

# Aristotle's "Substance"

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Aristotle's notion of *substance* is crucial to his metaphysics, but is complicated by the fact that he uses the term in several interrelated ways. The Greek noun that is usually translated 'substance' is *ousia*, a form of the verb 'to be'. It might plausibly be translated as 'reality' or 'real being'; still, the traditional translation 'substance' is the one most commonly used.

In the *Categories*, Aristotle marks off substances (such as a horse or a tree) from all other categories of beings, including qualities, quantities, relations, positions, etc. These latter categories contain things that cannot exist on their own; their existence depends on their being "in" substances. Among substances he distinguishes between *primary* (individuals, things not predicated of a subject) and *secondary* (the species and genera of the primary substances—the kinds into which the primary substances fall).

In his lexicon of philosophical terms (*Metaphysics* Δ.8), Aristotle makes a different distinction. There he tells us that "substance is said in two ways"—that is, there are two senses of 'substance'. In one sense, substances are the fundamental subjects; in another sense, a substance is the "cause of being" of a substance in the first sense. A substance in the second sense is the *essence* (the "what it is to be"), the *form* (*morphê* or *eidos*), of a substance in the first sense. A key to identifying this sense of the term is that it often (although not always) occurs in the phrase 'substance of', as in "the essence is said to be the substance *of* each thing" (1031a18).

In *De Anima* II.1 (412a6-9), Aristotle makes this distinction slightly differently, by dividing the substance-as-subject sense of 'substance' into two. There he tells us that there are three senses of 'substance': matter, form, and the compound of matter and form.

In *Metaphysics* Z.1, Aristotle tells us that "the question ... 'what is being?' ... is just the question 'what is substance?'" (1028b2-4). This is because among *beings* (that is, among the things that there are), it is substances (in contrast to qualities, quantities, etc.) that are fundamental. For there to be a quality is just for there to be a substance that is qualified in a certain way; for example, whiteness exists if, and only if, some substance is white. A substance is thus more fundamental than the properties that it happens to have. Presumably, this primacy belongs to substances in the first sense.

In the remaining chapters of *Metaphysics* Z, Aristotle focuses on the question of what the substance (in the sense of *essence*) *of* such a substance is. His answer is that it is the *form* inhering in the matter of which the substance is composed. The reason that this form is not treated like a substance's qualities, etc.—as a mere property that is ontologically secondary to the substance it belongs to—is that the form is not something that the substance merely happens to have. Rather, it is constitutive of what the substance by its very nature *is*.

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