

Humanities 116: Philosophical Perspectives on the Humanities

1 Readings from Aristotle on substance and accident

In this fundamental passage Aristotle introduces the *ten categories*: the ten kinds of things that exist (beings), or the ten kinds of things that can “be said” about something (not always clear which). The most important, both for our purposes and in general, are the first three—substance, quantity, and quality—and of those the most important is the first, *substance*. Pay careful attention to the examples Aristotle gives; we’ll see some other examples later. Notice that this is *not* exactly the way we ordinarily use the English word “substance” (we would not call a human or a horse a “substance”)—be careful about that! The members of the other, non-substance categories are traditionally called “accidents.”

(A) Of things said without any complexity, each signifies either [1] a substance or [2] a quantity or [3] a quality or [4] a relation or [5] a where or [6] a when or [7] a position or [8] a having or [9] an action or [10] a passion. To speak in outline: [1] a substance is, for example: a human, a horse; [2] a quantity is, for example: two feet long, three feet long; [3] a quality is, for example: white, grammatical; [4] a relation is, for example: double, half, greater; [5] a where is, for example: in the Lyceum, in the marketplace; [6] a when is, for example: yesterday, last year; [7] a position is, for example: lying-down, being-seated; [8] a having is, for example: being-shod, being-armored; [9] an action is, for example: cutting, burning; [10] a passion is, for example: being-cut, being-burnt. (*Categories* 4.1^b25–2^a4)

In a preceding chapter of the *Categories*, Aristotle makes a seemingly even more fundamental division. Actually there are two cross-cutting distinctions: (1) between “is said of a subject” and “is not said of a subject,” and (2) between “is in a subject” and “is not in a subject.” Roughly speaking you can think of “is said of a subject” like this: *X* is “said of a subject” if there is something (a “subject”) which is an *X*. For example, Socrates is a human, so *human* is said of a subject, namely Socrates. As for “is in a subject,” Aristotle gives his own definition (in parentheses, beginning “By ‘in a subject,’...”). Pay careful attention to this definition. I’ve set it all in **boldface**. It has three parts, which I’ve designated (a), (b), and (c).

The two cross-cutting distinctions produce four different possible combinations. We will see that these correspond to: (i) a kind (species or genus) of substances; (ii) an individual substance; (iii) a kind (species or genus) of accidents; (iv) an individual accident. (I’ve numbered these four combinations in the text, where they occur in a different order.)

(B) Of beings, [i] some are said of some subject, but are not in any subject. Human, for example, is said of a subject, namely a certain [individual] human, but is not in

any subject. [iv] Some are in a subject, but are not said of any subject. (**By “in a subject,” I mean that which [a] is in something, but [b] not as a part [of that thing], and [c] is incapable of subsisting separately from that in which it is.**) For example, a certain [individual] grammaticality¹ is in a subject, namely the soul, but is not said of any subject, and a certain [individual] whiteness is in a subject, namely a body (for every color is in a body), but is not said of any subject. [iii] Some are both said of a subject and in a subject. For example, science/knowledge [*epistēmē*] is in a subject, namely the soul, and is said of a subject, namely grammaticality.² [ii] Some are neither in a subject nor said of a subject. For example, a certain [individual] human or a certain [individual] horse. For no such thing is in a subject or is said of a subject. (*Categories* 2.1^a20–^b6)

Here is the beginning of Aristotle’s detailed discussion of substance in the *Categories*. He distinguishes between “primary” and “secondary” substances. Note that a *primary* substance is basically an individual one, whereas a *secondary* substance is a kind (species or genus) of substances (so this distinction is the same as as one of the distinctions made in the previous reading). For examples, Socrates is a primary substance, but the species *human* is a secondary substance. Note also what he says at the end, about the fundamental nature of primary substance. And notice that an individual *body* is an example of a primary substance.

(C) Substance which is most properly and primarily and especially so called is that which neither is said of some subject nor is in some subject, such as a certain [individual] human or a certain [individual] horse. But the species which those things which are primarily called substances belong to, are called secondary substances—those, and the genera of those species.³ A certain [individual] human, for example, belongs to a species, human, while a genus of that species is animal. Those, therefore (such as human and animal) are called secondary substances. . . .

But all the others are either said of subjects, the primary substances, or are in subjects, those [primary substances]. This is clear from the consideration of particular [cases]. Animal, for example, is predicated of human,⁴ therefore also of a certain [individual] human—for if [it were predicated] of no [individual] human, neither [would it be predicated] of [the species] human as a whole. Again: color is in body, therefore in a certain [individual] body. For it it were not in some one of the particular [bodies], neither would it be in [the genus] body as a whole. So that all the others are either said of subjects, the primary substances, or are in subjects, those [primary substances]. If, then, the primary substances did not exist, it would be impossible for the others

¹I.e., the quality of grammaticality (knowing grammar) in a particular individual human soul.

²I.e., because grammaticality is a (kind of) knowledge or a science, knowledge/science (*epistēmē*) is “said of” it, just as human is “said of” Socrates (because Socrates is a human).

³Note: the plural of “species” is “species”; the plural of “genus” is “genera.”

⁴That is, we say, “human is a (kind of) animal.” (In Greek you can say “human is animal.”)

to exist. (*Categories* 5.2^a11–19, 34^b6)

Here Aristotle gives a different characterization of substance: a substance is something that can change from one state to another, opposite state (for example: from white to black, from hot to cold, etc.), while still remaining one and the same thing as it was before (as Aristotle says: “numerically” the same—i.e., just one thing, not two different ones).

(D) But what seems most of all to be a proprium of substance⁵ is, being the same and numerically one, to be susceptible of contraries. So that in none of the other [categories] which are not substance could someone bring [an example of something] which, being numerically one and the same, is susceptible of contraries. A color, for example, being numerically one and the same, will not be [both] white and black, nor will the same and numerically one action be [both] worthless and worthy, and in the same way also in the other [categories] which are not substance. But a substance, being numerically one and the same, is susceptible of contraries. A certain [individual] human, for example, being one and the same, sometimes comes to be white [i.e., pale], other times black [i.e., tanned], and hot and cold, and worthless and worthy. (*Categories* 5.4^a10–21)

Here are some more things about substance. First, that substances are the *primary* kind of beings (the things which are called “beings” in the strict or primary sense of the word “being”).

(E) Being is said in many ways, as indeed we distinguished earlier in the [book] on how many ways [things are said].⁶ For it [i.e., “being”] signifies the what-is-it and the certain [individual] *this*, but also a quality or quantity, or one of the other [categories] which is predicated in such a way. But, though being is said in this many [ways], it is manifest that, of these, primary being is the what-is-it, which signifies the substance⁷....

Now primary is said in many ways, but still, substance is primary in all [ways]: in definition [*logos*] and in knowledge [*epistēmē*] and in time. For none of the other

⁵Here a “proprium of substance” means a characteristic which all substances possess, and which nothing else possesses. We will see more of the word “proprium” (Greek *idion*) in the reading for next time.

⁶I.e., *Metaphysics* book 5 (also called book Δ), in which every chapter is about a different word and how it is “said in many ways”—that is, has many different meanings. Recall that this is what Aristotle said about “virtue” in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: that there isn’t just one definition of “virtue,” as Socrates wanted, because it is used in a primary sense to mean one thing (intellectual virtue) and in a secondary sense to mean something else (moral virtue).

⁷Note: literally, “quality” means “howness” and “quantity” means “how-muchness.” By connecting “what-is-it” with the category of substance here, Aristotle is suggesting that, just as a *quality* is the answer to “how is it?” and a quantity the answer to “how much is it?,” a substance is the answer to “what is it?” For example: “How is this?” “It is white”; “How much is it?” “It is five feet long”; “What is it?” “It is Socrates” (individual substance); or: “It is (a) human” (species); or: “It is (an) animal” (genus).

categories is separable, but only it [i.e., substance] itself.⁸ But also in definition is this [i.e., substance] primary, for it is necessary that the definition of the substance be in every definition. But we also think that we know each thing most of all when we know *what* human or fire is, more than [if we know] the quality or the quantity or the where, since we know each of these also [only] when we know [for example] *what* the quality or the quantity is.⁹ (*Metaphysics* 7.1.1028^a10–15, 31–^b2)

Now lots more examples of substances (or at least, possible examples—there seems to be some doubt about them).

(F) Substance seem most manifestly to belong to bodies, because of which we say that animals and plants and their parts, and the natural bodies, such as fire and water and earth and each such thing, and those things which are parts of these or are made out of these, either of some them or of all of them, such as the heavens and its parts, stars and moon and sun, are substances. But whether these alone are substances, or [these and] also others, or some of these and others, too, or none of these, but [only] some different things, we must examine. (*Metaphysics* 7.2.1028^b8–15)

And a division of all substances into three kinds, two of which are “natural” (or “physical”—the Greek word for “nature” is *phusis*) and one “immovable.” (In the *Physics*, Aristotle defines “nature” as a principle of motion and rest. So every natural thing is movable; an immovable thing is supernatural.)

It is not absolutely clear what Aristotle means by the two “natural” (or “physical”) kinds of substance. Probably the simplest way of understanding this is that he means (1) sublunar bodies (bodies which exist below the sphere of the moon) and (2) celestial bodies. In any case, the third, “immovable” kind certainly represents a kind of substance which is *not* a body. The question raised at the end of passage (F) has therefore been answered: sensible, movable (natural) bodies are substances, but there are also other, supernatural substances which are not bodies. Because “corruption” (the process in which a substance ceases to exist) is a kind of “motion” (as Aristotle uses the word “motion”), an “immovable” substance can never cease to exist, i.e. it is eternal.

(G) Since there were three [kinds of] substances, two natural and one the immovable, about this [latter kind] we must say that there necessarily exists some eternal immovable substance. For the substances are primary amongst beings, and if all [substances] are corruptible, then all things are corruptible. But it is impossible for motion to be either generated or corrupted (for it always existed), or for time [to be

⁸I.e., only a substance can exist independently of the other categories, so a substance can exist without (say) one of its qualities (e.g., its warmth or its color), but not vice versa. For example: if Socrates starts out hot, and then gets cold, then Socrates existed without and before that coldness (the particular individual coldness that is now in Socrates). But, as Aristotle understands it, that particular individual coldness couldn’t exist without Socrates.

⁹Note: the last sentence is hard to understand (so don’t worry if you don’t understand it).

either generated or corrupted]. (*Metaphysics* 12.6.1071^b–7)

Enough about substance; now on to quantity. Here is the beginning of the detailed discussion of quantity in the *Categories*. For our purposes the most important point is that *body* is said to be a kind of quantity. (Can you already see why this will create a problem?)

(H) Of quantity, some is discrete, some continuous; and some is composed of parts which have position with respect to each other, some out of parts which do not have position. Discrete [quantity] is, for example, number and speech [*logos*];¹⁰ continuous [quantity] [is] line, surface, body, and furthermore besides those [also] time and place. (*Categories* 6.4^b20–25)

Here is some more, apparently, about the different kinds of quantity, from the *Metaphysics*.

(I) That, therefore, which is indivisible according to quantity, if completely [indivisible] and without position, is called a unit [*monas*];¹¹ if completely [indivisible] and having position, a point. But that which is singly [divisible], a line; if doubly [divisible], a surface; if completely and triply divisible according to quantity, a body. (*Metaphysics* 5.6.1016^b24–28)

Here are some examples of members of the third category: “qualities.” Most important for our purposes are the third and fourth type of quality Aristotle mentions. The third type apparently includes all sensible properties like color and taste; the fourth type is *shape*. Also pay attention to the second sentence (“But quality ...”). In context it seems merely to introduce the division of qualities into different genera, but we’ll see later that some understand it differently.

(J) By a quality [*poiotēs*] I mean that according to which certain qualities [*poioi*] are said. But quality is one of the things that is said in various ways.

Let one species of quality, then, be called habit [*hexis*]¹² and disposition. A habit is different from a disposition in being more permanent and longer lasting; such are the knowledge/sciences [*epistēmai*] and the virtues.... But those things that are easily movable and change quickly, such as heat [i.e., fever] and chill and health and illness and such, are called dispositions.... Another genus of quality is that according to which we call boxers or runners healthy or sickly, and in general such as are said according to a natural power or impotence.... A third genus of quality are affective [*pathētikēs*] qualities and passions [*pathē*]. Such are, for example, sweetness and bitterness and sourness and everything akin to those, and furthermore heat and cold and whiteness and blackness.... A fourth genus of quality is shape and

¹⁰In theory *logos* might mean other things here (for example: “ratio,” or “definition”). But it’s clear from the continuation of this passage (not printed here) that (somewhat weirdly) Aristotle really does mean “speech.”

¹¹The root of this word is *monad*-. Keep this in mind when we get to Leibniz!

¹²This is the word translated as “state” in Ross’s translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (as in “virtue is a state”). “Habit” is a more traditional translation.

the form [*morphē*] which subsists around each thing, and furthermore besides these straightness and curvedness and whatever is similar to those. (*Categories* 8.8^b25–9, 35–8, 9^a14–16, 28–31, 10^a11–14)