

Aristotle and Farabi on the Definition and Priority of Substance

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The Greek word for substance is *ousia*. It is a verbal noun from the verb *einai*, *to be*, and a more direct translation would be being or perhaps (more abstractly) *entity*.¹ Certainly Aristotle had this meaning of the word in his mind when he identifies the main question of the *Metaphysics*, i.e., the question of being, with the question of substance: Indeed, the question which, both now and of old, has always been raised, and always been the subject of doubt, viz., what being is, is just the question, what is *ousia*? For it is this that some assert to be one, others more than one, and that some assert to be limited in number, others unlimited. And so we also must consider chiefly and primarily and almost exclusively what that is which is in this sense.² In this paper I will use the word ‘substance’ as a standard equivalent for the Greek *ousia*.

1. Definition and priority of substance in Aristotle’s view

In his ‘*Categories*’ Aristotle says:

It is a common characteristic of all substance that it is never present in a subject.³
By being ‘present in a subject’ I do not mean present as parts are present in a whole, but being incapable of existence apart from the said subject.⁴

Although all substances have this property, i.e., they are not present in a subject, some of them, such as Socrates, cannot be said of or predicated of any thing else, since they are individuals; while others, such as man and animal, being universal, are said of and are predicated of other things (of

¹ See: Broackes 2006, 131.

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1028b 3-7.

³ Aristotle, *Categories*, 3a 6-8.

⁴ Aristotle, *Categories*, 1a 23-4.

Socrates, for example). Aristotle calls individual substances primary and universal substances secondary.

Substance—in the truest and primary and most definite sense of the word—is that which is neither predicable of a subject nor present in a subject, for instance, the individual man or the individual horse. But in a secondary sense, those things are called substances within which, as species, the primary substances are included, also those which, as genera, include the species. For instance, the individual man is included in the species ‘man’, and the genus to which the species belong is ‘animal’; these, therefore—that is to say, the species ‘man’ and the genus ‘animal’—are termed secondary substances.⁵

Aristotle here explains two different meanings of ‘substance’ rather than merely referring to two instances of the same meaning. In other words, the term ‘substance’ is ambiguous, i.e., there is no common essential element in the two cases. But substance in the first usage (individuals) univocally refers to different kinds of individuals such as matter, form and soul. Indeed, contrary to the term ‘accident’ it is a genus in relation to different kinds of primary substances.

Aristotle himself says that the species and genus of individual substances are substances because they reveal the primary substances; so they are called secondary substances. Sometimes Aristotle speaks in such a way that we can call all species and genus even those of accidents as substance. Many of his interpreters have been perplexed with regard this point.⁶ To the contrary, Muslim philosophers, especially Farabi, have discussed different usages of substance very accurately and in detail. According to them *substance* has yet a third meaning that may lead to equivocation if we fail to discern it.

With regard to the secondary substances, there is some hierarchy among them according to the degree of their displaying the essence of individual substances.

Of secondary substances, the species is more truly substance than the genus, being more nearly related to primary substance.⁷

There are two questions about the definition or characteristics of substance (as mentioned above) that require an answer.

⁵ Aristotle, *Categories*, 2a 11-9.

⁶ For example see: Ross 1995, 172.

⁷ Aristotle, *Categories*, 2b 7.

A. It seems that secondary substances, in addition to having been said of the individuals (as a matter of linguistics or logic), are present in a subject (as a matter of ontology). This issue has two aspects: the first aspect is related to the external existence of universal substances outside the mind. Contrary to Plato and his followers, Aristotle denied the independent existence of universals, including species and genus. As David Ross says:

Every substance in the universe is individual; the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence. The pure substance as well as the substances concrete of matter and form are individual.⁸

On the other hand, Aristotle also denies the presence of universals in the individual as subject. For man is predicated of the individual man, but is not present in any subject: for manhood is not present in the individual man. In the same way, ‘animal’ is also predicated of the individual man, but is not present in him.⁹

So, the problem is that if they are supposed to exist outside the mind, by denying their independent being on the one hand and their presence in a subject on the other hand, they can only exist in the individual, but not as something dependent on another thing that is in turn independent of them. In other words, they can exist as a part of a whole whose parts are not independent of each other. The universals then will exist outside the mind, neither independently nor as present in a subject, but as dependent on a place which in turn is dependent on them. This solution, if accepted, works only in the case of genus, because genus can be taken as a part of an individual, but it does not work in the case of the other universal substance, i.e., species. In other words, genus can be taken as revealing only a common part of an individual so it can be regarded as a part of an individual, but since species displays the whole essence of an individual, it cannot be regarded as a part of its instances.

At any rate, this answer on the whole is not correct because as universals neither genus nor species can be parts of an individual, albeit we can say that genus concepts are derived from a common part of the individuals. In other words, the source of a genus concept is a part of an individual and not the genus itself. Then the difficulty will remain and still need to be discussed.

⁸ Ross 1995, 175.

⁹ Aristotle, *Categories*, 3a 10-14.

The second aspect of the question is related to the existence of universals in our minds as present in a subject, i.e., the mind. All concepts, including universals, exist in the mind as mental qualities, but not instances of substance. In other words, the definition of substance as something never present in a subject implies that universals are not substances because they are always present in the mind as mental qualities, as is the case with other accidents. As far as I know, this problem was not discussed in the West, but we can find a rich and detailed discussion of it in Muslim philosophy, especially in the discussion of ‘knowledge’ or ‘mental existence’ (*al-wujud al-dhihni*).

B. The other problem is related to the application of the concept of substance to some thing which is not an instance of it. As Aristotle himself says, differentia is not a case of substance, but we see it to be included in the definition of substance.

Yet this [definition of substance] is not peculiar to substance for it is also the case that differentia cannot be present in subjects.¹⁰

It seems that the differentia has the same status as genus or species in that it reveals the essence of individual substance even more than the genus; and furthermore it is not present in a subject. The question is what makes it different from species or genus?

This question is not answered in Aristotle’s works, and also many of his commentators do not address it. In contrast, Muslim philosophers discussed the problem with much elaboration and detail. They devoted a chapter of their discussions about substance to the problem of including differentiae in the concept of secondary substances.¹¹

At any rate, the final and most important point in Aristotle’s *Categories* is:

Thus, everything except primary substances is either predicable of a primary substance or present in them, and if these last did not exist, it would be impossible for anything else to exist.¹²

In sum we can conclude that the priority of individual substance over secondary substance and the rest of the categories is rooted in its independent

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Categories*, 3a 21-23.

¹¹ See as an example: Tabataba’i 1404, 82-5.

¹² Aristotle, *Categories*, 2b 4-6.

existence. This anti-Platonic conclusion which Aristotle achieved combined with his view about real knowledge, which is assumed to be of universals, makes for some perplexities about the nature of metaphysics. According to him, metaphysics is the study of real existents, i.e., individual substances; but the real and important knowledge is the knowledge of universals! How can we combine the study of real being (the subject matter of metaphysics) with real knowledge (as the aim of metaphysics)?

In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle discusses the different forms of priority of substance in more detail, especially in Book Zeta, where he says:

Now there are several senses in which a thing is said to be first; yet substance is first in every sense—(1) in definition, (2) in order of knowledge (3) in time. For (3) of the other categories none can exist independently, but only substance. And (1) in definition also this is first; for in the definition of each term the definition of its substance must be present. And (2) we think we know each thing must fully, when we know what it is, e.g. what man is or what fire is, rather than when we know its quality, its quantity, or its place; since we know each of these things also, only when we know *what* the quantity or the quality *is*.¹³

In the *Categories*, as we mentioned, the contrast was between primary substances and all other things including secondary substances; but in the *Metaphysics* it is not apparent what sorts of substances are meant to be prior.

The question which may arise is what is meant by priority by definition and by the order of knowledge?

There are two possible interpretations; one is that accidents should be defined and known through substances, and the other is that substantial definition and knowledge but not the substance is prior to the accidental definition and knowledge. If the first interpretation is accepted the problem that may arise is how is it possible for substances, despite their being totally different from accidents, to act as an inseparable means of defining accidents. However, there is some evidence indicating that Aristotle himself holds this very view. Averroes understands Aristotle in this way, and accepting his view tries to solve the mentioned difficulty.

The way Averroes solves the problem of substances being constituents of the definition of accidents is that as accidents, in their own existence, they are ultimately dependent upon substances and definitions are derived

¹³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1028a 33-1028b 4.

from ontological constituents. Consequently, substances are the necessary elements of the complete definition and the full knowledge of accidents.¹⁴

Here we do not intend to discuss Averroes's view in detail and can only say that it seems that he has failed to distinguish the essential elements of a thing at the level of definition from existential principles.

The second possible solution, as understood from the words of Farabi, is that what is meant by substance as a constituent of the definition and knowledge of accident is not substance in contrast to accident, but rather that which is meant to be an essential property in contrast to an accidental property. This will be the third meaning of substance, and by taking it into account we can solve some of the difficulties in understanding Aristotle. In order to understand Farabi's view clearly, further explanation will be given at this point.

The priority by way of definition and in the order of knowledge means that the real definition and full knowledge of everything can be acquired only via understanding its substance. In other words, definition and knowledge of substance is prior to definition and knowledge of accidents.

David Ross correctly says:

In this argument substance is evidently being thought of not as the concrete thing but as the essential nature, and this double meaning pervades Aristotle's whole treatment of substance.¹⁵

2. Definition and priority of substance in Farabi's view

Farabi's discussion of substance can be found mainly in his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*¹⁶ and his famous book entitled '*Kitab Al-Huruf*' (Book of Letters), which is regarded as a commentary on Aristotle's '*Metaphysics*'.¹⁷

In his *Kitab Al-Huruf*, Farabi discusses different philosophical notions and his method is to lay down first the ordinary meaning or meanings of the term, i.e., to explain how and for what ordinary people use the term and then to explicate the philosophical notion.

¹⁴ Averroes 1990, v.2, 754.

¹⁵ Ross 1995, 172.

¹⁶ Many of Farabi's commentaries on Aristotle's logical treatises have been collected and published in a series of books with the name of *Al-Mantiq 'ind Farabi*, ed. Rafiq al-'Ajam and Majid Fakhry, 4 vols. 1986-7, Beirut.

¹⁷ Muhsen Mahdi published the book with the English subtitle of *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*.

He starts his discussion of substance with a detailed lexicology of the word *jawhar* which is the Arabic standard translation of the Greek term *ousia*. According to him the word in common usage has two basic literal meanings; *jawhar* literally means “jewel,” but when it is used in constructions literally meaning, “jewel of x”, it refers to the matter or materials of which x is made. For instance the *jawhar* of this table refers to the wood that is used in it. Because of this, ordinary people usually take the matter or materials constitutive of a thing as its quiddity or essence; then they use the word in its relative sense to refer to the essence of the related thing. The word can thus be used in relation to an individual substance, e.g. the *jawhar* of Socrates, and also in relation to an accident, e.g. the *jawhar* of this color. Therese Druart in her excellent paper on the discussion of substance summarizes Farabi’s lexicological discussion and concludes:

Farabi established two ‘common’ usages of the term *jawhar*: 1- the stones or gems commonly considered most precious; 2- the quiddity of a thing; that by means of which it has its quiddity and that which constitutes its essence, be it matter, form or both together.¹⁸

In philosophy, the word, correspondingly, has two uses; one is used in relation to something else, while the other one is used on its own. According to Farabi, *jawhar* originally refers to independent particular beings (primary substances), which are neither present in a subject nor can be said of anything else; but in a second way, and derivatively, it refers to all intelligible essential constituents of those individuals (secondary substances). Thus, Socrates, man and animal all in a way are substances.¹⁹ But the other meaning, i.e., the relative one, refers to the ‘whatness’ or quiddity of the related thing. All universal concepts which refer to the essence or part of essence (genus and differentia) of a thing, including an accident, can be a substance in this usage. This helps us to distinguish between two forms of definition; logical definition (*hadd*) and mere description (*rasm*).

In the light of the distinction between two usages of *jawhar*, we can see that two of the reasons given by Aristotle to prove the priority of substance over accidents only proves the priority of the substance in a relative usage, and does not concern the meaning of substance *per se* which is the main point of our discussion.

Consequently, what are proved to be prior are the essential definition and essential knowledge of a thing (even an accident) over their accidental

¹⁸ Druart 1987, 90.

¹⁹ Farabi 1969, 100.

definitions and knowledge. Using the logical terms, it only proves the priority of logical definition (*hadd*) over description (*rasm*).

It seems that the root cause of this ambiguity is that secondary substances, such as man or animal, are considered substance *per se* (because they are not present in a subject and being ultimately predicative of only individual substances, reveal primary substances) and also are considered to be substances in a relative usage of substance (because they indicate the quiddity of the individual substances, e.g. Socrates, and can be used in logical definitions of it).

In sum, according to Farabi, there are four concepts which are worthy of discussion.²⁰

- I. Individual or particular substance (*shakhs al-jawhar*) such as Socrates and Plato whose essential elements are immutable but whose properties are changeable. These are neither present in a subject nor predicated of any thing else at all.
- II. Universal substance (*al-jawhar al-kulli*) such as man and animal, which always are used to define essential constituents of the individual substances and cannot be said of anything else. These are not present in a subject at all, but can be predicated of a thing.
- III. Individual or particular accidents (*shakhs al-a'rad*), such as the tallness of John which just can be present in an individual substance. These are in a subject but cannot be predicated of anything.
- IV. Universal accidents (*al-a'rad al-kulli*) such as redness or fatness, which are predicated of both individual accident and substance. These are present in a thing and can be predicated of a thing.

When a universal accident is predicated of a substance, e.g. fever of Socrates, it indicates an accidental property of an individual; so it is not substance even in a relative usage of the term. However, when a universal accident is predicated of an individual accident it may indicate the essential property of that accident and be a substance in a relative meaning of the term such as temperature for a certain fever.

Among those things that have an extra-mental existence are the individual substance and accident, one of which is independent and the other dependent. With respect to universal substances and accidents as they function as universal predicates, they have only mental existence, and consequently can be regarded as a form of mental qualities. Farabi explains the

²⁰ Farabi 1986-7, 90.

reason for naming genus and species as secondary substances with the assertion:

Aristotle named the individuals things which are not present in a subject ‘first substances’ and their universals ‘the second substances’ because those things exist out of our mind and these only can be grasped after those and can exist only in the mind.²¹

Farabi repeatedly asserts that universals, including species and genus, are in need of individuals for their external existence, and indeed exist in their instances, but as mentioned, neither separately nor as present in a subject.²²

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi questions the applicability of the definition of substance to universal concepts such as species and genus. On his view, since substance by definition must not be present in a substratum, species and genera, such as man and animal, cannot be substances since they are universal concepts present in the substratum of the mind.

The typical answer is that we mean by substance what does not need any subject in its external existence. Everything that is conceived has mental existence and therefore has its mental existence in the substratum of the mind. Substances, according to this answer, are to be defined conditionally: something is a substance if and only if it is not present in a subject when it exists outside the mind. This will be vacuously true of things that cannot exist outside the mind, and so genus and species would be considered substances.²³

But if this were the case, then all universal concepts, such as those of red and time, which are considered universal accidents, also would have to be included as substances according to the conditional definition. They also are universal and cannot exist outside the mind. Ibn Sina, referring to an important point, says that all universal concepts, including secondary substances, such as ‘man’ and ‘animal’, are accidents with respect to their mental existence, because they are present in a subject, i.e. a mind. But they can be regarded as substances with respect to their essences, since a universal may be considered a substance if it has the same essence that an individual substance has.²⁴ As mentioned above, the conditional definition of substance is inadequate. In this connection, Farabi denies the independ-

²¹ Farabi 1969, 102.

²² Farabi 1986-7, 91.

²³ Razi 1990, v. 1, 242.

²⁴ Ibn Sina 1404/1983, 95.

ent existence of secondary substances such as the universal man. He takes them to exist in the totality of the individuals that instantiate these universals, not in any particular individual. Hence, the secondary substance man will continue to exist even after the death of any particular man.²⁵

In his important book, *Kitab al-jam 'bayn ra 'yay al-hakimayn*, (making the views of Plato and Aristotle coherent) Farabi rejects the apparent contradiction between the views of Plato and Aristotle with regard to the priority of universal or individual substances. He claims that Aristotle takes individuals to be prior for his purposes in logic and physics. Individuals are the basic subjects of logical propositions and also the individuals are near to our senses, and are thus more appropriate to the methods and purposes of the natural sciences. Plato, on the other hand, took universals to be prior because he had the paradigms of philosophy and theology in his mind that urges him to give priority to the abstract and universal things such as secondary substances.²⁶

Farabi explicitly rejects the view that universals exist extra-mentally. According to him it is only primary substances that exist extra-mentally and, indeed, if genus and species are said to be substances, it is because they *signify* individual substances and are the intelligible concepts of them; they are substances in a derivative way.

So, if metaphysics is the knowledge of being as such, and the primary being is *ousia* or substance, and also the real substances are particular ones, then the primary task of metaphysics will be the study of individual substances.

But according to Farabi, individual substances with their individuality cannot be grasped by the mind and they need universal concepts to be intelligible.²⁷ The task of metaphysics is the understanding of real particular substances in the mirror of their intelligible universal forms such as differentia and genus. In other words, metaphysics is a human struggle to make the mind analogous to the order of real things in the external world but via universal concepts, as metaphysics demands.

In conclusion, although the subject matter of metaphysics is not universal in a logical sense, its concepts and terms are always universal, and this is why sometimes it is called universal knowledge.

²⁵ Farabi 1371/1994, 89.

²⁶ Farabi 1960, 86.

²⁷ Farabi 1986-7, 91.

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