This volume is a posthumous collection of articles, all previously published and almost all on Aristotle, by Suzanne Mansion, along with a list of her scholarly works (xviii-xxi). The articles printed here are reproduced photographically along with their original pagination, and a continuous pagination for this volume has been added. The sections are: I. Aristote, critique de ses predecesseurs; II. Logique et theorie de la connaissance; III. Metaphysique; IV. Philosophie de la nature et de la vie; V. Ethique; and an Appendix comprising five articles on non-Aristotelian topics. This list shows the range of Mansion's interests. Those familiar with recent work on Aristotle will notice the absence of a section on Aristotle’s biology, but all other areas of Aristotle’s thought pertinent to Mansion’s main interests are covered, as are other areas too.

As one would expect from Mlle. Mansion, the style of the articles is one of modest but firm clarity. They contain much that is of continuing value, and ought to be consulted seriously by Aristotelian scholars. Perhaps their most valuable feature, in these days when so much scholarship on ancient philosophy is full of pompous authorial self-promotion, is their lack of pretentiousness. Mansion always shows, without calling attention to it, a clear sense of the magnitude of the task that understanding Aristotle presents to any reader, and refrains from making overblown claims for her work.

Though she is continuously sympathetic to Aristotle’s views, Mansion is ready to be critical of him too, and to call attention to points at which his exposition of his views seems to her obscure or incomplete. The influence of Aquinas on her readings is clear at many points, but Mansion always aims to give due weight to the difference between what Aristotle held and what he might have held (e.g., 196ff., 330, 405ff.).

Let me begin by bringing to the reader’s attention some points of interest in Mansion’s discussion. She treats so many topics in an interesting way that the selection of these few to mention is highly arbitrary, but still it gives some of the flavor of the book.

In, ‘Aristote, critique des Éléates’, Mansion gives an interesting discussion of Aristotle’s reply to Parmenides in Physics i. In recent decades scholars have lavished attention on Plato’s response to Parmenides’ problem about non-being—more attention, I think, than it deserves. Here as elsewhere Mansion is more sympathetic to Aristotle than to Plato, and in this case her attitude is a fruitful one. Though Plato’s solution tries to make sense of the notion of non-being, it leaves untouched some important questions about how false judgment is possible (95-96). According to Mansion, Aristotle tries to fill this gap, particularly by using the distinction between what a thing is essentially and what it is accidentally (96). Mansion does not spell out clearly enough how she thinks Aristotle’s solution is supposed to work. Nevertheless she is right to urge...
us to attend to Aristotle’s attack on this problem. Plainly he believed, correctly, that something was wrong with Plato’s solution, and just as plainly his views on the problem deserve more attention and respect than they have received recently.

Mansion’s discussion of Aristotle’s views on the soul, though I think they are in important ways mistaken, also raises issues that are well worth attending to. In ‘Deux définitions différentes de la vie chez Aristote’ and ‘Soul and Life in the De Anima’, she maintains that Aristotle moved from one view of the soul in the Protrepticus to a different one in the De anima. The De anima notion is that of soul as the cause of life in the body, whereas the Protrepticus notion is that of soul as perception, thought, and consciousness (e.g., 392, 368). First of all, it is arguable (though not, I think, certain) that Mansion’s use here of the notion of consciousness is due to an anachronistic assumption that when Aristotle speaks of perception and thought, he must associate them with phenomena of consciousness in the sense of, say, Descartes’ Meditations (e.g., 396, 435). Many commentators, in fact, have noted that the Cartesian notion of the mental and the various issues connected with it seem to play little role in Aristotle’s thinking. Second, the connection that Mansion wishes to make, on the basis of what she takes to be material from the Protrepticus, between perception on the one hand and both thinking and cognition on the other, is far from clear (368). (Like many scholars, Mansion takes a fairly generous view of how much of Iamblichus’s Protrepticus can be traced to Aristotle, though she is rightly wary about the matter [366-367; cf. 373].) Nevertheless there is much that is suggestive in her attempts, which partially anticipate various more recent attempts to see Aristotle as a ‘functionalist’, to show how Aristotle wished somehow to bring together the various aspects of his notion of soul.

Probably the least satisfactory section of the collection is the one devoted to Aristotle’s ethics, where the articles are given over more to summarizing than to analysing Aristotle’s views. Nevertheless these papers contain points that are worth noticing. They include a good (though lamentably brief) discussion of whether in Aristotle’s view, what a human agent wants is good for him because he wants it, or on the contrary is wanted by him because it is good (441, 442-443). They also include, in ‘Les critères du meilleur dans le Protreptique d’Aristote’, an attempt (unsuccessful, I think) to show that the notion of a human θέλειν can generate certain other criteria of what it is for something to be best for an agent that are operative in the Protrepticus (and also, I would add, elsewhere in Aristotle’s ethics).

The most interesting part of Mansion’s investigations, in my opinion, concerns issues in Aristotle’s metaphysics. In a series of five papers in Section III and one in Section IV, Mansion produces a number of interesting remarks on, in particular, the notions of form and matter in Aristotle. She has very helpful things to say (see esp. 342, 318-320) about the distinction in the Metaphysics, which she rightly insists on, between a universal (καθόλου) and a form (εἴδος), and indeed partially anticipates recent treatments of this distinction, e.g., by John A. Driscoll (‘ΕΙΔΗ in Aristotle’s Theory of Substance’ Studies in Aristotle. Dominic J. O’Meara ed. Washington: Catholic University of American Press, 1981. 129-159) and Michael J. Loux (‘Form, Species, and Predication in Metaphysics Z, H, Θ’ Mind 88 [1979] 1-23). The form, according to her, is the ‘principle’ of the thing of which it is form, which causes it to be the kind of thing that it is, whereas what it is or its essence, i.e., what we say that a particular substance is when we classify it as essentially, e.g., a man, is something that involves both a certain form
and also a certain type of matter (e.g., flesh and bones; cf. 343).

The form, according to Mansion, is not a universal. This leaves it open, she says, that there be individual forms, in the sense of forms of individuals (342). Unfortunately she does not pursue this issue enough to indicate clearly which things have individual forms. She seems to think that the form, man, is a non-universal, but she does not explain how this can be, given that it seems to be in some sense shared by a plurality of particular substances.

Much of her discussion of form and matter focuses on an issue to which Aristotle attaches a great deal of importance in Meta. vii, namely, which forms include (in some sense) matter and which do not (see esp. 317-320, 335-339, and ‘To σμαίνων et la définition physique’). Here she emphasizes a distinction between mathematical forms, which for the most part do not, and forms of living things, which do. In the aforementioned article on τὸ σμαίνων, she observes that snubness is from Aristotle’s own point of view a poor example of a physical form, because the non-material element of it, concavity, is a geometrical attribute and not the sort of change- or motion-involving attribute that Aristotle associates with things that have a φύσις (348-350). This is an important observation. It shows that although (as noted above) Mansion does not give much explicit attention to Aristotle’s biology, she is alive to the considerations that have recently led a number of scholars to pay increasing attention to it.

She then asks whether Aristotle could envisage physical forms that can be ‘abstracted’ from their matter in the way in which concavity can be abstracted from noses, and seems to answer in the negative. She takes the relation of matter to form as an instance of the relation of means to end (a similar view appears also in her interpretation of Aristotle’s account of the soul in the papers mentioned above). Certain ends require certain sorts of means to bring them about, and she claims that by analogy certain forms require certain sorts of matter to instantiate them (357, 339). It is not clear how she thinks mathematical forms are to be distinguished from physical ones in this regard. Are they the ones that can be instantiated in any matter whatsoever? That view would seem problematic, and is not, so far as I know, supported by Aristotle’s texts. Other possibilities come to mind, but the issue is not fully enough treated.

Most likely, I think, is the following interpretation. According to Aristotle, forms are in some sense structure. Certain structures are themselves sufficient, when imposed on certain matter, to cause that matter to move and change in particular ways, without external influence (this is the point of saying, as Aristotle does in Physics ii, that the φύσις of a thing is a cause of change or rest that is internal to the thing). These structures are the physical forms. Other types of structures, such as sphericity, are not like this: they do not by themselves cause something that possesses them to change or be at rest (for example, being spherical is not why a cabbage develops as it does). These are the mathematical forms. The fact that mathematical forms are not physical in this sense is thus the reason why Pythagoreans and perhaps some Platonists were wrong (as Mansion clearly explains, 351) to reduce Forms and in general causes to numbers. (What one might call matter-forms, such as fire and earth, likewise cannot cause biological substances to move and change by themselves in the way that they do—e.g., being earthen is also not what causes a cabbage to develop as it does—which is the reason why Aristotle thinks the materialists likewise were just as wrong as the Pythagoreans were.) The burden of Aristotle’s account here rests, then, on a difference, taken by him
as obvious and given, between different sorts of causal powers that different types of forms or structures possess.

Mansion is suggestive but tantalizingly incomplete on a related issue, the relation between ‘abstraction’ and ‘universalisation’, a distinction brought to her attention by Leszl in her written response to questions raised in oral discussion of her paper, ‘La notion de matière en Metaphysique Z 10 et 11’ (341-342). There seems to be a difference between ‘abstracting’ from the noseness element of snubness to get concavity, and ‘universalising’ from a particular man to get the universal, man. Though indirectly pointing to this distinction herself, through her insistence that forms are not universals, Mansion nevertheless claims a close connection between the two operations, yielding ‘a kind of abstraction necessarily linked to universalisation’ (342). One wishes that she had said much more about this issue, as about a number of the others that she treats.

Mansion’s usual procedure is to devote most of an article to a very close and fairly conservative exegesis of a particular text or set of texts, and to conclude with a few paragraphs or pages suggesting either ways in which the interpretation might be extended or difficulties that Aristotle faces. The resulting interpretations are often very cautious, even while being very suggestive. I myself think that more is to be gained from treating Aristotle as a participant in philosophical discussions that are ongoing and still far from resolved. Because of the caution exhibited by these articles, and because most of them were published quite a while ago, many will perhaps believe that they are no longer worth attending to. That would be a mistake. Although they are in some ways dated, and although they often fail to seize opportunities to push their ideas as far as those ideas deserve to be pushed, Mansion’s papers remain valuable and often exemplary sources of ideas that will continue to benefit all of us, and are an impressive monument to a life of scholarship.

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