Aristotle’s Phenomenology of Form:
The Shape of Beings that Become

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Abstract: Scholars often assume that Aristotle uses the terms *morphē* and *eidos* interchangeably. Translators of Aristotle’s works rarely feel the need to carry the distinction between these two Greek terms over into English. This article challenges the orthodox view that *morphē* and *eidos* are synonymous. Careful analysis of texts from the *Categories*, *Physics*, and *Metaphysics* in which these terms appear in close proximity reveals a fundamental tension of Aristotle’s thinking concerning the being of natural beings. *Morphē* designates the form as inseparable from the matter in which it inheres, while *eidos*, because it is more easily separated from matter, is the vocabulary used to determine form as the ontological principle of the composite individual. The tension between *morphē* and *eidos*—between form as irreducibly immanent and yet somehow separate—is then shown to animate Aristotle’s phenomenological approach to the being of natural beings. This approach is most clearly enacted in Aristotle’s biology, a consideration of which concludes the essay.

For there is also a need to examine how it is necessary to speak about each thing, but it is necessary not to say more than how [each thing] is.

—Metaphysics Z.4, 1030a27–28

For in all natural beings there is something wonderful.

—Parts of Animals I.5, 645a16–17

A perplexing reduplication appears in the way Aristotle speaks about form. At decisive moments in the *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, we hear what sounds like an echo, for when Aristotle designates the formal side of the composite, he often says *μορφή* and *εἴδος* together. Our predecessors have, for the most part, heard this as a simple repetition. They either explicitly assert that the two terms are synonymous, or implicitly suggest as much by translating the two by the single
word ‘form.’ Although it is perhaps tempting to hear “ἡ μορφή καὶ τὸ εἴδος” as a mere repetition of the same, Aristotle’s insistence that the various ways we speak about beings disclose something of the truth of those beings advises against this. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to follow the intuition that guides so much of Aristotle’s own thinking by attending to the ways μορφή and εἴδος echo off of one another, each pulling in a direction of its own.

To anticipate: if μορφή, as shape, remains irreducibly connected to the contingent individual, and εἴδος, as the ‘look’ of something or its class, kind or species, pulls in the direction of the visual and the universal, then it is perhaps no hyperbole to suggest that Aristotle’s thinking concerning the meaning of finite, sensible οὐσία is haunted by the tension between μορφή and εἴδος. This tension is heard most poignantly in the middle books of the Metaphysics where the attempt to define οὐσία and so to establish a general ἐπιστήμη of being qua being collides with Aristotle’s unwillingness to sacrifice the ontological autarchy of the individual for the sake of such a science. In the face of this tension, Aristotle’s thinking turns to a sort of phenomenology that dwells in intimate association with natural beings, deriving its definitions from a rigorous engagement with the things themselves. By listening attentively to how Aristotle says μορφή and εἴδος together in the Physics and Metaphysics, we will hear how his ontological engagement with finite, sensible οὐσία leads to the biological works in which precisely such a phenomenological approach is pursued.

**A Preliminary Sense of the Difference: The Categories**

In order to gain a preliminary sense of the subtle but important difference between μορφή and εἴδος, let us listen to how form is said in the Categories. In chapter eight, Aristotle considers the various senses of τοιοτήτα, or qualities. The fourth sense he comes upon is that of the μορφή or σχῆμα of each being, that is, its shape or outward appearance. Aristotle says: “And each being, with respect to its μορφή, is said to be something of a certain sort.” Here μορφή is closely associated with σχῆμα, both of which are understood to designate the physical shape of something and so to determine the sort of being it is. However, in the Categories such qualitative determinations are not ontologically substantive and so μορφή does not yet seem to take on the ontological significance it will have in the Physics and Metaphysics. Here it is a mere quality.

And yet already in the Categories there is a tendency to ascribe some degree of ontological efficacy to certain kinds of qualities. Specifically, a secondary οὐσία, that is, an εἴδος or a γένος, is said to signify “a certain quality.” But secondary οὐσίαι are not mere qualities, like the white that signifies a quality and nothing more; rather, as Aristotle writes, “the εἴδος or the γένος determines the quality in relation to an οὐσία, for it signifies that an οὐσία is qualified in some way.” Here Aristotle suggests that secondary οὐσίαι determine the being of primary οὐσίαι.
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in some ontologically more fundamental way than do mere qualities. However, we hear in these texts a certain hesitancy, for although Aristotle seems to ascribe some ontological efficacy to the εἴδος, atomic individuals retain ontological primacy.

This hesitancy is heard in the way Aristotle attends to how beings are said—λέγεσθαι. To be said-of a subject is to determine that subject in some ontologically significant way: being is disclosed through λόγος. Yet what is said-of a subject, τὸ εἴδος, is itself said to be “a certain quality” [ποιὸν τι σημαίνει]. As so often in Aristotle, we must attend to the little indefinite pronoun ‘τι,’ for it marks at once Aristotle’s reluctance to grant εἴδος ultimate ontological authority over the individual and yet also his unwillingness to reduce the εἴδος to a mere quality. While such qualities are not said-of subjects, they do inhere in them. The fundamental difference, then, between εἴδος and μορφή in the Categories is that εἴδος, as that which is said-of a subject but not present-in a subject, determines the being of οὐσία in a way that μορφή, which merely inhere in the subject, does not. Ironically, however, when Aristotle begins to think the ύποκειμένον, or underlying subject, itself as a composite, as he does in the Physics, these two ways of saying form are brought together. The said-of dimension of τὸ εἴδος is posited as inhering-in the individual itself—εἴδος becomes more like μορφή. While for its part, μορφή becomes more like εἴδος insofar as it is given an ontological role in determining the being of the composite. Let us turn to the Physics, where this transformation of form can be heard most distinctly.

Thinking μορφή and εἴδος Together: The Physics

Having established that accidental change requires three principles, two contraries and a ύποκειμένον, Aristotle attempts in Physics I.7 to map this model onto unqualified becoming or substantial generation. In turning his attention to the generation of natural beings, however, a certain ambiguity emerges in the three principle model of change, for the ύποκειμένον does not seem to remain constantly present through the process by which natural beings come into being. Aristotle’s own example suggests as much, for even as he claims that “there is always something underlying from which that which is generated [comes to be],” he appeals to the example of plants and animals that come from a σπέρματος, or seed. The problem here is that the seed itself changes and develops during the process of generation. An implicit recognition of the inadequacy of the static conception of the ύποκειμένον to account for natural generation leads to a sort of crises in Aristotle’s thinking concerning the being and becoming of τὰ φυσικά. This crises is marked by Aristotle’s vacillation concerning the precise number of principles required to account for natural generation.

Such moments of vacillation allow us to hear Aristotle’s thinking at work. In this case, the question concerning whether the principles of being and becoming
are two or three is wrapped up with and worked out through the tension between 
μορφή and εἶδος. This is most evident in the difficult second half of Physics I.7 
where, after Aristotle introduces the example of the seed and suggests that that 
which is generated is always a composite, he gives the following account of the 
meaning of the terms ὑποκείμενον and ἀντικείμενον: “I mean by the to be opposite 
[ἀντικεῖσθαι], the unmusical, but by the to lie under [ὑποκεῖσθαι] the human being, 
and the absence of σχήμα [ἀσχημοσύνην] and the absence of μορφή [ἀμορφίαν] 
and the disorder is an opposite, but the bronze or stone or gold is a ὑποκείμενον.”
Here as Aristotle begins to think the composite in terms of the distinction between 
form and matter, the gesture is not to the concrete appearance of an εἶδος in a 
particular parcel of matter, but to an absence of μορφή, to a sort of disorder that 
uncovers a deeper, more dynamic understanding of the ὑποκείμενον. In Physics 
I.9, the ὑποκείμενον is determined first as matter and then, in a decisive move, 
as δύναμις, potency: the power that reaches out to, indeed, yearns for its form. However, at the end of Physics I.7, the vocabulary of δύναμις is not yet deployed 
to think the ὑποκείμενον in relation to στερησίς, or the deprivation of form. Here 
the strange appearance of absence gives rise to a vacillation in Aristotle’s thinking 
concerning the number of principles of being and becoming.

Aristotle’s insistence that “everything that is generated is generated from a 
ὑποκείμενον and a μορφή” suggests that the principles are two in number. However, he goes on to consider that the ὑποκείμενον is itself one in number but two in εἶδος. The shift from the vocabulary of μορφή to εἶδος allows Aristotle to isolate 
the formal dimension of the composite and thus to think more deeply into the 
dynamics of its coming into being. Once this shift is accomplished, Aristotle goes 
on to suggest that in one sense we need to speak about the principles as two: the 
ὑποκείμενον and the εἶδος, which itself seems to be responsible for the order and 
unity of the composite. But in another sense, the principles need to be spoken of 
as three, for the deprivation, or στερησίς, seems also to play a role along with the εἶδος in determining the being of the composite. The tension at work in Aristotle’s 
thinking at this point is well expressed in the following passage: “And it is clear 
that something must underlie the contraries and that the contraries are two. But in 
another way this is not necessary, for it would be sufficient for one of the contraries 
to produce the change by its absence or presence.” The shift in vocabulary from 
μορφή to εἶδος brings with it a shift in the way in which the form is understood 
to function ontologically. Now the very presence or absence of the εἶδος is said to 
produce the change. Generation is here thought as a kind of coming to presence.

Although the vocabulary of στερησίς allows Aristotle to think generation as 
the coming-to-presence of an εἶδος, the danger of this sort of formulation is that 
the ontological principle will be hypostasized, posited as existing outside of the 
concrete composite whose principle it is. To mitigate against this, Aristotle draws 
our attention away from a consideration of form in isolation from the composite
back to the intimate connection between the ὑποκείμενον and its form. Here the vocabulary of μορφή returns. Aristotle writes:

But the nature of the ὑποκείμενον is known by analogy. For as bronze is to a statue, or wood is to a bed, or as that which is shapeless [ἄμορφον] before it takes on the μορφή is to any of the other things that have μορφή, so this [that is, the nature of the ὑποκείμενον] is to an ὀύσια or to a τόδε τι or to being. This then is one principle, although it is not one nor a being in the manner of a τόδε τι, and one principle is the λόγος of it, and also there is what is contrary to this, the στέρησις.15

This passage expresses a transformation of the meaning of both the ὑποκείμενον and the εἴδος. Whereas in the Categories, the ὑποκείμενον had referred simply to a determinate atomic individual like a horse or a human being, here it is understood analogically as matter before its taking shape. The absence of the vocabulary of δύναμις can be heard in the way Aristotle emphasizes the shifted conception of the ὑποκείμενον negatively by insisting that although the ὑποκείμενον is one principle, it is not one in the sense of being a τόδε τι — that is, it is not a demonstrably identifiable individual. For its part, the εἴδος, which had just been imbued with new ontological authority, is again called μορφή so as to emphasize its internal operation in determining the being of the τόδε τι. When, at the end of the passage, the formal dimension of the composite is again isolated, the μορφή is called λόγος and στέρησις emerges as a third kind of principle.

We hear in this confluence of ways of saying form — μορφή, εἴδος, λόγος, στέρησις — a thinking assiduously attentive to the manner in which the τόδε τι comes to presence. In Physics II.1, Aristotle further refines the complex interaction of these various ways of saying form as he attends ever more closely to the coming to presence of τὰ φυσικά: “Thus, nature is said in one way as the first matter underlying each of the things having in themselves the principle of movement and change, but in another way, as ἡ μορφή καὶ τὸ εἴδος τὸ κατὰ τὸν λόγον — as the shape, that is, the look, the one in accordance with speech.”16 The translation is admittedly awkward; but this is to allow what is expressed in the words to be heard more acutely. The καὶ here is taken as appositional so that ἡ μορφή may be heard to say τὸ εἴδος, but not just any εἴδος, specifically that εἴδος which is “disclosed in speech.”17 Here the εἴδος that in the Categories had been heard to pull toward the universal and the visual is at once tethered to μορφή, which holds firm to the contingent individual, and mediated by λόγος, the manner in which beings are disclosed in speech.

In this shift from the universal and visual to the contingent and auditory, a certain temporality emerges; it is the temporality endemic to the very coming-to-presence of τὰ φυσικά and expressed in the following sentence: “for what is bone or flesh in potency [δύναμει] has not yet [οὔτ’ ἔχει πεπο] its nature nor does it exist by nature until [πρὶν] it takes on the εἴδος τὸ κατὰ τὸν λόγον, by which we say what flesh or bone is when defining it.”18 We hear in this “not yet” / “until” an
interval that escapes the λόγος; yet it is an interval that resonates in every attempt to delimit the very coming-into-being of beings that become. These small words, ὀὐτὲ . . . τῷ, gesture to an absence that cannot be captured by the grasp of the λόγος. This interval, this absence, forces Aristotle’s thinking to vacillate, indeed, almost to repeat itself: “Thus, in another way, the nature of things having in themselves the principle of motion would be ἡ μορφή καὶ τὸ εἴδος, which is not separate other than in speech [κατὰ τὸν λόγον].”19 Although we may speak of the nature of a being in terms of its form, it is impossible to separate out what a being is save through a certain kind of speaking. Thus, immediately after asserting that “nature is μορφή,” Aristotle must offer a sort of palinode: “but the μορφή and the φύσις is said in two ways, for the στέρησις, deprivation, is somehow [πῶς] εἴδος.”20 Aristotle’s tenacious engagement with the coming-to-presence of τὰ φυσικά has forced him to think absence itself as a sort of presence. The little word πῶς however testifies to the impossibility of such an act of hubris—this ‘somehow,’ this ‘πῶς,’ points to the very limits of λόγος.

These limits resonate in the various ways Aristotle himself says form. Nowhere is this heard more acutely than in the middle books of the Metaphysics, where an extraordinary set of articulations emerge as Aristotle puts language in the service of a thinking that remains assiduously loyal to the phenomenon that is οὐσία. In order to perceive this, however, we must listen with different ears; for the formulations that disclose the limits of λόγος most distinctly have been systematically muted by a dense sediment of interpretation that has calcified Aristotle’s living, dynamic and flexible language into a codified philosophical lexicon.

Form is Said in Many Ways: The Middle Books of the Metaphysics

Let us listen to yet another way Aristotle says form. In Metaphysics Z.3, Aristotle again brings μορφή and εἴδος together as he distinguishes the various senses of ὑποκείμενον:

[I]n one way it is said to be matter, in another μορφή, in a third, that which is from these. (By matter I mean, for example, bronze, by μορφή the shape of the outward appearance [τὸ σχήμα τῆς ἴδεας], by that which is from these the statue as a composite.) Thus, if the εἴδος is prior to and is being more than matter, then by the same λόγος it will be prior to that which is from both.21

Here the tension between μορφή and εἴδος is again heard, for Aristotle says μορφή as he links form intimately to the shape and appearance of the composite, but as he considers the ontological priority of form, he says εἴδος. This is an echo of the tension discernable in the Categories between the qualitative and ontological understanding of form. It is a tension that resonates through the middle books of the Metaphysics as Aristotle seeks to define the concrete composite οὐσία.
In Z.4 Aristotle introduces the phrase τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι to designate that which each being is said to be in virtue of itself.²² Let us allow the oddity of the formulation to hover in the air, as the familiarity of the traditional translation, ‘essence,’ mutes the manner in which the phrase itself both seeks to designate that which makes each being what it is and fails to capture it completely. At first Aristotle seems to identify the τί ἦν εἶναι with that which is itself individual: “But the τί ἦν εἶναι is just a τόδε τί, a this.”²³ However, immediately thereafter, having insisted that there is only a definition when the name and its λόγος signify something primary, he suggests “[t]he τί ἦν εἶναι will belong to nothing that is not the εἶδος of a γένος.”²⁴ Traditionally this sentence has been rendered something like: “[t]he essence will belong to nothing that is not the species of a genus.”²⁵ The use of εἶδος here in close conjunction with γένος legitimizes such translations, for indeed, as we have heard, εἶδος carries with it something of the universal. In the Categories it was precisely the capacity to be said of multiple subjects that won it the title of οὐσία, albeit an οὐσία of secondary rank. It is no surprise, then, that as Aristotle seeks to further delineate the ontological role form plays in determining the nature of the composite, the vocabulary of μορφή should give way to that of εἶδος.

However, even here a tension can be heard, for Aristotle identifies the τί ἦν εἶναι both with that which is a τόδε τί and with the εἶδος. Further, in Z.5 Aristotle seems to recognize that the sorts of beings—that like the snub and indeed all natural beings—that have matter as part of their nature cannot be defined exclusively in terms of their εἶδος.²⁶ The τί ἦν εἶναι of such beings must include reference to matter as well as form. Here we feel the pull of μορφή once again—form must be thought together with matter, as determining principles of the composite. In response to this, Aristotle turns his attention in Z.7 to the manner in which beings come into being—and we again hear the voice of μορφή, though here speaking through its envoy, σχῆμα: “We say what a bronze sphere is in both ways: both with respect to the matter when we say that it is bronze and with respect to the εἶδος [when we say] that it is this sort of shape [σχῆμα]; for this shape is the kind into which it is first placed. Thus, the bronze sphere has matter in its λόγος.”²⁷ In this passage, Aristotle links εἶδος to σχῆμα in order to insist upon the need to include matter in the account of composite individuals. He goes on to suggest that our common way of speaking hints at how matter must be mentioned in the definition of such composites, for “whenever a being has been generated [ὁταν γένηται], that from which as matter it is generated is sometimes called, not that, but that-γ, for example, the statue is not stone, but stony.”²⁸

This peculiarity of language is heard, however, only when the being already ‘has become,’ ὁταν γένηται,’ that is, while we can speak of matter before it becomes a determinate being and we can articulate the material dimension of that being once it has already come into being, we are left with only a sort of gesture to the very coming into being of the being itself. If we listen attentively, we can hear precisely
such a gesture to the coming to presence of being in the vocabulary Aristotle deploys in his attempts to think the meaning of ὀντία. It is heard in the phrase ‘τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι’, which speaks at once the imperfect tense of the Greek ‘εἶναι’, ‘to be’, and its infinitive. The what is it question can only be answered in terms of the what–it-was-to-be, τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι. The imperfect carries with it progressive aspect in past time, and although we are told that in this phrase the imperfect has no grammatically temporal sense, nevertheless, the phrase itself points to a certain temporality. For while the infinitive affirms the very presence of the being under consideration, the imperfect, with its progressive aspect, signifies that this presence is always already somehow past. The phrase speaks the temporality of the phenomenon in its very coming to presence through a λόγος that always comes too late. The ἦν marks the finitude of the λόγος through which beings come to presence.

The limit of this λόγος is again heard in Z.8 as Aristotle says form in yet another way: “But the [ἐδώς] signifies a such [τοιοῦδε]; and it is not a this and a definite being, but what one makes or generates is a such from a this, and when it has been generated [ὅταν γεννηθῇ], it is a such this [τὸδε τοιοῦδε].” Here a faint echo of the Categories, with its insistence that ἐδώς is a sort of quality, can be heard. Μορφή too, as inseparable from the composite, resonates in this passage, for Aristotle rejects the notion that ἐδώς is itself something definite and a this and thus capable of existing in separation from the composite. Yet what is most striking about the passage is the manner in which Aristotle gestures to the moment of individuation that remains inaccessible to λόγος. He does this in two ways. First, he uses a combination of demonstratives—‘τὸδε τοιοῦδε’—to get at something of the very coming to presence of the individual. These gestures operate on the very boundary of λόγος. As demonstratives, they are strange λόγοι intent on designating the trace of that which always escapes the grasp of the λόγος—the very phenomenality of the phenomena. Second, Aristotle uses the temporal clause in conjunction with a verb in the aorist tense, with its completed aspect (ὅταν γεννηθῇ), to emphasize that the moment of individuation has already occurred. Before and after remain within the sphere of the λόγος, for we may speak about a form prior to its inhering in some matter, or of a matter prior to its taking on form, and we can identify each being once it has already become, but its very coming-into-being remains muted and inaccessible. We must, with Aristotle, resort to linguistic gestures.

Such gestures operate on the frontier of the conceptual. In them we hear at once Aristotle’s intense loyalty to the phenomenality of the phenomena and his tenacious desire to know—ἐδέσαι: to see, to render conceptual, to subject to an ἐδώς—the very coming into being of beings that become. This tension can be heard in Metaphysics H.1, where Aristotle finally clarifies the meaning of τὸδε τί as it relates to matter, form and the composite:

Now an ὀντία is a ὑποκειμένον, and in one sense, it is matter (by matter I mean that which is not a τὸδε τί being-at-work [ἐνεργείᾳ] but is a τὸδε τί in potency),
in another sense it is the λόγος and the μορφή, which is a τόδε τι being separable in λόγος; and [in a] third [sense] it is that which is from both, of which alone there is generation and destruction, and which is simply separable.\(^{34}\)

Μορφή is heard here instead of εἴδος as Aristotle attempts to think form and matter together as principles of the composite. Μορφή connotes this intimate connection between the form and its composite. Yet μορφή is again linked to λόγος, to the very articulation of the being under consideration. While something like the formal dimension of the composite can be isolated in λόγος, this form cannot be reified into an εἴδος existing independently of the composite in which it is found.

However, in this passage we hear in the word ‘ἐνεργεία,’ being-at-work, yet another, and this will be the final and most decisive, way form is said by Aristotle. At the end of book Η, Aristotle is concerned to address an aporia that emerges when the cause of a being is posited as existing in separation from that being itself. When this is the case, it is not clear how to account for the unity of the individual; for if a human being is what it is by participating in the idea of the Animal and the Biped, which themselves exist independently of the human being, then the human being will be two, not one—namely Animal and Biped. Aristotle suggests, however, that “if, as we say, the one is matter, the other μορφή, and the one is in potency [δυνάμει], the other exists as being-at-work [ἐνεργείᾳ], that which is being sought no longer seems to be an aporia. . . . What is responsible for that which exists in potency to be at-work aside from that which produces in however many things of which there is generation? But nothing else is responsible for the potential sphere to be a sphere at-work, but this was the τί ἦν ἐίναι in each.”\(^{35}\) Here μορφή is said to designate the being-at-work of a being while matter is identified with potency. Further, μορφή is now linked to τί ἦν ἐίναι, which is understood to be an immanent principle of the being of the composite. Aristotle says μορφή here precisely because it points to form as intimately linked to the composite individual. However, the ontological efficacy that had been associated with εἴδος is now ascribed to μορφή which itself gives way to the vocabulary of τί ἦν ἐίναι and “being-at-work,” ἐνεργεία.\(^{36}\) These later two expressions mark a shift in Aristotle's thinking away from the static and structural toward the dynamic and functional. Indeed, while μορφή and εἴδος are structural designations, τί ἦν ἐίναι and ἐνεργεία point to the ontological importance of the manner in which the composite itself functions.\(^{37}\) This way of speaking about beings recognizes that the being of a given being is ineluctably linked to what that being does.

Despite Aristotle's ongoing tendency to elucidate the distinction between form, matter and the composite by appealing to heuristic examples taken from the sphere of human fabrication—a tendency that reinforces the structural over the functional—Aristotle's intense engagement with the manner in which natural beings themselves come into being has led him to think μορφή and εἴδος together. Indeed, both τί ἦν ἐίναι and ἐνεργεία are ways of saying form that combine the competing
thrusts of μορφή and εἶδος. If μορφή cannot be separated from the being in which it inheres and if εἶδος is an ontological principle capable of determining the very being of that in which it is the form, then τί ἦν εἶναι and ἐνεργεὶα say in a fundamental way μορφή and εἶδος together. To say ἦ μορφή καὶ τὸ εἶδος is to recognize that an account of the being of τὰ φυσικά must assiduously attend to the ways such beings appear, it will, in short, require a λόγος of their very βίοι, that is, a certain biology.

The Phenomenology of Life: Aristotle’s Biology

Aristotle’s biological works enact the very phenomenology of natural beings our analysis of the interaction between μορφή and εἶδος has suggested is required. These treatises do not present a taxonomy of the animal kingdom, but rather, as A. L. Peck suggests, they “collect data for ascertaining the causes of the observed phenomena.”38 This is accomplished by describing not animals so much as the similarities and differences between them.39 The incredible breadth of this approach can be felt at the beginning of the History of Animals, where Aristotle writes: “The differences of animals are those that relate to their manner of life [βίους], their activities [πράξεις], their habits [ἡθῶν] and their parts.”40 Aristotle’s biology is phenomenological: it describes the differences that emerge from the direct observation of animals existing in the world. Indeed, as Heidegger has suggested, “[ζ]ωή, for Aristotle, “is a concept of being, ‘life’ means a way of being, that is, a being-in-the-world. A living being is not simply present-at-hand, but rather is in a world in such a way that it has its world.”41 For this reason, the ὅρισμός, or definition, of such beings must rigorously attend to their manner of life, their activities, their habits as well as their parts, for only a λόγος of an animal’s being-at-work, its ἐνεργεία, can stand as an adequate account of the what-it-was-for-a-being-to-be, that is, of its τί ἦν εἶναι.

Thus, at the beginning of Parts of Animals, Aristotle takes issue with Democritus who, he says, seeks to define each animal exclusively in terms of its ‘σχῆμα’ or ‘μορφή.’ The problem with this, according to Aristotle, is that “though the configuration of a corpse has the same shape [μορφή], it is nevertheless not a human being,” for, as he goes on to say, it will no longer be able to do its work.42 Democritus spoke too simply. Although he was in a certain sense right to point to μορφή in his attempt to determine the being of animals, he failed to the think μορφή and εἶδος together in their intimate relation to matter, that is, he did not recognize that the being of each being is determined by its being-at-work, ἐνεργεία. An adequate account of the being of such beings cannot simply point to μορφή as shape, rather, it must describe in detail the manner of living, the actions, the habits and, indeed, the parts that manifest themselves as each animal functions in its world. As Aryeh Kosman puts it, “animals . . . exhibit most manifestly the fact that form and matter in substance-being is linked to the concepts of activity and the structures of potentiality which
empower that activity. For the being of an animal consists in its life functions, in
the characteristic activities and modes of living in which it engages.\textsuperscript{43}

Because natural beings are what they do, Aristotle’s biology must become a
phenomenology of life. Its intent is to first gather as many observations as possible
in order then to go on to consider their causes.\textsuperscript{44} Aristotle pursues this purpose
with the tenacity of an avid collector. However, as Walter Benjamin suggests, “there
is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and
order.”\textsuperscript{45} Throughout the biological works, we feel this tension in Aristotle’s “spe-
cial interest” in animals that seem to defy classification.\textsuperscript{46} The seal, for example,
exhibits characteristics belonging to both land animals and water animals; for
although, like land animals, they breathe air, do not take in water and sleep and
breed on land, like aquatic animals, they spend most of their time in water and
derive their food from it.\textsuperscript{47} Aristotle calls such creatures \textit{ἐπιμοφτερίζωντα}, beings
that tend toward both, or as Peck translates, “dualizers.”\textsuperscript{48} Apes, for example, tend
toward both bipeds and quadrupeds; while bats tend toward both land dwellers
and flyers.\textsuperscript{49} And while Aristotle may ultimately classify such animals in one or
the other of the categories toward which they tend, he seems to take a special
joy in subverting his own classifications. Such “dualizers” stand as reminders of
the limits of the \textit{λόγος} that seeks to set the animal kingdom into order. They are
symptoms of the tension of which Benjamin spoke.

This tension animates Aristotle’s phenomenological approach which at once
seeks a general account while refusing to sacrifice the phenomenon for the sake
of the theory, no matter how beautifully structured. This approach is poignantly
expressed in \textit{On Generation and Corruption}:

\begin{quote}
Inexperience is responsible for a weakening of the power to comprehend the
agreed upon facts [\textit{τὰ ὁμολογούμενα συνορᾶν}]. Hence those who are more at
home with the beings of nature are more able to lay down the sorts of prin-
ciples that admit of a wide and coherent development; while those whom a
disposition to long discussions has rendered unobservant of the facts too
easily show forth on the basis of a few observations.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Aristotle recognizes that any comprehensive view [\textit{συνορᾶν}] of the whole depends
upon dwelling in intimate association with the beings of nature. Yet, he is never willing
to sacrifice the phenomena for the sake of such a vision. He is at once driven to pos-
ing principles of wide and coherent development and yet aware that any principles
not firmly grounded in the phenomena quickly give way to dogmatism. In the face
of the allure of order, Aristotle remains ultimately loyal to the things themselves.

However, this tension between order and disorder is simply another expression
of the tension we have heard between \textit{ἐἶδος} and \textit{μορφή} at the level of form. For
it results from Aristotle’s unwillingness to permit the hegemony of the \textit{ἐἶδος} to
subvert the peculiarity of the phenomena. This loyalty to the phenomena forces
Aristotle to say \textit{μορφή} and \textit{ἐἶδος} together in order to think form as inseparably
bound to matter. The name for this, the dynamic identity of form and matter is ἐνεργεία, being-at-work. Yet, the very being-at-work which is the individual cannot be captured by the ἔλεος alone; it is not merely a matter of seeing, but also a saying of matter in its being-at-work. This λόγος of ἐνεργεία must tarry with the contingent individual and so become, quite literally, a λόγος of the phenomena. Such a phenomenology will at once rigorously attend to the λόγος through which beings come to presence and dwell in intimate association with their peculiar ways of being-in-the-world. Aristotle practices precisely such a phenomenology and so allows each being to express “something wonderful.”

Notes

1. See, for example, Aristotle, Aristotelis Physica (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 193a30–31 and 93b4. In these passages Aristotle explicitly says “ἡ μορφή καὶ τὸ ἔλεος.” While this is repeated on other occasions—as at Metaphysics 999b16, 1017b26; Generation of Animals, 730b14; and Generation and Corruption, 335a16, 21 and b6—for the most part, the two terms appear in close conjunction with one another.


5. Cat., 3b15–16.
6. Ibid., 3b19–21.
8. Ute Guzzoni recognizes the importance of *Phyics* I.7 when she suggests that in it we see Aristotle’s teaching concerning becoming itself coming into being. Cf. Ute Guzzoni, *Grund Und Allgemeinheit: Untersuchung Zum Aristotelischen Verständnis Der Ontologischen Gründe* (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1975), 32.
10. Ibid., 192a15–20.
11. Ibid., 190b20.
12. Ibid., 190b25.
13. Ibid., 190b27–191a3.
15. Ibid., 191a7–14.
24. Ibid., 1030a11–12.
28. Ibid., 1033a5–7.
recognizes the importance of the imperfect as expressing the progressive aspect of \( \varepsilon \iota \nu \alpha \tau \), but insists that it has “no temporal sense.” See Sachs, *Aristotle’s Physics*, 254.


31. For a detailed discussion of the manner in which the phrase \( \tau \delta \varepsilon \tau \) too gestures to the very coming to presence of the individual, see Long, *The Ethics of Ontology*, 86–93.

32. This use of the aorist was already heard at 1033a5–7; there, however, it was said in the middle voice rather than in the passive, as here.


35. Ibid., H.6, 1045a29–33.

36. Aristotle tends to write the dative, \( \varepsilon \nu \varepsilon \rho \gamma \varepsilon \iota \alpha \), when the being-at-work in question belongs to the composite of form and matter. The dative serves to differentiate the sense of \( \varepsilon \nu \varepsilon \rho \gamma \varepsilon \iota \alpha \) as it applies exclusively to form from its sense as designating composite as the active identity of form and matter. See Theodore Scalsatsas, “Substratum, Subject and Substance,” in *Aristotle’s Ontology*, ed. Anthony Preus and John P. Anton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 192 and 207n58.


44. See, for example, *HA* I.8, 491a11–13.


46. Aristotle et al., *Historia Animalium*, vol. III, 73.

47. See *HA* 566b27–567a12 and 697a30–b13.


49. For apes, see *PA* 689b32. Aristotle says they tend toward both human being and quadruped at *HA* 502a16. For bats, see *PA* 697a30–b13.