

Aristotle's *Metaphysics*

Book Γ: the study of being qua being

First Philosophy

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” (1003^a21). (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. 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.

On this interpretation of “being qua being,” see n. 1 on 1003^a21; Aristotle makes clear at 1004^b10ff that this is the right interpretation.

“Being is said in many ways”

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: “healthy is said in many ways”

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 (1003^b6):

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 **substances** are beings in the primary sense of the term ‘being’, the “central cases” of being. The study of being qua being must therefore begin with a study of substances.

Book Z: What is Substance?

In Z.1, Aristotle tells us that the question “What is being?” amounts to this question: “What is substance (*ousia*)?” (1028^b3-5). And all we know so far is that substances (*ousiai*): the **basic** (*protôs*) entities, that exist without qualification (*haplôs*).

The population question vs. the definition question

- a. Population: What are the substances? Which things are substances?
- b. Definition: what is the nature of substances? What is it to be a substance? What are the criteria for being a substance?

In the *Categories*, we got these answers:

- a. Individual plants and animals: “a certain horse, a particular tree.”
- b. To be a subject that is not itself said of any other subject (i.e., to be a

particular); and not to be **in** a subject (i.e., to be ontologically independent).

But the matter/form distinction threatens the *Categories* answer. For a new subject emerges—matter—that is not said of a subject (i.e. it’s an “ultimate” subject) and does not appear to be “ontologically dependent” as the non-substances of the *Categories* are.

Substance vs. substance-of

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle starts using a new locution: “substance **of**”. As in, “what is the substance **of** *x*?” E.g., at the beginning of Z.3 (1028^b35):

For the essence, the universal, and the genus seem to be the substance of a given thing, and the fourth of these cases is the subject.

This is connected with his new emphasis on the definition question. In addition to the question “What type of entity is basic?” Aristotle now asks “What is it **about** a basic entity that makes it basic?”

Zeta 3: the subject criterion

Aristotle considers four candidate criteria for substancehood:

Essence
Universal
Genus
Subject (“substratum”—*hupokeimenon*)

and spends the rest of Z.3 considering where the subject criterion leads.

The most obvious place it leads is to **matter**. For if you remove all of a thing’s **predicates**, the only thing you are left with is something that “underlies” all the predicates: something which is a pure subject, with no properties of its own. This is matter.

But, Aristotle tells us, “this result is impossible.” For substance has two crucial characteristics that matter does not have. A substance is:

- i. Separable (*chôriston*)
- ii. A “this” (*tode ti*)

What are these characteristics? Why, and how, does matter fall short with respect to them? Some commonly accepted glosses:

- *Separable* means **independent**. This leaves room for a couple of varieties:
 - (a) capable of independent **existence**, being able to exist on its own.
 - (b) in **definition**: x is separable from y iff x can be defined without reference to y .
- *Tode ti* is usually translated “individual”. The problem with matter would then be that it is not an individual, but just **stuff**. Matter comes in *more* and *less*, not in *many* and *few*. (Matter-terms are mass terms, not count nouns.) On this account, the characteristic is **individuality**.
- Another way to read *tode ti*: “this **something** or other”. (I.e., an F , for some appropriate value of F). On this account, the characteristic is **being of a determinate kind**. (This leaves open the possibility of being an individual, but does not entail it.)

Now it may seem puzzling that matter should be thought to fail the “separability/thisness” 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.)
- **Thisness**: The matter of which a compound is composed seems to be in some sense an individual. The wood just **is**, one might say, the tree (or desk, or table) that it composes.

So it appears that matter can be separable, and that matter can be a *this*. But perhaps Aristotle’s point is not that matter is **neither** separable nor a *this*; all he is committed to saying is that matter fails to be **both** separable and a *this*. That is:

- Separate from a substance, matter fails to be a *this*.
- Considered as a *this*, matter fails to be separate from substance.

Explanation: The wood of which the tree is composed (although it can exist independently of the tree) is not, *per se*, an individual. It’s just **stuff**. It can, of course, *constitute* an individual (i.e., be the matter of which an individual is composed). But it is then an individual only because it composes an individual tree (or desk, or table). The matter that exists separately from a substance is not an individual; and the matter that is an individual is not separate from substance.

Possible objection: The claim that matter is not a *this* seems to hinge on the fact that matter-terms (e.g., ‘bronze’, ‘water’) are **mass** terms, whereas substance-terms are **count-nouns** (e.g., ‘statue’, ‘tiger’).

[Count-nouns take plurals, the indefinite article, and the modifier ‘many’; mass terms don’t pluralize (except when they mean ‘kind or type of ...’), don’t take the indefinite article, and take the modifier ‘much’, not ‘many’.]

But can’t we get around this by putting a prefix like ‘quantity of ...’ or ‘collection of ...’ or ‘thing made of ...’ in front of a matter term? This converts it into a count-noun, and gives us, effectively, a way to pick out matter that is both separable and a *this*—something with a kind of *ersatz* unity and individuality.

Possible reply: Aristotle would resist this suggestion, denying that terms like ‘quantity of bronze’ or ‘collection of bricks’ or ‘thing made of wood’ pick out anything that is a **genuine unity**. For example, a collection of bricks, as such, is what he would call a “heap” (cf. 1041^b12 and 1045^a8), and heaps do not count as genuine individuals. (They have no clear conditions of identity and individuation. E.g., move one brick in a heap of bricks to a different place in the heap—is it still the same heap? What about if you remove one brick entirely?)

So matter fails the separability/*thisness* requirement (on our interpretation, this means that matter cannot **simultaneously** be both separable and a *this*). Therefore, Aristotle concludes, matter cannot be substance. Substance must therefore be either form or the compound of matter and form.

Perhaps surprisingly, Aristotle dismisses the compound (1029^a31-32), and proposes to investigate the third and “most difficult” possibility: substance as form.

His method is to consider **sensible** (i.e. perceivable) objects, since these are better known **to us**. So the next topic will be to discover how it is that form can be the substance of a sensible object.

Zeta 4: Substance as Essence

The phrase (not a single word!) that Aristotle uses for ‘essence’ is peculiar: *To ti ên einai*, literally, “the what it was to be.” This phrase is normally used with a noun (or an adjective) in the *dative* (indirect object) case. For example: *To ti ên einai hippô_i*, “the what it was to be **for a horse**.” This is sometimes shortened to *To hippô_i einai*, literally “being for a horse.” English translators render these phrases as “essence of horse.”

Aristotle says that the essence of something is what that thing is “in virtue of itself” (*per se*). And his account of *per se* predication (in *APo* 73^a34 - 73^b5) is this:

x belongs *per se* to y if x is part of the definition of y .

But Aristotle realizes that this alone will not give an adequate test for being a substance. For even qualities like *pale* or *smooth* can have definitions. Yet Aristotle wants to say that, in some sense, only substances have essences.

Cross-categorial compounds

A *definiens* is typically a compound expression (e.g., *rational animal*). So Aristotle investigates cross-categorial compounds, such as *pale man*, and considers whether such things have essences.

There are two different things he might have in mind:

- i. Does a (given) pale man **have** an essence?
- ii. Does ‘pale man’ **specify** an essence? That is, is *being a pale man* the essence of anything?

It is probably (ii) that Aristotle has in mind, although he may run (i) and (ii) together. In any event, his answer seems to be that *pale man* is not an essence.

But he realizes that this may be thought to be just an accident of usage. Since we don’t have a single term that means ‘pale man’, we might not realize that there is any *definiendum* of which ‘pale man’ could be the *definiens*.

So, suppose the name ‘cloak’ meant ‘pale man’ (as, e.g., ‘tailor’ means ‘man who sews’, etc.) Then couldn’t we have

cloak =_{df} pale man?

Aristotle considers whether or not this qualifies as a *per se* predication, and (apparently) ends up not being able to reject it the grounds that it is not *per se*. So he turns to a different objection to the proposed definition.

An essence is “just what something is”

Considerations of *per se* predication seem inadequate to explain why *pale man* can’t be an essence. So Aristotle develops another crucial feature of essences: being **just what something is** (*hoper tode ti*)—1030^a3.

What Aristotle seems to have in mind is that, e.g., *human* is just what some animals (e.g., Socrates) are, and *horse* is just what some animals (e.g., Nashua) are, etc. I.e., where x is an individual, **to be just what x is to be the species of x** . Hence, *pale man* is not just what anything is (since *pale man* is not a species).

From this Aristotle concludes (1030^a11) “essence will belong only to species of a genus and to nothing else.” By this he probably has in mind that it is only the species of (what the *Categories* classified as) **substances** that have essences.

A qualification

Aristotle backs off from this, however. For there is a sense in which things other than substances are definable (you can define *white*, for example, as a certain kind of quality). So there is a sense in which things other than substances have essences.

But “definition and essence in the **primary** and simple sense belong to substances” (1030^b4). Why is this? Aristotle throws out the following dark hint: for the formula of a thing to be a definition in the primary sense, the *definiendum* must be a **unity**:

“. . . not by continuity like the *Iliad* or the things that are one by being bound together, but in one of the main senses of ‘one’ which answer to the senses of ‘is’.” (1030^b9)

But what makes something a unity in the required sense? Aristotle says nothing here, but returns to the topic of unity in two important places:

- Z.12, where it once again appears that only a species (as opposed to an “accidental compound”) will have the required unity.
- H.6, where he says that the problem of unity is solved by noting that matter and form are related as potentiality and actuality: “Matter and form are one and the same thing, the one potentially, the other actually” (1045^b18).