

Aristotelian Nonsubstantial Particulars

Abstract

The paper discusses the two main interpretations of Aristotle's notion of nonsubstantial particulars, on the basis of the definition of inherence stated in his *Categories*. According to the first interpretation, nonsubstantial particulars should be understood as non-recurring particular qualities (attributes). The second interpretation has been proposed as a way to avoid an incoherence in Aristotle's ontological system which those who endorse the first interpretation would have to accept; according to it nonsubstantial particulars should be understood as most determinate universals, that is, maximally determinate, but recurring qualities (attributes). I propose a reading of the definition that supports the first interpretation and does not lead to incoherence.

In this paper I will discuss some issues related to what Aristotle called 'nonsubstantial particulars', and which we can intuitively think of as either qualitative property instances or fully determinate (i.e. non-determinable) properties (or universals). One of the issues that generated controversy with respect to the plausible interpretation of the way Aristotle tried to elaborate a coherent picture of his metaphysics is precisely that of nonsubstantial particulars as defined in the *Categories*. There are two main interpretive contenders in this respect: a "received view" that interprets nonsubstantial particulars as *individuals*, i.e. as numerically distinct, non-recurring, though qualitatively identical, particular qualities, and an alternative interpretation, which takes Aristotle as giving an account of nonsubstantial particulars as determinate but recurring qualities, that is, some most fully determinate universals. In this paper I shall offer arguments for both interpretations and try to show that while the traditional interpretation is not more supported by the Aristotelian text than the alternative view, still, it does not lead to the incoherence the defenders of the alternative view suggested.

I

In the *Categories* (1a20-1b9), Aristotle offers a system of classification for the things there are, that is, the fundamental ontological categories, based on two fundamental relations, the SAID OF and the IN relations.

The first is understood as predication: if x is said of y, then x is a general term applied as a predicate to a particular entity y. But y is not necessarily an individual if it is a subject of something that is said of it. Namely, y itself can be said of a z. For example, color is said of red and, at the same time, red is said of a particular shade of red, say crimson. This means that the "said of" relation has the role of distinguishing general from particular in a relative way: red is particular with respect to color, but universal with respect to crimson. The same applies, of course, in the case of substantial entities, animal is said of man, while man is said of Socrates, and Socrates is not said of anything.

The second relation is that of inherence. It is meant to create a division line between substances and non-substances. If there is a y such that x inheres in y, then y is a substance. Inherence has to be understood as possession of an accidental property by a substance. For example, my hair being blond is an accident, while my subsumption under the predicate man is not so.

This is a rough characterisation of the two relations, but I will refine it further. Predication and inherence are cross-cutting, so that Aristotle can come up with a fourfold division of entities:

- (1) Things that are neither said of, nor in anything – primary substances, e.g. Socrates, Callias.
- (2) Things that are said of, but are not in anything – secondary substances, e.g. man, animal, chair, furniture.
- (3) Things that are both said of and are in something – nonsubstantial universals, e.g. color, literate, knowledge.
- (4) Things that are not said of anything and are in something – nonsubstantial particulars, e.g. Socrates' white.

This means that we have to acknowledge both that there are accidents which are nonetheless general and that there are particulars which are nonetheless nonsubstances. It is important for the discussion that follows to keep these two theses constant, as something that Aristotle is committed to, that is, I propose to set them as constraints on what a correct interpretation should not omit. So we have two theses:

- (A) There are universals which inhere in substances.
- (B) There are inherent entities which are particulars.

II

Our main interest in the paper regards the last kind of entity in the above classification, the nonsubstantial particular. *Prima facie*, there should be no problem with its nonsubstantiality: it inheres, therefore it is not a substance. Similarly, its particularity is easily explained: it is a most determinate property, therefore it cannot be further decomposed, which means that it is an indivisible (*atomon*). But things are not so straightforward. The problem allegedly lies in the way Aristotle defines inherence, the IN relation.

What has been considered a dogma about Aristotle's view on the status of nonsubstantial particulars says that the correct interpretation of how he defined inherence commits him to conceiving of nonsubstantial particulars as particular non-recurring qualities individuated by their subjects. For example, the particular shade of red instantiated by my shirt is only of my shirt, it cannot be instantiated by any other thing. Similarly, the particular shade of white that Socrates has is Socrates' white and nobody else's. This view is put forward, among others, by J. L. Ackrill as a result of an interpretation that he proposes for what Aristotle meant, or more precisely what he should have meant, by how he defined inherence.

At 1a24-25 *Cat.* Aristotle gives the following account: "By 'in a subject' I mean what belongs in something, not as a part, and cannot exist separately from what it is in." The first thing that we can observe is that this definition is circular as it stands since the 'in _____' expression appears both in the *definiendum* and in the *definiens*. Ackrill (1963, p.74) has two proposals to escape this circularity: (1) to construe IN in a technical sense as a two-place predicate and (2) to interpret the 'in' appearing in the *definiens* non-technically as what we intuitively take as '_____ belonging to _____' or '_____ being had by _____'. The resulting definition then is the following:

(AIN) Ackrillian IN: x is in $y =_{df}$

- (a) x belongs to y
- (b) x is not part of y
- (c) x cannot exist independently of y

Point (c) of this interpretation has two logical consequences: that only nonsubstantial particulars can properly be in a substance because universals can exist independently of a certain substance, and that the particular qualities instantiated by particular substances are not repeatable elsewhere since they are inseparable from what they are in. With this result we can have the following account of nonsubstantial particulars:

(ANP) Ackrillian nonsubstantial particulars: x is a nonsubstantial particular iff $(x \text{ is in } y) \rightarrow ((x \text{ is in } z) \rightarrow y=z)$.

This means that for example color cannot be, according to (AIN), in Socrates since color can exist without Socrates. At the same time, if Socrates instantiates a certain shade of white, then it is only his white (*Socrates-white*), it cannot be anybody else's, i.e. it cannot recur on a shirt, on a book, on a dog etc.

There are two problems with Ackrill's account. First, it contradicts our thesis A, namely it disallows inherence for universals. Aristotle expressly allows this when he says at 1a28-29 that: "... and an individual white is in a subject, the body (*for all color is in a body*), ..." (Akrill's translation, my italics). In order to maintain his definition of inherence, Ackrill is ready to sweep aside this passage by taking Aristotle to speak negligently. Second, I think that although it is correct to say that the 'in' of the *definiens* is a nontechnical one, when we try to give a definition of inherence which we intend to be technical, we should eliminate even this relaxed sense. More precisely, I think Aristotle mentioned this 'in' in the relaxed sense just for the sake of calling the reader's attention to some intuitive way to grasp the technical notion, but this does not mean that we should use it as part of our reconstructed technical definition. Thus, I would better avoid any reference to belonging or containment in the definition.

III

In response to the implications of (AIN), G.E.L. Owen (1965, pp.97-105) proposed another definition of inherence, which would avoid both the problem of disallowing universals to inhere and the necessity of construing nonsubstantial particulars as non-recurring individuals. Owen observes that by 'it cannot exist separately from what it is in' one could mean 'it cannot exist on its own'. This means that the thing which x is not part of -- call it 'y' -- is not identical to the thing which x cannot exist separately from -- call it 'z'. So, we have the following definition of inherence:

(OIN) Owenian IN: x is in y =_{df}

- (d) x belongs to y
- (e) x is not part of y
- (f) there is some z , such that if x exist, then z exists.

Point (f) of OIN has the implication that universals can be in subjects, e.g. color can be in Socrates because it is not a (mereological) part of Socrates and there is a subject, body, which has to exist if color is to exist. Another implication is that nonsubstantial particulars will not be necessarily individuated by their bearers since there is no inseparability requirement in (f), just an ontological dependence on some subject, not on a specific individual.

My second critical point exposed in the case of (AIN) still holds for (OIN), namely I think (d), just as (a), should better be somehow avoided. The problem, however, is that if one tries to replace the expression 'belongs to' with some synonym, then nothing illuminating is gained in terms of analysis. If, on the other hand, we simply eliminate it, then we get the following formulation:

(OIN*) : x is in y =_{df}

- (g) x is not part of y
- (h) there is some (or there is at least one) z , such that if x exist, then z exists.

The problem that emerges at this point is that (OIN*) will not distinguish inherent things from predicated ones; things that are IN from those that are SAID OF. To see this, consider 'white' and 'man'. Both are generic terms, both can be said of some other thing -*white* of Socrates' white, *man* of Socrates- and at the same time, and this is the odd consequence, both can be in something according to (OIN*):

White is not part of Socrates and

there is at least one subject, body, such that (white exists) \rightarrow (body exists)

Man is not part of Socrates and

there is at least one subject, some (unspecified) human, such that (man exists) \rightarrow (some human exists)

It turns out then that the definition is not able to insulate universal inherent from universal non-inherent entities.

IV

One could avoid this consequence of the mutilated Owenian definition of inherence by adopting the following definition, put forward by Michael Frede (1987, p.62):

(FIN) Fredean IN: x is in-a-subject =_{df} there is some y such that

- (i) x is not part of y
- (j) x cannot exist independently of y .

Note first that Frede construes inherence with the use of a one-place predicate. We no more have ‘ x is in y if ...’ but ‘ x is an inherent if ...’. Second, it is not circular as (AIN) and (OIN) were. Third, (j) is an inseparability requirement, which rules out inherence for secondary substances. Fourth, it makes possible for our theses (A) and (B) to be maintained. Finally, it makes possible for particulars in nonsubstantial categories to be determinate universals, that is, to be repeatable. But I think it still does not decide *in favor* of this view of nonsubstantial particulars; it just makes possible for Aristotle not to be forced to adopt the tropist view about them. The particular shade of white that Socrates has can still be just Socrates’ or it can recur in other subjects: in both cases it is an *in-a-subject* kind of thing.

While I favour Frede’s approach to inherence, I think it is incomplete in some respect. The problem is the following. Frede uses the one-place predicate ‘in-a-subject’. That is, inherence is interpreted as a relation meant to state the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be an accident, *in general*. This is also *prima facie* the intention of Aristotle’s at 1a24-25. Yet, when he exemplifies the kinds of things there are, he expressly uses inherence as a two-place predicate. Throughout the paragraph, after he puts forward the definition of inherence, he gives examples of inherence:

- an individual piece of knowledge is in a subject, the soul, ...
- an individual white is in a subject, the body, ...
- knowledge is in a subject, the soul, ...

If we ask: “why is knowledge in-a-subject?”, given these examples, Aristotle could answer: “because knowledge is in the soul”. This would not be circular since we interpret the answer as “there is a subject, the soul, from which knowledge is inseparable”. It will also be sufficient: it is sufficient for something to be an in-a-subject thing that there be a subject which satisfies (FIN). But if we ask: “why is knowledge in the soul?” and we get the answer: “because it is an in-a-subject kind of thing”, this status of knowledge (as being an accident) does not provide a sufficient condition for knowledge to be in the soul (though it provides a necessary one). Thus, I think that unless we construe inherence from the start as a two-place predicate, when it comes to concrete examples, the analysis is insufficient for whether an entity is in a specific other entity. To see the issue more clearly, consider Socrates as having a particular shade of white. We can ask: “why is this white in Socrates?” According to (FIN), the answer is “because this white is an *in-a-subject* thing”, that is because there is a subject, body in this case, such that this white cannot exist separately from it. But this is clearly not sufficient for this white, which we stipulated to be Socrates’, to be in Socrates since only body in general is required by (FIN) such that this white is inseparable from it. Consider the following two short dialogues:

Dialogue 1: - Why is it possible for Socrates’ white to be in Socrates?
 - Because it is an *in-a-subject* sort of thing.

Dialogue 2: - Why is Socrates’ white in Socrates?
 - Because it is an *in-a-subject* sort of thing.

While (FIN) gives a satisfactory answer to the question in the first dialogue, not the same can be said as regards the second. A satisfactory answer would be that occurring in the following dialogue:

*Dialogue 2**: - Why is Socrates’ white in Socrates?
 - Because (1) it is an *in-a-subject* sort of thing and (2) it is in Socrates.

While this answer is satisfactory, it gives necessary and sufficient conditions for the particular white to be in Socrates’, it is circular: (2) repeats what is asked in the question. I conclude that inherence should be construed as a two-place predicate, and, at the same time, the definition should make possible for universals to inhere in order for us to avoid falling into Ackrill’s problems. The account I propose is the following:

(D): x is in $y =_{df} \exists u, \exists w, \exists z$, such that

- (k) x is not part of y
- (l) x cannot exist independently of z , and
- (m) x cannot exist independently of w , and
- (n) u cannot exist independently of z , and
- (o) $(z = y \ \& \ u = x \ \& \ wPz) \vee (xPu \ \& \ zPy)$ ¹.

¹ In the second case, namely in that of the second disjunct, $x \neq w$.

Where: $xPy = x$ is truly predicated of y ,
and the disjunction is exclusive.

With this definition we can accommodate any case of inherence, namely for any actually inhering entity, we can give necessary and sufficient conditions according to (D) for their inhering in what they are in². For example, we can accommodate what Aristotle says about color, namely that it is in body and therefore in an individual body like Socrates'. The necessary and sufficient conditions for color to be in Socrates are given by (m) – (q) with the following values for the existentially quantified variables: $u =$ Socrates' white; $x =$ color; $y =$ Socrates; $z =$ body. This means that applying (D), we have:

- (k*) color is not part of Socrates
- (l*) color cannot exist independently of body
- (n*) Socrates' white cannot exist independently of body
- (o*) color is predicated of Socrates' white and body is predicated of Socrates³.

(k*) to (o*) gives the definition and the necessary and sufficient conditions for color to be actually in Socrates. We can get similar results for all possible inherent entities. The upshot of this analysis is that nonsubstantial particulars turn out to be Ackrillian, but at the same time inherence is still Aristotelian in the sense of permitting generic entities to inhere. For a case of nonsubstantial particular take $u = x =$ Socrates' white, $z = y =$ Socrates, and $w =$ body. And we can clearly see that

- (1) $u=x$, and
- (2) u cannot exist independently of z , and
- (3) $z=y$,

together imply (ANP).

V

I cannot offer a knock-down textually-based argument in favor of (D). What Aristotle says at 1a24-25 is quite compressed and this is why I think we can still be talking about a “secret of 1a24-25”. But I believe that (D) is not so implausible if we take Aristotle to base his ontology, as opposed to Plato, on the primacy of objects not that of universals. I agree with Frank Lewis (1991) that there is a strong dependence of every existent on primary substances in the *Categories*. Namely, predication should be thought as one-step, i.e. direct, between any entity and a primary substance. Consequently, in the case of inherence I favor the following picture, which can vindicate (D). Nonsubstantial particulars are individuated by their bearers, they inhere in the first place in primary substances -in Socrates, *Socrates' white*, in Fido, *Fido's white* (and they, of course, may be qualitatively exactly alike). Nonsubstantial universals inhere in primary substances *just because* there are these primitive bearer-individuated particular nonsubstances which they are species and genera of. Both universal and particular nonsubstances inhere in secondary substances *just because* secondary substances are species and genera of the prime individuator of nonsubstances, i.e. primary substances. With this interpretation, a maximally determinate universal, that is the most precise intensity of a quality, say “crimson 1893”, would be said of *my shirt's red*, *your jacket's red*, *this mailbox's red*, if they are identical in their qualitative parts, but they will not be said of anything, e.g. *my shirt's red* cannot be said of anything. It is a mistake to say, as critics of the Ackrillian

² An extremely astute observation regarding (D) has been made to me by István Bodnár, namely, that, indeed, it can account for any *inhering* entity (that is, an entity corresponding to x), but not for any entity that is a *host* for an inhering entity (that is, an entity corresponding to y): e.g. take the case of $y =$ body. Since body is the most general category, both disjuncts of the disjunction (o) (which does all the job for my purposes) will be useless: the first disjunct needs an entity w , more general than body, which is lacking in this case, while the second disjunct needs an entity z with the same property, which, again, is lacking. In response, I should point out that it is precisely the case of the most general category of hosts for inherence for which the whole debate involving Ackrill, Owen, and Frede does not arise, as that debate is precisely one surrounding the relation among a nonsubstantial particular, a less than maximally general host, and a more general (possibly maximally general) host.

³ That body is predicated of Socrates may sound strange in light of Aristotle's form/matter distinction and his philosophy of mind, but keep in mind that we are here discussing a text written well before the theory of hylomorphic compounds, and so it is unproblematic to consider that Socrates can be subsumed under the most general category of body.

interpretation did, that Ackrillian individuals preclude the possibility of two objects having the same shade of color, like “crimson 1893”. They allow a perfect qualitative identity of these, so that we could define a relation, call it same_q relation which will exist among all these objects, but still each of them will be numerically distinct⁴.

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