

ARISTOTLE "INDIVIDUAL SUBSTANCE" [CATEGORIES] (c.330 BCE)

Aristotle. "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).

Secondary substances are enduring properties of the primary substance in question, whereas all other qualities predicated of the primary substance are merely contingent. 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.