

Substance and Separation in Aristotle

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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)¹

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,² 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 those³ 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.

³ 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.

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:

- (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.