

The Substance of Early Aristotle

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In Chapter Five of the *Categories*, the early Aristotle turns his attention to the nature of substance. Although not lacking in significant insight, Aristotle's commentary often seems strange and incoherent due to contrary purposes and approaches to the subject matter. In his argument for the ontological primacy of particulars, Aristotle attempts to integrate ontological and rhetorical concerns. In his discussion of the hierarchy of substance, Aristotle's metaphysical conclusions are at odds with his epistemological arguments. In order to understand the problems generated by these conflicting purposes, we must first understand the basics of the early Aristotle's account of substance.

Two Axes: "Said of a Subject" and "In a Subject"

Aristotle begins his discussion of substances by asserting substances to be "most strictly, primarily, and most of all" individual particulars, such as this flower or that book (2a13-15). These individual particulars are, unlike other things, "neither said of a subject nor in a subject" (2a14). But what does this mean? Aristotle's explanation of "said of" and "in" a subject can be found earlier, in Chapter Two of the *Categories*.

Along the first axis, to be said of a subject or not said of a subject is simply the distinction between abstract, universal terms and concrete, particular terms. The individual man Howard Roark is not said of any subject, but the universal term "man" is said of Howard Roark. My particular copy of *The Fountainhead* is not said of any subject, but the universal term "book" is said of my particular copy of *The Fountainhead*. So universal and abstract terms are said of subjects, while particular and concrete terms are not.

On the second axis, to be or not to be in a subject concerns the possibility of independent existence. Aristotle describes a subject as "what is in something, not as a part, and cannot exist separately from what it is in" (1a25). That which is not in a subject seems to be the subject itself. So the gray of my cat's fur, for example, cannot exist separately from my cat, so the gray is in a subject. But the cat itself is not in any subject, as the subject *is* the cat (3a13-15). In other words, Aristotle seems to be distinguishing between attributes (that which is in a subject) and entities (that which is not in a subject).

Aristotle's distinctions can thus be understood as a simple four-square grid¹:

That which is...	Said of a subject (Universal and abstract)	Not said of a subject (Concrete and particular)
In a subject (Attributes)	Attribute-concepts e.g. white, long	Attribute-particulars e.g. this white, this length
Not in a subject (Entities)	Entity-concepts e.g. cat, book	Entity-particulars e.g. this cat, that book

¹ This chart was inspired by a similar one in Robin Smith's notes on Aristotle at

<<http://aristotle.tamu.edu/~rasmith/Courses/Ancient/predication.html>>.

Returning to Aristotle's discussion of substance, we can now better understand Aristotle's strange distinction between primary and secondary substances. Primary substances — being neither said of nor in a subject — are individual, concrete particulars, such as this dog and that table (2a13-15). By extension of this fundamental and strict meaning of substance, secondary substances are the species and genera of the primary substances, such as dog/animal and table/furniture (2a13-17).

The Primacy of Particulars: Ontology versus Rhetoric

These axes of "said of a subject" and "in a subject" then allow Aristotle to argue, contra Plato, for the ontological primacy of individual, particular entities. His argument is quite simple, as he merely observes that "all the other things are either said of primary substances as subjects or in them as subjects" (2a35-6). With respect to entities, "animal" is predicated of the abstract term "man" only because animal is predicated of individual men. Similarly for attributes, color is in body generally only because it is in individual bodies. Thus Aristotle concludes "if the primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist" (2b5-6).

Aristotle's terminology of "primary substances" and "secondary substances" is not necessary in any philosophical sense for this argument about the ontological primacy of particulars. On the contrary, it serves as a source of philosophical strangeness and confusion. Nevertheless, the terminology does perhaps serve a rhetorical function. By speaking of "primary" and "secondary" substances, Aristotle has stacked the deck in his favor, using language to make his conclusion about the ontological primacy of particulars more natural and plausible. Using the term "substance" for both universals and particulars also allows Aristotle to more directly compare them, to argue that some universals are "nearer" to or more like particulars than others (2b8). Finally, the talk of secondary substances may be a superficial concession to Platonism, allowing Aristotle to say that *even if we grant* universals the status of substance, they are still dependent upon individual particulars, upon primary substance, for their existence — and are thus less real than those individual particulars.

Thus Aristotle's argument for the primacy of particulars seems to be a somewhat confused hybrid of ontological claims and rhetorical devices. Nevertheless, the tension generated does not give rise to genuine contradiction, unlike the tension in his discussion of the hierarchy of substances.

The Rigid Hierarchy of Substances: Ontology versus Epistemology

After establishing the ontological primacy of particulars, Aristotle turns his attention to differences in secondary substances, arguing for a three-tiered ontological hierarchy of substances. Aristotle asserts that "the species is more a substance than the genus" (2b7) on the grounds that the species is a "more informative and apt" a description of a primary substance than the genus. Thus it is more useful to describe a particular elm tree as "an elm" rather than merely as "a tree." Additionally, Aristotle offers an argument from analogy to justify his ordering of secondary substances. Primary substances are "substances most of all" because they "are subjects for all the other things" (2b16-7). Similarly, "the species is the subject for the genus," but the genus is not the subject for the species (2b20-1). For example, Howard is man, man is animal, but animal is not man. Thus species are more primary — more substance — than genera.

Aristotle then explicitly denies any further subdivisions in his hierarchy of substance. Primary substances are all ontologically equal. Species (as secondary substances) are all ontologically equal. And genera (as secondary substances) are all ontologically equal. To use Aristotle's examples, the individual man is no more or less a substance than the individual horse. And that individual man is no more or less a man than that individual horse is a horse.

This rigid ontological hierarchy of particulars, species, and genera implies that the species and genus of a particular entity are immutable facts about reality. On this account, the species/genus of Howard Roark would necessarily be man/animal, not architect/man or male/man. Similarly, the species/genus of my Thoroughbred mare Tara would be horse/animal, not mare/animal, Thoroughbred/mare, Thoroughbred/horse, or any other possible combination. Such a rigid scheme of ontological classification is likely an expression of Aristotle's static view of the world as a whole.

However, this rigid and fixed ontology is at odds with Aristotle's epistemological arguments about the species being more "informative and apt" than the genera (2b10). In short, the most "informative and apt" description of some particular entity may or may not correspond to the designated species of that particular entity.

However, before we can understand this conflict, we must better understand Aristotle's epistemological arguments about useful description. In his discussion of why only species and genera are secondary substances, Aristotle writes:

It is reasonable that, after the primary substances, their species and genera should be the only other things called secondary substances. For only they, of things predicated, reveal the primary substance. For if one is to say of the individual man what he is, it will be in place to give the species or the genus (though more informative to give man than animal); but to give any of the other things would be out of place — for example, to say white or runs or anything like that. So it is reasonable that these should be the only other things called substances (2b29-36).

In other words, only species and genera are designated as secondary substances because they alone capture the basic nature of the individual particular, the primary substance.

There is merit in this perspective. Imagine, for example, that you are walking with a young child. She points to a tree and asks "What is it?" To say "It's green and brown" or "It's alive" or "It has leaves" or "It what paper is made of" may be truthful, but not nearly as helpful to the child as saying "It's an elm tree." The species and genera are so useful to us largely because they often imply or hint at those other possible descriptions, such as having leaves, being alive, and so on. In short, the species and genera, the secondary substances, are often most "informative and apt" because they encapsulate and thus communicate a great deal of ancillary knowledge.

Additionally, in attempting to designate particulars, there is a certain progression of usefulness from genus to species to primary substance, in that the species is more informative than the genus, just as an ostensive "this" or "that" is more informative than the species. For example, if I am gardening and tell my husband to bring me "the plant" (the genus), he might not know which plant I mean. If I tell him to bring me "the geranium" (the species) there still may be confusion as to which geranium. But if I say "that geranium right there" or "that plant right there" or even "that thing right there," clearly designating a primary substance, then I have provided the most useful indication of my wishes to him.

Thus from the perspective of what is "informative and apt," we do often see a continuum from the more abstract to the more particular. However, this continuum, properly understood, is not amenable Aristotle's rigid and fixed conception of genus and species. After all, to describe my horse Tara as a "Thoroughbred mare" to someone familiar with horses would be more

“informative and apt” than to simply describe her as “a horse.” But for someone unfamiliar with farm animals at all, “Thoroughbred mare” would be an unhelpful designation compared to the more general “horse.” In sum, the standard of usefulness in description is incompatible with rigid ontological hierarchy of particulars, species, and genera. Thus Aristotle’s ontological conclusions seem in direct conflict with his epistemological arguments.

Parting Comments on Conflicting Purposes

The two problems of conflicting purposes examined in this paper are not the only conflicts in the *Categories*. Throughout the work, Aristotle’s discussions are a blend of ontology and linguistic analysis. On one hand, the categories discussed are ontological categories. On the other hand, much of Aristotle’s discussions of these ontological categories concerns our use of language. He begins the *Categories* with a discussion of the linguistic terms homonyms, synonyms, and paronyms (1a1-15). The next chapter speaks “of things that are said,” distinguishing between concepts and propositions (1a16). The chapter on relatives opens with the linguistic statement “we call relatives all such things...” not an ontological claim that “relatives are all such things...” (6a37). Such examples can be found throughout the *Categories*.

Looking broadly, the conflict between ontology and rhetoric in his argument for the ontological primacy of particulars and the conflict between epistemology and ontology in his discussion of the hierarchy of substance are perhaps best understood as instances of this broader conflict between ontology and language found in the *Categories*.