

Aristotle on Substance, Matter, and Form

Metaphysics Γ: the study of being qua being

Aristotle often describes the topic of the *Metaphysics* as “first philosophy.” In Book IV.1 (Γ.1) he calls it “a science that studies being in so far as it is being” (1003a21). (This is sometimes translated “being qua being.”) What does this mean?

“*S* studies *x* qua *y*” means that *x* is the subject matter of science *S*, and *y* is the aspect of *x* under which *S* studies it.

Thus, physics studies natural objects—things that are subject to change. These are things that come into being and go out of being. So physics studies certain beings (the natural ones), and it studies them in so far as they are subject to change.

Metaphysics, on the other hand, studies beings in general (not just changeable ones) and it studies them “qua being”—in so far as they are beings.

But in Γ.2 Aristotle reminds us (as he frequently says elsewhere) that “being is said in many ways”. (There were intimations of this in the *Categories*, where we learned about the ten categories of being.) But this does not mean that the term *being* is “homonymous” (i.e., equivocal or ambiguous). Rather, the term is applied to one *central* case, and all other uses of the term are explicated with reference to the central case. G. E. L. Owen has given the label *focal meaning* to this kind of multivocity.

Example

Take the term *healthy*. Many different things can be called healthy: a person, a diet, a complexion, etc. But they aren’t all healthy in the same sense. A person is healthy because he *has* health; a diet is healthy because it *leads to* health; a complexion is healthy because it is *indicative of* health.

Notice that in all cases there is reference to **health**. And what is the central case of health? What is it that is healthy in the primary sense? Clearly, a person (or animal, or plant). A diet is healthy only because it makes a person healthy, and a complexion is healthy only because it indicates that the person who has it is healthy, whereas a person is healthy because he **has** health (and not because of his relation to other things that are healthy in some more central way than the way a person is healthy).

So one might say that persons are healthy in the **primary** sense of the term, while diets and complexions and the like are healthy only in **secondary** senses of the term.

It is the same with beings, Aristotle tells us (1003b6):

For some things are called beings because they are substances, others because they are attributes of substances, others because they are a road to substance, or because they are perishings or privations or qualities of substance, or productive or generative of substance

This fits in perfectly with what we learned in the *Categories*, where primary substances (individuals) were argued to be the ontologically basic things. Beings in other categories (e.g., qualities, etc.) owe their existence to the substances they inhere in. Qualities are beings, too, but not in the way that substances are.

So the study of being qua being must begin with a study of the central cases of being, the things that are beings in the primary sense: substances.

Metaphysics Z: the study of substance

Aristotle begins book Z (VII) with a reminder that being is said in many ways, and that the being of substances is central, and that if we are to study being we must study substance. Indeed, he tells us (1028b3):

... the old question—always pursued from long ago till now, and always raising puzzles—‘What is being?’ is just the question ‘What is substance?’

But Aristotle can no longer take it for granted that the old *Categories* examples of substances—a man, a horse, a tree—are going to be acceptable as basic items. Why? Because of the **hylomorphic analysis** that was introduced in the *Physics*.

How hylomorphic analysis threatens *Categories* substances

Matter underlies and persists through substantial changes. A substance is generated (destroyed) by having matter take on (lose) form. Examples:

1. A house is created when bricks, boards, etc., are put together according to a certain plan and arranged in a certain form. It is destroyed when the bricks, boards, etc., lose that form.
2. An animal is generated when matter (contributed by the mother) combines with form (contributed by the father).

This suggests that the primary substances of the *Categories*, the individual plants and animals, are, when analyzed, actually compounds of form and matter. And in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle suggests that a compound cannot be a substance (Z.3, 1029a30).

This may seem a strange move for Aristotle to be making. But the idea may be this: a compound cannot be a basic ontological ingredient. Cf. these compounds:

- a brown horse
- a scholar

Each of these is a compound of substance + attribute:

- a brown horse = a horse + brownness
- a scholar = a human + education

In these cases, the compound is a compound of entities that are more basic. (“A scholar is not an ontologically basic item in the world—a scholar is just a human with a liberal education.”)

If then primary substance (in the *Metaphysics* conception of primary substance) cannot be a form-matter compound, what is primary substance? The possibilities seem to be: **matter** and **form**. (Aristotle actually discusses more possibilities—this is a simplification.)

Metaphysics Z.3: the subject criterion

In Z.3, Aristotle considers the claim of matter to be substance, and rejects it. Substance must be **separable** and a **this something** (usually translated, perhaps misleadingly, as “an individual”).

- **Separable**: to be separable is to be nonparasitic. Qualities, and other non-substances of the *Categories*, are not separable. They only exist **in** substances. Separability, then, amounts to **independent existence**.
- **This something**: [there is much dispute over what Aristotle means by this odd locution] “Individual” comes close, except for the suggestion that only a primary substance of the *Categories* could count as a “this something”. Perhaps an individual plant or animal counts as a this something, but perhaps other things do, too. For Aristotle seems to count form as, in some way, a this something (e.g., H.1, 1042a28). But, as a rough gloss, **individuality** seems to be what is at issue.

Now it may seem puzzling that matter should be thought to fail the “separability/individuality” test. For:

- **Separability:** It seems that the matter of a compound is capable of existing separately from it. (The wood of which a tree is composed can continue to exist after the tree has ceased to exist.)
- **Individuality:** We can certainly pick out a definite, particular, batch of matter as a singular object of reference: “the quantity of wood of which this tree is composed at this time.”

But perhaps Aristotle’s point is not that matter is neither separable nor individual; all he is committed to saying is that matter fails to be **both** separable and individual.

- **Separability:** Separate from a substance, matter fails to be a this. It owes what individuality it has to the substance it is the matter of. (What makes this quantity of wood one thing is that it is the wood composing this one tree.)
- **Individuality:** Considered as an individual (a “this something”), matter fails to be separate from substance. (This batch of wood no longer has any unity once it no longer composes the tree it used to be the matter of—unless it now happens to be the matter of some other substance that gives it its unity.)

So matter cannot simultaneously be both separable and individual, and therefore matter cannot be substance. The only remaining candidate for primary substance seems to be **form** (which Aristotle now begins to call **essence**). It is clear that Aristotle is now focusing on the concept of the substance **of** something—i.e., what it is about an individual plant or animal (what the *Categories* called a “primary substance”) that makes it a self-subsistent, independent, thing. Some evidence:

- Z.3, 1029a30: “the substance composed of both—I mean composed of the matter and the form—should be set aside ... we must, then, consider the third type of substance [the form], since it is the most puzzling.”
- Z.6, 1031a16: “a given thing seems to be nothing other than its own substance, and something’s substance is said to be its essence.”
- Z.11, 1037a6: “it is also clear that the soul is the primary substance, the body is matter, and man or animal is composed of the two as universal. As for Socrates or Coriscus, if <Socrates’> soul is also Socrates, he is spoken of in two ways; for some speak of him as soul, some as the compound.”
- Z.17, 1041a9: “substance is some sort of principle and cause ...”

It thus appears that in rejecting the claim that matter is substance, Aristotle is rejecting the **subject criterion** as the basis for deciding what a primary substance is. To be a substance is not to be an ultimate subject, for the ultimate subject of change seems to be matter (perhaps even a featureless and unknowable prime matter?).

Metaphysics Z. 6-17: form as substance

Aristotle concludes Z.3 by considering three possible candidates for substance: matter, form, and the compound of matter and form. He has already rejected matter (1029a28), and at 1029a31 he says that the compound “should be set aside, since it is posterior to the other two, and clear.” Instead, he suggests that we consider the third candidate—form—for the title of substance.

This seems very odd, since we’d expect Aristotle to be rejecting both materialist and Platonist answers to the question of which things are the substances (i.e., ultimate realities). That would suggest rejecting both matter and form, and opting instead for the compound.

What may be going here is that Aristotle has shifted away from the **population question** (which things are substances?) and toward the **explanatory question** (what is it that makes something a substance?). Evidence of this is the frequent occurrence beginning in Z.3 of the locution “substance of”—as in 1028a35

For the essence, the universal and the genus seem to be the substance **of** a given thing ...

The idea is this: when you ask what the substance **of** x is, you are asking what it is that **makes** x a substance. So the reason form gets the nod over the compound is that we are trying to explain what makes a given hylomorphic compound a substance. In this case, it is pointless and circular to cite the compound. Our choices seem to be: matter or form. Since matter has been rejected, form is the default candidate.

Aristotle and Platonism

Does Aristotle’s view that substance is **form** or **essence** make him a Platonist? Most commentators think not, but for different reasons.

- Some think that the kind of essence or form that Aristotle counts as primary substance is one that is not in any way universal; a form that is as individual as the compound whose form it is. (Thus, Socrates and Callias would each have his own distinct individual form—there would be as many individual human forms as there are humans.) This view is usually supported by appeal to Aristotle’s use of expressions like “your essence” (“your essence is what you are in your own right,” 1029b17), and “being Socrates” (1032a8), and to his argument in Z.13 that universals are not substances.
- Others think that the “individual forms” solution is not to be found in Aristotle, and is anyway unavailable to him. On their view, the primary substance of the *Metaphysics* is **species form**—something that is common to different members of the same species, but is still, in some plausible sense, an individual (“this something”). This view is usually supported by appeal to Aristotle’s claim in Z.4 that essence belongs only to species of a genus, and to his argument in Z.15 that no individual is definable (together with his account of a definition as a formula that tells us the essence of something).

***Metaphysics* Z.17: Forms as causes**

Z.17 seems to chart a course about substance that is anti-Platonic but does not (so far as I can tell) decide between the individual-form and species-form interpretations of Aristotle’s doctrine. The main ideas:

The individual substances of the *Categories* are, indeed, compounds of matter and form, **but** they are not just heaps, or piles, of components. Rather, they’re like syllables.

That is, they’re not just unstructured collections of elements, but have a structure that is essential to their being what they are. The syllables **BA** and **AB** are different, but they are the same collection of components—they have the same “matter”.

Structure or form is not just an ingredient (or what Aristotle here calls an “element”) in the compound. Here’s a useful analogy. A recipe is more than just a list of ingredients. It also includes instructions on how to put the ingredients together. But it would be a mistake to think that the instructions are just another ingredient.

Aristotle offers an infinite regress argument for this: if the structure of a compound (e.g., a syllable) were just another component (along with the letters) then the whole compound would just be a heap. (E.g., the syllable **BA** would be a collection consisting of two letters and one structure. But a structure considered by itself, as an element, is not the structure **of** the syllable. The syllable **BA** consists of two elements structured in a certain way; it isn't an unstructured collection of three things, one of which is a thing called a *structure*.

So substance is the structure or form of a compound of matter and form (i.e., of a plant or an animal). At the end of Z.17, Aristotle describes substance, in this sense, in three ways:

1. Primary **cause** of being.
2. The **nature** (of a plant or animal).
3. Not an element, but a **principle**.

The resulting view is not Platonism

The form that Aristotle says is primary substance is not, like Plato's, separable from all matter (except, perhaps, in thought). And it cannot exist if it is not the form of something. (E.g., the species-form does not exist if there are no specimens of that species.) But it is still separable, in Aristotle's sense, since it is non-parasitic: it does not depend for its existence on the particular batch of matter it's in, nor on the accidental characteristics of the compound it's the form of.

The form is not a "thing" in the manner of a Platonic form. It's the **way** something is, the way the matter composing an individual compound is organized into a functioning whole.

Nor is it materialism

Why doesn't this view collapse into materialism? That is, why isn't the form that can only exist in matter just a **mode** or **modification** of the matter that it informs? Why isn't matter more basic than form in the way that the primary substances of the *Categories* are more basic than their accidents?

The substantial form (i.e., what makes Socrates *human*, or, for the proponent of individual forms, what makes Socrates *Socrates*) is really the basic entity that persists through change. This may seem wrong, since when Socrates dies, his matter persists, although he no longer exists. But when we are tracing the history of Socrates through time, we do not follow the course of the matter that happens to compose his body at any given moment, but that of the form that the matter has. (Animals and plants metabolize; the matter that they are composed of differs from time to time.) So what makes Socrates the kind of thing he is, and what makes him remain, over time, **the same thing** of that kind, is the form that he continues to have.

For Aristotle, the form of a compound substance is **essential** to it; its matter is **accidental**. (Socrates could have been composed of different matter from that of which he is actually composed.) Form may be accidental to the matter that it informs, but it is essential to the compound substance that it is the form of. Form is what makes the individual plants and animals what they are. Therefore, it is the **substance** of those individuals.