



## Philosophical Review

---

Review: [untitled]

Author(s): S. Marc Cohen

Reviewed work(s):

Substance and Essence in Aristotle: An Interpretation of Metaphysics VII-IX. by Charlotte Witt

Source: *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 101, No. 4 (Oct., 1992), pp. 838-840

Published by: Duke University Press on behalf of Philosophical Review

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2185929>

Accessed: 23/08/2009 19:43

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=duke>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Duke University Press and *Philosophical Review* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Philosophical Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## BOOK REVIEWS

just need a solution. On the alternative, however, there is a need to show, by serious argument and patient exposition, that what had seemed to be a logical truth is in fact just false.

These are objections to Pelletier's interpretation, but not to Pelletier's book. The great virtue of the book is that its sharpness of focus demands a corresponding clarity and systematicity of any rival. Everyone interested in the *Sophist* should read it.

MICHAEL MORRIS

*University of Sussex*

*The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 101, No. 4 (October 1992)

*SUBSTANCE AND ESSENCE IN ARISTOTLE: AN INTERPRETATION OF METAPHYSICS VII–IX.* By CHARLOTTE WITT. Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1989. Pp. viii, 201.

The central question in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is, What is substance? His answer, that substance is *essence*, confronts a well-known difficulty. For as Aristotle is traditionally interpreted, an essence is a species-form and hence universal—shared by all the members of a species. But Aristotle denies that anything universal can be a substance. So his account would seem to be inconsistent.

In this book, Charlotte Witt joins a growing list of interpreters who would resolve this difficulty by opposing the tradition and finding in Aristotle a doctrine of *individual* essences. Further, an Aristotelian essence, on her interpretation, is not a property of an individual substance, but a cause of its being. Since "Aristotelian forms and essences are inherently teleological" (100), it is in his teleology that we find the basis for his hylomorphic analysis of sensible substances. After three preliminary chapters on being, substance, and teleology, Witt develops her interpretation in the book's two central chapters, outlining the nature, function, and ontological status of essence. A final chapter (which will be of particular interest to those approaching Aristotle for the first time from the perspective of contemporary metaphysics) provides a useful comparison between Aristotelian and Kripkean versions of essentialism.

*The core of the traditional interpretation, according to Witt, is the idea that essences are classificatory properties whose function is to place individuals into their species. Against this, Witt argues that essences are not properties. She derives the conclusion that essences are not properties of individual substances from three premises: (1) essences are causes, (2)*

causes are prior to what they are the causes of, and (3) properties are not prior to what they are properties of. This argument is problematic, however. For it relies on a notion of property that does not correspond precisely to any Aristotelian notion. Witt takes properties to be what Aristotle would classify as nonsubstances (qualities, quantities, and the like). For example, she says that for Aristotle, “all nonsubstances (properties) exist in substances” (51). Now Aristotle does say that substances are prior to nonsubstances (in that nonsubstances inhere in and thus depend on substances for their existence), and Witt takes this to mean that, for Aristotle, substances are prior to properties. But surely it is no part of the traditional interpretation that an essence is a nonsubstance. So Witt’s argument against it will be unpersuasive to the extent that it equates properties with nonsubstances.

But even if we waive this objection, there is still an important limitation to the argument. For premises (1)–(3) do not entail that an essence is not a property. They entail only that the essence of something cannot be a property of *that thing*. This leaves open the possibility that an essence is, indeed, a property, but not a property of the same thing that it is the essence of. On this conception, the essence or *form* of a material compound would be an accidental property of the matter it informs and not the essence of that matter. Against this, Witt argues that if a form or essence were an accidental property of matter, a form-matter compound would have only accidental unity, and would not be “one” by its own nature, as Aristotle requires of substances. This argument may tell against those who hold that it is the form-matter compound that is the primary substance of the *Metaphysics*. But if Aristotle holds that it is form, not the compound of matter and form, that is primary substance, there will be no difficulty for him in maintaining that form is an accidental property of matter. For the unity of substance will be the unity of form, not of the compound.

A key issue for the proponent of individual essences concerns individuation. What role do essences play in the individuation of material substances? And how are those essences themselves individuated? Witt does not shy away from these questions. As against the traditional view that matter is the principle of individuation, she holds that material substances are individuated by their forms. But the forms of Socrates and Callias, for example, differ only numerically, not qualitatively. Hence those forms themselves cannot be individuated by their features. Witt considers several possibilities, but favors the idea that the differences between two essences of the same kind are explained by the material differences between the individual substances. This is, in effect, to model the identity conditions for individual essences on those for the “individual qualities” and other individual nonsubstances of the *Categories*. Callias’s white and Socrates’

white may be qualitatively identical, but they differ by inhering in different substances. The model is not apt, however, since qualities, unlike essences, are posterior to their substances.

In comparing the essentialisms of Aristotle and Kripke, Witt finds two fundamental points of difference: (1) "Aristotle does not derive his essences from reflecting upon the identity of individual substances" (190), and (2) unlike Aristotle, Kripke does not connect his theory of essences to a theory of basic individuals. She bases the first difference on the fact that Kripke counts an object's origin as essential to it, whereas Aristotle, she says, does not. In excluding material and efficient causes from the essence of material substances, Aristotle rules out such properties of origin, according to Witt. This characterization of Aristotle may be correct, but it does not cohere very well with Witt's claim that "the central function of essence is to explain the actual existence of a unified substance" (144n). For if the essence of Callias is to explain the actual existence of Callias, and not just what Callias is in terms of his characteristic functions, it must at least have an efficient, and not just a final, causal role. On Witt's interpretation, then, Aristotle may not be as different from Kripke as she suggests.

This is a clear and readable introduction to Aristotle's theory of substance and essence, providing a modest alternative to the traditional interpretation. But one will have to look to other recent authors to find a more probing and comprehensive development of that alternative.

S. MARC COHEN

*University of Washington*

*The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 101, No. 4 (October 1992)

*ARISTOTLE ON SUBSTANCE: THE PARADOX OF UNITY.* By MARY LOUISE GILL. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989. Pp. xi, 284.

Aristotle conceives of organisms as compound substances, as complexes of form and matter. Although ambivalent about the substantiality of nonorganisms, Aristotle typically uses artifacts to illustrate this view. Thus a statue of Hermes is analyzed as a Hermes-shape inhering in some quantity of bronze (*Phys.* ii 2, esp. 194b16–195a3). That same quantity of bronze might equally realize some nonidentical shape, say a Nixon-shape, and the initial Hermes-shape could arguably sustain some amount of material replenishment while remaining numerically one. The compound, the statue of Hermes, may therefore seem to be a mereological aggregate of two nonidentical components. Indeed, Aristotle's very mode of expression ev-