

## Introduction

We are sufficiently assured of this, then, even if we should examine it from every point of view, that that which entirely *is* is entirely knowable. (*Republic* 477a)<sup>1</sup>

This is a study of Aristotle's theory of substance, more precisely of his theory of sublunary substance. Although some philosophers, upon reading the *Metaphysics*, see the influence of Aristotle's biology,<sup>2</sup> others – and I am one of them – see Plato. Indeed (although Aristotle would not have put the point in this way), I would go so far as to say that Aristotle can be seen as attempting to offer a defensible version of Platonism. What I mean when I say “a version of Platonism” is that for Aristotle, as for Plato, there is something which is first in knowledge, definition, and time, and that for Aristotle, as for Plato, whatever is knowable must be eternal and unchanging. In the case of Plato, it is, of course, the Forms which are intended to meet these requirements. But Aristotle finds the Forms problematic on both metaphysical and epistemological grounds, and while Plato himself certainly struggled with some of the difficulties that Aristotle complains of, Aristotle believes that Plato's solutions fail, chiefly on account of separation. Specifically, Aristotle seems to believe that separation creates a gap that recollection cannot fully bridge and that Plato's blurring of the distinction between universality and particularity not only leads to regress but casts doubt upon the very intelligibility of Forms. What I intend to argue, however, is that despite all his criticisms Aristotle's own account of substance is nevertheless very like Plato's Theory of Forms but for the denial – or more accurately, the reassessment – of separation.

1 All quotations from Plato follow the translations in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Complete Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961). Emphasis in all quotations follows the sources cited unless otherwise indicated.

2 This view was most recently explored in Furth (1988).

In Chapter I, a chapter that lays the groundwork for Aristotle's theory, I examine Aristotle's criticism of Plato for separating the Forms, arguing that by 'separation' Aristotle has in mind numerical distinctness, and I cite passages to show that he believes that the numerical distinctness of the Forms from sensible objects causes insoluble metaphysical and epistemological problems. To see Aristotle's theory as a response to Plato inevitably raises questions about the accuracy of Aristotle's presentation of Plato's Theory. Even though in Chapter I and elsewhere I do from time to time sketch, in a very broad way, various interpretations of Plato's own views, in a sense the question is irrelevant to my project – if Aristotle's theory is a response to what he took Plato to be saying, the impact on his own views will be the same regardless of his skill as an interpreter. Nevertheless I must admit that upon reading Plato and Aristotle, I find the view that Aristotle misunderstood or failed to appreciate Plato's Theory to be largely false. Rather, I agree with those<sup>3</sup> who say that it is just inherently implausible that one of the finest philosophers who ever lived should, after twenty years in Plato's company, have failed to grasp his views and the issues that underlie them. But, as I have said, the cogency of my project does not depend on agreement with this claim.

Having discussed Aristotle's criticisms of Plato in Chapter I, I turn to Aristotle's own views in the subsequent chapters. If Aristotle is to say, as his criticism of Plato makes it plausible that he should, that substances are not numerically distinct from sensible objects, one might reasonably expect that he holds them to be identical with sensible objects. But it has to be remembered that, like Plato, Aristotle wants substances to be unchanging if they are to be epistemologically fundamental. One might suppose that if substances are forms and if forms are universals this requirement could be met. But then again Aristotle wants substances to be ontologically fundamental as well, a fact that seems to argue for their being objects, not properties. In Chapter II I discuss the problem of referential opacity in Aristotle, claiming that Aristotle uses a distinction between numerical sameness and identity to address many sorts of metaphysical problems, and in Chapter III I argue that this distinction is the key to Aristotle's theory of substance. What I hold is that substances are for Aristotle specimens of natural kinds, where specimens, as particular forms lacking the accidents introduced by matter, are numerically the same as sensible objects yet not identical with them. While specimens of kinds are not eternal, within a kind they are indistinguishable from one another, with the result that unlike sensible objects they are knowable.

<sup>3</sup> One of them is Russell Dancy, to whom, as a result of a conversation in the summer of 1988, this description of the stance and my confidence in its reasonableness are in part owed.

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Thus by the conclusion of Chapter III, an account of substance has been given which, despite the denial of separation, makes it possible for Aristotle to say that substances are knowable objects. But, of course, when Aristotle objects to Plato's Theory of Recollection, his difficulty is not with the knowability of Forms in this sense – Forms are, after all, eternal and unchanging in a way that even specimens of kinds are not. His complaint is rather that it is by no means assured that Plato's Forms can now be known by us. In Chapter IV I consider Aristotle's epistemology, that is, his account of the progression from perception to knowledge, and argue that what supports it is precisely a theory of substance of the sort I have proposed, namely, one characterized by rejection of the Platonic separation of form. Indeed I argue here too that Aristotle's lack of concern for certain skeptical questions can be explained quite naturally by the fact that his epistemology is addressed specifically to Platonic problems arising from separation.

Yet even if it is agreed that Aristotle intends substances to be specimens of natural kinds and even if it is conceded that specimens are not only knowable but such as to make possible a credible account of the acquisition of knowledge, there remain two problems. The first is that, although I have tagged separation as the crux, Aristotle himself says that substances must be separate. In Chapter V I address this question, suggesting that by 'separation' what Aristotle endorses is what I call the ontological counterpart of separation in definition. That is to say, while he wants more than separation in definition (something only conceptually separate from sensible objects could hardly be ontologically more fundamental than they), the separation of Aristotle's substances is not, I argue, the numerical distinctness characteristic of the Forms.

Finally, in Chapter VI, I address what has to be the most serious internal challenge for my interpretation. The problem is just that it is by no means obvious that specimens of natural kinds will be ontologically fundamental, as Aristotle's criteria for substance require. Here I take on the question and argue that Aristotle does believe, contrary to our inclinations, that specimens of natural kinds are more fundamental than sensible objects. The argument in this chapter is admittedly more speculative in that it attempts to assess how it is, if I am right about his theory, that Aristotle could think that something like a specimen of the kind *lion* is more fundamental than a given individual lion in all its peculiarity, that sensible object with which it is numerically the same. In this chapter I argue that the grounds for Aristotle's view are teleological, a case I try to make more plausible by drawing some parallels with art before embarking on a general discussion of Aristotle's agentless teleology and the understanding of the good which sustains it.

To summarize, the project is to defend the following claims:

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- (i) Rejection of Platonic separation is the starting point for Aristotle's account of substance.
- (ii) In order to avoid separation while keeping the Platonic criteria according to which substances must be first in knowledge, definition, and time, Aristotle distinguishes between numerical sameness and identity.
- (iii) Having done so, he holds that substances can be specimens of natural kinds.

Yet even as I have been writing, others have also, and the two most recent accounts of substance in Aristotle, Michael Loux's *Primary 'Ousiai'* (Cornell University Press, 1991) and Frank Lewis's *Substance and Predication in Aristotle* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), came after I had essentially completed this manuscript. As it happens, both Loux and Lewis argue for forms as universals while my argument requires them to be particulars, yet I have not attempted to provide an exhaustive examination of all the texts that bear on this long-standing controversy. Instead I have tried to consider a somewhat different cluster of issues in such a way that they illuminate one another. For what I want to contend is that, if read as criticism and revision of Plato in the way I propose, Aristotle has a coherent view which, even if different from our own, is nevertheless a philosophically challenging response to the experienced world.

## I

## The Separation of Platonic Forms

And Socrates gave the impulse to this theory, as we said before, by means of his definitions, but he did not *separate* them from the particulars; and in this he thought rightly, in not separating them. This is plain from the results; for without the universal it is not possible to get knowledge, but the separation is the cause of the objections that arise with regard to the Ideas.

(*Metaphysics* XIII 9 1086b2–7)<sup>1</sup>

That Aristotle criticizes Plato for separating the Forms is a fact known to every reader. However, what exactly it is that Aristotle wants to criticize has, until recently, seldom been discussed explicitly and at length, and indeed as exploration of the question has occurred, views have differed considerably. It has been proposed by some interpreters that when he criticizes Plato for separating the Forms, by ‘separation’ Aristotle means their independent existence,<sup>2</sup> that is, their capacity for existing even if there were no sensible objects. But other interpreters have held that he means their numerical distinctness from sensible objects,<sup>3</sup> and some writers have thought that he means both of these.<sup>4</sup>

Thus despite the considerable importance Aristotle places on Plato’s separation of the Forms, there is disagreement about just what he is objecting to. Moreover, besides our uncertainty about what Aristotle meant, there is a further problem. For even as he criticizes Plato, Aristotle tells us that substances must be separate (*Metaphysics* VII 1 1028a34). Only after an account of Aristotle’s theory of substance is

1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Aristotle follow *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984). The page, column, and line numbers have where necessary been corrected against the edition of the Greek text prepared by Immanuel Bekker for the Berlin Academy, published in 1831. Emphasis follows Barnes except where indicated.

2 Fine (1984); Hardie (1936), 73; Irwin (1977), 154.

3 Mabbott (1926). See also Morrison (1985), esp. 138–39 and 149–50.

4 Allen (1970), 131–32.

given will it be possible to decide whether the separation he intends to assert is the same as that he intends to deny and, if so, whether in light of his criticism of Plato, the assertion of it is problematic. These tasks will be undertaken in later chapters. In this chapter, however, I want to try to clarify what Aristotle means when he says Plato separated the Forms and why he should think it a cause for objection. For I plan to take seriously the idea that what Aristotle rejected in Plato's Theory was principally the separation of the Forms<sup>5</sup>; indeed, as I have said, my overall argument will be that Aristotle's account of substances can best be seen as an attempt to preserve much that is Platonic by rethinking separation.

## I

In *Prior Analytics* I 11 Aristotle says, "For there to be forms or some one thing apart (*para*) from the many is not necessary if there is to be demonstration; however, for it to be true to say that one thing holds of many is necessary" (77a5–7). In addition to the many passages such as this where Aristotle implicitly criticizes Plato for separating the Forms, there are, fortunately, several where he tries to explain why Plato separated the Forms and two where he explicitly describes the priority of Forms over phenomena, a relation that has sometimes been thought to explain what is meant by separation. I will begin with the latter group.

At *Metaphysics* V 11 in the course of a number of definitions of priority, Aristotle says:

Some things then are called prior and posterior in this sense, others in respect of nature and substance, i.e. *those which can be without other things, while the others cannot be without **them**, – a distinction which Plato used.* (1019a1–4; emphasis added; boldface indicates Barnes's emphasis)

This sense of priority – the priority of whatever can exist without other things which in turn cannot exist without it – seems to be illustrated at *Eudemian Ethics* I 8 in Aristotle's discussion of the Form of the Good. There he says:

We must then examine what is the best, and in how many senses we use the word. The answer is principally contained in three views. For men say that the good *per se* is the best of all things, the good *per se* being that whose property is to be the original good and the cause by its presence in other things of their being good; both of which attributes belong to the Idea of good (I mean by 'both' that of being the original good and also the cause of other things being good by its presence in them); for good is predicated of this Idea most truly (other things being good by participation in and likeness to this); and this is the

5 Morrison (1985) suggests a similar line. See 149–50. See also Mabbott (1926).

original good, for the destruction of that which is participated in involves also the destruction of that which participates in the Idea, and is named from its participation in it. But this is the relation of the first to the later, so that the Idea of good is the good *per se*; for this is also (they say) separable [*chōristēn*] from what participates in it, like all other Ideas. (1217b1–16; emphasis added)

Following Gail Fine, let us call the capacity to exist without the existence of some other thing the capacity for independent existence with respect to that thing.<sup>6</sup> Citing the passage just quoted, Fine argues that when Aristotle talks of ‘separation’ he means a capacity for independent existence<sup>7</sup> and thus that in his criticism of Plato he (in the main, wrongly, as she sees it) attributes to Plato the view that Forms are separate from sensible objects in the sense that they are able to exist independently of them. She says:

Aristotle is probably correct to say that at least some Forms, in some dialogues, are separate. But he and others are incorrect to suggest that Plato, beginning with the *Phaedo*, heralds separation as a new feature of Forms. On the contrary, so far from this being the case, Plato never even says that Forms are separate; it proves surprisingly difficult to uncover any commitment to separation; and commitment to it emerges in unexpected ways and in unexpected cases.<sup>8</sup>

Fine understands Plato’s Forms to be universals, and thus when she denies that the independent existence of Forms is a key component of Plato’s Theory of Forms, what she is denying is that it is especially important to Plato that the Forms be able to exist uninstantiated. But whatever Forms are, Fine’s conclusion about the role of separation is, as she admits, very surprising. T. H. Irwin, for example, who agrees that Forms are universals, thinks that even though Plato does not formulate it clearly and even though his arguments justify only the claim that Forms are not defined in terms of sensible properties and are not identical with such properties (which leaves open the possibility that they might be identical with nonsensible properties of sensible objects), he does in fact believe that he has established their capacity for independent existence.<sup>9</sup>

Since my concern is with the nature of separation, Irwin’s conclusion need be pursued only if it is plausible to hold that Forms are universals

6 Fine (1984), 35.

7 See Fine (1984), 33.

8 Fine (1984), 33–34. According to Fine the most likely candidates for separate Forms are Forms of artefacts (as in the *Cratylus* and *Republic X*) since there would have been a time when they existed which was prior to the work of human artisans, that is to say, they would have existed in the absence of instances (76). If the account of creation in the *Timaeus* is taken in such a way that, while Forms have always existed, there was a time at which there were no sensibles, then, says Fine, many Forms are separate (79). However, even in that case not all Forms would be so. For even before creation there are some Forms that would have instances; traces of fire are found in the chaos, the demiurge exemplifies justice and goodness, and so on (79).

9 See Irwin (1977), 154–55.

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and that 'separation' does in fact mean a capacity for independent existence. That Forms are not universals will be argued in a later chapter. But as to the question of whether a capacity for independent existence is what 'separation' means, it seems to me that the case has not been proved. In *Metaphysics* V 11 natural priority is defined in terms of independent existence and then the definition is illustrated by an appeal to Plato, that is to say, by the Forms, and there is no mention at all of separation. Admittedly, in *Eudemian Ethics* I 8 when independent existence and natural priority are said to be characteristic of the Form of the Good, that the Idea of the Good is also said to be separable is added in a way which suggests its connection with these other notions. But the difficulty is that 'separation' need not *mean* a capacity for independent existence for separation and natural priority to be linked; rather, if a capacity for independent existence were merely entailed by the nature of the Forms, that is to say, by the attributes that Forms are able to have in virtue of being separate, the connection between separation and the natural priority of the Forms would also follow.<sup>10</sup>

I have argued against Fine that neither *Eudemian Ethics* I 8 nor *Metaphysics* V 11 clearly identifies a capacity for independent existence with separation. But there is also another reason for holding that a capacity for independent existence is not what Aristotle means. For if one takes Aristotle to attribute to Plato the separation of the Forms, meaning by that their capacity for independent existence, then Aristotle seems to attribute to Plato an argument for separated Forms which would have no persuasiveness at all. That is to say, as will be made clear in the passages to be discussed in Section II of this chapter, Aristotle takes flux to be Plato's primary motive for the postulation of separated Forms. Whether he is right in this assessment is disputed.<sup>11</sup> But if being in flux is supposed to be an obstacle to being knowable and indeed fully real, then given that there are in fact things that meet these criteria,

10 For example, in his commentary on 1217b14–15 Woods (1992), 68, refers the reader to his discussion of 1218a1–15 where he says of separation: "[Unlike *Nicomachean Ethics* I 1096a34–b5, in *Eudemian Ethics* I 8] there is mention also of the status of the Form as something separate. Does that mean that it does not depend for its existence on particulars? Or is it rather that it has to be conceived of as a distinct *good*? The argument does seem to assume that the Form of the Good is itself a good, and argue from that that it will be a good after a different fashion from other goods, and hence not the common character" (80).

11 Owens (1963), 199, cites Plato's concentration on definitions. Cornford (1939), 74, and, more cautiously, Burnyeat (1979), 59, cite recollection as the motive; Mabbott (1926), 74, thinks that separation is entailed by the fact that Forms are originals of which phenomena are copies. However, if the reason the originals must be separate is that only in this way can they be perfect, for example, and if, as Plato sees it, whatever is perfect and thus a suitable object of definition must be eternal and unchanging, then it seems that Aristotle is still right: the basis for the separation of the Forms is the argument from flux. As will become clear in Chapter IV, I take recollection to be a consequence of the inaccessibility of Forms to our present experience.

what is proved is that there exist some things that are not in flux. That is to say, what has been proved is, at most, that there are things that exist besides – in addition to – those that are in flux. Whether they would exist even if those that are in flux did not do so is clearly another question.

In short, I have no inclination to deny that Plato intended the Forms to have a capacity for independent existence and indeed neither would I deny that Aristotle thought that this was Plato's intention. But if a capacity for independent existence is what is meant by 'separation', then it would seem that Aristotle must attribute to Plato an argument for the existence of Forms which is flagrantly invalid. In fact Fine offers a way to avoid this conclusion. What she suggests is that Aristotle did not take Plato to be arguing directly from flux to Forms capable of existing independently but rather to be using the assumption that there is knowledge despite the existence of flux to establish only that there are Forms which are universals, not that they are separate. Recalling that separation is taken by Fine to be a capacity for independent existence, why then would Aristotle accuse Plato of separating the Forms? What Fine proposes is that these universals or Forms are, in Aristotle's interpretation of Plato's ontology, the only available candidates for substances, and substances, so Aristotle holds, are separate.<sup>12</sup>

Thus as Fine understands it, the argument for the separation of the Forms – which, if Forms are universals and 'separation' means a capacity for independent existence, is, as I have said, just an argument that universals can exist uninstantiated – need not after all be invalid; it is not so because the need for something which is not in flux is not by itself supposed to be sufficient to establish that Forms are separate. Yet even if the argument is not invalid, neither is it in Aristotle's view sound. Rather what Aristotle holds, according to Fine, is that Plato errs in his belief that Forms, being universals, *can* be substances.

In fact I would agree with Fine that Aristotle believes that universals cannot be substances. Nevertheless I disagree with her understanding of separation and in consequence with her construal of how, from the fact of flux, Aristotle supposes Plato to have arrived at separate Forms. Indeed the passage in *Metaphysics* XIII 9 from which the quotation at the head of the chapter was taken and upon which Fine founds her argument would not seem most naturally to support her interpretation. Aristotle says:

as regards those who believe in the Ideas one might survey at the same time their way of thinking and the difficulties into which they fall. For they at the same time treat the Ideas as universal, and again as separable [*chōristas*] and individual. That this is not possible has been shown before. The reason why

<sup>12</sup> Fine (1984), 51–53.

those who say substances are universal combined these two views in one, is that they did not make them the same<sup>13</sup> [*autas*] with sensible things. They thought that the sensible particulars were in a state of flux and none of them remained, but that the universal was apart [*para*] from these and different. And Socrates gave the impulse to this theory, as we said before, by means of his definitions, but he did not *separate* them from the particulars; and in this he thought rightly, in not separating them. This is plain from the results; for without the universal it is not possible to get knowledge, but the separation is the cause of the objections that arise with regard to the Ideas. His successors, treating it as necessary, if there are to be substances besides the sensible and transient substances, that they be separable, had no others, but gave separate existence to these universally predicated substances, so that it followed that universals and individuals were almost the same sort of thing. (1086a31–b11)

Passages such as this will be mined for another purpose in Chapter V. At present, however, my point is that when Aristotle says that Forms are both separate and universal, his diagnosis of Plato's error would seem to be not, as Fine claims, that he made the Forms universals while, if they are to be substances, they must be separate and therefore particular. Rather Aristotle's complaint is that Plato *failed to make Forms the same as sensible things* (1086a36). To be sure, this claim *could* mean that he failed to make them the same in kind – in other words, that he failed to make them particulars – but since in fact Aristotle here also says that Plato makes Forms both particular and universal, this would be, to say the least, a peculiar complaint and, anyway, the manner in which he continues suggests a different explanation. For if the reason for postulating something not the same as sensibles is that the latter are in flux, this reason tells neither for nor against the universality or particularity of Forms – it counts only for the postulation of something that does not have the property of being in flux. Thus their numerical distinctness from things in flux would seem to be what is asserted.

## II

Even though Plato's Forms do have the capacity to exist independently, as I have argued, a capacity for independent existence would not seem to be what Aristotle has in mind when he says that Plato's Forms are separate. Rather, as I see it, the attribution of a capacity for independent existence to the Forms is an assertion of the ontological priority they have over the phenomena from which they are held to be separated. But if this is so, it is necessary to establish what 'separation' does mean, and I have already given a reason for favoring numerical sameness. In *Metaphysics* I 6 987a32–b10 when Aristotle gives his account of the

13 Barnes (1984) has 'identical'. My reason for preferring 'same' will become apparent in Chapter II.