In this paper I will be concerned with two interrelated issues, one of which concerns the interpretation of some philosophical doctrines in the Metaphysics, and the other is of a more scholarly nature. I'll begin by introducing the philosophical issue and bring in the more scholarly one when it becomes pertinent.

My main philosophical aim here is to explore some aspects of Aristotle's main project in Metaphysics Zeta, which is nothing less than to identify and analyze what he calls primary substances (πρῶτα όντων), those ontologically fundamental entities in terms of which the existence and nature of all other things is to be explained.

Before beginning, however, I want to identify and set aside a plausible and rather modern-seeming approach to this issue of which Aristotle was clearly aware, and which he quite consciously rejects. This approach is based on the assumption that the order of ontological priority is the same as the order of physical composition—that the fundamental existents are simply the ultimate constituents of which everything else is composed. This assumption characterized the tradition of "natural philosophy" that dominated philosophical thought before Plato. In its later and more sophisticated phase, which occurred in the mid-Fifth Century, this tradition included both the classical atomists, whose fundamental existents were atoms moving about randomly in the void, and the Empedocleans, who denied the existence of the void and whose fundamental existents were portions of the four basic materials (earth, water, air, and fire)
swirling around randomly in a plenum. In each of these systems, middle-sized objects were analyzed as temporary configurations of the fundamental micro-entities (either atoms or minute portions of the four elements) posited by the theory in question.

Aristotle has specific metatheoretical reasons for rejecting each of these two subtraditions of natural philosophy. In addition to these specialized arguments, however, he also has a deeper and more general reason for rejecting any so-called "compositionalist" metaphysics which tries to identify the fundamental realities with micro-entities that are supposed somehow to constitute perceptible reality. I will discuss the reasons behind this rejection and their ramifications in some detail later on. My point now is that for whatever reason, Aristotle's own approach to the search for the fundamental entities is clearly not compositionalist. To see the difference, we might think of the compositionalist as beginning at the level of middle-sized objects and looking for the fundamental entities in a "downward" direction by asking of what they are constituted, what constitutes those constituents, and so on, in the hope that one will eventually reach the rock-bottom elementary micro-entities which make up everything else. Now in Physics I 7 Aristotle too begins with a consideration of middle sized objects, but he subjects them to a different kind of "analysis". Selecting as his example a particular bronze statue, say one of Hermes, he distinguishes the material or matter (ὕλη) of which it is made—namely the bronze—from what he calls its form (εἴδος): whatever it is about the finished thing that make it the kind of thing it is (that is, a statue rather than an ingot, a statue of Hermes rather than one of Apollo, and so forth).

1. In Book One of Generation and Corruption Aristotle argues against the elegance of the atomic theory on the grounds that it posits not just an indefinite number of atoms, but an indefinite number of kinds (or "shapes") of atoms as well (314a20-24; 325a23-38). And in Book II of the Physics (at 193a28-b 22; 198b10—199a12) he argues that because the Empedoclean theory seeks to explain all change in terms of random movements of the four elements, it lacks the resources necessary to provide a plausible account of such "teleological" phenomena as the generation and development of biological organisms. (Incidentally, this objection would presumably apply with equal force against the atomists).