alexander's text)

<p>ἀλλ' ἀμυδρῶς [14] ταύτας καὶ τρόπον μὲν τινα ἀπάσας, ὡς καὶ πρότερον εἴρηται, τρό- [15] πον δέ τινα οὐδαμῶς.</p>	<p>But [<i>sc.</i> they seek] these unclearly and in one way all of them, as has also been said earlier, but in another way not at all.</p>
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Note the following differences to our text: Alexander's text reads the accusative *ἀπάσας* instead of the nominative *πάσαι*, and then the phrase *ὡς καὶ πρότερον εἴρηται* ('as has also been said earlier') instead of *πρότερον εἴρηται* ('they have been said before'). The accusative *ἀπάσας* fits well with *ταύτας* in the first clause of the sentence; the construction of the first clause continues seamlessly in the second clause. According to this version, Aristotle says that the predecessors seek these causes 'dimly' or 'unclearly' and that they 'in one way' seek all of them. Here, in contrast to the text of our manuscripts, Aristotle inserts a back reference to his own previous words ('as has also been said earlier'). As I will show presently, this reference is to a specific statement in A 7. Then Aristotle closes, just as in the version of our text, by saying that 'in another way' the predecessors seek those causes 'not at all'.

Why is Alexander's text, compared with the text in our manuscripts, more likely the original text? An immediate answer is because Alexander's text is free of all three oddities that we find in the text of our manuscripts. First, the syntactical oddity of a switch from an implied active verb to an explicit passive construction is healed. There is no switch in Alexander's text, but the verb, implied from the previous sentence, as well as the corresponding subject and object are consistent throughout. Second, and even more importantly, Aristotle uses the formula (*ὡς καὶ*) *πρότερον εἴρηται* regularly in other works to refer to an earlier statement,¹⁸ while the combination of *πρότερον* and *εἴρηται* (read in the text of our manuscripts) is without parallel. Since we are here

¹⁵ The alternative reading is not mentioned in the edition by Bekker (1831), nor in those by Schwegler (1847), Bonitz (1848) (which is especially surprising, given that Bonitz edited Alexander's commentary before he edited Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and had an intimate knowledge of Alexander's text), Christ (1895), Ross (1924), Jaeger (1957) or Primavesi (2012).

¹⁶ However, regarding the difference in line 993a16–17 (*καὶ τὸ πρότον*), which I have mentioned above, Jaeger and Ross made use of that passage.

¹⁷ Alex. Aphr. *In Metaph.* 63.26–31 Hayduck: ἐπὶ τέλει τοῦ βιβλίου τούτου αὐτὸς οὕτως λέγει 'ὅτι μὲν οὖν τὰς εἰρημένους ἐν τοῖς Φυσικοῖς αἰτίας ζητεῖν εὐόικασι πάντες, καὶ τούτων ἐκτὸς οὐδεμίαν ἔχουμεν εἶπειν, δῆλον καὶ ἐκ τῶν πρότερον εἰρημένων: ἀλλ' ἀμυδρῶς ταύτας, καὶ τρόπον μὲν τινα ἀπάσας, ὡς καὶ πρότερον εἴρηται, τρόπον δέ τινα οὐδαμῶς: ψελλιζομένη γὰρ ἔοικεν ἢ πρώτη φιλοσοφία περὶ πάντων, ἔτε νέα καὶ κατ' ἀρχὰς οὐσα.' I have checked online (in the digital repository of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana) MS Laurentianus Plut. 85.1 (= O), which is a crucial witness to Alexander's commentary that Hayduck did not consult; it confirms Hayduck's text.

¹⁸ The combination of *πρότερον* and *εἴρηται* (within six words) appears 290 times in Aristotle's corpus. Here are some examples of the combination introduced by a comparison: *Eth. Nic.* 1135a23 ὥσπερ καὶ πρότερον εἴρηται, *Eth. Nic.* 1177a11 καθάπερ καὶ πρότερον εἴρηται, *Hist. an.* 535a5 ὥσπερ καὶ πρότερον εἴρηται, *Poet.* 1450b13 ὥσπερ πρότερον εἴρηται, *Top.* 139a32 καθάπερ καὶ πρότερον εἴρηται.

at the beginning of the last chapter of Book A, back-references to earlier parts of the book are in order. And we already encountered one in the first sentence of the chapter. Third, there is no odd change in focus of what Aristotle is saying. The entire sentence is consistently about how the *predecessors* searched for the four causes: in a sense they got them all, yet in another they missed them entirely.

Could, however, the smoothness of Alexander's text be the result of a correction made to the text, either one that aimed at smoothness or one that stemmed from the expectation of a back reference? This possibility cannot be completely ruled out, but it can be shown to be very unlikely for two reasons.

First, the genesis of the error that I claim occurred in the text of our manuscripts can be fairly easily reconstructed. From the original sequence of letters ΠΑΣΑΣΩΣΚΑΙΠΟΤΕΡΟΝ resulted ΠΑΣΑΙΠΟΤΕΡΟΝ by the following simple mistake: a scribe wrote ΠΑΣ... and instead of continuing the word with the ending ...ΑΣ (accusative plural) he jumped a few letters ahead (leaving out ΑΣΩΣΚ) and completed it with the ending ...ΑΙ (nominative plural). The letters ΑΙ were originally the last two letters of the word καί (ἀπάσ-ας, ὡς κ-αὶ πρότερον —> πᾶσ-αι πρότερον). To make the resulting sentence intelligible, the verb form was then adjusted from the singular εἴρηται to the plural εἴρηνται.

Second, Alexander's reading makes better sense in the bigger picture, as it opens up new vistas about Aristotle's verdict of his predecessors, the status and function of chapter 10, which had been questioned by Jaeger, and hence even the unity of Book A.

On the basis of the new reading, we can see more clearly what Aristotle is doing at the beginning of chapter 10. First, in lines 993a11–13 (see text above), he starts off by summarizing the results of his discussion in the previous chapters: his predecessors searched for the same causes that he presented in the *Physics* and for no others besides these. This result strengthens the suspicion he already expressed in chapter 7 (988a20–22), where he gave an interim summary of his discussion in chapters 3–6. Thus, when Aristotle says it 'is clear from what has been said before' (993a13), he is referring to what he said at the beginning of chapter 7.¹⁹ The relevant lines are:

Arist. *Metaph.* A 7, 988a20–3

ὅμως δὲ τοσοῦτόν γ' ἔχομεν ἐξ αὐτῶν,
 [21] ὅτι τῶν λεγόντων περὶ ἀρχῆς καὶ
 αἰτίας οὐθεις ἔξω τῶν ἐν [22] τοῖς περὶ
 φύσεως ἡμῖν διωρισμένων εἴρηκεν,
 ἀλλὰ πάντες [23] ἀμυδρῶς μὲν ἐκείνων
 δέ πως φαίνονται θιγγάνοντες.

And yet this much we can take from
 them, that of those who speak about
 principle and cause no one has named
 a cause outside of those defined by us
 in the *Physics*, but (that) all evidently
 have touched on them, albeit unclearly
 and vaguely.

On the basis of our new reading in line 993a14, we can now see that Aristotle makes another reference to the passage in chapter 7. While the first reference concerns the question whether the predecessors sought a cause outside those stated in the *Physics*, the new, second reference concerns the question of how and to what extent they sought those causes. Crucially and in contrast to the first reference, the second reference does not simply repeat a point made in chapter 7, but corrects or revises the view expressed in chapter 7.

¹⁹ See Cooper (n. 1), 337–40 for an extensive discussion of the implication of 'also' (καί).

I will briefly spell this out. According to the new reading that I reconstructed from Alexander's commentary, Aristotle says 'But [*sc.* they seek] these in an unclear way (ἀμυδρῶς) and in one way all of them, as has also been said earlier'. This is a reference specifically to chapter 7, lines 988a22–3.²⁰ The correspondence is clear owing to the adverb ἀμυδρῶς, which is used in both passages. In chapter 7 (988a22–3), Aristotle states that his predecessors spoke about the causes 'in an unclear way' (ἀμυδρῶς) and that they 'somehow' or 'vaguely' (πῶς) touched upon the causes. In chapter 10, Aristotle similarly states that his predecessors searched for the causes 'in an unclear way' (ἀμυδρῶς) and that in some sense they got them all, but then continues by saying that 'in another way **not at all**' (τρόπον δέ τινα οὐδαμῶς). In between the repetition of the view of chapter 7 and the correction of that very view Aristotle added a back-reference to make sure that the reader recognized the correction as a *correction* and adjustment of his previous statement. This correction of his own previous view is justified after Aristotle took in chapters 8–9 a second look at certain predecessors, but with a focus slightly different from the one he had in chapters 3–6.²¹ The new back-reference in chapter 10 (993a14) shows that Aristotle explicitly adjusts the verdict he reached in chapter 7. By means of this back-reference, Aristotle highlights that the somewhat grim conclusion he offers in A 10 is a correction of the milder view he expressed earlier in chapter 7. After his renewed investigation in chapters 8–9, he must now conclude that in a sense they really did not get it at all.

That Aristotle explicitly refers back to chapter 7 and explicitly revises his earlier interim result makes it possible to rule out Werner Jaeger's influential but misleading thesis about the origin and status of chapter 10. Jaeger argued that Aristotle wrote A 10 as a later version of A 7 with the intention to replace the latter by the former. A later editor then attached what we know as chapter 10 in lack of a better place to the end of the book.²² Now that we have at the beginning of A 10 a new back-reference to A 7 that explicitly revises the view expressed in A 7, we have acquired a strong piece of evidence that Book A is not a jumbled patchwork, as scholars have suggested, but that Aristotle composed the book as a series of consecutive steps in a didactic process of fully understanding his predecessors' contribution to wisdom (*sophia*). A 7 and A 10 are not randomly placed duplicates but interconnected parts of a finely crafted whole. Aristotle composed A 7 to give an interim report of the results of his discussion in chapters 3–6, and then A 10 to give a full and revised report of the results of chapters 3–6 and 8–9.²³ The new back-reference that comes to light through the testimony in Alexander's commentary helps us to appreciate the purpose of chapter 10 within the architecture of Book A.

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²⁰ These lines follow seamlessly the lines to which the first back-reference in chapter 10 (line 993a13) refers.

²¹ See O. Primavesi, 'Second thoughts on some Presocratics', in C. Steel (ed.), *Aristotle's Metaphysics Alpha* (Oxford, 2012), 225–63, at 226–7.

²² W. Jaeger, *Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Metaphysik des Aristoteles* (Berlin, 1912), 14–21; cf. also M.E. Kotwick, 'Die Entwicklungsgeschichte of a text: on Werner Jaeger's edition of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*', in C.G. King and R. Lo Presti (edd.), *Werner Jaeger: Wissenschaft, Bildung, Politik* (Berlin and Boston, 2017), 171–208, at 175–7.

²³ Cf. Cooper (n. 1), 339, who also defends the status of A 10 against Jaeger, but does not build his argument on the fact that A 10 contains an explicit correction of A 7, something that becomes visible only through the new reading I propose here.