

### Aristotle's *Metaphysics*

#### I. The Nature of Substance

According to Aristotle, "there is a science that studies being insofar as it is being." (1003a21) This is what he elsewhere calls "first philosophy". And the object of his *Metaphysics* is just this: to study being in general, to study the nature of existence in its most general aspect. While the special sciences (biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics) focus on specific aspects of existent things (things insofar as they are alive, or composed of atoms and bonded in certain ways, or matter, forces, or energy, or measures of quantity), metaphysics looks at the common features of being in all these sciences.

In *Metaphysics* IV.2, Aristotle writes that "being is spoken of in many ways, but always in reference to one thing." (1003a34) That one thing is *substance*: "For some things are called beings because they are substances, others because they are attributes of substance, 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 or of things spoken of with reference to it, or because they are negations of one of these or of substance." (1003b6-10) It is the job of the philosopher engaged in metaphysics to "grasp the principles and causes of substances." (1003a19) Or, as he puts it in Book VII, "the old question... 'What is being?' is just the question 'What is substance?'" (1028b3)

In Book VII, Chapter 3, we learn that "substance is spoken of, if not in several ways, at any rate in four main cases. 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." (1028b34-36) Aristotle seems to mean that, if  $x$  is a substance, then the substance of  $x$  is either

- (a) the essence of  $x$  (the Greek is *to ti ēn einai* or 'the what it was to be [ $x$ ']'), or
- (b) the universal that is predicated of  $x$  (e.g. the substance of Socrates is human being insofar as we can predicate humanity of Socrates), or
- (c) the genus to which  $x$  belongs (e.g. the substance of Socrates is a human being insofar as Socrates belongs to a certain class of beings: human beings), or
- (d) a subject of which  $x$  is predicated.

Aristotle will speak of (a)-(c) later; *Metaphysics* VII.3 is devoted to an analysis of (d), the subject, which he claims seems to be substance most of all. While it seems as though this is what Aristotle had in mind in the *Categories*, where substance was described as primary and as that which is the subject of predication (but not predicable of anything else), he means something different here. First, Aristotle is speaking of what the substance of something is, that is, what makes a substance that substance. So, the point is that, if Socrates is a substance, then the substance of Socrates lies in the fact that there is some subject of which Socrates is predicated. This subject, Aristotle says, is either matter, form (*morphē*), or the compound of the two. In other words, what is Socrates? This particular matter? This particular form? Or this particular composite of matter and form? Whatever the answer should turn out to be, it ought to be clear that, insofar as Aristotle is adopting the hylomorphism of the *Physics*, he has a different and more sophisticated ontology than in the *Categories*. As we learn in the course of VII.3, matter cannot be the substance of a thing because it fails the two criteria that Aristotle establishes for substancehood (see 1029a27). To be a substance, Aristotle says, something must be:

- (a) *separable*, i.e. capable of existing independently, and
- (b) *some this (tode ti)*, i.e. a determinate or genuine individual.

Presumably, matter fails these criteria because, without a form, it is not any kind of determinate being. Therefore, Aristotle concludes that form and the composite of matter and form are substance more than matter is.

In *Metaphysics* VII.6, Aristotle analyzes the notion of essence to see if this can be the substance of a thing. His answer, Yes. “We find that a thing itself and its essence are non-coincidentally one and the same, and that knowing a thing is knowing its essence.” (1031a19-21)

In Chapters 7-12 of the same book of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle returns to his hylomorphic account of substance. Echoing ideas we saw in *De Anima*, Aristotle tells us that the soul of an animal is the form (*eidos*) and essence of a certain kind of body. (1035b15-17) (See also 1037a5: “the soul is the primary substance, the body is matter.”) Another way of putting this is to say that the substantial form of a thing is its essence, and the substantial form seems to be related to its species. In other words, the substantial form is related to a universal. For example, the substantial form of Socrates is related to the *eidos* of humanity. (In a chapter not in the anthology (VII.8), Aristotle says that Socrates and Callias have the same form but differ in matter. In other words, Socrates and Callias are *individuated* by their matter. Does this run afoul of his claims in VII.3 that matter cannot serve as the substance of something?)

But *Metaphysics* VII.13 confuses the issue, for it seems that we have three inconsistent claims:

- (1) Substance is form.
- (2) Form is a universal (one thing had by many).
- (3) No universal is a substance.

The question of how to reconcile these claims or the ideas presented in Book VII through Chapter 13 is really tricky. One way out of this is to deny that the form of an individual corresponds to some species. That is, Socrates’ substantial form is *not* humanity, but a unique form. (One denies the thesis of *species form* in favor of the thesis of *individual form*.) Another way out of this problem is to suggest that Aristotle means something special by universal. For example, the universal humanity is not a substance because it cannot exist separate and as a this, but it is *immanent* in certain kinds of substances, human beings. In either case, it should be clear from this chapter (and from *Metaphysics* I.9) that Aristotle fundamentally rejects Plato’s ontology of *transcendent* forms, which exist independently of particular things in the world.

## **II. The Prime Mover**

*Metaphysics* XII is devoted to Aristotle’s account of theology. It is here that he gives his famous account of God as the prime mover. Consider the following passages:

[S]ubstances are the primary beings, and if all substances are perishable, then everything is perishable. But motion cannot come to be or perish (since it has always been), nor can time (since there cannot be a before and an after if there is no time). Motion is also continuous, then, in the same way that time is, since time is either the same as motion or an attribute of it. But the only continuous motion is local motion – specifically, circular motion. (1071b5-12)

There is something, then, that is always being moved in a ceaseless motion, and this motion is circular (this is clear not only from argument but also from what actually happens); and so the first heaven is everlasting. Hence there is also something that initiates motion. And since whatever both is moved and initiates motion is an intermediary, there is something that initiates motion without being moved, something that is everlasting and a substance and actuality. (1072a22-26)

If, then, something is moved, it can be otherwise. And so, if something’s actuality is the primary type of local motion, it follows that in so far as it is in motion, in this respect it admits of being otherwise, in place if not in substance. But since there is something that initiates motion without itself being moved, and this is actually operating, it cannot be otherwise in any respect at all... Hence the primary mover exists necessarily; and in so far as it exists necessarily, its being is fine, and in so far as it being is fine, it is a principle. (1072b5-11)

We can take from these passage the following theses about the nature of the supreme being (God):

- (1) God is responsible for the continuous and everlasting (circular) motions of the heavens.
- (2) God is a necessary being (i.e. God could not not exist).
- (3) God is *not* a creator, for the heavens have always existed in motion.