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Aristotle's 'Principle of Individuation'

EDWARD REGIS, JR.

There are two major views on what is Aristotle's principle of individuation: one is that matter, the other that form, individuates an entity.¹ My concern in this paper is to argue that neither of these views is a possible one, that there is in fact no principle of individuation in Aristotle's metaphysics, and that it is superfluous to invest it with one.

A problem which has beset many who have treated of this issue is that of specifying the precise question or questions to which a principle of individuation is supposed to provide the answer.² Some of these reflect a conception of the problem as mainly an epistemological one, for example: (i) How do we know an individual when we see one? (ii) What is it about a description that enables it uniquely to identify an individual? (iii) How do we distinguish one individual from another? Other questions, however, disclose a conception of the problem as a metaphysical one: (iv) How does an individual differ from a universal? (v) What makes an entity the same throughout change? (vi) What makes an individual a unit, e.g. one man, as opposed to two legs, two arms, etc.? (vii) What in the nature of specifically identical individuals makes them numerically different?

It follows that to discover whether Aristotle enunciated, in however elliptical or implicit a fashion, something which *we* may label his "principle of individuation," one must first be clear which of these questions it is to which an answer is desired. I delimit the scope of this study to an examination of two answers which have often been

¹ There are others, for example the view that it is the conjunction of matter and form which is the principle of individuation; cf. W. D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1924), Vol. I, p. cxv.

² The variety of problems which are thought to fall under the heading of individuation may be illustrated by reference to recent discussions, for example Milton K. Munitz (ed.), *Identity and Individuation* (New York, 1971), esp. pp. iii-viii; Michael J. Loux (ed.), *Universals and Particulars* (Garden City, 1970), esp. pp. 189-203; Jan Lukasiewicz, G. E. M. Anscombe, and Karl R. Popper, "The Principle of Individuation," *Arist. Soc. Suppl. Vol. 27* (1953) 69-120.

given to question (vii).³ Since the problem is to account for the uniqueness and non-repeatability of each and every individual substance of the same kind, we take the expression “to individuate” to mean “to give uniqueness or singularity to (= make different from everything else),” and the expression “to be individuated” to mean “to be given uniqueness or singularity (=to be made to be different from everything else).” Given this conception of the problem, we hope to show that neither form nor matter (nor, indeed, anything else) individuates an entity for Aristotle; rather, an entity is individual as given, and no principle of its individuality is either necessary or possible.

I

The view that matter is the principle of individuation is the “orthodox” interpretation of Aristotle.⁴ Texts commonly given in support of this thesis include the following from the *Metaphysics*:

- (1) things are one in number whose matter is one, in species whose form is one, ἀριθμῶ μὲν ὧν ἡ ὕλη μία, εἶδει δ' ὧν ὁ λόγος εἷς (1016 b 32-3, cf. 1054 a 34)
- (2) ‘man’ and ‘horse’ and what applies to individuals in this way, but universally, are not substance but a composite of this formula and this matter taken universally; an individual is composed of the last matter (τῆς ἐσχάτης ὕλης), Socrates for example, and similarly in other cases (1035 b 27-31)
- (3) Those things which are many in number have matter (for one and the same formula is of many, for example ‘man’, whereas Socrates is one). (1074 a 33-5)
- (4) When the whole has been generated, such a form in this flesh and in these bones, this is Callias or Socrates; and they are different on account of their matter (for it is different) (καὶ ἕτερον μὲν διὰ τὴν ὕλην (ἐτέρα γάρ), but the same in species (for the species is indivisible). (1034 a 5-8)

³ In his recent paper “Aristotle and the Principle of Individuation,” *Phronesis* 17 (1972), W. Charlton takes the question “what makes one individual differ from another at the same time,” to be that which “most people mean when they say that for Aristotle matter is the principle of individuation,” pp. 239-40. We understand this question to be the same as our question (vii).

⁴ It is held, for example, by A. C. Lloyd, “Aristotle’s Principle of Individuation,” *Mind* 79 (1970) 519-29; Whitney J. Oates, *Aristotle and the Problem of Value* (Princeton, 1963), pp. 71-4; Anscombe, *op.cit.*, pp. 83-96, cf. *Three Philosophers* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 54-5; G. R. G. Mure, *Aristotle* (New York, 1964 [1932]), p. 187, and n. 1; Ross, *op. cit.*, p. cxvi.

An immediate problem with these texts, however, is that they are not all concerned to make the same point, and only (3) and (4) are relevant to the problem of individuation in the sense in which we have formulated it. Text (1) occurs in Δ 6, which explains the many senses of the term "one," and states that if a thing's matter is one then the thing is one in number. The meaning of this is dependent upon understanding what it is for matter to be one, and upon the meaning of the expression "one in number." The latter is defined and exemplified at *Top.* 103 a 6-39: something is one in number if it is referred to by more than one name or description, e.g. "Socrates" and "the person who is seated" refer to an entity who is one in number. The sense in which matter is one, on the other hand, can best be gotten from a passage elsewhere in *Metaph.* Δ (viz. 1016 a 17-24), which, although it gives no definition of the oneness of matter, provides examples of things whose $\delta\pi\omicron\kappa\alpha\iota\mu\epsilon\nu\alpha$ are one (it being clear that matter is a $\delta\pi\omicron\kappa\alpha\iota\mu\epsilon\nu\omicron\nu$):

a thing is called one from its subject's being undifferentiated in form, and it is undifferentiated if its form is perceptually indivisible... for wine is called one and so is water, in that they are indivisible in respect of form.⁵

From these considerations it becomes clear that text (1) is concerned with oneness in the sense of unity or continuity, not with individuation as we have conceived it. Thus the text is relevant in answer to question (vi), not to (vii).⁶

Aristotle's point in (2) seems to be that whether an individual substance is regarded universally or individually, there is matter and form in each case: that is, an individual may be treated as if it were universal, but the individual itself is composed of matter which is $\xi\sigma\chi\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma$, "last" or "ultimate" in the sense of being individual.⁷ The context again makes it clear that it is question (vi), not (vii), which is being answered. Further, while the text can be read as asserting that the matter of an individual is itself individual, there are no grounds in this assertion for the additional thesis that it is *because* matter is individual that the composite which is made out of it is.

Text (3) appears in a passage devoted to proving that there is only one heaven. The reasoning is as follows: If there were many heavens,

⁵ Kirwan tr.; see also his comments *ad loc.*

⁶ This agrees with Charlton. pp. 242-4; Kirwan sees (1) as "intrusive," p. 136-7.

⁷ On the notion of matter "taken universally," cf. J. Owens, "The Grounds of Universality in Aristotle," *Amer. Philos. Quart.* 3 (1966), esp. pp. 163-4.

then, since each would have a moving principle, these (moving principles) would be many in number (but one in species). Now (3): things which are many in number have matter. But the moving principle is complete actuality and contains no matter. Therefore the moving principle is one in number, as is also the heaven whose motion it causes. This proof assumes that matter and multiplicity are coextensive notions, or at least that multiplicity includes matter. If this is Aristotle's doctrine, then at most we are entitled to say that there being matter is a necessary condition of there being many. But there being matter is not a sufficient condition, and, for that reason, is not an explanation of there being a multiplicity. To say that matter is the material cause of an individual is unobjectionable, but all this means is that it is an aspect of the individual in question. It does not confer upon the individual its individuality, nor cause it to be different from other things. At least this is not asserted by text (3).

As for (4), it seems to provide the strongest evidence for the claim that matter is Aristotle's principle of individuation. Two individuals of the same species (Callias and Socrates) are said to be ἕτερον διὰ τὴν ὕλην (ἑτέρα γάρ). Charlton (pp. 244-5) suggests that this be read as an answer to a question like (iii), and points to 1058 b 1-11 in confirmation of this interpretation. This suggestion would be more plausible if the διὰ in 1034 a 7 were followed by the genitive rather than the accusative, and if the support allegedly derivable from 1058 b 1-11 were a little more definitive; as it is, the passage is surely as ambiguous as the one it is supposed to explicate. While I think Charlton is right in his view of the way we are to take text (4), I want to defend this interpretation from different evidence. It will center about doctrinal considerations concerning the possible way in which matter could 'cause' individuals to be numerically different from one another.

In general, it is not possible for matter to be the cause of differences among individuals, for matter is characteristically conceived of by Aristotle as sheer potential having no attributes in and of itself, but rather to be that of which all attributes, and even form, are predicated.⁸ More specifically, matter lacks that attribute which is most proper to individuals: *thisness*. Thus we are regularly told that an individual substance is a *this*⁹, an expression which applies to form¹⁰

⁸ 1029 a 20-5; cf. J. Owens, "Matter and Predication in Aristotle," reprinted in J. M. E. Moravcsik, *Aristotle* (Garden City, 1967), esp. sect. 3.

⁹ 1033 b 24-5; 1029 a 29-30, 1060 b 23.

¹⁰ 1030 a 3-4, 1042 a 29, 1049 a 35, 1070 a 9-15; *De An.*, 412 a 8-9.

as well as to the composite.¹¹ In no case, however, is matter called a “*this*,” while it is several times emphatically denied that it is a *this*.¹² This fact alone disallows to matter any role as the cause of an entity’s individuality, identity, or difference from other individuals: the cause of any characteristic, Aristotle holds, must itself contain that characteristic in the highest degree.¹³ Matter, itself featureless, cannot be the cause of differences among other things. If anything matter would seem to be precisely that which *requires* individuation.¹⁴

It is true that the matter of an already constituted substance has characteristics. But then the substance exists as an individual already different from other individuals. When this condition obtains, and only then, we may speak of the matter of this thing and the matter of that thing; but it is important that in such cases numerical difference is something *given*; it is presupposed by the very distinction between this one and that one. Numerical difference is then a primary, not something which needs explanation. While we may *notice* differences in the matters of two different individuals (or, in their forms) and use these observed differences to mark out the one from the other, this is not the same thing as the matter’s being the cause of the differences or that which explains them. Numerical difference does not in fact require nor admit of causal explanation; and if it did, matter would not provide it.

Further, it is just as incorrect to say that the composite ‘gives’ existence or individuality to its matter as to say that the matter ‘gives’ existence or individuality to, or makes possible those attributes of, the composite. It is true that without matter there would be no composite, not one, much less a multiplicity. But it is also true that

¹¹ Cf. further discussion of *thisness*, below pp. 163-4.

¹² *De An.*, 412 a 7; *Metaph.* 1042 a 27, 1029 a 26-8.

¹³ *Metaph.* 993 b 24-5; *An. Po.* 72 a 28-9.

¹⁴ Cf. Walter Leszl, *Logic and Metaphysics in Aristotle* (Padova, 1970), p. 497: “The fact is that for Aristotle matter is a principle of individuality only in that it is itself something which is numerically one (i.e. singular) in the same way as the individual entity to which it belongs, thus only when taken as making up, *qua* something individual, the individual aspect of that entity. It is mistaken to talk of matter as of a principle of individuality in any stronger sense, as if Aristotle intended by matter something absolute, an independent factor or force which causes the individuality of things.” D. J. Allan, *The Philosophy of Aristotle* (Oxford, 1970), puts the point brusquely, p. 30: “I suppose we may credit Aristotle with sufficient common sense to see that the imposition of the same Form on a quite featureless matter can only produce a number of identical individuals.”

without composites, *matter* would not and could not be. Neither being nor individuality is derived from the one to the other. Composites exist and only composites exist, and it is just their nature to exist as individuals. To demand a causal explanation why an individual is the very individual it is, holds Aristotle, is to ask why it is itself; but

To ask why something is itself is to inquire into nothing, for the fact or the existence of something must be clear; ... the fact that something is itself, this is the one answer and the one cause in all cases... clearly the question is 'Why is the matter some one thing?' ... Thus we are seeking the cause (and this is the form) through which the matter is a thing.¹⁵

It is the conception of matter provided by Aristotle, then, which speaks against construing text (4) as an answer to question (vii). To do so would hardly be consistent with this fundamental doctrine of the Aristotelian metaphysics, and it is therefore best to see (4) as an answer to (iii).

Matter is not Aristotle's principle of individuation.¹⁶

II

The view that form is Aristotle's principle of individuation has been entertained by some commentators.¹⁷ Here are the frequently cited texts:

- (1) things whose substance is one have also one essence (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι) and are themselves one (*Met.* 1038 b 14-15)
- (2) the causes and elements are distinct for things not in the same genus... and they are distinct even in the same species, not distinct in species, but numerically distinct, as in the case of your matter and your form (ἡ τε σὴ ὕλη καὶ τὸ εἶδος) and your moving cause, on the one hand, and mine, on the other, although universally and in form they are the same. (*Met.* 1071 a 24-9, Apostle tr.; cf. 14-15)
- (3) shape or form is that in virtue of which a thing is said to be a *this* (*De An.*, 412 a 8-9; cf. *Metaph.* 1042 a 26-30)
- (4) an individual has a form and shape peculiar to it (ἕκαστον ἴδιον ἔχειν εἶδος καὶ μορφήν, *De An.*, 407 b 23-4)
- (5) we are seeking the cause (and this is the form) through which the matter is a thing (*Met.* 1041 b 7-8)

¹⁵ 1041 a 14-17, b 5, 7-8, Apostle tr.; cf. Charlton, pp. 241-2.

¹⁶ Other passages which have been offered in support of matter as principle of individuation (see Ross, pp. cxvi-ii), can be dealt with in a similar manner, as they offer no new difficulties.

¹⁷ Charlton, pp. 246-7; cf. H. Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy* (Baltimore, 1944), p. 506.

At least one of these texts can be dismissed as not being relevant to question (vii), namely (1). For it appears in a context where the relation of (specifically Platonic) universals to particulars is being discussed, and it is rather ambiguous whether numerical or specific oneness, or perhaps oneness in the sense of unity or continuity is meant. No clear support, then, is derivable from this text.

As for the others, however, they do in fact seem to assert that it is because of any entity's form that that thing is an individual, a *this*, something different from everything else. Form appears to be thought of as that which makes any individual to be the very individual which it happens to be, and thus to be the principle of individuation as we have understood it.

To see whether this is in fact the case it will be necessary to investigate the doctrine of 'individual forms', for it is this notion which Aristotle seems to be advancing here. This is a question which has been addressed by several commentators recently. Cherniss, for example, citing texts including and supplementing some of those above,¹⁸ maintains that Aristotle held that "all the particulars of the same species have numerically different forms."¹⁹ More latterly, Sellars²⁰ has reaffirmed the doctrine of individual forms, while both Albritton²¹ and Lloyd²² have spoken against it. Since much of the discussion centers about the notion of form as a *this*, it will be of some help to set out the ways in which form and composite are each *thises*.

The most characteristic employment of the term τὸδε τι is in reference to the composite: "the entire *this* is Callias or Socrates, as in the case of this bronze sphere" (1033 b 24-5). At times a *this* is even *contrasted* with form or essence alone: "'form' signifies a such, and this is not a *this*" (1033 b 21-2); "there is some matter in every thing which is not an essence and a form by itself but is a *this*" (1037 a 1-2). Additionally, the term is so often coupled with the notion of separation that one might suppose that it refers exclusively to composites, for example: "substance is not a universal, but rather a *this* and a separate

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 507

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Cherniss qualifies this view later, pp. 507-8.

²⁰ W. Sellars, "Substance and Form in Aristotle," *Journal of Philosophy* 54 (1957) 688-99.

²¹ R. Albritton, "Forms of Particular Substances in Aristotle's Metaphysics," *Journal of Philosophy* 54 (1957) 699-708.

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 521.

thing" (1060 b 21-2); "to be separate and to be a *this* is thought to belong most of all to substance" (1029 a 27-8).

In other passages, however, τὸδε τι is used quite differently and designates form alone. Thus: "an essence is just a *this*, whereas if something is said of something else we do not have just a *this*; for example a white man is not just a *this*" (1030 a 3-5, Apostle tr.). Is Aristotle's usage of this term merely arbitrary and capricious?²³ Perhaps the term is an equivocal. Instead of deciding upon this issue, however, let us merely recognize, in view of the many texts in evidence, that both form *and* composite are said to be *thises*. It would follow, then, that they are both individual. The problem now becomes: Is the individuality of the composite caused by and derived from that of the form? If the answer is affirmative, and only if it is, form will be the principle of individuation.

That the answer is negative is suggested by the following considerations. For Aristotle, it is the singular sensible composite which is primary in substance and exists in the fullest sense. This is Aristotle's regular doctrine from the *Categories* through the *Metaphysics*.²⁴ But if the composite is primary, then form can be no more causal of individuality than can matter. As was true of matter, the composite cannot exist without form; but neither can form exist without matter.²⁵ In no sense does the composite, which alone is "separate without qualification" (1042 a 30-31), derive its existence from form, or, indeed, from anything else unless it be a moving cause in the case of generation of substances. The form of a composite is individual, then, only in the same sense in which its matter is individual, namely, it is just the form (or matter) which the already individual composite happens to have. Form, therefore, is no more a principle of individuation than matter.

The cases in which Aristotle speaks of form as "the first cause of the thing's existence" (1041 b 28) are not to be taken as applying to the composite, but to the *matter* of which the composite is made. This is clear from the context: "Thus we are seeking the cause (and this is

²³ Leszl, p. 437, warns of the danger of building an interpretation on Aristotle's terminology alone since it "varies very much from one text to the other."

²⁴ *Cat.*, 2 a 11-13; *Metaph.* 1042 a 26-31.

²⁵ We ignore deliberately the unmoved movers and the active intelligences; *sui generis* as they are, they are not relevant to understanding the nature of sensible composites.

the form) through which the matter is a thing" (1041 b 7-8, = text (5) above). Again:

What causes that which exists potentially [viz. matter] to be in actuality, then, aside from that which acts in the case of things which are generated? Doubtless, nothing else causes that which is potentially a sphere to be a sphere in actuality, but this is the essence [= the form] in each. (1045 a 30-3, Apostle tr.)

The form may be understood to individuate sheerly featureless matter; but it does not individuate the composite, for it is individual in itself.

Common to both matter and form is that they are both only aspects or features of a composite which alone exists in itself. They are factors which are separable from the thing conceptually only, not physically. Individuation has seemed to be a 'problem' to a large degree because it has been supposed (a) that the existence of numerically different but specifically identical individuals is something which itself stands in need of causal explanation, and (b) that matter or form can provide it. What I am suggesting, however, is (a) that the existence of such individuals is for Aristotle not an *explanandum* but *explanans*, not something requiring explanation but something which as a first principle is presupposed by and the basis of all explanation. Also (b) that if nothing can be prior to what is first (the composite), neither is matter or form: both are only distinguishable aspects of the composite and do not have a more primordial or elemental ontological status than it.

This primacy of individual composites has been recognized by other writers on the problem of individuation in Aristotle, but its force has unfortunately been limited by them to their opponents. Thus Lloyd, for example, arguing against form (and for matter) as the principle of individuation, says that "difference of form so far from explaining numerical difference presupposes it."²⁶ Charlton, contrariwise, in a paper against matter (and for form) as principle of individuation points out that "we must speak of [an individual] as this [one] rather than another [one] if we are to raise any question about [it] at all."²⁷ (This remark Charlton directs at a formulation of the problem given by Lloyd.) But why may not the principle which is embodied in both of these comments be taken in an unrestricted sense? For then the problem of individuation would disappear: numerical

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 521.

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 242.

difference is a given, a primary, and not something which either stands in need of explanation or admits of it.

Acceptance of the primacy of individuals in Aristotle would allow us to see him as the naturalistic realist that he is, almost uniquely, in the history of Western philosophy. It would also allow us to dispose of the Platonic spectacles through which commentators have interpreted his thought during much of the career of its exegesis.²⁸ It is in Plato's world of universals that individuation presents a problem; it is not a problem in Aristotle's world of individuals.

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²⁸ Cf. Leszl, pp. 500-502.