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Aristotle on Secondary Substance

In the *Categories* Aristotle attempts to classify and describe the types of being. To gain a purchase on such an abstract concept, Aristotle considers ontology through the lens of language and “things spoken of” (τά λεγόμενα, 1a16).¹ After defining homonymy, synonymy, and paronymy, Aristotle begins by dividing the “things spoken of” into two logically exhaustive categories: [A] “things spoken of in combination” (τὰ μὲν κατὰ συμπλοκὴν, 1a16) and [B] “things spoken of without combination” (τὰ δ’ ἄνευ συμπλοκῆς, 1a17). One might think of the former class as simple statements or even (sometimes) propositions; Aristotle offers the example “man runs” or “man wins”. In contrast, the latter class would define the “atoms” of thought, to speak etymologically. For a majority of the *Categories* Aristotle is primarily interested in this second group of entities. To over simplify, Aristotle uses the *Categories* to analyze the various ways in which the verb “to be” expresses relationships between nouns. In this paper, I focus on one sub-division of one kind of these “things spoken of without combination”, namely the secondary substances.

In order fully and clearly to explicate Aristotle’s understanding of this particular category of being, I follow Aristotle’s linguistic focus to ontology. This paper looks to

¹ It is unclear whether τὰ λεγόμενα means “things said”, i.e. words/signifiers, or “things spoken of”, i.e. concepts/signifieds. Given the apparent equality of τὰ λεγόμενα with τὰ ὄντα (“things that exist”, 1a20), I tend toward the latter interpretation.

determine both what secondary substances are in-themselves and what they are in contrast to primary substances. Structurally, I begin by considering how the secondary substances fit within Aristotle's larger 10-fold division of being before turning to his explicit definition of them. After explaining the definition of secondary substances, I turn to consider their complicated relationship with the primary substances. In the end, I aim to answer what makes secondary substances *substances* but not *primary* substances.

Following a thoroughly intriguing section on predication (1a20–1b24), Aristotle returns to his two-fold division of “things spoken of”, focusing on what [B] the “things spoken of without combination” signify. At this point Aristotle present his famed 10-fold division of categories:

- substance (οὐσία)
- quantity (ποσός)
- qualification (ποιός)
- relative (πρός τι)
- where (ποῦ)
- when (ποτέ)
- being-in-a-position (κεῖσθαι)
- having (ἔχειν)
- doing (ποιεῖν)
- being-affected (πάσχειν)

Aristotle spends the rest of the *Categories* considering more intimately certain of these concepts. It is worth noting that although Ackrill translates the categories as nouns, Aristotle's Greek presents them primarily as interrogatives, or at least the answers to interrogatives. Substance answers the question, "What is it?" Quantity answers, "How much is it?" Qualification answers, "What kind is it?" I pause to point out this element of Aristotle's language because these considerations play an important part in understanding what makes secondary substances *substances* at all. Before we get to that quandary, however, let us examine Aristotle's definition of secondary substances.

Taking pride of place among the categories are the substances, or perhaps more literally, "that which exists".² Aristotle defines two classes of substances: [1] primary substances (πρώται οὐσίαι) and [2] secondary substances (δεύτεραι οὐσίαι). The former are physical particulars, while the latter are the species (τά εἶδεα) and genera (τά γένη) of these particulars (2a14). Aristotle offers the individual man (a primary substance), the species man (a secondary substance), and the genus animal (another secondary substance) as examples of these distinctions. Since modern biology classes "animal" as a kingdom and not a genus, perhaps it would prove constructive to offer another example. Lassie was a particular collie. She belonged to the collie species, which is

² οὐσία is a nominalization of the Greek verb "to be" (εἶμι).

in the canine genus. For Aristotle, both “collie” and “dog” would be secondary substances, while Lassie herself would be a primary substance.

One could reasonably ask what makes “collie” and “dog” substances at all. Aristotle’s definition of primary substances marks them as clearly physical and particular. As he will say later, primary substances are “individual and numerically one” (3b11); that is, they can be pointed at. I could go out, find Lassie, and tell you, “This is Lassie.” There is a being which is spatially and temporally bounded. This means that if I pointed at *anything* other than Lassie, I would have to say, “That is not Lassie”. There is a definiteness to primary substances that appears lacking in secondary substances. As Aristotle himself confesses (3b15), you cannot point at a secondary substances. I could never show you “collie”, only some particular collie. Aristotle holds that secondary substances are thus not a “this”, but rather “a certain qualification” (ποιόν τι, 3b16). Since species and genera are not numerically one, but “said of many things” (3b17), they are not a being *per se*, but rather “a quality of being” (περὶ οὐσίαν τὸ ποιόν, 3b18). But what exactly does this mean?

Aristotle states that secondary substances “signify substance of a certain qualification” (ποιᾶν γὰρ τινα οὐσίαν σημαίνει, 3b21). Clearly, Aristotle here links secondary substances to another class of being, qualification (ποιός). Yet Aristotle is also quick to differentiate secondary substances from qualifications *per se*. As an example of a pure qualification, Aristotle offers us “white”. Recalling the interrogative nature of the cate-

gories discussed above, one could say that white answers the question, “What qualities does the subject have?” To say that paper is white is to say that paper has the quality of whiteness. Similarly, to say that Lassie is a collie is to say that she has the quality of being a collie. Like the category qualification, secondary substances communicate what sort of thing the subject is. Yet secondary substances are sharply distinguished from qualifications. As Aristotle says, “the species and the genus mark off the qualification of substance” (τὸ δὲ εἶδος καὶ τὸ γένος περὶ οὐσίαν τὸ ποιὸν ἀφορίζει, 3b22). To put it otherwise, secondary substances are a special kind of qualification insofar as they have some direct relation to primary substances.

Unfortunately, the nature of this relationship between primary and secondary substances appears opaque. In describing it Aristotle returns to his earlier description of the various types of predication. While this passage is itself difficult to interpret, it is necessary to understand with any degree of exactitude Aristotle’s view on secondary substances. To summarize his views of predication briefly, Aristotle distinguishes two types of predication: [1] said-of and [2] present-in. While exact definitions of these descriptors are lacking, Aristotle’s examples do provide some clarification. As an example of the present-in predication, Aristotle looks to the relation of white to a body. To say “that body is white” is to say that white is present-in that body (1b1). Conversely, when describing the said-of relationship, Aristotle returns to the example of a man. He states that “man is said of a subject, the individual man” (1a21). To say “Tom is a man” is to

say that man is said-of Tom. The overlap of examples further clarifies the difference between secondary substances and qualifications *per se*; the former are said-of primary substances, the latter present-in them. But what of the relation of primary to secondary substance? What does it mean to say that secondary substances are said-of primary substances? And how does this allow them to be a sub-division of substance and not of qualification?

In sections 2a19–2a34, Aristotle works to answer such questions. In order to further explain how the two types of predication differ from one another, Aristotle considers their communicative implications. Said-of predication ensures that “both its [i.e. the predicate] name and its definition are necessarily predication of the subject” (2a19–20). This means that to define Tom requires using “man” in the definition. In contrast, present-in predication cannot have the definition of the predicate applied to the subject. It would be logically absurd to define Tom as white. Now, Tom is white (this is a valid predication), but this has nothing to do with the formal definition of Tom. Focusing specifically on the relation of primary to secondary substances, if secondary substances are necessary components of the formal definitions of primary substances, there is a clear and strong relationship between the two. In fact, in a sense, one could understand primary substances as relying upon the secondary substances. That is, could there be an individual man, Tom, without the species “man”? No. But clearly there could not be the

genus “man” without any individual men either. It is this biconditional implication that would appear to make secondary substances *substances* and not qualifications.

In conclusion, we might gain further purchase on the similarities and differences between primary and secondary substances by elucidating what would make something (a) a substance but not (b) a primary substance. As we’ve already noted, primary substances are a “this”, one can point to them. Secondary substances are qualifications and cannot be pointed to. One cannot even point to an individual man and say, “that is man”, since secondary substances are not present-in primary substances, merely said-of them. As previously discussed, this means that secondary substances are an essential part of the definition of primary substances. Recall our interpretation of the 10 categories as answers to interrogatives. If one were to ask (while pointing to our friend Tom), “What is that?” we should reply, “Tom”. Tom is a substance, an answer to the specific question “what is that?”. But suppose someone were to ask, “What is Tom?” Answering “Tom” would be tautological and unhelpful. Being precise, one could say “Man”, or being more general “Animal”. Returning to Lassie, one could say that Lassie is a collie or that she is a dog when asked, “What is Lassie?” Since the species and genus are the proper, expected answers to the question “what is that primary substance?”, species and genera are substances.