


12-28-2003

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Recommended Citation

Corkum, Phil, "Ontological Independence in Aristotle's Categories" (2003). *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 387.
<https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/387>

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ONTOLOGICAL INDEPENDENCE IN ARISTOTLE'S *CATEGORIES*

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SAGP East 2003

Aristotle holds that substances (such as you and me) are ontologically independent from nonsubstances (such as our qualities and quantities) but nonsubstances are ontologically dependent on substances. There is then an asymmetry between substances and nonsubstances with respect to ontological dependence. Such asymmetry is widely and rightly thought to be a lynchpin of Aristotelian metaphysics. What is really real for Aristotle are such ordinary objects as you and me. Our properties—my paleness, your generosity—inhabit Aristotle's ontology only in so far as they are *ours*. This much we can all agree on; and I'll only briefly rehearse one of the reasons for ascribing this picture to Aristotle below. For I agree with the orthodoxy that substances enjoy a certain kind of ontological independence from nonsubstances—an independence which nonsubstances lack with respect to substances. But I disagree with the orthodoxy as to *what kind* of ontological independence substances have and nonsubstances lack. Under the orthodox interpretation, the ontological independence ascribed to substances and denied of nonsubstances is a capacity for separate existence.¹ But, I'll argue, there's a tension between this interpretation and the asymmetry between substances and nonsubstances with respect to ontological independence.

The paper comes in four parts. First, I'll examine the evidence for the asymmetry claim: that the Aristotle of the *Categories* holds both that nonsubstances are ontologically dependent on substances and that substances are ontologically independent from nonsubstances. Then I'll argue against the orthodox interpretation of ontological independence as a capacity for separate existence. This argument draws on the just mentioned tension between this interpretation and the asymmetry between substances and nonsubstances. This tension hasn't gone completely unrecognized in the secondary literature and responses to it include weakening the ascription of ontological independence to substances (to the claim that substances are ontologically independent only from *some* nonsubstances) and positing two notions of ontological independence (so that the ontological independence ascribed to substances isn't that denied of nonsubstances). I'll argue against both responses and, in the third part of the paper, propose an alternative: to weaken the view of ontological independence as a capacity for separate existence. Aristotle also holds the asymmetry thesis in works other than the *Categories*, and in the fourth and final part of the paper, I'll spell out the significance of my interpretation for Aristotle's criticism of Platonism in the *Peri Ideon* and elsewhere.

Asymmetry thesis

I'll begin by showing that the Aristotle of the *Categories* holds both that nonsubstances are ontologically dependent on substances and that substances are ontologically independent from nonsubstances. First, it'll be helpful to remind readers of Aristotle's ontology in this work. The *Categories* gives a fourfold taxonomy of beings—into individual or primary substances, universal substances, nonsubstantial individuals and nonsubstantial universals—classified according to two criteria: whether the thing is *said of* a subject and whether the thing is *present in* a subject: individual or primary substances such as Callias are neither said of, nor present in, a subject; universal substances such as human are said of, but not present in, a subject; nonsubstantial universals such as color are both said of, and present in, a subject; nonsubstantial individuals are present in, but not said of, a subject.

A full account of these two notions, being said of a subject and being present in a subject, is not the concern of this paper. For our present purposes, it's enough to make four observations: (1) all nonsubstances are present in substances, (2) no substance is present in any nonsubstance, (3) it's a sufficient condition for one thing to be in another that it isn't a part of that other thing and it cannot exist apart from that other thing, and (4) no substance is a part of something else. Putting these four claims together will show that nonsubstances are ontologically dependent on substances and that substances are ontologically independent from nonsubstances. I'll defend each claim in turn. This will be a mere sketch of an argument, since the concern of the paper is the interpretation of ontological independence, not a defense of the correctness of ascribing such independence to substances and denying it of nonsubstances. Nonetheless, it'll prove useful to have this sketch before us. For one thing, the argument will bring out how our interpretation of ontological independence hinges on how we read certain passages in the *Categories*.

I'll start with claim (1). At 2a34-b7, Aristotle argues for a stronger claim, the ontological dependence of nonsubstances on *individual* substances, concluding that "all the other things [including nonsubstances] are either said of the primary substances as subjects or in them as subjects. So if the primary substances did not exist (*einai*) it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist (*einai*)."² There's a host of interesting problems here I'll have to leave aside, but I've flagged one interpretation issue by transliterating the Greek that is here translated as "to exist" and I'll come back to this point.

Now claims (2) to (4). First, (2). It's a mark of substances that they are not present in any subject.³ So, *a fortiori*, no substance is present in any nonsubstance. (3) At 1a24-5, Aristotle claims that what is present in a subject "is in a subject, not as a part, and cannot exist (*einai*) apart from what it's in." All interpreters plausibly read this claim, that what is present in a subject cannot exist apart from what it's in, as a sufficient condition for a non-part to be present in a subject. (4) Aristotle uncontroversially holds that the parts of things are not substances.⁴ Putting (2) to (4) together: since no substance is present in any nonsubstance, and no substance is a part of something else, any substance can exist apart from any nonsubstance.

So Aristotle holds both that nonsubstances are ontologically dependent on substances and that substances are ontologically independent from nonsubstances. I'll cash out the asymmetry in this way:

(Asymmetry Thesis) For any substance S and any nonsubstance N, S is ontologically independent from N, and there is a substance S' such that N ontologically depends on S'.

We might ascribe a weaker claim to Aristotle by allowing that either some substance depends ontologically on a nonsubstance or some nonsubstance is ontologically independent from all substances. But anything weaker than the Asymmetry Thesis would considerably water down the picture drawn in the opening paragraph. For then properties wouldn't *generally* inhabit Aristotle's ontology in so far as they are ours. Moreover, a claim weaker than the Asymmetry Thesis would come into conflict with the apparent generality of the conclusion of 2a34-b7. So we have these *prima facie* reasons for holding on to the Asymmetry Thesis.

Now, how *interpret* the notion of ontological independence operating in the Asymmetry Thesis? The translations of 2b7 and 1a24-5 that I've used suggest the following interpretation. Let's, following terminology introduced in a series of articles by Gail Fine, make the following first stab:

- (IE) A is *ontologically independent* from B just in case
A can exist without B.

This thesis takes the Greek *einai* in the passages existentially; hence the acronym for existential independence. Although this is a natural enough reading for modern ears, this isn't the only possible reading, and there are reasons to look for a better reading. For, as I'll argue in the next section, there's a tension between IE and the asymmetry holding between substances and nonsubstances with respect to ontological independence.

Against IE

The claim that A's can exist without B's is ambiguous between two claims. Under one disambiguation, the claim is that, for any given thing of kind B, things of kind A can exist without *that* B. This claim is consistent with holding that A cannot exist without some B or other. Under the other disambiguation, the claim is that, for the class of B's, A can exist without any of those B's whatsoever. Let's use the following acronyms:

- (IE₁) For any given B, A can exist without *that* B.
(IE₂) A can exist without any B whatsoever.

I will say that IE₁ or IE₂ is *exhibited by As with respect to Bs*. Now, do either of IE₁ or IE₂ meet the demands imposed by our condition of adequacy, the Asymmetry Thesis? That is to say, are either of IE₁ or IE₂ exhibited by substances with respect to nonsubstances and not exhibited by nonsubstances with respect to substances?

Individual substances exhibit the kind of independence expressed by IE₁ with respect to some nonsubstances: Callias need not be generous. So the individual substance Callias can exist without the nonsubstance quality generosity. But there are problems for viewing the relevant notion of ontological independence as IE₁. First, individual substances do not possess this capacity with respect to all kinds of nonsubstances. Consider *propria*, necessary but inessential properties. An individual substance cannot exist without its *propria*. A traditional example—not Aristotle's—of a *proprium* for humans is risibility. If risibility is indeed a *proprium* for humans, then Callias cannot exist without risibility. Consider also nonsubstantial universals such as color. It seems entirely plausible that substances cannot exist apart such general properties: Callias cannot exist colorless. There is thus a need to restrict that from which substances are ontologically independent, if we are to view ontological independence as IE₁. Under this view, individual substances are not ontologically independent from nonsubstances generally, but only from accidents. Were ontological independence IE₁, then we would need to weaken the Asymmetry Thesis to the claim that substances are ontologically independent from *some* nonsubstances.

One might be willing to accept this consequence. But there are worse problems for viewing ontological independence as IE₁. Although individual substances exhibit IE₁ with respect to some nonsubstances, nonsubstances also exhibit IE₁ with respect to some substances. In particular, nonsubstantial universals also uncontroversially possess this kind of independence from individual substances: although Callias can exist without being generous, generosity can exist without Callias. So IE₁ is inadequate to the Asymmetry Thesis. A capacity to exist independently of some specific thing is shared by both individual substances and universal

nonsubstances, but ontological independence is something attributed to individual substances and not attributed to universal nonsubstances. This cannot then be the relevant notion of ontological independence.

I'll turn to IE₂, under which the claim that A can exist without B is the claim that A can exist without any B whatsoever. One might hold that nonsubstantial universals lack this kind of independence from individual substances. For nonsubstantial universals cannot exist without any individual substance whatsoever: if no one were generous, generosity would not exist. However, individual substances also lack this kind of independence from nonsubstances. An individual substance such as Callias cannot exist denuded of all attributes whatsoever. If this is what is meant by ontological independence, then it is simply false that substances are ontologically independent. So IE₂ is also inadequate to the Asymmetry Thesis. This then cannot be the relevant notion of ontological independence either.

This asymmetry problem has long been recognized. Burnyeat (1979: 4-5) proposes a solution: to restrict the class of things from which substances are ontologically independent to nonsubstantial individuals. If these are nonrecurrent, found in at most one subject, then it is true that individual substances can exist apart from them but any one of them cannot exist apart from the individual substance that is the only subject in which it is found. So Callias need not be generous, but Callias' generosity, on this view, cannot exist apart from Callias. This response rests on a controversial view of nonsubstantial individuals; but moreover, it requires that we weaken the Asymmetry Thesis: for the proposal denies that individual substances are ontologically independent from nonsubstantial universals.⁵

Let's sum up. I have argued that the claim that As can exist without Bs is ambiguous between two claims. Neither reading distinguishes substances from nonsubstances. That is to say, neither reading is adequate to the Asymmetry Thesis, the condition of adequacy that ontological independence is something substances possess and nonsubstances lack. The initial plausibility of IE, I suspect, rests on an equivocation: substances possess IE₁ with respect to accidents; nonsubstantial universals lack IE₂ with respect to individual substances. There's an out for those who would continue to hold IE. One might respond that the ascription of ontological independence to substances alone of the categories is *indeed* equivocal. But this response is unattractive. For, under this view, the ontological independence ascribed to substances is no longer the ontological independence denied of nonsubstances. If we can provide a unitary account of ontological independence, without recourse to posited equivocations, then surely the unitary account is preferable.

In this section, I have provided evidence that ontological independence cannot be a capacity for independent existence. Although I have not shown that there is no sense of IE adequate to the Asymmetry Thesis, I hope I have shown that the burden of proof has shifted to those who would believe that separation is a capacity for independent existence. *Prima facie*, it seems that no account of IE can reflect the asymmetry between substances and nonsubstances which ontological independence requires. Although the problem has been well recognized, few have concluded that IE is mistaken. The reason for this reluctance, I suspect, is the difficulty of seeing an alternative.⁶

An alternative

Aristotle is not generally concerned with questions of existence. His ontological concerns are rather with such questions as, what things are among those we call beings? And, in virtue of what does each such thing have claim to this ontological status? This is Aristotle's methodology

in the *Categories*. Recall, he begins with a taxonomy of beings classified according to two criteria: whether the thing is said of a subject and whether the thing is present in a subject. Both said-of and present-in relations⁷ express ontological dependencies: what is either said of or present in a subject has claim to the status of a being in virtue of standing in at least one of these relations to a subject. Standing in one of these relations to a subject is sufficient for the thing to be classified as a kind of being. And it is in virtue of standing in one of these relations that nonsubstances and universal substances are in fact classified as beings. Individual substances, which are neither said of nor present in a subject, but which are nonetheless beings, have claim to the status of a being independently of standing in one of these relations to a subject.

My conjecture is that this is the relevant notion of ontological independence. So let's make a first stab:

- (OI) A is *ontologically independent* from B just in case A admits of the ontological status of a being independently of standing in some relation to B.

And if A is ontologically dependent from B, then A has the ontological status of a being in virtue of standing in some relation to B. In contrast with IE, this reading eschews both an existential and a modal characterization. Yet this is a plausible reading of the Greek.

I turn now to the question whether there is a reading of OI that meets our conditions of adequacy for any interpretation of ontological independence. The claim that A's are beings independently of B's is ambiguous in just the way that the claim that A's exist without B's is ambiguous. That is to say, the claim is ambiguous between these two theses:

- (OI₁) For any given B, A admits of the ontological status of a being independently of standing in some relation to *that* B.
- (OI₂) A admits of the ontological status of a being independently of standing in some relation to any B whatsoever.

Are either of OI₁ or OI₂ plausible candidates for an account of ontological independence? Do either meet the demands imposed by our condition of adequacy, the Asymmetry Thesis? Individual substances exhibit OI₁: Callias would have his ontological status as a being even were he not generous. However, a nonsubstantial universal does not generally depend on any individual substance for its status as a being. Generosity would be a being no less than Callias even if he were not generous. Nonsubstantial universals exhibit OI₁ and so the thesis fails to meet the demands imposed by the Asymmetry Thesis.

What then of OI₂? Substances do not depend on nonsubstances for their ontological status as beings. Individual substances are classified as beings independently of standing in any relation to anything else—independently, that is to say, of being present in or said of any other beings. Universal substances, on the other hand, have their ontological status as beings in virtue of standing in relation to other things—but only in virtue of being said of individual substances; they do not depend for their ontological status on nonsubstances. Moreover, a substance doesn't depend even on properties from which it cannot exist apart. Consider again *propria*. Although these properties are necessary, a substance is not a being in virtue of standing in some relation to its *propria*. So although, for example, Callias cannot exist without risibility, Callias's claim to having the ontological status of a being does not depend on his being risible. Similar comments

could be made for such general properties as *being colored*. So individual substances exhibit OI_2 . Moreover, nonsubstantial universals fail to exhibit OI_2 ; although generosity, for example, does not depend on Callias, the property would not have the ontological status it enjoys were there no generous people whatsoever.

A full defense of the account of ontological dependence and independence I have proposed would need to go well beyond the aims of this paper. It would need to flesh out an account of what it is for a thing to depend on something else for its ontological status, if such dependence isn't an incapacity for separate existence. Since the two ways in which such dependence is expressed is to be either present in or said of a subject, a full defense would need to explicate these relations. Such a defense would be another paper.⁸ However, one point of significance for my interpretation of ontological independence can be spelled out even with this general and programmatic account of ontological independence. And it'll be useful to develop this point, since it helps to show what hinges on an interpretation of ontological independence. I'll turn to this issue in the next section.

Priority, Separation and Platonism

Aristotle continues to hold the Asymmetry Thesis outside of the *Categories*. Although Aristotle does not generally employ the terminology of being present in a subject or being said of a subject outside of the *Categories*, he continues to maintain that nonsubstances are beings in virtue of standing in a relation to something else while substances are beings independently of standing in any such relation. He writes, for example, at 1003b5-10 that "there are many senses in which a thing is said to be, but all refer to one starting-point; some things are said to be because they are substances, others because they are affections of substance, others because they are a process towards substance...." In this section, I'll consider one aspect of this continued commitment to the Asymmetry Thesis. Aristotle criticizes the Platonists for separating Platonic Ideas from sensible particulars.⁹ Fine (1984, 1985) has argued that such separation is ontological independence. I'll next briefly canvass her argument.

There's evidence that, for Aristotle, the claims that A is separate from B and B is not separate from A are jointly sufficient for the claim that A is prior to B. One passage that Fine (1984: 34) offers in support of this relation is EE 1.8 (1217b10-15):

[The Platonists claim that the Idea of the good] is the original good, for the destruction of that which is participated in involves also the destruction of that which participates in the Idea, and is named from its participation in it. But this is the relation of the first to the later, so that the Idea of good is the good per se; for this is also (they say) separable from what participates in it, like all other Ideas.

Aristotle seems to be ascribing to the Platonists the following argument: the Idea of the good is separate from what participates in it; if it is separate from something, then it is naturally prior to that thing; so the Idea of the good is naturally prior to what participates in it. Were this the correct reading of this passage, it would support the claim that separation is a *sufficient* condition for priority. But this is not the correct reading. Rather, the passage is ascribing to the Platonists the following argument: if a thing is separate from what participates in it, then it is naturally prior to them—given that what participates cannot be without that in which it participates. That is to say, there is an additional premise: what participates cannot be without that in which it participates. The passage, correctly read, shows that separation and this additional premise are *jointly* sufficient for priority.¹⁰

The relevant notion of priority, expressed by the ordinal, is substantial or natural priority, which is defined at 1019a1-4: "Some things then are called prior and posterior ... in respect of nature and substance, i.e. those which can be (*einai*) without other things, while the others cannot be without them." The definition of natural priority thus has two components:

A is *naturally prior* to B just in case both of the following conditions hold: (i) A can be without B and (ii) B cannot be without A.

Natural priority thus concerns some kind of ontological dependence and independence. Let's put these points together. A is prior to B just in case A can be without B but B cannot be without A. This suggests (although it doesn't force¹¹) the view that A is separate from B just in case A can be without B.¹² I find Fine's argument compelling, although she assumes (wrongly, for the reasons given in this paper) that the ontological independence here is a capacity for independent existence.¹³

Let's return to Aristotle's criticism of the Platonists for separating Platonic Ideas from sensible particulars. Under the interpretation of separation as a capacity for independent existence, Aristotle is attacking the straw man position that Platonic Ideas are capable of existing independently from the enformed particulars. Under the interpretation of separation argued for in this paper, the Platonist position is stronger and Aristotle's criticism, of more interest. The question is: have abstract qualities like humanity and generosity their ontological status in virtue of standing in a relation to sensible particulars or have sensible particulars their ontological status in virtue of standing in a relation to such abstractions?¹⁴ I'll stop here; but this indicates just one point of significance of an interpretation of ontological independence. The interpretation I've proposed is but the beginning of an investigation that might yield better understanding of a range of issues in Aristotelian metaphysics.

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¹ As an indication of the orthodoxy of this interpretation, it's a claim assumed by both sides of a lively debate on whether nonsubstantial individuals are recurrent properties—whether they are found in more than one subject. I discuss this assumption of the debate in my 2002.

² Translations of passages from the *Categories* are from Ackrill 1963.

³ See 3a7-21.

⁴ Aristotle at least sometimes holds that certain parts are inseparable from wholes. Consider *Meta.* 1040b5-8: "Evidently even of the things that are thought to be substances, most are only potentialities, e.g. the parts of animals (for none of them exists separately and when they are separated, then they too exist, all of them, merely as matter)." Such separation is a mark of substances, as I'll discuss later in the paper. Daniel Devereux argues that the Aristotle of the *Categories* initially held that the parts of substances are themselves substances and only rejected this view in later writings such as the *Metaphysics*. He (1992: 120) cites several passages as evidence for this claim. But I find that no passage convincingly supports Devereux's view. Consider 8b15-21: "But as for a head or a hand or any such substance, it is possible to know it—what it itself is—definitely, without necessarily knowing definitely that in relation to which it is spoken of. For whose this head is, or whose the hand, it is not necessary to know definitely. So these would not be relatives. And if they are not relatives it would be true to say that no substance is a relative." Devereux takes this passage to be claiming that heads and hands are substances. But the passage can be read as making at least one of two weaker claims. It may be noting that parts are thought by some to be substances. The argument, on this reading, is: if parts, which are controversially claimed by some to be substances, are not relatives, then *a fortiori* things which are uncontroversially substances are not relatives. Alternatively, the passage might be claiming that a head or a hand is homonymously a substance. Of course, a body part has a semblance of substantiality: it is enformed matter. On this reading, the argument is: if parts, which are merely homonymously substances, are not relatives, then *a fortiori* things which are unequivocally substances are not relatives. At very least, we are not compelled to read the passage as claiming that parts are, strictly and truly speaking, substances.

⁵ A second proposal from Burnyeat 1979 is: "a kind of substance, e.g. animals, can exist without exhibiting a given quality, e.g. baldness; but baldness cannot exist without some animal having it." As Burnyeat recognizes, this works for determinate qualities but not for all determinable qualities. Bodies, for example, can exist without being pink but not without being colored. So the proposal runs into the same problem as before: it also requires that we weaken the Asymmetry Thesis.

⁶ IE gels with some contemporary theories of ontological dependence. Simons (1991), for example, writes that something is "ontologically dependent on something else when the first cannot exist unless the second exists." Kit Fine (1995) argues against such an account with an appeal to *propria*: necessarily, if Socrates exists then so does the singleton that contains Socrates as its sole member, but Socrates doesn't depend on his singleton.

⁷ "Relation" here refers to a syncategorematic notion, not the category.

⁸ Let me here gesture towards such a defense. Some things have the ontological status of a being in virtue of other things being them; these are the things present in a subject. Some things have the ontological status of a being in virtue of things, which are one and the same as them, being them; these are the things said of a subject. And finally, some things have the ontological status of a being simply in virtue of being themselves; these are the individual substances. Fleshing out these claims would require discussion of being, unity and difference.

⁹ For example, at *Peri Ideon* 84.23-4 and *De An.* 432a14.

¹⁰ Other evidence of the relation holding between separation and priority include *Meta.* 1028a31-b2, 1038b29 and 1218a1-9.

¹¹ Since the fact that the two conditions that A is separate from B and B is inseparable from A are jointly sufficient for A being prior to B fails to entail that either condition is necessary for A to be prior to B. Indeed, Fine only explicitly claims that separation is a necessary condition for priority; since her cited passages do not establish this (but only the weaker claim that certain separation and inseparability facts are

jointly sufficient for priority). This is perhaps the source of some confusion in the literature concerning Fine's argument: see Morrison (1985a: 187) and Fine's (1985: 160 n. 6) response.

¹² Aristotle holds that substances, alone of the categories, are separate: see 185a31-2, 1029a27-8. The separation so ascribed to substances needs to be distinguished from a variety of other kinds of separation in Aristotle; these typically are marked by a dative of respect and include local separation, defined at 226b21-3, temporal separation, mentioned at 1016b2, and definitional separation, distinguished from simple separation at 1042a28-31. Moreover, Aristotle holds that substances are prior to nonsubstances. Consider 1069a20: "substance is first, and is succeeded by quality, and then by quantity." See also 1071b5: "substances are the first of existing things." This, along with the relation holding between separation and priority, suggests (although it doesn't compel) the claim that nonsubstances are inseparable from substances, independently of the interpretation of separation terminology as expressing ontological independence.

¹³ De Strycker (1955: 125) and Fine (1984, 1985) have argued for this interpretation; for other exponents see Morrison 1985a: 130 n. 11. Morrison (1985a and 1985b) views the separation ascribed to substances as numerical distinctness. Numerical distinctness is a symmetrical relation. If substances are separate from nonsubstances, and separation is numerical distinctness, then nonsubstances must be separate from substances. So the view is committed to denying either that substances alone of the categories are separate or that it's not nonsubstances, from which substances are separate, but other substances. Morrison takes the second option, presumably because there's explicit textual evidence against the first. The burden on this view is to explain the relation between separation and priority.

¹⁴ In the *Peri Ideon*, however, Aristotle may ascribe to the Platonists another error: the fallacious inference from the alleged separation of Ideas to their existential independence, the claim that they are something different (*allon*) from sensible particulars. It's this latter claim that entails the regress of entities in the Third Man argument.