

Aristotle on Being and Unity within the Framework of Aporia XI

Aporia XI Çerçevesinde Aristoteles'in Varlık ve Birlik Görüşü

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Abstract: Metaphysics Book Beta includes a series of aporiai that stem from the treatment of Book Alpha. In Metaphysics B, it is understood that studying through the aporiai enables us to identify the knots binding us, to know the direction in which we must proceed, to recognize it when we have found what we are seeking, and to be competent judges of competing accounts. In other words, in Aristotle's Metaphysics, studying aporiai has a crucial role in his method of inquiry. In this paper, I will try to focus on one of the most complex aporiai in Metaphysics, which is the eleventh aporia that concerns the status of being and unity.

Keywords: Aporia, Metaphysics, Beta, Aristotle, being, unity.



It is necessary to inquire what being and one really are, on the supposition that another nature underlies them as subject.

(Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 996a1-5)

According to Aristotle, *aporiai* or perplexities/impasses are to be dealt with in Book B and tie our thinking up in knots. The word *ἀπορίᾱ* refers to “without a passage, path or way” and, in the domain of philosophy, this term has been used in the Plato’s dialogues and Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. According to Gelber (2017, p.4), the full meaning of *aporeseien an tis* is unclear. Whether it means “someone might be puzzled” or “someone might raise a puzzle” is under question. Gelber (2017, p.4) claims that the same is true about the use of the noun *aporia*. In other words, it is not clear whether *aporia* refers to a state of puzzlement or the difficulty that gives rise to puzzlement. In the book titled “*From Puzzles to Principles?: Essays on Aristotle's Dialectic*”, Garreth (1999, p.130) defines *aporia* as not a *state* of puzzlement, but rather a puzzle or conundrum or difficulty that produces, or is likely to produce, a state of puzzlement. Yet for Aristotle, philosophy begins with wonder and puzzlements. He says:

That it is not a productive science is clear from a consideration of the first philosophers. It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize; wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising questions about the greater matters too [...]
(*Metaphysics*, Alpha, 982^b10).

It is also important to note that the definition of *aporia* was also given in the *Topics*. At least, Aristotle gives a good overall characterization of the very notion of *aporia*. He says:

Aporia is not a characteristic of opposite reasonings...Moreover, people who define [it] in this way [i.e. who define *aporia* as an equality of opposite reasonings] put effect for cause, or cause for effect...[Rather] it would seem that the equality of opposite reasonings is the cause of *aporia*; for it is when we reason on both [sides of a question] and it appears to us that everything can come about either way, that we are in a state of *aporia* about which of the two ways to take up (*Topics*, VI.145b4-20).

Politis (2005, p.69) argues that, according to Aristotle, there is a crucial difference or distinction between two meanings of the term *aporia*:



(1) *aporia in the sense of the mental state of puzzlement and perplexity;*
and

(2) *aporia in the sense of particular puzzles and problems which, he says, are responsible for and the cause of the mental state of aporia.*

It is also crucial to note that Aristotle argues that the former sense is primary, and the latter is elicited from it. For Aristotle argues that we think what is responsible for our mental state of puzzlement (*aporia*) is, particular problems, that we call these problems: *aporiai* and this very conception of puzzlement goes back to Plato and Socratic dialogues. From the passage from *Topics* given above it is understood that for a problem or a question to be considered as an *aporia* must meet certain criteria: First, the problem or the question itself must lead to a state of puzzlement. Second, there must be two equally acceptable solutions to the problem. And third, these two acceptable solutions lead us to a state of being unable to choose which solution is correct. Therefore, puzzlement of the problem leads us to define the problem as *aporia* and the possible acceptable solutions lead us to an even deeper state of puzzlement since all acceptable solutions are pulling us in equally divergent directions (Karuzis, 2013, p.4).

Thus, it is understood that perplexities, impasses, and puzzlements – or *aporiai* – are the main sources of philosophy. Again, philosophy starts with these *aporiai* and a growing sense of wonder (*thauma*). If we are to interpret what is said by Aristotle, one cannot philosophize if there is no *aporia* and wonder. Thus, the question is how a person would philosophize when (s)he encounters an *aporia* and embrace his/her lack of knowledge. One possible answer to this question lies in these lines of Aristotle:

It is necessary, with a view to the science which we are investigating, that we first describe the questions which should first be discussed. These consist of all the divergent views which are held about the first principles; and also, of any other view apart from these which happens to have been overlooked. Now for those who wish to get rid of perplexities it is a good plan to go into them thoroughly; for the subsequent certainty is a release from the previous perplexities, and release is impossible when we do not know the knot. The perplexity of the mind shows that there is a "knot" in the subject; for in its perplexity, it is in much the same condition as men who are fettered: in both



cases, it is impossible to make any progress. Hence, we should first have studied all the difficulties, both for the reasons given and also because those who start an inquiry without first considering the difficulties are like people who do not know where they are going; besides, one does not even know whether the thing required has been found or not [...] (*Metaphysics*, Beta, 995^a25-30).

Furthermore, Aristotle claims that our knowing is closely linked with our ability to search in metaphysics and our awareness of various metaphysical *aporiai* is crucial. Aristotle says:

Those who search without first engaging with *aporiai* are like people who don't know where they need to be going; moreover, they do not even know whether or not they have found what they are searching for. For the end [of a search] is not clear to such a person, but it is clear to the person who has first raised *aporiai* [...] (*Metaphysics*, Beta, 995^a34).

These passages clearly show that the *aporiai* given in Book B are inherent in the subject matter of the science of metaphysics. As mentioned in the first lines of Book B, it is not possible to proceed in metaphysics without going over these *aporiai*. Problems must be clearly understood before we can fully grasp their solutions. Politis (2003, p.148) suggests that dealing with particular *aporiai* is both a necessary and sufficient condition for our knowing what is the *telos* or aim of a particular metaphysical search, hence for our ability to begin a search. For Politis (2003, p.145), what makes engaging with *aporiai* a necessary condition is that without it we are most likely become people who do not know where we need to be going and thus, the *telos* or the end is not clear to us. Furthermore, it is a sufficient condition since the end of a search is clear to the person who has first came up with *aporiai*. Awareness of particular *aporiai* and engaging with them enable us to understand the end of the search when we find it and hence what enables us to conclude a search. Thus, we could argue that a proper engagement with *aporiai* encourages progress of a search, and this progress might result with resolving or untying the knots we were previously puzzled with. Resolving a particular *aporia* does not necessarily mean that the knots or the puzzle is fully untied. Rather, making progress towards a solution can also be considered as an integral part of resolving a particular *aporia*. Therefore, a successful journey towards untying the knots means success in this search. Aristotle says:



[...] For to someone like that the end is not clear, whereas to a person who has already grasped the puzzles it is clear. Further, a person is necessarily in a better position to make a judgment when – as if they were opposing parties in a court case – he has heard all the contending arguments [...] (Metaphysics, Beta, 995^{b1}).

In the opening lines of the Book B, Aristotle does not claim that the perspective of our ability to search is about searching in metaphysics, but rather metaphysics is the science we are seeking. Thus, it would not be wrong to claim that the metaphysics itself is an aporetic search.

Another relevant question is that how *aporiai* would contribute to one's seeking of knowledge. It could be argued that there are four possible ways for such contribution. First, recognition of a particular aporia leads to a motivation for a search. Second, recognition of a particular aporia provides our search with a cause and a direction. Third, *aporiai* provides us with criteria about whether we are right on track in our search yet there is still no complete clarity. Finally, a relevant combination of particular *aporiai* enables us to achieve definitions. For example, according to Aristotle, metaphysics could be characterized through the *aporiai* given in the book.

As mentioned earlier, all of the Metaphysics B is devoted to fifteen *aporiai*, and according to Halper (1985, p.1) these *aporiai* are originated from Platonism. Halper (1985, p.1) notes that there are no clues about how Aristotle has constructed these fifteen *aporiai* and the path through which these *aporiai* constructed remains in the shadows by our lack of knowledge of Aristotle's contemporaries and of the discussions in Plato's Academy. One claim is that the main source of these *aporiai* are actually the former philosophers and Aristotle's disagreement with them. If it is true, that when raising a question, Aristotle discusses the views of preceding Greek philosophers. We could name this method as the dialectical method, in which such reputable views are discussed and set a path for an original solution that is superior to the original views (Karuzis, 2013, p.13). It could also be argued that these fifteen *aporiai* could be studied in two main sections. While a group of *aporiai* (1-4, 7) are about the metaphysics and the possibility of metaphysics, some others are particular and specific *aporiai* in the field of metaphysics. Metaphysics B has been at the focal point of the philosophers and scholars since they troubled Aristotle and remained



unsolved when he wrote *Metaphysics B*. In this paper, we will try to focus on one of the most complex *aporiai* in *Metaphysics*, which is the eleventh *aporia* given below:

The Eleventh *Aporia*: Further, the most difficult one of all and the one involving the most puzzles – whether the one and being are not, as the Pythagoreans and Plato used to say, another thing, but rather the substance of beings, or whether this is not so but the underlying subject is another thing, which Empedocles says is love, someone else, fire, someone else, water or air. (*Metaphysics*, Beta, 996^a1)

As mentioned above, Aristotle notes that even a theoretical grasp of this *aporia* is difficult. However, tackling this *aporia* is important and necessary for acquiring the knowledge of truth. We can rephrase the *aporia* as a question or puzzle about whether unity and being are the substance of things or are they not? *Aporia II* starts with the question whether being and unity are the substance of things. However, the argument immediately switches its focus on the problem of whether being and unity have the mode of existence that they would require in order to be the substance of things, or indeed to be the primary principle or the *arkhe*. Bell (2000, p.2), implies that it is not difficult to see how Aristotle's phrasing of the question invites the interpretation in terms of a distinction between substances and attributes. Then, the problem is whether being and unity are *ousiai*, and if they are not *ousiai*, then they will be attributes of some subject.

Cavini (2009, p.179) notes that this *aporia* divides the whole Greek metaphysical tradition. One of the main reasons for this division is that *Aporia II* includes two superlatives namely as “*the most difficult and the most necessary*”. Such difficulty stems from the fact that the notions of being and unity are the most universal yet the furthest from perception. In Book Beta, Aristotle asks the question “whether being and the oneness are *ousiai* (substances) of things-that-are, and whether each of these is not being something else”, as Plato, Parmenides and the Pythagoreans say, or “whether we must ask what being and the one are, there being some other underlying nature [of which these are predicated],” as the physicists say (*Metaphysics*, 1001^a5-8).

As mentioned above, such difficulties divide the Greek metaphysics



(natural philosophers on the one hand, Plato, Parmenides, and the Pythagoreans on the other). Furthermore, aporia 11 deals with the main principles of philosophy. Cavini (2009, p.176) also claims that this aporia is historically important and this importance must be underlined. This historical importance is, as mentioned earlier, is that it is the breaking point between the physicists and the Pythagoreans, as mentioned in Metaphysics Book Alpha 987^a13-19:

[...] The Pythagoreans, while they likewise spoke of two principles, made this further addition, which is peculiar to them: they believed, not that the Limited and the Unlimited are separate entities, like fire or water or some other such thing, but that the Unlimited itself and the One itself are the essence of those things of which they are predicated, and hence that number is the essence of all things [...] (Metaphysics, Alpha, 987^a13-19).

In the following lines, Aristotle says that Plato follows the same path with the Pythagoreans and uses a similar technical statement as in aporia 11. Regarding this similarity, Aristotle says:

In saying that the one is substance, and is not by being another thing said to be one, he (Plato) spoke in a quite similar way to the Pythagoreans [...] (Metaphysics, Alpha, 987^b22).

This new understanding of the One first introduced by the Pythagoreans and later applied to being and to Plato is the focal point of this aporia and the first pillar of this puzzle. In addition to his predecessors, Plato has taken a step further and considered being and unity not simply the functions of nature, but they became the ideas and principles of reality. Being and unity are no longer simply sensible, material, empirical, and contingent; but they are the supersensible and infinite reality of things, the intellectual or necessary ideas in which reality and thought are conceptualized scientifically “in *one* unity” (Hegel, 1995).

Thus, it is clear that, as with the other *aporiai*, the problem of the eleventh aporia is dialectical and it demands a preference between two alternatives. If we start from the second (b) part of the aporia or the second alternative, which is “we should inquire what being and unity are as if there were some other nature underlying them” (Metaphysics 1001^a7-8), the question is whether being and unity are essences or not (τί ἐστι). Aristotle



notes that the “underlying nature” would be posited as the possible answer to this *essence* (τί ἐστι) question and so would define being and unity (Bell, 2000, p.2). In other words, the question is whether being and unity are attributes rather than substances. In this direction, Bell (2000, p.2) note that if attribute is a part of the subject’s definition, then it is the attribute that defines the subject and not vice versa. Aristotle gives solid examples of the approach he is implying while appealing the views of Empedocles and the other natural philosophers:

[...] the natural philosophers believe that [being and unity are not ousiai of things]. Empedocles, for instance, as if reducing unity to something more known, states what unity is; for it would seem that he says that this is Friendship; it is this, at any rate, which for him is the cause of unity in all things. Others say that this unity and being, of which things consist or from which they have been generated, is fire, and others say that it is air (Metaphysics, Beta, 1001^a12-17).

According to Bell (2000, p.3), one possible reason for Aristotle to use underlying subject or underlying nature is that such an approach reflects the fact that the natural philosophers’ causal accounts of being and unity are mostly provided in material components. It is also probable to claim that these “material elements underlie being and unity in the same way that Aristotle maintains that matter is an underlying subject of for form” (Bell, 2000, p.3). It is also important to note that, for Aristotle, this underlying nature does not only include material causes but also other causes. Concerning Aristotle’s position in underlying subjects, Bell says:

In speaking of something “underlying,” Aristotle appears to be using a word that implies a predominantly materialistic conception of the causes to refer to principles and causes generally. For Aristotle’s purposes, the essence of the natural scientists’ position is not precisely that being and unity have material principles, but just that they have distinct principles and causes in terms of which they are to be defined (Bell, 2000, p.3).

In the other alternative, as mentioned above, Aristotle depicts the view that unity and being are the *ousiai* of things according to the Platonists and the Pythagoreans:

Plato and the Pythagoreans believe that neither being nor unity is some other



thing, but that such is their very nature, that is, the ousia of Unity is to be Unity and that of Being is to be Being (Metaphysics, Beta, 1001^a9-12).

Paragraphs given above clearly shows the two sides of the eleventh aporia. However, it is not easy to tell which alternative is embraced more by Aristotle. Aristotle mentions about being and unity in his several different books and several times in Metaphysics. Few examples are given below:

Again, see if the species and its genus have an equal denotation; suppose, for instance, that of the attributes which go with everything, one were to be stated as a species and the other as its genus, as for example Being and Unity: for everything has being and unity, so that neither is the genus of the other, since their denotation is equal. Likewise, also, if the 'first' of a series and the 'beginning' were to be placed one under the other: for the beginning is first and the first is the beginning, so that either both expressions are identical or at any rate neither is the genus of the other. The elementary principle in regard to all such cases is that the genus has a wider denotation than the species and its differentia: for the differentia as well has a narrower denotation than the genus (Topics, 121^b7-8).

Aristotle uses a different tone about the being and one as substances in Book Zeta:

But since something is said in the same way to be one and to be, and the substance of what is one is one, and things whose substance is one in number are one in number, it is evident that neither one nor being can be the substance of things, just as neither being for an element nor being for a starting-point can. Rather, we look for what the starting-point of something is in order to lead the thing back to something more knowable. So then, of these, being and one are in fact substance to a higher degree than are starting-point or element or cause. But not even they are substance, if indeed nothing else – nothing that is common – is either (Metaphysics, Zeta, 1040^b20).

Based on the passages given above, it looks like Aristotle claims that unity and being are convertible. Claiming that being and unity are convertible would mean that anything that has being also has unity. In other words, there is not hierarchy between being and unity. Also, such a claim places being and unity on equal metaphysical levels. Saying that “p is” implies that “p is one”. Similarly, saying “p is one” implies “p is”. These cases



reveal that both being and unity are not substances themselves, but predicates of and logically posterior to substance; and substance is that which corresponds to the “p” which is or is one (Bowe, 1997, p.43). A solid example of Aristotle’s perspective on convertibility is given in the passage below:

Being and one are the same and one nature, in that they follow along each other, just as starting-point and cause do, but not in that they are made clear by one account (although it makes no difference if we do take them like that, instead it in fact helps with our work). For one human and a human who is and a human are the same thing, and no other thing is made clear by an expression that uses two of them, “He is a human and a human who is [...] Further, the substance of each thing is one in no coincidental way, and likewise is just a certain sort of being (Metaphysics, Gamma, 1003b22-24).

Bowe (1997, pp.44-45) implies that, by saying unity and being are predicated of substances, Aristotle can avoid Parmenideanism and avoid placing them in an hierarchy through making them dependent upon something prior (substance) and by making them convertible predicates. Another expression about convertibility is given in the Metaphysics in the passage below:

[...] And that the one in a way signifies the same as being is clear from the fact that it follows along with the categories in the same number of ways and from its not being in any category (for example, not in the what-it-is and not in quality either, but instead it has the same relation to these as being does); from the fact that no other thing is additionally predicated in “one human” than in “human” (just as the being is not something beyond the what or quality or quantity); and from the fact that being for the one is just the being for the given thing (Metaphysics, Iota, 1054^a13).

Based on the passage above, according to Aristotle, being and unity are convertible and logically dependent on substance. Aristotle employs this view in order to criticize Plato’s position and to suggest that Forms cannot be individual substances and universals at the same time (Bowe, 1997, p.51). In regard to this position, Aristotle says:

[...] for it seems impossible for any of the things said (of something) universally to be substance. For first the substance of each thing is special to it, in that it



does not belong to anything else. A universal, by contrast, is something common, since that thing is said to be a universal, which naturally belongs to many things. Of which, then, will it be the substance? For it is either the substance of none or of all. And it cannot be the substance of all. But if it is the substance of one, all the other will be this one as well. For things whose substance is one and whose essence is one are also themselves one. Further, substance is said to be what is not said of an underlying subject, whereas a universal is always said of a certain underlying subject (Metaphysics, Zeta, 1038^b8).

Unlike a universal, substance is never predicated of anything else. However, since being and unity are predicated of everything, neither unity nor being can be a substance. Aristotle implies that being and unity are not substances, but they are the most universal of predicates.

Aristotle's solution to the eleventh aporia can be found in two different places, first in Metaphysics 7.16 and then as part of his account of unity in Metaphysics 10.2. However, the explicit solution to the eleventh aporia occurs in Metaphysics 7.16:

But since something is said in the same ways to be one and to be, and the substance of what is one is one, and things whose substance is one in number are one in number, it is evident that neither one nor being can be the substance of things, just as neither being for an element nor being for a starting-point can. Rather, we look for what the starting-point of something is in order to lead the thing back to something more knowable. So then, of these, being and one are in fact substance to a higher degree than are starting-point or element or cause (Metaphysics, Zeta, 1040b18).

According to Aristotle, we must inquire into the principles of being and unity and so "reduce" them to something more known. This solution partially is identical with the methodology of natural scientists. There is no nature that is intelligible just as being and unity; the being and unity of things must be understood in terms of some other nature that will also serve as a principle of being and unity. Bell (2000, p.8) suggests that if we seek to understand Aristotle's solution the eleventh aporia, we must also consider the parallel arguments in Metaphysics 7.13. In these arguments Aristotle starts with telling us that the universal is considered a candidate for being *ousia* because some think that the universal is to the highest degree a cause and a principle. Aristotle says:



For first the substance of each thing is special to it, in that it does not belong to anything else. A universal, by contrast, is something common, since that thing is said to be a universal which naturally belongs to many things. Of which, then, will it be the substance? For it is either the substance of none or of all. And it cannot be the substance of all. But if it is the substance of one, all the others will be this one as well. For things whose substance is one and whose essence is one are also themselves one (Metaphysics, Zeta, 1038^b10).

In the argument of being and unity cannot be *ousiai* of things, Aristotle is applying the result of his treatment of the universal in Metaphysics 7.13. As we have seen, one of the dialectical considerations that Aristotle raises in Metaphysics 3.4 is that if being and unity are not *ousiai*, neither will any other universal (Bell, 2000, p.9). Thus, it could be said that being (to on) and one (to hen) are the first principles of all things and according to Aristotle neither one nor being can be the genus of things. Since being and unity (one) are the most universal of all predicates and no universal can be a substance, neither being nor unity can be *ousiai*.

Second place where we can find Aristotle's solution to the eleventh aporia is given in Metaphysics 10.2. Aristotle says:

If, then none of the universals can be substance, as has been said in the accounts concerned with substance and with being, and because being cannot itself be substance in the sense of some one thing beyond the many (since it is common to all of them), but instead is only something predicated, clearly the one cannot be substance either, since being and one are the most universally predicated things of all (Metaphysics, Iota, 1053^b16).

According to Madigan (1999), after all these passages in regard to Aristotle's views on the substantial position of being and unity, is the question about the status of one. So far, it is already granted that one is not substance. However, it is not simply nothing, and it remains to be seen what it is. Aristotle has two answers for this question. First one can be found in Gamma 2. One is coextensive with being and an essential attribute of being. Aristotle says:

Being and one are the same and one nature, in that they follow along with each other, just as starting-point and cause do, but not in that they are made clear by one account (although it makes no difference if we do take them like



that, instead it in fact helps with our work (Metaphysics, Beta, 1003^b22-24).

One has species (same, like, equal); these and their contraries (other, unlike, unequal) are also studied by the science of being as being. Thus, one of the tasks of the science of being is to investigate other questions about one – for example, whether Socrates and Socrates seated are one. The second answer is found in Iota 2. Aristotle says:

Things, though, are said to be one and to be in the same number of ways. So if indeed among qualities the one is a certain thing and a certain nature, and similarly too among quantities, it is clear that it must be investigated in general what the one is, just as what being is, on the grounds that it is not enough to say that its nature is just this [namely, to be one or to be] (Metaphysics, Iota, 1053b24).

Madigan (1999) implies that the term one has no single meaning: it has many different meanings as “being”, a different meaning according to the category or species in question.

According to Madigan (1999, p.108) Aporia II raises eight questions:

1. Whether being and unity are the ousiai, substances or essences of beings: Aristotle denies that one and being are the ousiai of anything.
2. Whether being and unity exist in their own right or attributes of something else: Aristotle denies that they exist in their own right, but without reducing them to mere accidents.
3. Whether being and unity are substances: Aristotle denies this.
4. Whether there is one itself and a being itself: Aristotle denies this.
5. Whether the substance of one is to be one and the substance of being is to be being: Aristotle recognizes several senses of one and being, but not a one that is purely and simply one or a being that is purely and simply being.
6. Whether one is the only one, being the only being: Aristotle denies this.
7. Whether one is the principle of numbers: Aristotle denies that the one is the principle of numbers in the sense of a source from which numbers are produced, but affirms that one is the principle of numbers in the sense that it is the unit of counting.



8. Whether one is the principle, or a co-principle, of magnitudes: Aristotle denies that one is a principle of magnitudes: things cannot be substances without having unity, but a thing's unity is due to its form, not to a separately existing one.

Conclusion

According to Aristotle, there are questions like the nature of the relationship between being and unity unanswered since Plato. Furthermore, whether there is a convertibility among being and unity serves as another question. For Aristotle, it seems like being and unity are convertible terms. In other words, unlike Plato's approach, there is no hierarchical relationship between the two. Based on these questions and Aristotle's answers, we could argue that the being and unity are the most universal of all predicates. They also serve as the first principle of all things. However, since no universal can be a substance, neither being nor unity can be a substance. We could argue that being and unity – as convertible concepts – do not exist in their own right and they depend on particular substances.

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Öz: Metafizik Beta kitabı, kökleri Alfa'da izlenebilecek olan bir dizi aporia içermektedir. Beta kitabındaki aporiaların sorgulanması, bizleri bağlayan zincirleri tanımlamamıza, ilerlememiz gereken yönü belirlememize, aradığımızı bulduğumuzda bunun farkında olmamıza ve nihayet birbiriyle rekabet eden görüşlere ilişkin yetkin yargılar geliştirebilmemize olanak sağlayacaktır. Diğer bir deyişle, aporiaların ele alınması Aristoteles'in sorgulama metodolojisinde önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Bu çalışmada Metafizik Beta içindeki en karmaşık aporialardan biri olan ve varlık ile birliğin statüsünü sorgulayan onbirinci aporiaya odaklanılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Aporia, Metafizik, Beta, Aristoteles, varlık, birlik.



