

ARISTOTELIAN UNIVERSALS

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THE concept of the universal originated with Aristotle in the sense that he was the first to define it explicitly and give it a name. His definitions of it may be divided into two groups: (1) those which rest on the notion of predicability; and (2) those which refer to the ontological tie between particular and universal (or substance and universal).

- (1) By "universal" I mean that which is such as to be predicable of a plurality of things, by "particular" that which is not; man, for instance, is a universal, Callias a particular. [*Int.* 7. 17a39–b1]

By "substance" is meant what is not predicable of a subject, whereas the universal is always predicated of a subject. [*Metaph.* 7. 13. 1038b15–16]

- (2) The universal is common; for that is called "universal" which is such as to belong to a plurality of things. [*Metaph.* 7. 13. 1038b11–12]

For we mean by "individual" what is numerically one, and by "universal" what holds of (*ἐν*) these. [*Metaph.* 3. 4. 999b34–1000a1]

I have discussed the first group of definitions elsewhere¹ and do not propose to examine either group in detail here. My purpose is to draw attention to a peculiarity in Aristotle's treatment of universals which has, as far as I know, gone almost unnoticed by historians of philosophy. The notion of the universal yielded by the definitions above (roughly, "general characteristic") corresponds more or less (with possible qualifications about numbers, etc.) to the notion in common acceptance in medieval and modern times; and it is usually assumed that such was Aristotle's working conception of the universal. I shall try to show, however, that, though Aristotle does often operate with a notion of this breadth, there is at the same time in his works a much narrower conception, according to which the universal is restricted to what is predicable (*a*) essentially, and (*b*) of substance. I shall suggest a reason for each of these restrictions. The principal evidence comes from two fairly explicit passages in *Metaphysics* 5. 9 and *Analytica posteriora* 1. 24. The reason for restriction (*a*) lies in the natural meaning of the term *καθόλου* ("universal"); for restriction (*b*), in a discrepancy between two different approaches to the definition of substance.

Let me say at once that I have not been able to find any systematic basis for classifying the passages in which the two different notions appear—for example, into early or late, logical or metaphysical. As is often the case with technical terms introduced by Aristotle, the notions covered by *καθόλου* appear side by side, with no explicit differentiation, in a somewhat bewildering way. (Compare "substance," "matter," "form," "what it is to be," each of which covers at least two different concepts which are nevertheless sometimes found to occur side by side in adjacent chapters and even sentences.)

1. "Aristotle's Distinction between Substance and Universal," *Phronesis* 18 (1973): 139–55.

However, the wider notion is on the whole prevalent in the logical works;² but contrast *Analytica posteriora* 1. 24, to be discussed on pages 20–21. The narrower notion appears to be more usual in the *Metaphysics*, but the wider one crops up for example in *Metaphysics* 10.³ I turn now to establishing the existence of the narrower conception.

In *Metaphysics* 5. 9, Aristotle considers the sense in which things may be said to be identical (*ταὐτά*) in virtue of an accidental connection, and enters into a digression on the difference between common and proper names with respect to the ascription of accidental properties (I number the instances in the first sentence for the sake of clarity).

Things are called identical, in one sense, in virtue of an accidental connection, for instance, (i) the white and the musical are identical because they are accidents of the same thing, and (ii) man and musical are identical because the one is an accident of the other, and the musical is a man because it is an accident of a man; and (iii) this [*sc.* musical man] is identical with each of these [*sc.* man and musical] and each of these with it, for both the man and the musical are spoken of equivalently (*ταὐτὸ λέγεται*) to the musical man, and it to them (this is why all these statements are not made universally; for it is not true to say that every man and the musical are identical; for universals belong essentially, whereas accidents do not belong essentially; but in the case of individuals there is only the simple statement; for it is thought that Socrates, and for Socrates to be musical, are identical; and the name “Socrates” does not hold of a plurality of things, which is why we do not say “every Socrates” as we do “every man”). [1017b27–1018a4]

Aristotle wants to say that “Socrates” and “musical Socrates” (and, it may be, “the musical”) do not refer to two (or three) different people, but to something which is numerically one;⁴ at the same time the content of these expressions is different. As he puts it in *Metaphysics* 7. 6, man and white man are the same; but to-be-man and to-be-white-man are different. Thus, if two expressions X and Y refer to the same thing, to-be-X is not necessarily to-be-Y—though it may be, if, for example, X is “man” and Y is “biped animal.” The regulations about adding to and detracting from (*πρόσθεσις* and *ἀφαίρεσις*) in *Metaphysics* 6. 4 and 5 are designed to point to obvious differences in content between expressions taken as having the same reference.⁵ It is essentially this distinction which Aristotle is insisting on in *Metaphysics* 4. 4:

For what we reckon as having one and the same significance is not having significance of one and the same thing, since on that view “musical,” “white,” and “man” would actually have had one and the same significance. [1006b15–17]

In *Metaphysics* 5. 9 Aristotle is considering identity of reference obtaining in virtue of an accidental connection (the implied contrast being with the

2. See for example *Int.* 7. The distinction between *κατὰ παντός* and *καθόλου* (“true in every case” and “true universally”: W. D. Ross) in *An. post.* 1. 4, where essentiality is made a requirement of universality, might be thought to point to the type of restriction I shall be discussing. But Aristotle probably has in mind here universal *propositions*.

3. 1087a10, universal color.

4. Cf. *Top.* 1. 7. 103a29–31: “A third sense is drawn from the accidental—for instance the sitting, or the musical, is identical with Socrates; for all these mean to signify what is numerically one.”

5. Cf. *Metaph.* 13. 2. 1077b9–11.

identity of reference obtaining between, e.g., "man" and "biped animal"). "Man" and "the musical" may, he points out, be used to refer to the same thing, if a man possesses the (accidental) attribute of being musical. But it is the parenthesis with which we are chiefly concerned at the moment. Since the argument is slightly compressed, I offer an expanded version. "No universal statements can be built on these [i.e., you cannot move from 'Man is musical' to 'Every man is musical']. For universals belong essentially [and will therefore be predicable of all the members of the class in question], whereas accidents do not [and therefore those indefinite statements which ascribe to a sort a property accidental to it cannot be universally quantified]. With individuals, on the other hand, there is only the simple statement; [there is no question of quantification, for] the name 'Socrates' does not hold of a plurality of things, so we do not say 'every Socrates' as we do 'every man.' "

Aristotle's point about the validity of generalizing the ascription of a universal, and the invalidity of generalizing the ascription of an accidental property, and the reason he gives for it—that universals belong essentially whereas accidents do not—appears to be straightforward evidence for restriction (a), and at the same time to suggest a confusion lying behind it. The notion of something which is predicable, not merely of a plurality, but of a totality of (determinately designated⁶) things is different from the notion established by Aristotle's official definitions of the universal. Since, however, Aristotle was, as far as we know, the first to introduce *καθόλου* as a technical term, it is incumbent on us to note that it is in fact the latter meaning which the term would bear in the absence of a specially assigned technical sense. Thus in *Analytica posteriora* 1. 8 we have a sentence in which the components of the term occur separated:

Therefore of perishable things there is no demonstration or knowledge in the strict sense, but only *per accidens*; because it is not of the whole of the class (*καθ' ὅλου αὐτοῦ*) but only at certain times or in certain ways. [75b24–26]

It is also noteworthy that in *Metaphysics* 5. 26, where Aristotle is explaining the *technical* sense of *καθόλου*, and contrasting the way in which the instances of a universal form a whole with the way in which continuous parts form a whole, he first says that the universal is what is predicated of many things, and then stresses that these form a whole because the universal covers them *all*:

For the universal, and in general what is spoken of as a whole, is universal in the sense that it contains many things by being predicated of each of them and by their each and all being one, e.g., man, horse, and god, because they are all living beings.⁷ [1023b27–33]

6. On the narrow view, only generic universals could be non-tautologically exhibited as universals: for any completely specific term X could only be counted as a universal on the grounds of its predicability of all X's. Note Aristotle's highly generic example, "living being," in the *Metaph.* 5. 26 passage (quoted above).

7. Cf. *An. post.* 1. 31. 87b30–31, "the universal, i.e., what holds in all cases" (*τὸ δὲ καθόλου καὶ ἐπὶ πάντων*).

So it seems possible that the meaning of *καθόλου* may have aided a restriction of its use to what is essentially predicable.

But this is not the whole story. In *Analytica posteriora* 1. 24, Aristotle says:

Further, if there is some single definition and the universal is not an ambiguity . . . there will be no need to suppose that this has an existence apart from these [*sc.* the particulars], just because it has one sense, any more than in the case of those other terms which do not signify "what" but quality or relation or activity. [85b15–21]

Here universals signify "what" or substance, and the "other terms" signify qualities, relations, etc. The restriction of universals to substance is so casual as to pass almost unnoticed.

What motives could lie behind this latter restriction? I mentioned earlier a discrepancy between two different approaches to the definition of substance. On the one hand, Aristotle distinguishes between universals, which are capable of occurring predicatively, and substances (or particulars), which can only occur as subjects in strict predication. On the other hand, Aristotle distinguishes substances from qualities, quantities, etc., and provides various distinguishing marks for picking out substances from members of other categories.⁸ But is the notion of substance established by the definition in terms of predicability the same as the notion established by the categorical criteria? This resolves itself into the question whether substances, as delimited by the *Categories*, are the only logical subjects.

Aristotle appears to consider that they are. For it is a prevailing assumption with him that substance as delineated in the *Categories* coincides with substance defined as what is not predicable of anything else—what he refers to as the *ὑποκείμενον*, or owner of properties. For example, in *Metaphysics* 7. 1 he speaks of substance as opposed to quality, quantity, and so on, and, side by side with this, of substance as the *ὑποκείμενον*.⁹ But the prevailing assumption is surely false. Clearly, under the conditions for strict predication Aristotle lays down,¹⁰ subject expressions may refer to items in any category, not merely to those in the category of substance. For example, the sentence, "This speech is long" ("speech" coming within the category of quantity), is not an accidental predication. The idea that substances are the only class of terms capable of functioning as logical subjects may have been buttressed by Aristotle's doctrine of the *existential* primacy of substances over non-substances.¹¹ He may have thought that speeches were unsuitable candidates for logical subjects because speeches were existentially dependent, i.e., on men. But this would clearly be a confusion.

Thus the definitions of substance in terms of predicability serve to establish the notion of the particular in general, and not of the substantial (as

8. *Cat.* 5.

9. He recognizes, of course, that secondary substances are predicable of something else: but since he regards their status as substances as derived solely from the fact that they are predicable in a special way of primary substances (*Cat.* 2b29 ff.), the qualification is not important here.

10. See *An. post.* 1. 22. 83a1–18; and on this passage Engmann, "Aristotle's Distinction," pp. 141–53.

11. See *Cat.* 5. 2b5–6c.

opposed to qualitative, quantitative, etc.) particular. The root mistake here lies in taking only substantial particulars as logical subjects. Another way of putting this would be to say that Aristotle confuses the notion of the particular with the notion of the basic particular, and perhaps I may reinforce my point by quoting part of a note by P. F. Strawson.

Aristotle seems to have thought that the only independent particulars (of an at all familiar kind) were fairly substantial things like horses and men. But there seems no reason for denying that some phenomena or occurrences less substantial than these may also rank as independent particulars. No doubt there will be borderline cases, i.e. cases where we should hesitate between saying that one particular is dependently attributed to another and saying that it is genuinely (e.g. causally) related to another. But it seems difficult to force the border quite as far as Aristotle would wish in the direction of the satisfyingly substantial particular; unless indeed we reinforce the present notion of an independent particular with further criteria such as those employed in Part I of this book as tests for the status of basic particular. [*Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London, 1959), p. 170, n.]

I have been speaking as though Aristotle clearly recognized particulars in categories other than substance. This is a notoriously obscure area in the exegesis of the *Categories*,¹² and I do not propose to enter here into the debate about the individuation of properties in that work. It is usually assumed that the *Categories* is unique among Aristotle's works in recognizing (if it indeed does) non-recurrent particulars in categories other than substance. Thus Barrington Jones writes, "Such non-substantial individuals do not seem to reappear elsewhere in the Aristotelian corpus."¹³ I do not think this is quite true. Elsewhere, Aristotle does not make use of the notion of properties' being "in" their possessors. This notion does not, indeed, apply at all comfortably to the whole of the range of cases which, in the *Categories*, it is taken as covering. It is scarcely appropriate to say that an action is "in" the agent who performs it, and paradoxical to say that the place that a substance is in is "in" it. What replaces inherence can be examined on two fronts. On the one hand, it is replaced by the theory of accidents, which correspond for the most part to the *qualities* of the *Categories*, "musical," "white," and "just" being the favorite examples. On the other hand, there seems to be no consideration of those non-substantial terms that are not included in the theory of accidents *qua* properties of substances: Aristotle does not provide any description of their relation to substance which would fill the place of the "in" relation of the *Categories*. He clearly does, however, recognize non-recurrent particulars in some of these categories. For instance, there is a discussion in *Physics* 5. 4 of what constitutes a numerically single change, in which he envisages a non-recurrence test. In *Physics* 7. 1, non-

12. See G. E. M. Anscombe and P. T. Geach, *Three Philosophers* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 8-9; J. L. Ackrill, *Aristotle's "Categories" and "de Interpretatione"* (Oxford, 1963), esp. pp. 74-75, 83; G. E. L. Owen, "Inherence," *Phronesis* 10 (1965): 97-105; J. Moravcsik, "Aristotle on Predication," *PhR* 76 (1967): 80-96; Barrington Jones, "Individuals in Aristotle's *Categories*," *Phronesis* 17 (1972): 107-123; J. Annas, "Individuals in Aristotle's *Categories*: Two Queries," *Phronesis* 19 (1974): 146-52.

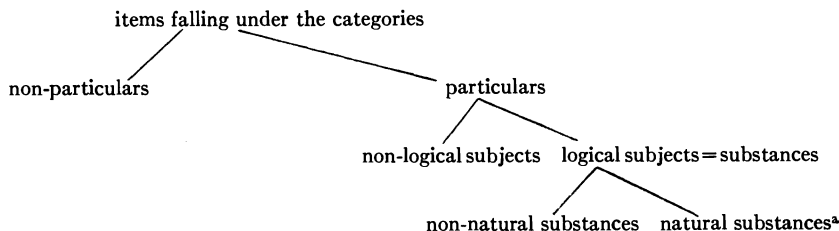
13. "Individuals in Aristotle's *Categories*," p. 107.

recurrence is assumed without qualification to be a necessary condition of numerical singularity in such cases.¹⁴ There is a brief but interesting discussion of what constitutes numerical and formal singularity for physical objects and what I shall contentiously call sense data in *De sensu* 6.¹⁵ In at least one passage, Aristotle also recognizes non-recurrent particulars among accidents: in *Physics* 7. 4. 242b39, he speaks of “this white” and “this black” (τόδε τὸ λευκόν, τόδε τὸ μέλαν), where it is clear from the context that he is talking of qualities and not of white things and black things.

So, outside the *Categories*, Aristotle is not averse to recognizing what are, in effect, non-recurrent particulars in non-substance categories. But this never seems to get properly tied up with his distinction between particular and universal and the theses about predicability involved with it. Aristotle prefers, in the case of members of non-substance categories, to talk in terms of “numerically one” (or “a this”) and “formally one,” rather than of “particular” and “universal.” Compare, for instance, the *Metaphysics* 5. 9 passage discussed earlier (pp. 18–19), where the term καθόλου is explicitly withheld from accidents, and where it is the subjects of which accidents are predicated that are distinguished as καθόλου (“man”) or καθ’ ἑκάστον (“Socrates”).

Counting in particulars in non-substance categories, then, Aristotle’s position may be represented diagrammatically (table 1). Such a scheme is exceptionable for the reasons touched on earlier (pp. 20–21). Amending it to take account of those objections would yield a different scheme (table 2). This is, as I stipulated, what the picture *would* be like if Aristotle were willing to use the “particular” terminology in non-substance categories. But the very confusion which the opposition between table 1 and table 2 is intended to represent would be a reason why Aristotle should not be clear on this point. For, if substance is being defined in a way appropriate to the

TABLE 1

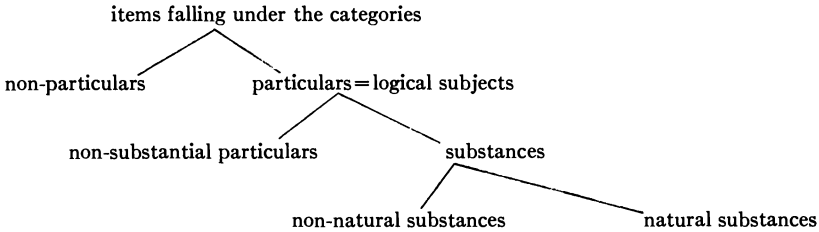


* At times, in the *Metaphysics* (6. 17. 1041b28–30; 7. 3. 1043b21–22), Aristotle allows the notion of substance to cover only “natural” things—this would presumably include plants, animals, and the heavenly bodies; it is not clear whether it would also include such things as rocks, rivers, etc. The reason given is that natural bodies are (causal?) principles of other bodies (*De an.* 2. 1. 412a11–13). The meaning of this is obscure, and the restriction is not important here; I introduce it only to make the diagram more complete.

14. 227b20–228a19, 242b37–41; cf. in the alternative text 242a33–b4.

15. 446b15–26.

TABLE 2



particular generally, and it is nevertheless assumed that only basic particulars count as (logical subjects and) substances, it becomes unclear whether the distinction between particular and universal is to cut across all the categories. According to Aristotle's definition of the universal as "that which is predicable of a plurality of things," and his account of strict predication—whereby wisdom, as an instance of a member of a non-substance category, may be strictly predicated of Socrates, Callias, et al.—wisdom would count as a universal. But if the definition of substance, by contrast with which the universal is being defined, is not taken as covering all the categories, it becomes uncertain whether some such restriction is not also being applied to the universal. In any case, once universals are taken as *essentially* predicable, and substances are assumed to be the only particulars capable of functioning as logical subjects, universals are going to be confined to substantial terms.

Thus it would seem that Aristotle considered the distinction between substance and non-substance, and between essential and non-essential predication, to be of such importance as to impinge on the distinction between particular and universal, with the effect that the universal becomes what is essentially predicable of a subject, viz. (for him), substance in the categorial sense. But the possibility of drawing the last distinction independently of the former two also allows him to operate with a wider conception, which is more in conformity with his definitions of the universal.

It was left to Aristotle's successors to clarify the use of the term *καθόλου* (*universale*) and, by assigning to it the wider meaning, cut it off definitively from its natural semantic roots.

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