

ARISTOTLE CATEGORIES (c.330 BCE)

"Categories." Trans. J. L. Ackrill. Vol. 1 of Complete Works: the Revised Oxford Translation. Ed. Jonathan Barnes. 2 Vols. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984. 3-24.

Aristotle argues that instances of *primary substance* are found only in concrete examples (e.g. of a man or a horse) while *secondary substances* are found in the *species* (e.g. mankind) and the *genus* (e.g. animals) to which particular examples belong (such as an individual man named Richard). Species and genus are secondary in that they would not exist at all were it not for the existence of specific individuals. Aristotle points out, too, that species ranks above genus (as he puts it, the "species is more a substance than the genus" [5]) in that the former (e.g. mankind) is "nearer to the primary substance" (5), that is, to the individual example (e.g. particular men) than the latter (e.g. animals). He argues that it is "more informative to say of the individual tree that it is a tree than that it is a plant" (5). What is primary for Aristotle is, in other words, the here and now, concrete examples rather than ideal versions that can be imagined in the mind. This is what Aristotle means when he writes that "[e]very substance seems to signify a certain 'this'" (6) for the "thing revealed is individual and numerically one" (6) (i.e. a given man or a particular horse). By contrast, secondary substance "signifies a certain qualification, for the subject is not, as the primary substance is, one, but man and animal are said of many things" (6).

The question is: how does Aristotle reach this definition of 'substance,' that is, this equation of primary substance with particular examples of anything and secondary substances with the species and the genus? In other words, why is the priority placed on concrete specific examples? He reaches this conclusion by exploring the concepts of 'subject' and 'predicate' in grammar (because to make truth-claims of any kind inevitably involves the use of language and thus the composition of sentences). If I say that 'Richard is the greatest thing since sliced bread,' for example, the subject of this sentence is Richard and the predicate is greatness. To put this another way, the quality of greatness is predicated of or found in Richard. From this point of view, the substance of Richard exists in its own right (it is its own subject), it does not have to exist in anything other than itself whereas greatness does not exist in and for itself but can only exist in someone like the aforementioned Richard. By the same token, then, particular men (e.g. Richard) are men (species) and all men are animals (genus). Without specific examples (e.g. Richard) there could be no concept of either mankind or the genus of animals to which men belong. Hence, the primary substance consists of specific concrete examples (men such as Richard) which demonstrate the existence of secondary substances such as mankind or animals or even qualities such as greatness.

Aristotle stresses that many things may be predicated of the subject (he refers to these qualities variously as "differentia" [6] and "qualifications" [6]) but only the secondary substances "of things predicated, reveal the primary substance" (71) in that qualities such as a colour (e.g. he is white) or an action performed by the subject (e.g. he runs) are accidental or contingent qualities subject to modification (e.g. one does not always run) whereas the secondary substances are enduring properties of all men at all times. This is why Aristotle claims that a colour such as white "signifies nothing but a qualification, whereas the species and the genus mark off the qualification of substance" (6).

Aristotle makes a number of assertions about the nature of substance. One "characteristic of substances is that there is nothing contrary to them. . . . For example, there is nothing contrary to an individual man" (7). Secondly, substance "does not admit

of a more and a less. . . . For example, if this substance is a man, it will not be more a man or less a man either than itself or than another man" (7). The third and "most distinctive" (7) characteristic of substance is that "that which is numerically one and the same is able to receive contraries" (7). Non-substances such as a colour or an action do not fall into this category because a "colour which is numerically one and the same will not be black and white, nor will numerically one and the same action be bad and good" (7). The contrast is true, however, of individual men: Aristotle contends that some accidental or contingent qualities predicated of a substance may change (a pale individual may get a tan, for example, while men perform good actions now and bad ones later). However, other essential properties must remain constant otherwise one would not be able to recognise particular individuals (e.g. specific men) as manifestations of a particular species (mankind). As a result, if men were to suddenly sprout horns, one would not be dealing with men per se but another substance.

In short, for Aristotle, there are some essential characteristics which make a substance what it is and which differentiates it from other substances everywhere. These universal essences do not have an independent reality: they exist solely in the particular substances of which they are instances. There is, in other words, a substance to men which differentiates them from cows. Where Plato privileges universals over particulars (specific men being pale imitations of the Ideal Form of Man which exists independently of the men), Aristotle reverses this hierarchy: individual substances (e.g. particular men) exist independently but the qualities predicated of the substances in question (e.g. greatness, evil) cannot exist independently, i.e. they can do so only in the form of particular men.