

Aristotle on Form, Substance, and Universals: A Dilemma

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In Book Zeta of the *Metaphysics* and elsewhere, Aristotle commits himself to the following propositions:

- (A) No universal can be substance.¹
- (B) The form is a universal.²
- (C) The form is that which is most truly substance.³

These three statements appear to be inconsistent, and if they are then Aristotle's metaphysics becomes untenable on a fundamental point. To defend Aristotle, we must find reason to reject at least one of these claims as an accurate statement of his position.

The following options are open to us, and each has been defended by commentators: (a) Aristotle does not subscribe to (A); instead, his position is that nothing *predicated universally* is a substance, and the species form is not predicated universally even though it is a universal.⁴ (b) The form is not a universal but peculiar (*ἰδιον*) to each individual.⁵ (c) Aristotle equivocates on "substance". The sense of

¹ *Metaphysics*, 1038 b 8 - 9. Except where noted, translations are taken from W. D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics* in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (Random House: New York, 1941). Ross' version of 1038 b 8 - 9, "it seems impossible that any universal term should be the name of a substance", is overly linguistic since Aristotle makes no mention of 'terms' or 'names'.

² Aristotle does not explicitly say this to my knowledge, but he is committed to it for several reasons. He explicitly says the following: Socrates and Callias are different individuals, "but the same in form, for their form is indivisible", *Meta.* 1034 a 5 - 8; "both individuals the same in species", *De Gen. An.* 730 bb 35; "these individuals [Socrates and Corsicus] possess one common specific form", *De Part. An.* 644 a 24 - 25; "that which is common to many things is a universal", *Meta.* 1038 b 11 - 12; "'man' is universal", *Cat.* 17 a 40 - b 1; "definition is of the universal and of the form", *Meta.* 1036 a 28.

³ *Meta.* 1032 b 1 - 2, 1033 b 17, 1037 a 27 ff., 1041 b 6, 1050 b 2.

⁴ Michael Woods, "Problems in *Metaphysics Z*, Chapter 13", *Aristotle: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. M. E. Moravcsik (Doubleday: New York, 1967), pp. 215-238.

⁵ Rogers Albritton, "Forms of Particular Substances in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LIV, No. 22 (October, 1957), pp. 699-708.

"substance" in which a species form is a substance is not that in which no universal is substance.⁶

I shall argue that none of these accounts is ultimately defensible. If I am correct, then a traditional suspicion about the developments in *Metaphysics* Zeta and Eta will have been confirmed: by developing a conception of form as substance, Aristotle becomes subject to some of the criticisms which he had earlier raised against the Platonists.

I

An initial difficulty with the claim that Aristotle distinguishes between being a universal (*καθόλου*) and being predicated universally (*τῶν καθόλου λεγομένων*) is that it is not borne out by Aristotle's actual usage. Throughout Zeta 13, where Aristotle discusses universals and substance, *καθόλου* and *τῶν καθόλου λεγομένων* are used interchangeably.⁷ The evidence in surrounding passages is equally difficult to reconcile with this distinction.⁸ But it is possible that such usage does not represent Aristotle's considered opinion; a philosopher's usage is not always consistent with his own doctrines. In defense of (a), Michael Woods claims that Aristotle is committed to (A) on doctrinal grounds: Aristotle never denied that the species form is a universal, but he did deny that it was predicated universally, and this is some reason to think that he recognized a difference between the two. The crucial claim here is that, for Aristotle, the species form is not predicated universally, and to support what otherwise

⁶ A. R. Lacey, "Ousia and Form in Aristotle" *Phronesis*, Vol. X, No. 1 (1965) pp. 54-69.

⁷ Aristotle first notes that the universal (*τὸ καθόλου*, 1038 b 3) is called substance since the universal (*τὸ καθόλου*, 1038 b 8) is thought to be a cause and principle. After stating the impossibility of anything *τῶν καθόλου λεγομένων* being substance, he states that substance is peculiar to each individual, whereas *τὸ δὲ καθόλου κοινόν*, "the universal is common" (1038 b 10 - 11). Further, the universal (*τὸ δὲ καθόλου*) is always spoken of as belonging to some subject (1038 b 15 - 16), and no substance consists of universals (*ἐκ τῶν καθόλου*, 1039 a 15).

⁸ In Book Iota, Aristotle reminds us that he has already shown (Ross refers the reader to Zeta, 13) that "no universal (*μηδὲν τῶν καθόλου*) can be a substance (as we have stated in our discussion of substance and being)..." (1053 b 16 - 17). His last word on the subject is that *τὴν δ' οὐσίαν μὴ τῶν καθόλου εἶναι*, "substance is not a universal thing" (1060 b 21). Similar problems arise if we attempt to distinguish *καθόλου* from *κοινῇ κατηγορούμενον*; cf. *Meta.* 999 a 21 - 22 where *καθόλου* is interchanged with *καθόλου κατηγορεῖται*.

would be simply a verbal maneuver, Woods attributes the following argument to Aristotle.⁹

(1) It is the species form (e.g. man) which is the principle of individuation (e.g. which "marks off the bits of matter that constitute men").

(2) If (1), then we can distinguish individuals only if we recognize the occurrence of the species form.¹⁰

Therefore (3) we cannot distinguish individuals without recognizing the occurrence of the species form.

(4) The species form is predicabile of individuals only if we can distinguish individuals without recognizing the occurrence of the species form.

Therefore (5) the species form is not predicabile of individuals.

We have several reasons for thinking that this argument and its conclusion do not represent Aristotle's own view. And consequently, the fact that Aristotle uses *καθόλου* and *τῶν καθόλου λεγομένων* interchangeably remains very good grounds for concluding that he had no distinction between them in mind. We could not then rescue him from the charge of inconsistency on this basis.

Premiss (1) is inconsistent with several passages in which Aristotle explicitly states that it is not form which individuates, but matter: "and when we have the whole, such and such a form in this flesh and in these bones, this is Callias or Socrates; and they are different in virtue of their matter (for that is different) but the same in form; for their form is indivisible."¹¹ If (1) is a claim that form is a sufficient condition for individuation, these passages pose a serious problem. Woods might have meant however that matter and form are individ-

⁹ This is an abbreviated and schematic version of Woods' discussion (*ibid.* pp. 237-238).

¹⁰ Woods' position may be that recognizing the species form is sufficient for distinguishing individuals (the species form is said to "supply a basis for distinguishing them", p. 238), but this stronger claim is not needed in order for the conclusion to follow, and I do not discuss it here.

¹¹ *καὶ ἕτερον μὲν διὰ τὴν ὅλην (ἕτερα γάρ), ταὐτὸ δὲ τῷ εἶδει (ἄτομον γὰρ τὸ εἶδος)*, 1034 a 5-8. Cf. 1016 b 32, "those are one in number whose matter is one"; 1054 a 34, "you are one in number, e.g. one in matter"; 1074 a 31-34, "all things that are many in number have matter, for one and the same definition, e.g. that of man, applies to many things, while Socrates is one." The arguments in support of Aristotle's claim that it is matter which individuates are clearly set out by G.E.M. Anscombe, "Symposium: The Principle of Individuation", *Aristotelian Society Suppl.* Vol. XXVII (1953), pp. 92 ff.

ually necessary and *jointly* sufficient conditions for individuation,¹² and this would be consistent with Aristotle's remarks.

But this revision of (1) would create additional difficulties for (2). If *both* matter and form are necessary for individuation, it is difficult to see why this fact lends support to the claim that we recognize individuals only if we recognize the occurrence of form (or if it does lend support, why a similar claim about the necessity of recognizing the presence of matter is not equally justified). We could defend (2) by adopting the stronger claim that every condition which is necessary for an individual being what it is is also a condition for our knowledge of what it is, but it is unlikely that Aristotle adopted this view. The scholastic distinction between *causa essendi* and *causa cognoscendi* has a basis in Aristotle's observation that the principles and causes which are first in the order of being are not first in the order of knowledge (*An. Post.*, 72 a 1 - 3; *Meta.*, 1029 b 3 - 12). In short, even if x is a condition for the existence of y, we need not have knowledge of x in order to have knowledge of y. It is unreasonable then to defend (2) as an interpretation of Aristotle's own views. Short of this, however, it is difficult to see why this particular necessary condition for the existence of an individual substance should figure so essentially in our recognition of that individual.

(2) Might be partially supported if it could be shown that Aristotle held both (1) and (3) and that they were closely allied in his thinking. But the available evidence suggests that this is not the case, for although there is one interpretation of (1) which is confirmed by Aristotle's remarks, his own account is that we distinguish individuals by sight even without recognizing their essential nature or form. At *Meta.* 1018 b Z 32 - 33, Aristotle remarks that the universals are prior in definition (*λόγον*), but that the individuals (*καθ' ἕκαστα*) are prior in perception (*αἰσθησιν*).¹³ The genetic accounts of knowledge in *Meta.* A 1 and *Post. Anal.* II, 19 sketch out an advance from the

¹² This is suggested by his remark that "it is only in virtue of possessing the form *man* that bits of matter which constitute men are marked off from one another." (p. 237) Still, it is difficult to see how this would be consistent with saying that it is form which is the individuating principle.

¹³ It is a familiar refrain in his writings that "perception must be of the particular, whereas scientific knowledge involves the recognition of the universal" (*An. Post.* 87 b 3-8. Cf. 81 b 6-7, 86 a 29; *N. Ethica*, 1142 a 27, 1147 a 26; *De Anima*, 417 b 22-23) and that perception is prior to and easier than knowledge. (*An. Post.*, 99 b 32 - 100 a 5; *Meta* 985 a 10 - 12).

discrimination of particulars through sense perception to the realization of the universals which they exhibit. We can then distinguish the individual through perception without recognizing the occurrence of the species form.¹⁴ (3) cannot be attributed to Aristotle, and this is some reason to think that he did not hold (2) either.

Aristotle's main discussion of predication occurs in the *Categories*, and as Woods concedes, "At that time he did not object to the notion that a species was predicated of a plurality of objects." (p. 227) Aristotle says, for example, that "'man' is predicated of the individual man".¹⁵ Even in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle countenances predication of species,¹⁶ but Woods insists that by the time of Book Zeta, there "is a clear contrast between the things that Aristotle is willing to say about species forms and the things that can, in his view, be said of genera." (p. 226) The passage cited in defense of this is 1038 b 9: "No οὐσία [substance] (and therefore no species) is καθόλου λεγόμενον [predicated universally]." But this will not do. The inference made within parentheses is Woods' own. We cannot resolve the dispute of

¹⁴ It might be objected that Aristotle's account of perception at *De Anima* 424 a 18 is inconsistent with this view since he speaks there of perception as 'receiving the sensible form' (τῶν αἰσθητῶν εἰδῶν) of the object. Perhaps then it is not possible to perceive an individual object already grasping its form. But this would not be correct in the important respects - what we are concerned about is the species form, what sort of thing the individual is; i.e. what he is essentially, and this must be distinguished from the sensible qualities which we perceive him to have. Aristotle reinforces this distinction at *De Anima* 429 a when he explains that the objects and faculties of thought and sense are distinct but analogous (the faculty of perception (τὸ αἰσθητικόν) is to the objects of perception (τὰ αἰσθητά) as the faculty of thought (τὸν νοῦν) is to the objects of thought (τὰ νοητά) 429 a 17 - 18). Thus, while there is a sense in which it is true to say that we perceive the εἶδος of an object, it is not the εἶδος in the important sense of the species form which is grasped by perception.

¹⁵ οἶον ἄνθρωπος καθ' ὑποκειμένον λέγεται τοῦ τινός ἀνθρώπου, 2 a 22 - 23. Cf. Gareth B. Matthews and S. Marc Cohen: "Aristotle's notion seems to be this. Φ is said of a subject, X, if and only if, X is said to be a Φ (or a kind of Φ). That is, Φ is said of a subject, X, if and only if, X is classified as a Φ." ("The One and the Many", *The Review of Metaphysics* (June 1968), p. 638. Thus, not only would predication of the species form be allowed on Aristotle's account, it would be an example par excellence of predication.

¹⁶ "The species predicated of individuals seem to be principles rather than the genera" (*Meta*, 999 a 15: μᾶλλον... τὰ ἐπὶ τῶν ἀτόμων κατηγορούμενα ἀρχαὶ εἶναι τῶν γενῶν).

whether Aristotle contradicts himself by simply assuming here that he doesn't. What Aristotle says in 1038 b 9 is that nothing predicated universally is substance.¹⁷ He says elsewhere that the species form is substance, and thus he *ought* to say that the species is not predicated universally. But what he does say, repeatedly, is that it is predicated of its members, and this is sufficient to count as being predicated universally.

Woods' argument has failed to show that the species form is not predicated of individuals, and thus that there are grounds for distinguishing between being a universal and being predicated universally. Aristotle remains committed to (A): No universal can be substance.

II

Albritton argues that Aristotle recognizes both a universal form and a particular form, one which is "not the form of any other thing".¹⁸ If this is correct, (B) can be rejected and Aristotle can consistently claim that the particular form is that which is primarily substance, as well as criticize the Platonists on the grounds that nothing universal is a substance. Albritton concedes that the evidence for his view is controversial but cites two passages as especially suggestive: the discussion of proximate causes in Book Lambda and the account of the soul in Books Zeta and Eta. In the first, Aristotle remarks "your matter and form and moving cause [are] different from mine" (1071 a 28), and in the second, Aristotle claims that the form (εἶδος) of an animate substance, its soul, is peculiar to it (ἴδιον). My argument in reply is this: Aristotle's account of the soul provides only a partial defense against the criticism of inconsistency; and the passage from Book Lambda fails to justify the claim that there is any second form peculiar to the individual. There is only one form, and while it is peculiar to the individual in one sense, there is a second and more relevant sense in which Aristotle is committed to the universality of form.

As Albritton concedes, the most we can find in Books Zeta and Eta is that there are particular forms of animate substances. Since Aristotle

¹⁷ ἔοικα γὰρ ἀδύνατον εἶναι οὐσίαν εἶναι ὅτιοῦν τῶν καθόλου λεγομένων. No mention is made of the species form (τὸ ἀτόμον, εἶδος).

¹⁸ A similar view has been defended by Wilfred Sellars, "Substance and Form in Aristotle", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LIV, No. 22 (October 1957), pp. 688-99.

countenances inanimate substances (e.g. bronze spheres, wooden circles, etc.), the problem is not long avoided. Aristotle's account would still be untenable as a general theory about substance. Second, the evidence from Book Lambda is difficult to fit to Albritton's purpose. What Aristotle says there is that the proximate causes of individuals are themselves individuals, and this does not mean that the form which is the cause of your form is an individual, but only that the form which is the cause of your form exists in an individual substance (e.g. you have the form of a man because your father was a man and it is his form which is the cause). Thus your form is in a sense different from mine, not in species, but in the different individuals which were our proximate causes. Aristotle explicitly says here that the universal definition of each of our forms is the same (1071 a 29). Thus Albritton cannot conclude from this that the form is not a universal, but only that the form *exists* only in the individual substances which have it.¹⁹

This is an important feature of Aristotle's philosophy since it marks his departure from the theory of the Platonists: forms are separable in thought and definition, but not separable as capable of existing as substances. The sense in which form can be said to be particular is just Aristotle's doctrine of immanent form – the form exists in particular substances. But this will not rescue Aristotle from the present difficulties. In order to show that Aristotle held the form to be universal we need only find evidence that the form is common to those things which have it, "since that is called universal which is such as to belong to more than one thing" (1038 b 11 - 12). It is possible then to attribute (B) to Aristotle consistently with Aristotle's doctrine of particular forms in Book Lambda.

That (B) represents a centrally important Aristotelian view is confirmed by Aristotle's conception of science, the *sine qua non* of which is the possibility of commonality of form.²⁰ A world in which individuals possessed forms which were not only ontologically particular (in the sense just explained) but epistemologically particular

¹⁹ This is perhaps the sense of Sellars' remark that "if anything is clear about an Aristotelian form it is that its primary *mode of being* is to be a this... as contrasted with a universal." (My italics; *ibid.* p. 688).

²⁰ "For all things that we come to know, we come to know in so far as they have some unity and identity (ἐν τι καὶ ταύτόν), and in so far as some attribute belongs to them universally (καθόλου)." *Meta.* 999 a 28 - 29. Cf. 994 b 28 - 29.

(in the sense that no two individuals were the same sort of thing) would be a world in which Aristotelian science would be inoperative. In light of the importance of scientific knowledge for Aristotle, and the centrality of form in this knowledge, we can conclude that the form must be universal in his account, and thus that he remains committed to (B).

III

The claim that it is form which is substance is a surprising departure from the common sense position of the *Categories*, where primary substance is thought to be the compound of form and matter, the concrete sensible individual. It should not come as a surprise to find this new doctrine embroiled in the present controversy. It has been recently suggested that in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle develops multiple senses of "substance", and if this could be shown, the extent of the departure from the *Categories* could be minimized, and the present dilemma could be avoided. For if the sense of "substance" in (A) "No universal is a substance" were not the same as the sense of "substance" in (C) "The species form is substance", then there would be no inconsistency even if the species form were a universal.

Lacey contends:

"What Aristotle ought to be saying in the *Metaphysics* is that terms like 'man' are not the name of an οὐσία in the sense in which one can talk of an οὐσία as an object, but are used to say what the οὐσία of an object is. But it seems to me that Aristotle never makes this completely clear (though he often approaches doing so and I think this is the view he is really aiming for)..."²¹

There is some textual support for this interpretation even within Book Zeta: at 1039 b 20, Aristotle distinguishes between substance which is 'the concrete thing' (τό τε σύνολον) and substance which is the formula (ὁ λόγος). Since the form is what is stated in the λόγος, Lacey's view that there is substance which is what the thing is, its nature as constituted by its form, is partially supported by the text.

But there is a crucial distinction to be made: is Aristotle distinguishing different senses of "substance" or is he merely distinguishing different kinds of substances? We have ample evidence that he

often does the latter; the *Metaphysics* slices up substances in several different ways, sensible, non-sensible, eternal, perishable, etc. But this is not sufficient to rescue Aristotle from the inconsistency, for if thesis (C) were simply the claim that the species form is a kind of substance, it would still be subject to the inconsistency, since if no universal is substance, then no universal is any kind of substance either. Moreover, it seems unreasonable to take (A) as a claim that no universal is a kind of substance, for in this weaker form the Platonists reply would have been too obvious to Aristotle: the Forms are simply substances of another kind. The force of (A) must be then that no universal can be a substance of any sort; consequently it will not be sufficient simply to hold that the species form is a different kind of substance from the substances which are compounds of form and matter.

What reason is there to think that Aristotle recognized different senses of "substance"? My view is that the available evidence counts against this being the case. There are of course multiple senses of "is" or "being", but the linguistic structure of Aristotle's metaphysics is that there is one "nuclear" or "focal" sense which is that of substance.²² Aristotle throughout the *Metaphysics* takes the job of the metaphysician (or first philosopher) to be studying what it means to be in this fundamental sense, and "that which is primarily, i.e. not in a qualified sense but without qualification, must be substance."²³ In Aristotle's usage, "substance" functions as an honorific term, reserved only for that which is most fundamentally real; and although the candidates for the honor change, the nature of the award does not.²⁴

Further, the reasons for Aristotle's choice of form indicate that it is the initial criteria for substance which form alone meets. From Plato and Parmenides, Aristotle accepted the view that what is most real is most knowable, definable, and permanent. These are among the conditions that the candidate for substance must satisfy (1028 a ff., 1028 a 33, 1040 a ff.) and it is these which the form but not the individual compound of form and matter meets. It would then be

²² *Meta.* 1003 a 33: τὸ δὲ ὄν λέγεται μὲν πολλαχῶς ἀλλὰ πρὸς ἓν καὶ μίαν τινὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐχ ἁμωμένως. "Being is spoken of in many ways, but all related back to one nature which is said to be unambiguously." Cf. 1028 a 10 - 15.

²³ 1028 a 30. At the beginning of Zeta, Chapter 3, Aristotle says that substance is applied not in four senses (πλεοναχῶς) but "to four main objects", 1028 b 33.

²⁴ In Δ 8, Aristotle speaks of the variety of ways in which we speak of substance, but this list is obviously provisional in the light of Aristotle's subsequent argument.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 66.

extraordinary to find Aristotle coining a new sense of substance in Zeta to confer upon form. The form does represent what is 'substantial' in the individual as Lacey's remark suggests; it is 'what makes a thing what it is', but this too is taken to be a mark of substance as that which is most real (1041 a 9). The sense of "substance" in which no universal is substance remains the same as the sense of "substance" in which the form is substance, and Aristotle remains committed to the inconsistency.

IV

None of the attempts to rescue Aristotle from the contradiction has succeeded, and it is difficult to see any other Aristotelian doctrine that could be marshalled in defense. But if it cannot be avoided, it ought at least to be explained. How could Aristotle have contradicted himself on this fundamental point? I suggest that the inconsistency is generated by Aristotle's failure to distinguish between the following claims, both of which are suggested by "nothing universal can be substance":

- (1) Nothing which is non-particular can exist as substance.
- (2) Nothing which is common to many can exist as substance.

It is (2) which generates the contradiction with the claims that the species form is common to its members and that it is this form that is most truly substance. (1) Causes no similar problems, for the doctrine of immanent form does not commit Aristotle to non-particular substances. The failure to make two distinct claims along the lines of (1) and (2) is the source of Aristotle's dilemma. If we take Aristotle's position to be that expressed in (1) we avoid the dilemma, but Zeta 13 loses its argumentative force, and becomes merely a statement of Aristotle's position in contrast to that of the Platonists. If we attempt to support (1) by claiming that no non-particular is substance since nothing which is common to many is substance, then we criticize the Platonists at the expense of Aristotle's own metaphysics. In light of recent attempts to construct a cogent version of another of Aristotle's arguments against Plato's Theory of Forms, the Third Man Argument, it seems only fair to Plato to point out that this is an argument of Aristotle's that cannot succeed.²⁵

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²⁵ I am indebted to David Furley, Raymond Martin and Walter Leszl for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.