

POSSEIBLE: JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

Volume 12 / Issue 1 / July 2023

ISSN: 2147-1622

Interview: Adriel M. Trott on *Aristotle on the Matter of Form*

Çiğdem Yazıcı & Adriel M. Trott

Üsküdar University
cigdem.yazici@uskudar.edu.tr
ORCID: 0000-0002-9761-5241

Abstract

Çiğdem Yazıcı interviewed Adriel M. Trott about her works on Aristotle.

Posseible: Journal of Philosophy, 2023, 12(1), 1-105.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8171519>

Category: Interview / Date Submitted: 21.06.2023
Date Accepted: 28.06.2023 / Date Published: 25.07.2023

POSSEIBLE: FELSEFE DERGİSİ

Cilt 12/ Sayı 1 / Temmuz 2023

ISSN: 2147-1622

Söyleşi: Adriel M. Trott ile *Aristoteles'te Maddenin Formu*
üzerine

Çiğdem Yazıcı & Adriel M. Trott

Üsküdar Üniversitesi
cigdem.yazici@uskudar.edu.tr
ORCID: 0000-0002-9761-5241

Öz

Çiğdem Yazıcı, Adriel M. Trott ile Aristoteles üzerine yaptığı çalışmalarla ilgili bir söyleşi yaptı.

Posseible: Felsefe Dergisi, 2023, 12(1), 1-105.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8171519>

Kategori: Söyleşi / Gönderildiği Tarih: 21.06.2023
Kabul Edildiği Tarih: 28.06.2023 / Yayınlandığı Tarih: 25.07.2023

Interview: Adriel M. Trott on *Aristotle on the Matter of Form*

Çiğdem Yazıcı & Adriel M. Trott

Çiğdem Yazıcı: Thank you for coming today for this interview on your book *Aristotle on the Matter of Form*, published by Edinburgh University Press, in 2021. The book title seems to be telling already a lot. Therefore, I want to start with the title: Why not *matter and form* but *the matter of form*? Would you like to tell us more about this?

Adriel M. Trott: Yes, that's a great question. Thank you. I'm interested in the ways that we think about reading Aristotle and the connection between what we think of as the theoretical texts and the biological texts. I think traditionally we read the *Metaphysics* and the *Physics* and find principles, and then look to apply them, or look to see how the biological texts fit into those accounts. When I looked at the biological works, it was interesting to me that they seemed to trouble some of the things that we took to be settled about the *Metaphysics* and the *Physics*. And so, I wanted to think about how to read it more dialectically; to consider how the biological works inform how we think about Aristotle's hylomorphism i.e., the relation of matter to form in natural substances, to allow these texts to influence how we interpret ambiguous aspects of the *Metaphysics*, rather than assuming we know what the biological works have to say because of conclusions we have already drawn about the theoretical texts. So, when I looked at this microcosmic level of how form connects to matter, or how the semen, as the figure that does the formal work, is connecting to the menses as the material work, I was interested to see how at its most basic level the material had some kind of power; it was contributing to the capacity of the form or the semen to do what it did in animating the menses.

The way that material seems to interweave with form's work can be thought about in connection to the history of the ways that we thought about sexual difference. So, I think about this connection between form and matter as mapping on to that

connection between sexual difference. One way of mapping the history of sexual difference is that ancient views view it through a one-sex model, where we have one true sex, the male, and then the female is a kind of derivation, or almost deprivation, of the capacities of the male. And then, later, in the early modern period, we have more of a sense of the female having her own power, and that the male having his own power. But that “own power”, say, of the pregnancy, for the female actually shows that she is again “inferior” and “weaker”. Aristotle is an interesting place where these two models come together because he both needs to have a form and a matter, formal and material principle, two distinct principles and contributions, and he wants to think the difference between male and female in terms of the degree of heat that differentiates the male contribution from the female contribution. So, it seemed to me that difference shows a way that you get something like a kind of a turning or a torque. In this way, I talk about the Mobius strip in the book, where what seems, say, the same turns into a difference and what seems different turns into a point of convergence. And so, when I talk about the matter of form, I am thinking both in the sense of the topic that’s under discussion and the sense of this material power that underwrites formal work here. The structure of the title is also a call back to my first book where I talk about Aristotle on the nature of community where nature means essence, but also where Aristotle makes a claim about the community being natural that I’m trying to work out.

ÇY: I think you already touched upon some points in relation to my second question, which would be about the implications of this alternative account of the matter in feminist philosophy. Now, I want to expand this question . . . You have already mentioned how such an account of matter gives us an alternative way of thinking on sexual difference. Can there be something more we can think of, like how we take matter as nature, not just with feminist philosophy, but also with ecological discussions, or how we think of work with matter about the discussions of slavery in Aristotle, since you also work on the question of community? For, the division between the free citizen and the slave takes us to the division between the work for one’s own *telos* and the work for someone else’s *telos*, as if there can be a kind of work with *technê* with its own self-sufficient *telos* and a kind without such *telos* or movement in itself. I am trying to think out loud, here, and I don’t want to distract from the topic too much. What I want to ask is this: How can we re-think about the *technê* itself with your interpretation of matter in Aristotle? Would there be a similar account of a dichotomy if we were to take *technê* in separation from matter, too, where *technê* was associated with activity and matter with passivity? Hence, can this alternative account of matter, in its relation to nature and work, have more implications, in other areas of political philosophy or ecology, as well as it has in feminist philosophy?

AT: This is a very large question. I think about the work of people, like Luce Irigaray, who are concerned about the way that the history of philosophy seems to have written this forgetting of sexual difference into it, associating the feminine with the different and the other, and then treating difference as just distance from the same. Part of my motivation in the book is to talk about material in a robust sense as having its own capacity. Aristotle calls it its own cause, but it is often treated as lack of form and in Aristotle scholarship, people seem to treat material as defined against form

making material what is not formal. And if it ever even shows up as having power, it's because form has already done some work on it. So that's in the background. I, at the same time, appreciate the connection here between matter and thinking about nature, because I'm also intrigued by Aristotle's account of nature in *Physics* II.1 as the internal source of motion and rest (*archē kinēseōs*). That account, I think, challenges notions of nature or of material as inert or given. I think more modern notions of nature say nature is what we need to pick up and change and make into something useful for us. And we, I think, read that back into Aristotle, and then those who seem more natural, more associated with the body, then become distinguished from those in the service of culture. You know you can see this in the history of philosophy. I think a way to resist that division is to show how nature, in order for it to have this internal source of motion, seems to depend on a more fundamental unity of form and matter that shows how material needs to already have a kind of power of its own and form in hylomorphic substance or natural substance already has some kind of dependency, even in its work as form, even before it gets to being the fully actualized substance. I do think that there are implications for ecological discussions and for feminist projects, because I think it shows that we can't divide matter from motion, and we can't even do that in the texts that people think are the grounding efforts of dividing form and matter.

ÇY: Thank you. I think, this account has a lot more productive implications not just for contemporary issues in ecology or feminist philosophy but also for Aristotle scholarship. Maybe, we can talk a little more about that.

Merve Arlı Özekes: I want to ask also about Aristotle's reading of *chôra*. I think that Plato's *chôra* is similar to what you said about Aristotle's matter. There is something more dynamic to Plato's *chôra* than being just a passive element. But when I look at Aristotle's reading of Plato's *chôra*, he takes it as matter and *topos*. I think Aristotle's reading of Plato's *chôra* is in the same lines as the classical account of matter. He reduces the active aspects of *chôra* when he reads it as matter. Would you like to say anything about that?

AT: Yes, I appreciate that question. There are a couple of things I want to say. One is, I think it's useful to appreciate how ancient philosophers are drawing on the language that they have available to them that is full of metaphors and isn't yet the kind of technical language that we treat it as. We sometimes impute a kind of technical fixity to those principles that aren't yet in Aristotle or Plato. When Aristotle talks about *hylê*, I think the historical understanding of the term in relation to wood is still there. There's still something 'live' about that that's worth attending to. I think that Aristotle's material is certainly to be read this way and one of the reasons to resist the whole discourse around prime matter as technical rather than the first material. That notion of prime matter serves an account of nature that follows a craft model, a *technê* model. On that model, you have a separate form, and you have unformed stuff that form arranges. That model ends up having a difficult time achieving a unity between form and matter. That comes out of ways of talking about matter or reading *protê hylê* in the text as having a technical meaning rather than it being like "this is the first material that's available in this kind of work." So, when you look at places in *On Generation and Corruption*, and you see Aristotle talk about elemental change. He

describes that in terms of movement between elemental powers, where one power (i.e., the hot and the cold and the dry and the wet) remains the same and another one changes. So, fire is the hot and the dry, and then I think it's, the hot remains and the dry turns to wet, and you have air. So, there isn't like nothing and then something changes. It's rather something staying the same and it has some kind of capacity. On that account, I don't think you ever get to a basic stuff that doesn't have any power in Aristotle.

MAÖ: So, even then, even in the case of elemental change, there is an active aspect to it.

AT: Sure. Yes, they take turns being the active; it's not all being active or all passive. That's a good point.

ÇY: I think, we are approaching the end of our time. I'm very happy to see how matter and form unite in Aristotle with your book. It's very helpful and inspiring not only for feminist philosophy but in general for philosophy itself. Would you like to add anything more?

AT: I appreciate that. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about the book. I would say, I think it's important to be thinking about these questions in Aristotle, because I think that Aristotle's text is taken to lay the groundwork for a social division between what gives shape and meaning and what needs meaning given to it. It's important to go to the texts that are read that way to offer counter possibilities. And then, I would also say that it's important to find different ways of thinking about nature. Part of why we privileged a kind of craft model of nature is that when we think about the formal and the efficient and the final causes in Aristotle's account, which he says are coincident in *Physics* II 7, we think the efficient cause is the main one, and I want to challenge that view. I think we have something like the formal cause, but not as just a shape or an arrangement, but as an organizing or active principle whose ongoing efforts actualize the being whose form it is to fulfill its end. So, we have this material figure of the semen that comes from the father. That's the efficient cause, but also it is actively animating. When the semen comes to the material menses and the material is animated, the new fetation takes over the power from the semen. It's very interconnected: is this the role of material or the role of form? I think those questions become really complicated here. And that's what I'm trying to get to see what I call a kind of "equiprimordiality" of those different principles there because they're not separated. Resisting that separation has politically productive possibilities. If we have a kind of normative hylomorphism, we end up saying "Well, there's a power for the ruler that's separate from the power of the ruled, and that's written into our metaphysics". That's what I'm trying to resist.

ÇY: I think with your terms of "the emergent sense of nature," there is really a fresh way of looking at nature with political as well as philosophical implications. This is very helpful. Thank you again for being with us today and answering our questions.

AT: Thanks for this opportunity. I'm grateful for the Turkish philosophical community for the occasions to discuss my work.