

Z.6: The Identity Thesis

The problem

At 1032a5, Aristotle claims that “in the case of primary things, those spoken of in their own right, a thing and its essence are one and the same.” What does this mean? Primary things spoken of in their own right would appear to be **substances** (as opposed to accidental compounds like *pale man*). Abbreviating “the essence of x ” as $E(x)$, the claim seems to be this:

If x is a substance, then $x = E(x)$

We’ll call this the Z.6 identity thesis. Since Socrates and Callias are substances, this would seem to yield these two instances of the Z.6 identity thesis:

1. Socrates = $E(\text{Socrates})$
2. Callias = $E(\text{Callias})$

But Z.4 seemed to tell us that it was **species** that have essences. A natural way to understand this is as follows: if x has an essence, then either x is a species, or (if x is not a species) the essence of x is the essence of the species that x belongs to.

Since Socrates is not a species, $E(\text{Socrates})$ must be the essence of Socrates’ species, $E(\text{human})$. Similarly, it follows that $E(\text{Callias})$ is the essence of Callias’ species, $E(\text{human})$. That is:

3. $E(\text{Socrates}) = E(\text{human})$
4. $E(\text{Callias}) = E(\text{human})$

But from (3) and (4) it follows (substituting equals for equals) that:

5. $E(\text{Socrates}) = E(\text{Callias})$

And now the identity thesis gives us an intolerable result. For if we substitute into (5) the equals given by (1) and (2), we get:

6. Socrates = Callias

But Socrates and Callias are supposed to be two different substances. So how can they have the **same** essence (as Z.4 seems to say) and yet each substance be **identical** to its essence (as Z.6 seems to say)?

Some alternative solutions

1. "... is one and the same as..." does not mean identity.
2. The substances under discussion are not individuals like Socrates and Callias.
3. The essences of individuals are not shared, i.e., $E(\text{Socrates}) \neq E(\text{Callias})$

A type 2 solution: the Z.6 Identity thesis pertains to proper definables

The best solution I know of is that of Code ("Aristotle: Essence and Accident"). These are the general lines.

Essence and Definition

An essence is the ontological correlate of the definiens in a definition. Hence, the essence must be the essence of something that is **definable**. This tilts us toward something at the species level (man, horse), rather than the individual (Callias, Nashua).

The Z.6 thesis should be understood as the object language counterpart of the straightforward semantic thesis that in a fully analyzed definition, the definiens and the definiendum denote one and the same entity. (The definiendum denotes the thing and the definiens denotes the essence of that thing.) Hence, **for the definiens and definiendum to denote the same thing is for the thing to be identical to its essence.**

Instances of the identity thesis

Man = E(man)

Horse = E(horse)

Support for this interpretation

The way to test this interpretation is to see whether it fits together with its surrounding text, and whether it can explain some passages that would otherwise be difficult to understand. This interpretation does very well in that regard:

The regress argument in Z.6

At 1031b28, Aristotle gives an infinite regress argument in favor of the identity thesis. If a thing is not identical to its essence, we are led on an infinite regress:

We can also see that it is absurd <for something not to be the same as its essence>, if we give a name to each essence; for apart from that essence there will be another essence as well—for instance, another essence will be the essence of the essence of horse.

A few lines later (1032a3), he makes clear that this is an infinite regress:

Moreover, if there is another essence, the essences will go on to infinity.

His way of breaking the back of the regress (back to 1031b31) is to assert the identity thesis:

But why not let some things be essences at once, going no further, since essence is substance?

The account of definitions and their parts in Z.10

The claim that a (definable) thing and its essence are identical has consequences for definitions. Aristotle has just licensed us to talk about the essence of an essence (although he claims, of course, that they are identical). This means that not only is a substance definable, but its essence is also definable. That means that we should be able to treat the definiens of a definition as a definiendum, and ask how to define **it**?

So Aristotle needs an account of definitions that will guarantee that when we go to define the definiens of a definition, the definiens of the definiens will be the same as the original definiens.

This is exactly what we find in Z.10. And since Z.7-9 are generally agreed to be a later interpolation (in Z.11 1037a22, Aristotle gives a summary of Z.4-10 that makes no mention of anything in Z.7-9) it seems likely that Aristotle turned immediately from stating the Z.6 identity thesis to providing for its defense.

Z.10: definitions and their parts

Z.10 begins with a consideration of definitions and their parts. Its main question is this (1034b22): "... whether or not the account of the parts must be present in the account of the whole." The remainder of the chapter is devoted to a careful distinction between those parts of a thing that do get mentioned in its definition and those parts that do not.

The key idea is that parts of the **form** get mentioned, but **material** parts (except in special circumstances) do not.

The idea seems to be this. Suppose we have a definition, of the form:

$$x =_{df} ABC$$

Further suppose that each of A , B , and C is definable, and that this is a proper definition (i.e., A , B , and C are parts of the **form** of x). That means the definitions of each of A , B , and C are (implicitly) in the original definition.

So to make the original definition more explicit, we should replace each term, A , in the original definition with **its** definition, $D(A)$:

$$x =_{df} D(A) D(B) D(C)$$

It may be that these terms, $D(A)$ etc., are further definable, say by $DD(A)$ etc. In that case, we should make those replacements, as well.

Example: *man* is defined as *rational animal*. But *animal* is also definable, e.g., as *sensitive living thing*. So we can rewrite the original definition: *man* is defined as *rational sensitive living thing*. If *rational*, *sensitive*, and *living* are also definable (as they presumably are) we should plug in their definitions, as well.

Can this go on forever? Aristotle says no (*APst.* I.22)—definitions cannot be infinitely long. Hence we will ultimately arrive at a **fully analyzed definition**, in which every definable term has been replaced by its definition, until nothing further definable remains.

Now, let y be such an ultimate part (not further definable), and ask this question: **what is the essence of y** ? $E(y)$ is whatever is denoted by $D(y)$. But y is not further definable, so $D(y)$ is just y all over again. Hence $E(y)$ is just y itself: $y = E(y)$

Z.10 therefore provides exactly the account of definitions that the Z.6 identity thesis requires.

The regress argument in Z.6 reconsidered

We can now apply what we've learned from Z.10 to the regress argument in Z.6. Aristotle argues that unless we let at least one thing be identical to its essence, we will get an infinite regress.

His example concerns *horse* and $E(\textit{horse})$. Suppose they are not the same, that is, suppose that $\textit{horse} \neq E(\textit{horse})$. Now he wants to ask about the essence of $E(\textit{horse})$. (He seems to think we will find this question more tolerable or intelligible if we first give $E(\textit{horse})$ a name. So let's call $E(\textit{horse})$ "Charlie" and ask: what is the essence of Charlie? Presumably, whatever drove us to deny the identity of *horse* and $E(\textit{horse})$ —i.e., to deny that $\textit{horse} = \textit{Charlie}$ —will also drive us to deny the identity of Charlie and $E(\textit{Charlie})$. (Presumably, we should also give $E(\textit{Charlie})$ its own name—say, "Jim.") That leaves us with this infinite sequence of distinct objects:

horse, Charlie, Jim, E(Jim), ...

which we can rewrite as:

horse, E(*horse*), EE(*horse*), EEE(*horse*), EEEE(*horse*), ...

Aristotle insists that this sequence cannot be infinitely long. But how can we be sure that it doesn't go on for quite a ways before stopping? If it did, we would be stuck with $horse \neq E(horse)$ and no infinite regress.

But what we learned from Z.10 shows us that this cannot happen. That is, if the regress breaks down **anywhere**, it breaks down **everywhere**—i.e., it can't get started. Here's why:

According to Aristotle, definable things are individuated by their definitions: if x and y have the same definition, they are the same thing, $x = y$. In Z.13 1038b14, he states the ontological counterpart of this claim: things with the same essence are themselves one <and the same>.

$$E(x) = E(y) \rightarrow x = y$$

So if the chain above comes to an end, it will be because at some point we have a true identity statement, such as:

$$EEE(horse) = EEEE(horse)$$

But if these two essences are the same, then so are the things of which they are the essences:

$$EE(horse) = EEE(horse)$$

Repeating the same move yields:

$$E(horse) = EE(horse)$$

and ultimately:

$$horse = E(horse)$$

Hence Aristotle's conclusion: "... why not let some things be essences at once, going no further ...?"

Why does Aristotle hold this thesis?

Aristotle's reasons for maintaining this identity thesis seem to be mainly epistemological and anti-Platonic. He spends a lot of time in the beginning of Z.6 talking about Platonic Forms and the dangers of separating them from their essences (as he thinks Plato did). The worry is that if everything is distinct from its essence, no one will ever know anything, since "knowing a thing is knowing its essence" (1031b20).

The argument for this is straightforward enough. Suppose everything is distinct from its essence, but that we do know something, say x . It would seem to follow that we know infinitely many things if we know anything at all. For to know x is to know $E(x)$, and to know $E(x)$ one must know $EE(x)$, and to know $EE(x)$ one must know $EEE(x)$, etc., ad infinitum. But one can't know infinitely many things. So one can't know any thing at all.