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Essentialism in Aristotle

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ESSENTIALISM, as Quine characterizes it, is “the doctrine that some of the attributes of a thing (quite independently of the language in which the thing is referred to, if at all) may be essential to the thing, and others accidental.”¹ In Quine’s more austere formal characterization, essentialism is committed to the truth of sentences of the form

$$(A) (\exists x) (\text{nec } Fx \cdot Gx \cdot \sim \text{nec } Gx)$$

for at least some open sentences ‘ Fx ’ and ‘ Gx ’. The crucial feature here is the commitment to modality *de re*, reflected in the use of ‘nec’ as a sentence operator, applicable to open sentences. The essentialist must then offer some account of necessity *de re*, that is, of sentences of the form ‘ $(\exists x) (\text{nec } Fx)$ ’, an account which, it has been argued, cannot settle for construing necessity as a semantical predicate.

Questions about the intelligibility of necessity *de re* have become more sharply focussed in recent years with the advent of “possible worlds” semantics. The details of such semantics need not concern us here; it will be enough to note that to say that an object has an attribute necessarily is to say that that object has that attribute in all of a certain set of possible worlds. For example, one might hold that an object has an attribute necessarily if and only if it has that attribute in all possible worlds in which it exists. If Socrates is human in all possible worlds in which he exists, then he could not have failed to be human. Insofar as essentialism is committed to there being objects having attributes necessarily, it is committed to there being constraints of a broad metaphysical sort on what an object might have been.

Quine calls the view encapsulated in (A) above “Aristotelian essentialism.” One might well complain, however, that this characterization of (A) is unjustified. On the one hand, it might be argued that Aristotle espoused no such doctrine as that some sentences of the form of (A) are true. If one needs something like (A) to formulate

¹ “Three Grades of Modal Involvement,” in *The Ways of Paradox* (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 173–74.

essentialism, there is very little evidence to suggest that such a formulation can be found in Aristotle. As Nicholas White has pointed out,² neither Aristotle's grasp of modal notions and sensitivity to the placement of modal operators nor his own notion of necessity seem to have been sufficient for him to have expressed the distinction between essential and non-essential attributes along the lines of (A).

On the other hand, it might well be pointed out that (A) does not go nearly far enough to characterize adequately Aristotle's essentialism. An Aristotelian essence is not merely any attribute *F* satisfying (A); such an essence is intimately bound up with Aristotle's *ti esti* ("what is it?") question, and not every attribute *F* which satisfies (A) will be an answer to the *ti esti* question.

Of these two complaints, the second seems to me justified,³ but not the first. For, on the one hand, even if Aristotle may not have been able to formulate essentialism in Quine's sense, he may still have been committed to it. On the other hand, even if Quine's characterization is not an adequate representation of Aristotle's kind of essentialism, it may likewise be true that Aristotle is committed to essentialism in Quine's sense. The question, then, that I wish to consider here is where in Aristotle such a commitment may be found. His account of substantial change—i.e., coming-to-be and passing-away—vs. alteration has been made the basis of an essentialist position by one recent author;⁴ and his (notoriously difficult) ruminations about substance in his later metaphysical writings certainly suggest an essentialist interpretation. In this paper, I will consider (some of) what Aristotle has to say on these topics and present some reasons that might be given for supposing that there is no essentialist commitment in these parts of Aristotle's writings. I will confine my attention to the question whether Aristotle is committed to essentialism with respect to individual material objects. I will try to show that the anti-essentialistic appearance of much of what Aristotle has to say can be

² "Origins of Aristotle's Essentialism," *Review of Metaphysics* 26 (September 1972): 57–85. White and I are both dealing with the question whether a commitment to essentialism can be found in Aristotle. His conclusions, mainly negative, concern texts other than *Metaphysics* 7–9, which he explicitly declines to consider. I shall argue that it is in precisely these late writings that we find Aristotle committed to essentialism. Hence, my results do not conflict directly with White's main thesis.

³ Cf. n. 11 below.

⁴ B. A. Brody, "Why Settle for Anything Less than Good Old-Fashioned Aristotelian Essentialism?" *Nous* 7 (November 1973): 351–365.

satisfactorily explained away and that his conception of an individual material object is such as to commit him to essentialism in at least one important way.

I

Among the kinds of change (*κίνησις*) that Aristotle distinguished are coming-to-be (*γένεσις*) and passing-away (*φθορά*), or *substantial change*, on the one hand, and *alteration* (*ἀλλοίωσις*), on the other. The general idea is that an alteration of a thing leaves it in existence, but with (or without) an attribute (*πάθος*) it previously lacked (or had). Substantial changes, on the other hand, involve a thing's coming into or going out of existence. Suppose a thing's ceasing to be ϕ would take that thing out of existence. Then that thing's loss of the attribute of being ϕ would be a substantial change and not mere alteration. Even this brief sketch suggests a basis for essentialism: a non-essential attribute of something, x , is one whose loss is an alteration in x ; an essential attribute of x is one whose loss is a substantial change, taking x out of existence.

There are difficulties in trying to formulate Aristotelian essentialism in this way, however. For one thing, there are attributes a thing cannot lose, once it has them, that seem in no way essential to it. Socrates, for example, cannot *lose* the attribute of having fathered a son, and yet it is hardly necessarily or essentially true of him that he fathered a son. This difficulty can be overcome by suitably revising the characterization that has been offered in terms of substantial changes. One can say, instead, that an essential attribute of something, x , is one which x has as long as x exists and whose loss would be a substantial change, taking x out of existence.⁵

An essentialist position formulated along these lines requires that one be able to delineate clearly the class of substantial changes. That is, given a change, one ought to have a clear and unambiguous answer to the question whether it is a substantial change or an alteration. And if the distinction between substantial changes and alterations is to have any interest, there ought to be at least some clear cases of alterations that are not substantial changes. But this is just what an anti-essentialist might plausibly deny. Consider an essentialist's

⁵ In what follows, I will ignore this emendation where it would needlessly complicate matters to bring it in.

paradigm case of substantial change, such as a man's ceasing to be human. Let us grant this is an *existence-depriving* change, in that it entails that the man goes out of existence. But, the argument goes on, *every* change, suitably described, can be seen as existence-depriving. If a pale man acquires a suntan, and so ceases to be pale, then the population of pale men has been diminished by one; similarly, if a bachelor gets married, and so ceases to be a bachelor, then the ranks of bachelorhood have been likewise depleted. In the two cases, the world contains one fewer pale man and one fewer bachelor, respectively. So something goes out of existence just as much in cases of so-called alteration as in cases of substantial change. If all changes are existence-depriving, then the distinction on which essentialism is based collapses.

The obvious essentialist reply⁶ is to point out that the bachelor does not go out of existence when he gets married, nor the pale man when he acquires a suntan. He has ceased being a bachelor (or being pale), but he still exists; he is just no longer a bachelor (or pale). This is in obvious contrast to the case of a man's ceasing to be a man, in which we cannot suppose that the man still exists, except no longer as a man.

But it seems very difficult to try to make this reply on Aristotle's behalf, for (as White points out) Aristotle suggests in many places that even (allegedly) non-substantial changes such as the ones we have considered take something out of existence. It looks as if Aristotle may be willing (cheerfully?) to concede that when a man who was once pale tans, *the pale man* perishes.⁷

Thus, if we take it that x is essentially F when x 's ceasing to be F would drive x out of existence, Aristotle's position seems to line up—surprisingly—with Quine's. That is, whether a thing is essentially F or not depends upon how we describe it. For Aristotle, we have seen, the man's ceasing to be pale does not drive the man out of existence, but the pale man's ceasing to be pale does drive the pale man out of existence. This would leave us in the position of saying

⁶ Cf. C. Kirwan, "How Strong are the Objections to Essence?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 71 (1970–71): 54.

⁷ Cf. *Phys.* 190a9–21, where *the unmusical man* is said not to remain (*ὑπομένει*) when the man becomes musical; *Gen. & Corr.* 319b25–31, where *the musical man* is said to perish (*ἐφθάρη*) when the thing which remains—the man—takes on the *πάθος* of unmusicality (*ἡ ἀμουσία*). For other references see White, "Origins of Aristotle's Essentialism," p. 71.

that the pale man is essentially pale while the man is not. And this seems to link the essentiality of pallor to 'pale man', *de dicto*, rather than to the pale man himself, *de re*. At this point, we are reminded of Quine's contention that "necessity resides in the way in which we say things, and not in the things we talk about."⁸

This apparent alliance between Aristotle and Quine is, I believe, misleading. Quine's point, I take it, is that contexts like '. . . is essentially (or necessarily) *F*' are referentially opaque, that is to say, that intersubstitution in such contexts of two expressions designating the *same thing* may not be counted on to preserve truth value. And Aristotle would be able to agree with this diagnosis of the suggested analysis of '. . . is essentially *F*' only if he held that 'the man' and 'the pale man' were two expressions designating the same thing. But it seems highly unlikely that he held this. For where we might hold 'the man is the pale man' to be obviously an identity statement, Aristotle seems to want to hold that the man and the pale man are, at best, accidentally the same.⁹ This is not too surprising a view for someone to hold who believes the pale man to perish on the acquisition of a suntan. For suppose the man acquires a tan; then the pale man has perished and the man has not. So the two can hardly be identical, given that something true of the one is false of the other.¹⁰ Unless contexts such as '. . . has perished', '. . . no longer exists', etc., can be reasonably construed to be referentially opaque (which seems unlikely), Aristotle's reluctance to identify the pale man with the man is well-motivated by his seemingly bizarre view of existence-deprivation.

Having disentangled Aristotle's position from Quine's, let us reconsider the question whether we have found a home for Quinean essentialism in Aristotle's view of existence-deprivation. Aristotle's landscape now seems strewn with individuals such as *the man*, *the pale man*, *the pale thing*, etc., each strictly distinct from all of the others and each with different conditions threatening its continued existence. It might be argued that, along with the exceedingly generous ontology, we now have essentialism with a vengeance. For just as *the man* ceases to exist when no longer a man, so *the pale thing*

⁸ Quine, "Three Grades of Modal Involvement," p. 174.

⁹ Cf. *Met.* 5. 6, 9; and Nicholas White, "Aristotle on Sameness and Oneness," *Philosophical Review* 80 (April 1971): 177–97.

¹⁰ Cf. David Wiggins's life-histories principle (*Identity & Spatio-Temporal Continuity* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1967], pp. 10, 67).

ceases to exist when no longer pale. Hence, one might hold that Aristotle is committed to the view that just as *the man* is essentially a man, so, too, *the pale thing* is essentially pale. And, in general, for any descriptive phrase, 'the *F*' formed from any predicate '*F*', *the F* is essentially *F*.

Nevertheless, it does not seem to me that this peculiar view qualifies as Quinean essentialism. An essentialist, in Quine's view, must allow that one and the same thing may be variously referred to and said to have the same attributes necessarily, however it is referred to. We have seen that, for Aristotle, *the man* and *the pale man* do not have the same attributes necessarily. And so, not surprisingly, 'the man' and 'the pale man' do not, for him, refer to the same thing, strictly speaking. But now it appears as if it will not be possible to refer variously to one and the same thing, in the strong sense of 'one and the same'. Aristotle's stringent conditions on non-accidental identity are precisely what stand in the way of our finding Quinean essentialism, in any interesting sense, in this area of his thought. If we adhere to strict criteria of identity, then Aristotle's world is cluttered with individuals, with no nonequivalent ways available of referring to the same one. If we loosen the criteria, then whether an individual has an attribute essentially will depend on how it is specified. In neither case does essentialism as Quine envisages it emerge.

We have been operating, thus far, with a relativized notion of essential attributes. *Being F*, that is, may be essential to *x* but not to *y*, and there is no clear sense to the question of whether an attribute is essential, tout court. One can only ask whether it is essential to this or that individual. But one might construct on this basis the notion of an *absolutely* essential attribute, i.e., one that is essential to any individual that has it at all. Some such notion, it seems to me, is involved in Aristotle's thought.¹¹

¹¹ It should be noted that any account of essential attributes given purely in terms of the notion of substantial change will fail to capture a leading idea of Aristotelian essentialism. For consider vacuous attributes, such as *being self-identical* or *being red or not red*. Can a thing lose its vacuous attributes? Perhaps not; but if so, it will surely be at the price of its own extinction. In either case, vacuous attributes would seem to be absolutely essential in the sense just introduced. Yet these must be discounted as Aristotelian essences, for they do not answer Aristotle's *ti esti* question: they do not tell us *what* anything is. Aristotle's emphasis on the *ti esti* question indicates that he views an essential attribute as providing—or helping to provide—a way of sorting things into kinds in a fundamental way. Accidental attributes fail to sort in the right way, as is indicated by

It now begins to appear that we may have a way of segregating a class of absolutely essential attributes. *Pallor* would not be in the class, since, although *the pale man* may be essentially pale, *the man* is not. But *being human* would, if it were an attribute with respect to which change is *always* substantial. Or, to put it another way, if *being human* is not accidental to anything, then this attribute is absolutely essential—what one might call an *Aristotelian essence*.¹²

All that has been accomplished so far is the characterization of the notion of what I have dubbed “Aristotelian essence.” What has not been established is whether anything would, for *Aristotle*, count as an Aristotelian essence. And there seems to be a very straightforward argument to the conclusion that there are, for *Aristotle*, no such essences.

their figuring in non-substantial changes; vacuous attributes (which *Aristotle* did not discuss) fail to be essential, since they do not sort at all. Vacuous attributes and the problems they engender will not be discussed below. They can, of course, be ruled out of consideration by adding the requirement that an absolutely essential attribute be one that some things lack.

¹² This will seem especially plausible to those who take essential attributes to have natural kinds as their extensions. And one would expect this formulation to be congenial to an Aristotelian view of secondary substances (such as *man*, *horse*, *tree*) as natural kinds. I shall consider below one important line of argument—based on considerations of *matter* and *subjecthood*—designed to show *Aristotle* incapable of holding such a position. I should note, in passing, that there might be other lines of argument to the same conclusion. One of these is alluded to by *White* (“Origins of *Aristotle’s Essentialism*,” p. 66), viz., that *Aristotle* not infrequently will use a *substance* term ‘*F*’ to say of something else (usually designated by a non-substance term) that it is *accidentally F* or *happens to be F*, e.g., at *Cat.* 7a36–37 he says that *being a man* is one of the accidents (συμβεβηκότα) of a master. *White* is willing to allow that *Aristotle* here “means that it is not necessarily the case that every master is a man” (ibid.). So construed, *Aristotle’s* remark does not conflict with the position under consideration. But *White* is quite right in pointing out that, for just this reason, *Aristotle’s* use of the expressions καθ’ αὐτό and κατὰ συμβεβηκός cannot by themselves support an essentialist interpretation. If *Aristotle* can say that something is κατὰ συμβεβηκός *F* which an essentialist would plausibly regard as essentially *F*, then his καθ’ αὐτό/κατὰ συμβεβηκός distinction does not seem to match the essentialist’s essential/accidental distinction. It may be, as *White* says, that in predicating *man* of *Socrates* καθ’ αὐτό, *Aristotle* is “merely registering the view that . . . *Socrates* is per se a man relative to a background grouping of him as a man” (ibid.). The point I want to stress, however, is that if we do not try to base *Aristotle’s* essentialism solely on his notion of καθ’ αὐτό predication, we will not find his—otherwise jarring—tendency to say that something is a man κατὰ συμβεβηκός inconsistent with the view that an essential attribute is had essentially by everything that has it at all.

Pick any attribute an essentialist might be expected to regard as an Aristotelian essence, say, *being a man*. This is an Aristotelian essence only if it is essential to everything that has it. This, in turn, requires that anything's *ceasing* to be a man would drive it out of existence. Yet Aristotle concedes (*An. Post.* 83a2) that statements like "that pale thing is a man" may be true (cf. White, "Origins of Aristotle's Essentialism," p. 74). And it certainly seems as if *that pale thing's* ceasing to be a man would not drive *it* out of existence. On Socrates' demise, *that pale thing* ceased being a man, but continued to exist, now correctly described, of course, as a corpse. So *being a man* does not appear to be an Aristotelian essence; and it seems easy to generalize on this result and show that nothing is, for Aristotle, what we have called an Aristotelian essence.

The crucial consideration here, of course, is whether Aristotle is committed to saying that *that pale thing* or *that body* is a man. For unless that pale thing is, at some time, a man, it cannot very well ever *cease* being one. Here we are confronted with a very difficult passage in *An. Post.* (83a1-23) where Aristotle addresses himself to this very point.

In this passage Aristotle contrasts sentences like

- (1a) The pale thing walks
- (2a) That large thing is a log

with their preferred counterparts

- (1b) The man walks
- (2b) The log is large.

Aristotle goes on to give a number of reasons for preferring the (b) versions to the (a) versions, which we will shortly investigate. But he begins his discussion with the crucial concession (which White fastens on) that (1a) and (2a) are *true*. And this seems to be enough to show that *being a man* is not an Aristotelian essence, for, by the same token, Aristotle should accept

- (3a) The pale thing is a man

as being true, and our previous argument will apply.

But along with his acceptance of the (a) sentences as true, Aristotle offers a number of qualifications concerning them. The (a) sentences, he says, are not predications at all, or, at least, not in a strict sense (*ἀπλῶς*) but only accidentally (*κατὰ συμβεβηκός*). His

reason for saying this (although he would not have put it this way) seems to be that the same facts underlie the (a) and (b) versions, and that the grammatical form of the (b) sentences, unlike that of their (a) counterparts, correctly represents the logical form of those facts. The grammatical subject of (2a) is ‘that large thing’, but this is not the logical subject of the fact it expresses, for that subject, as correctly represented in (2b), is *the log*. Aristotle’s way of making this point is to insist that ‘the white thing is a log’ *means* that something which happens to be white ($\hat{\omega}$ συμβέβηκε λευκῶ εἶναι) is a log, and not that the white thing is the subject ($\hat{\upsilon}$ ποκείμενον) which happens to be a log. Aristotle thus provides what he takes to be a more perspicuous expansion of ‘the white thing is a log’. But the analogous expansion of ‘the log is white’ (viz., ‘something which happens to be a log is white’) he finds defective, for, he says, ‘the log is white’ does not mean that something *else*, which happens to be a log, is white. (As an example of a non-defective expansion of an instance of ‘_____ is white’ Aristotle offers to expand ‘the musical is white’ into ‘a man who happens to be musical is white’.) In the regimentation that Aristotle suggests, *white* appears as a predicate (*κατηγορούμενον*) and *log* as that of which something is predicated ($\tau\hat{o}$ οὐ̇ κατηγορεῖται), i.e., as a subject.

These considerations suggest that the notion of a $\hat{\upsilon}$ ποκείμενον—a subject—will be a crucial one for Aristotle in this connection. To salvage the notion of an Aristotelian essence we would have to amend it as follows: an attribute is an Aristotelian essence if and only if it is essential to every individual having it which is a genuine subject for that attribute. This characterization is immune to our previous counter-example, since *that pale thing* is not, according to the *An. Post.* doctrine we have been expounding, a subject of which *being a man* is an accident (*συμβεβηκός*).

It now appears that we can produce at least an analogue of the feature of Quinean essentialism noted above (p. 392), that there may be various ways of referring to an individual which itself, independent of the mode of reference, has an attribute necessarily. Instead of thinking of ‘the man’, ‘the pale man’, and ‘the pale thing’ as three ways of referring to an individual which is necessarily a man, we can think of *the man*, *the pale man*, and *the pale thing* as three distinct individuals which *coincide*, that is, which are related by “accidental sameness.” So where the Quinean essentialist might say “that

thing is identical to something which (no matter how we refer to it) is necessarily a man," the Aristotelian analogue would be: "that thing coincides with something which (no matter what it coincides with) is necessarily a man." The individual which (no matter what it coincides with) is necessarily a man is a *basic* individual. And a basic individual is one which is a genuine subject for an attribute which is an Aristotelian essence, as defined above.¹³

Our present characterization of "Aristotelian essence" will not do us much good, of course, without a clearer idea of what it is to be a subject, in Aristotle's sense, for a given attribute. But one of Aristotle's favorite candidates for a *ὑποκείμενον* in general seems to threaten this characterization. For Aristotle, at least some of the time, and especially in his later metaphysical cogitations, favors *matter* as the ultimate subject of predication. "Everything else (sc., other than substance) is predicated of substance," he tells us, "and substance is predicated of matter" (1029a23-24). This is presumably what makes matter the ultimate subject. Now it is reasonable to suppose that Aristotle held that some *matter's* ceasing to be *F* (where '*F*' is a substance predicate) need never drive *that matter* out of existence. And if this is so, then it would appear, once again, that nothing will count as an Aristotelian essence, as long as matter is held to be the subject for predicates in the category of substance.

Aristotle's concept of matter, at least at first blush, seems to be in direct conflict with the possibility of his holding an essentialist position. For if matter is the ultimate subject of predication and matter can be *anything*, then the subjects themselves of which we speak, ultimately, are such that everything true of them is accidental to them. So our ultimate subjects are never essentially anything at all. In the face of this, I want to contend that Aristotle's conception of matter and form does not conflict with there being Aristotelian essences as defined above. And so I will have to show, *inter alia*, that the reasoning just supplied is based on an inadequate understanding of Aristotle's notions of matter, form, and substance. This will take us into the heart of Aristotle's metaphysical jungle—*Metaphysics* 7 and 8.

¹³ Hence, there must be Aristotelian essences in order for there to be basic individuals, and there must be basic individuals in order for an Aristotelian analogue of Quinean essentialism to obtain. Basic individuals are, of course, substances.

II

In his attempt to answer the question, “What is substance?”—the main concern of *Metaphysics* 7 and 8—Aristotle considers the claim of *matter* to the title of *οὐσία* and rejects it. The claim is based on the idea that being a *ὑποκείμενον*—a subject of predication—can be thought to be the criterion of being a substance. This recalls the doctrine of *Categories*¹⁴ that first substance is neither *said of* nor *in* a subject, in Aristotle’s technical senses of these expressions. This doctrine leaves first substance no role but to be a subject—that about which everything else is predicated. The concept of matter, of course, plays no role in the *Categories*. For various reasons, matter comes into the picture in the *Metaphysics*, and the natural role for it to take up is that of the ultimate subject of predication. I will not try to detail what these reasons may have been. But it is worth mentioning, in passing, one obvious candidate: Aristotle seems to find himself required to offer a finer-grained analysis of the physical objects in his ontology than the *Categories* scheme permitted. In the *Categories*, first substances, such as *this man* or *this horse* were characterized by their ability to persist through change—by the fact that, as he puts it, “something the same and one in number can receive contraries” (4a10). But substances come to be and pass away, and these occurrences are *changes*, and Aristotle’s view of change requires a subject. So matter comes in to take up the slack and serve as the subject for the changes in which substances come to be and pass away.

The picture that seems to emerge is this: when a man is said to be pale, or musical, a substance—the individual man—is the subject of which *being pale* or *being musical* is predicated. Now what is it of which *man* is predicated? The answer in the *Categories* is that it is *the individual man* (1a20). But the answer that 7.3 suggests would be different, for there, we are told, “substance is predicated of matter” (1029a23–24). This picture has two crucial features: 1) that the relation between substance and matter is the same as, perhaps even modeled on, that between items in non-substance categories (e.g., quality) and substance; 2) that pride of place in the ontological

¹⁴ Cf., esp., 2b37: “It is because they are subjects for everything else that primary substances are most properly called substances.”

scheme has been given to *matter*, which now emerges as the ultimate subject—that of which everything else is said.

But Aristotle is unwilling to let *matter* claim the titles of οὐσία and so is unwilling to allow the question of what substance is to hinge on the issue of subjecthood. So two (presumably) independent reasons are given for rejecting the claim. Substance has to be *separable* (χωριστόν) and *a this* (τόδε τι), and Aristotle is confident that matter does not meet these requirements. On the topic of what these requirements amount to, however, darkness obtains. Separability seems to have to do with ontological independence, the ability to exist independently of something else (cf. the discussion of the non-separability of *walking* at 1028a20 ff.), but what it is that matter cannot, while substance can, exist independently of is unclear. Matter, to be sure, cannot exist independent of form, but then, neither can substance. Presumably, matter cannot exist independent of the various non-substance categories—e.g., you cannot have matter without having some *amount* of it—but it is hard to see how substance is independent of these items. At any rate, the general idea seems to be that matter can be assimilated to items in the non-substance categories in that it is always the matter *of* something, just as a quality is always the quality *of* something. And Aristotle's conclusion, right or wrong, seems to be that a substance is going to be that *something* that the qualities are qualities *of* and that the matter composes.

This ties in nicely with the second requirement, that substance be τόδε τι—a *this*, or, as we might gloss it, an individual thing of a certain kind. Matter by itself is not *an* anything. Gold, for example, is not by itself a ring or a sphere. Nor even is a certain *bit* of gold—just like that—a genuine individual. But the bit of gold can be shaped in one way or another, and then you have a τόδε τι—*this ring*, for example, or *this sphere*. The individual here is the ring or the sphere. But the gold of which the ring is composed is not the ring any more than the shininess or yellowness that the ring manifests is the ring. (The importance of this point for understanding Aristotle's concept of a material individual will become clear as we go on.) For our present purposes, we should note that, once again, we see matter lining up with the non-substance categories rather than with substance. This interpretation is further confirmed by Aristotle's insistence in several places¹⁵ that we should say, e.g., of a casket

¹⁵ Cf. 1033a5–23, 1049a18–b2; *Phys.* 245b9–16.

made of wood that it is *wooden* (ξύλινον) rather than that it is *wood* (ξύλον). So impressed is Aristotle by this point that he strains his linguistic resources to the breaking point in generalizing on this example: if ‘that’ (ἐκεῖνος) is a matter-term, we should call a thing made of that not ‘that’, but ‘thaten’ (ἐκείνινον). Calling the ring ‘golden’, rather than ‘gold’, presumably relieves us of the temptation to think that the gold is what the ring is. This assimilation of matter to accident is made explicit at 1049a30 ff., where Aristotle says that calling a thing ‘thaten’, rather than ‘that’, is just like calling a man ‘musical’ (μουσικόν) or ‘pale’ (λευκόν) rather than ‘music’ (μουσική) or ‘pallor’ (λευκότης). We cannot identify a man with musicality or pallor in general, of course, as we cannot identify a ring with gold in general. But Aristotle’s point is stronger than this. For we cannot identify the man with his particular musicality or pallor either, and, by the same token, we cannot identify the ring with the particular bit of gold that makes it up. It is this last attempted identification that would be most tempting to make, and hence it is crucial to see that Aristotle is denying it. The reason for this denial can be gleaned from Aristotle’s claim, reiterated in the passage in 7.7 cited above (1033a5–23), that a thing which is produced is not said to be that from which it comes. Suppose a ring is made here and now out of a particular bit of gold; the ring which is produced cannot be “that from which it comes”—i.e., cannot be *identified* with the particular bit of gold—for while the ring was produced here and now, the particular bit of gold was not. And, we might add, the ring can be destroyed without destroying that particular bit of gold. The point is the now familiar one that the ring and the bit of gold of which it is composed cannot be identified since their persistence conditions differ.¹⁶

We are now in a position to see how misleading was the idea developed above of matter, as ultimate subject of predication, providing us with individuals whose substance-predicates hold good of them only accidentally. It is not as if the bit of gold is the individual of which *being a ring* is predicated (as the ring is the individual of which

¹⁶ This is another application of Wiggins’s life histories principle; cf. also John Perry, “The Same *F*,” *Philosophical Review* 79 (April 1970): 198–99, and Sydney Shoemaker, “Wiggins on Identity,” *Philosophical Review* 79 (October 1970): 530–31, who might not accept this formulation. Shoemaker would say that the ring is composed of gold, or even composed of a particular portion of gold, but balks at saying that it is composed of a *piece* of gold. I don’t know what he would say about ‘the bit of gold’.

being round is predicated). Rather, the ring is the individual of which *being golden* is predicated. The matter-term by itself does not specify any individual and hence does not specify an individual whose substance-predicates hold good of it only accidentally.

Matter as ultimate subject enters the discussion in 7.3 as part of a *reductio* against the ultimate-subject criterion of substantiality. If you adopt this criterion and look for the subject of which *gold*, say, is predicated and, whatever *that* is, look for the subject of which *it* is predicated, etc., you wind up with an ultimate subject which is a blank, something which cannot be said to be anything in its own right (*κἀθ' αὐτό*)—for it is “neither a particular thing nor of a certain quantity . . . ,” etc., 1029a20—although, paradoxically, it is supposed to be that about which everything can be said. Whatever Aristotle’s attitude may be to the viability of such a concept of an ultimate subject,¹⁷ he is at least confident that our search has *not* turned up a genuine individual, something *χωριστόν* and *τόδε τι*, and therefore has not turned up a legitimate claimant to the title of *substance*. So the ultimate-subject criterion must be rejected.¹⁸

By now it has become clear, I hope, that Aristotle’s view of matter as ultimate subject of predication does not leave him in a clearly anti-essentialistic position. Socrates, for example, would not be essentially a man if the individual of which *man* is predicated, in his case, were something—e.g., an undifferentiated clump of matter—whose continued existence would not be threatened by that predicate’s failing to hold good of it. But the only sort of individual which is a subject for the predicate *man* is an individual *man*, and the matter of which Socrates is composed is not a man. Whatever the relation between Socrates and the matter, e.g., the flesh and bones, of which he is composed may be, it is not such as to make that matter the individual of which *man* is predicated. So it is not at all clear that there is, for Aristotle, any subject which is *both* identical to Socrates and yet might have failed to be a man. To be sure, there is a material subject—something “underlying” Socrates—which will survive his demise, at which time it will not be a man. But then it

¹⁷ Here we touch on, but will not examine, the topic of *prime matter* in Aristotle. Cf. W. Charlton, *Aristotle’s Physics, I, II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 136–38.

¹⁸ Considerations such as these may have prompted Aristotle to hold that ‘is a subject’ or ‘underlies’ (*ὑπόκειται*) is used in two ways. Cf. 1038b5.

never was a man—it only went to make one up. Socrates himself, on the other hand, does not go to make up a man—he *is* one.

One might complain that it is not necessary to search for an undifferentiated clump of matter to serve as the material subject of the substance-predicate *man*. The material subject can be something with as much claim to being a *τόδε τι* as Socrates himself—namely, his body. It has enough form to be an individual and so might seem to be a perfectly suitable subject for the predicate *man*. If so, then the subject said to be a man during Socrates' lifetime still exists (at least for a while) after Socrates' death, even though *man* can no longer be truly predicated of it. And if this is right, then *being a man* will not be an essential attribute of the subject of which it is predicated.

Aristotle is ready for this move, however. The plausibility of the move derives from the fact that Socrates' body has form and shape, and so appears qualified to be the *οὐσία* of which *man* is predicated. Indeed, the form and shape it has seems just the same as the form and shape of Socrates himself. (Imagine someone complaining that Socrates resembles his body so closely in form and shape that it is hard to tell them apart!) Aristotle's response to this is to construe *form* in his technical sense as going beyond mere physical shape. Otherwise, we would have to count things as men that are clearly *not* men, e.g., corpses.¹⁹ We are likely to lose sight of this point if we model the case of the form of a man too closely on that of the form of a statue, for there is nothing that stands to the statue as Socrates' corpse stands to Socrates. But this is just the difference we would expect to find between a living thing and an artifact. Aristotle's way of marking the difference is to consider the form of the statue to be its shape, but that of a living creature to be its soul. Hence his insistence that the student of nature investigate soul rather than matter (*De Part. An.* 641a29–30). But the main point remains as before: the subject of a substance-predicate has to be *that very thing* that is predicated of it,²⁰ that is, the subject of which *man* is predicated has to be *that very thing*, namely, a *man*. So Socrates' body cannot be the subject of which *man* is predicated, in Aristotle's view.

¹⁹ Cf. *De Part. An.* 640b34–35: “A corpse has the same shape and form (τοῦ σχήματος μορφῆν), but all the same it's not a man.”

²⁰ Cf. the discussion in *An. Post.* 83a24–35: substance-predicates (τὰ μὲν οὐσίαν σημαίνοντα) denote the *very things* (ὅπερ ἐκείνο) they are predicated of.

I have tried to sketch a partial account of Aristotle's concepts of matter and form, which removes the temptation to find embodied in them a straightforwardly anti-essentialist position and, instead, suggests a full-blooded essentialism. But we are still left with Aristotle's tendency to treat form as predicable of matter and to say or imply that the material subject can be said to *be* the substance that is predicated of it. And it remains to be seen why this tendency does not show that he holds a view about the matter/form relation that conflicts with the one I have been ascribing to him.

Consider, for example, the discussion in 7.17 which culminates that book's investigation into the nature of substance. Aristotle maintains that the way in which certain 'why' questions are answered tells us something important about substance. Suppose, for example, we ask why something is a house or a man. The correct answer, he suggests, will mention, in the one case, *what it is to be a house* (or *what being is for a house*—ὁ ἦν οἰκίᾳ εἶναι) and, in the other, the *form* (εἶδος) that a certain body has. But what is the *something* about which we ask, "Why is *it* a man?" or "Why is *it* a house?" Aristotle here faces a problem. There must be something about which we ask this question, he believes, for all such questions are about why something is predicated of something (τὶ ἄρα κατὰ τινος ζητεῖ: 1041a23). But, as we have seen, the thing of which *house* (or *man*) is predicated is the house (or the man). And so we seem to be asking why the house is a house and why the man is a man. Now Aristotle finds this an embarrassment, for it is as if we are asking something of the form, "Why is a thing itself?" (διὰ τί αὐτό ἐστιν αὐτό), which is, he says, an empty inquiry (οὐδέν ἐστι ζητεῖν: 1041a15). There is a single answer to all such questions (εἰς λόγος καὶ μία αἰτία ἐπὶ πάντων: 1041a17), as "Why is a house a house?" and that tells us nothing about houses, for it is the logical truth that each thing is itself (αὐτὸ δὲ ὅτι αὐτό: 1041a16). So we seem to be prevented, on pain of engaging in an empty inquiry, from asking our questions about the one thing that we are entitled to ask it about.

From a contemporary perspective, the answer to Aristotle's problem lies in considerations of scope. Thus, to modify slightly an example of Russell's, if I ask you why your yacht is no longer than it is, it will not do to cite the logical truth that nothing is any longer than itself. Thus, we want to distinguish

(Q1) Why is it that your yacht is no longer than your yacht?

from

(Q2) With respect to the length of your yacht, why is your yacht no longer than *that*?

(Q1) might be answered by an appeal to logical truth, but not (Q2). The difference between (Q1) and (Q2) lies in differences of scope: in (Q1) ‘why’ has wider scope than ‘your yacht’, while in (Q2) ‘the length of your yacht’ has wider scope than ‘why’. So we might solve Aristotle’s problem similarly, by distinguishing between

(Q3) Why is it that: a house is a house?

and

(Q4) With respect to a (any) house, why is it a house?

Using ‘?’ as the question-forming operator ‘why is it that . . .?’ we can represent the logical form of (Q3) and (Q4), respectively, as:

(Q3’) ? (x) (Hx \supset Hx)

(Q4’) (x) (Hx \supset ?Hx).

The scope differences make clear, as we would expect, that (Q4) is about *houses, de re*, whereas (Q3) is about the statement that a house is a house, *de dicto*. So we can solve Aristotle’s problem, while allowing the question, “Why is it a house?” to be *about* the house, by insisting that the question be understood as *de re*. Hence there is no need to find something *other* than the house to ask the question about, as Aristotle seems to have supposed (cf. 1041a11: *διὰ τί ἄλλο ἄλλω τινὶ ὑπάρχει*).

Clearly this solution was unavailable to Aristotle. His own solution is to ask a different question, one (as if) about a different subject. We should ask, Aristotle says, “Why are those bricks and stones a house?” (1041a26–27), and, in general, “Why is the matter *this*?” (1041b5), where for ‘this’ we supply the appropriate substance-term. This solution strongly suggests that Aristotle does, after all, think that matter terms can be used to pick out individuals that can be said to *be*, but only accidentally, the substances that they are said to be. I say “accidentally” for, clearly, the bricks and stones might not have been a house. At this point, the essentialism I have been trying to isolate in Aristotle once again seems to lose its grip.

It is inviting to look upon Aristotle’s solution to this problem as an effort, hindered by lack of adequate machinery, to solve it our way. For Aristotle’s importation of *matter* as the subject for his ‘why’ questions seems to be his way of trying to refer to the *thing* in ques-

tion (e.g., the house or the man) in a logically independent way (i.e., a way that doesn't already imply that the thing *is* a house or a man.²¹ This logical independence is achieved, for us, by the free variable in the open sentence governed by the operator '?' in (Q4'). So what we accomplish with variables Aristotle tries to do with matter-terms.²²

If this account of Aristotle's solution is correct, then he is not committed to the view that matter-terms pick out individuals which have substantial attributes as accidents. For he seems to be using, e.g., 'these bricks and stones' as a way of referring to a *house* without implying that it is a house. And it may be possible to do this without identifying the house with the bricks and stones and, hence, without thereby losing the essentialist commitment. If we were to confront Aristotle with the direct question, "Are the bricks and stones the house, or aren't they?" his answer would have to be put rather delicately. No, they are not, he would have to say—at least, not just like that. But, on the other hand, when we want to know *why* something is a house, the bricks and stones are what we are asking about, and so it seems that they are, after all, the house.

Aristotle's position has to be that in a sense they are and in a sense they are not. And this is just what we find, for his solution to this particular problem is to say that the bricks and stones are *potentially*, although not *actually*, the house.²³ And, in general, matter and potentiality, on the one hand, are contrasted with form and actuality, on the other (cf. 8.6, 9.8). If the matter/form distinction is, as has been made immensely plausible recently,²⁴ the distinction between constituent and thing constituted, then the potential and the actual may be expected to be similarly related. It then seems quite natural to understand Aristotle's talk of the bricks, etc., *being* (potentially) the house in terms of the so-called *constitutive* sense of 'be'.²⁵ And if the bricks and boards *are* a house in the constitutive sense, that is, if they constitute a house, then they need not—indeed, cannot—be *identical* to the house. So there seems to be a perfectly good sense in which the bricks and boards can be said to be a

²¹ This point, and much of the rest of my treatment of 7.17, has been inspired by Gareth Matthews' contributions to a course we offered jointly in 1967–68.

²² This rather formal conception of matter fits in very nicely with Aristotle's oft-repeated suggestion that genus is matter. Cf. *Meta.* 1024b6–9, 1038a5–6, 1057b37–1058a2, 1058a23.

²³ Cf. 8.2. 1043a14–16: "Those who, in giving definitions, say that what a house is is stones, bricks and boards are talking about the potential house (*τὴν δυνάμει οἰκίαν*), for these things are matter."

²⁴ Cf. Charlton, *Aristotle's Physics, I, II*, pp. 71–73.

²⁵ Cf. Wiggins, *Identity & Spatio-Temporal Continuity*, p. 10.

house, but without their being identical to any house. Aristotle would put this last point by saying that they are not *actually* a house. In so far as Aristotle is willing to posit a material subject to predicate substance of, this subject only constitutes, and is not actually, the substance that is predicated of it. So Aristotle's inclination to predicate substance of matter does not conflict with his being an essentialist.²⁶

Essentialism, then, is part and parcel of Aristotle's conception of substances as the basic individuals. An individual such as *the pale man* is not basic, for Aristotle, but breaks down into a basic individual (a substance) plus a quality. The quality *pale* is predicated (accidentally, of course) of the substance *the man*. But even though substance can be predicated of matter, the place of substances as rock-bottom individuals is not threatened. For there is no *individual* of which *man* is predicated accidentally.

This conception of substances as basic individuals imposes constraints on what a given substantial individual might have been. If there were no such constraints, then Socrates, for example, might have been an artichoke. But how is one to make sense of this counterfactual situation? The only way I can see would be if there were some way of picking out *that thing* which (as it happens) is Socrates and conceiving of *it* as an artichoke. If Socrates were an appropriate material substratum²⁷ (such as a clump of matter, or a collection of molecules, etc.) then it would, perhaps, be possible to conceive of that substratum (and, hence, Socrates) as an artichoke. But, on Aristotle's view, Socrates is no such thing. Picking out *Socrates* means picking out not *that matter* but *that form*. And 'that form' here means *that man*. Aristotle's theory neither provides us with nor allows us any way of conceiving of Socrates as being non-human. That theory seems committed, then, to Socrates' being essentially human. This seems to me to be essentialism, and Aristotle seems to me to be committed to it.²⁸

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²⁶ In the sense of being committed to what we have called "Aristotelian essences."

²⁷ If Socrates were an even purer substratum, a "bare particular" with no properties at all save individuality, then our counter-factual situation would also be conceivable. But it should be quite clear that Aristotle's view is even less like this than it is like the alternative considered above.

²⁸ Earlier versions of this paper were read at the Universities of Victoria, Washington, and Wisconsin, and at Reed College. I am indebted to various members of those audiences for their helpful discussion, and in particular to Alan Code, Joan Kung, and Gareth B. Matthews for detailed comments and criticism.