

ARISTOTLE'S DOCTRINE OF SUBSTANCE REVISITED

TERFA KAHAGA ANJOV, PhD

Department of Philosophy
Benue State University, Makurdi
Nigeria
anjovterfa@gmail.com

&

SAMUEL OKOH OCHE

Department of Philosophy
University of Lagos
Akoka-Yaba
Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

Metaphysics is the study of that one substance which exists and causes or connects all things. Metaphysics is the necessary foundation for human knowledge, except for most post-modern philosophers, like Thomas Kuhn, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Popper etc., who find it very difficult to accept the existence of any ultimate principles that can explain everything for everybody as Aristotle holds in his doctrine of substance. They argued that Aristotle's contribution to the evolution of current science and reason is gruesomely irrelevant to contemporary society. This thinking forms the basis for anti-metaphysical hostilities. The study argues that human beings must take seriously the truth about unity in diversity which is in agreement with Aristotle's doctrine of substance as the standard for humanity that is interested in transforming society to a better place.

Keywords: Aristotle, Humanity, Metaphysics, Substance

Introduction

There is hardly any philosophical discourse that stands completely divorced from metaphysics. No wonder it is the root of human knowledge and the core of philosophy. It forms the pre-occupation of the Ionians. They demonstrated this with the postulations about the primary stuff of reality. With the Golden age which kick-started the golden age of the Greek philosophy a paradigm shift that witnessed an overbearing anthropomorphic tincture was established. Everything that happened in the world was man centered. This gave rise to the Socratic article of faith which says, "Man Know thyself." This was possible due to the involvement of human wisdom. The advent of Plato saw an intense metaphysical tradition with a moralistic interest similar to that of Socrates. It was a metaphysical rendition that was heavily diluted by Orphic-Pythagoreanism by all standards. Plato gave a dualistic interpretation of the world in which he bifurcated reality into the "world of forms" and the "physical world".

It was against this background that Aristotle took a relatively¹ radical departure from Plato's idealistic² metaphysics in his (Aristotle) realist construct. The Platonic separation of form from matter, and essence from existence could not stand erect before Aristotle's court of reason and hence stood debunked with Aristotle's doctrine of substance. In fact, Aristotle stood against any metaphysics that was other-worldly. This is not to deny the truth that he emphasized the primacy of form over matter, even though reality, per se, is essentially constitutive of matter and form. This paper, therefore, undertakes an exposition of Aristotle's theory of substance which stands pivotal in his entire metaphysical venture.

Metaphysics

The term 'metaphysics' is believed to have originated in Rome about 70 BC, after the editing of the works of Aristotle by the Greek Peripatetic philosopher, Andronicus of Rhodes. It was during the arrangement of Aristotle's works that Andronicus placed the treatise which was originally called First Philosophy or Theology, after the treatise known as *Physics* that later gave the description of the First Philosophy as *meta (ta) physica*, which is metaphysics, or literally means "following (the) *Physics*. This tradition of conceptualizing metaphysics following the classification of Aristotle's works by Andronicus, has been questioned by philosophers. This group of philosophers are of the view that *meta ta physica* is a great deal of purposefulness and intentionality by the writer.

The name was not the result of book cataloguing. It is instructive to note that for the layman, the word deals with matters that transcend material reality. In the philosophic sense, metaphysics applies to "all reality and is distinguished from other forms of inquiry by its generality."³ From the foregoing, metaphysics does not just transcend the ordinary, it controls the ordinary. Metaphysics as first principles underlies all physical/empirical activities. Its primary duty is to posit those primitive concepts, basic axioms, or unifying principles for organizing experience and for comprehending reality in totality.⁴

¹Relative because, as one observes subsequently, some items against which Aristotle stood in Platonism were remodified and given certain realistic interpretations constituting "metaphysical Aristotelianism."

²Idealism is the system of philosophy which gives primacy to idea or spirit in its conception of reality.

³"Metaphysics." *Microsoft® Encarta® 2009*. (Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008).

⁴Chidozie, Okoro "The Futility of Any Anti-Metaphysical Position", *Lagos Notes and Records. A Journal of the Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos Vol. 18, No. 2., 114.*

Aristotle's Metaphysics of Substance

Aristotle started his discourse on substance in these words: "We speak in many ways of what is, a *this*, and of what quality or quantity or any of the other things thus predicated. The primary thing that is, is [its?] substance. Other things are said to be by being either quantities of what is in this way, or qualities or affections or something else of this sort."⁵ Bearing this complex interrogatives in mind concerning substance it is important to ask at least four primary questions about being as highlighted by Richard McKeon, when he interpreted Aristotle's second book of the *Posterior Analytics*: "(1) Is it? Does it happen to have several attributes? (2) What is it? How is it defined? (3) Of what sort is it? By what attributes is it qualified? (4) Why? Why does that attribute attach to that subject?"⁶ These interrogatives shall add flesh to the treatment of substance in this study.

The reason why the idea of substance is primary and dominant in Aristotle's metaphysics is that he treats 'being' not as anything else but precisely as the being that it is. This signifies that metaphysics, for him, is the study of "being qua being."⁷ It implies that any talk of being can only be reasonable if it consists in the investigation of reality. Indeed, Aristotle maintains that this worldview constitutes the primary preoccupation of the Pre-Socratic philosophers like Thales, Anaximander, Empedocles, among others who for the most part traced "being" to a variety of things such as water, air, earth, etc. For Aristotle, "the old question has not changed. The subject of doubt was what being is. Today, it is what substance is? For some, 'being' is one, others may say it is more than one, while others consider it unlimited, there are those who insist that it is limited. The task is to consider primarily what that is which is in this sense".⁸

Aristotle defines the term 'substance' as: that which is neither said of a subject nor in a subject, e.g. the individual man or the individual horse, but the species and genera of these species in which the primary substance belong are called *secondary substances*. For example, "the individual man belongs in a species, man, and animal is a genus of the species; so both man and animal are called secondary substances in their own right."⁹

⁵Aristotle, "Book Zeta 1028" in *Metaphysics Books Z and H*, David Bostock, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 13.

⁶Richard McKeon, *Introduction to Aristotle, 2nd Edition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 271.

⁷Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, W. D. Ross, trans., (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968), 485.

⁸Aristotle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics with an Introduction 6th Edition*, W.D. Rose, trans., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 92.

⁹Aristotle, "Categories" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, J. L. Ackrill, trans., (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1991), 12.

It is based on this definition of substance that Aristotle in his wisdom raised the problem associated with his predecessors' understanding of substance especially that of Plato who postulated the non-substantiality of matter. He wondered what substance is if it is not predicated of a substratum. The denial of matter as substance presents a world of obscurity. He is baffled if matter is denied substantiality. This is so in the sense that "when all else is stripped off eventually only matter remains."¹⁰ Aristotle's argument for substancehood is summarized below.

Substance as Matter

Aristotle wonders how matter would not qualify as substance, whereas it is the only fragment of reality that remains when all other qualities are taken away. In other words, if matter is divorced from substance, what then can be said to be a substance? Qualities such as affections, products, potencies, among others, are only predicated of substance and not of themselves; what remains when these qualities are taken away cannot but be matter. This way of thinking made Aristotle anti-rational. Plato saw the real observable concrete reality as worthless and preferred to talk about a transcendent form which is the actual quiddity.

It was based on this perspective that Aristotle argued for an immanent form which is present in matter. Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics* outlined the various applications of substance with a view to making his argument more lucid. For Aristotle, the word 'substance' can be applied at least to four main senses; the essence, universal, genus, substratum. Now, of all the four senses, it is the substratum that fits the definition of substance as that of which everything else is predicated, while it is itself not predicated of anything else.

Matter is by nature the substratum. However, it needs the form or shape to be a particular thing. This can be realized when matter combines with form as a compound. Bronze is matter without definition. It needs a shape or pattern of its form of a statue. The combination of bronze and form of statue brings out the bronze statue as the concrete whole. Therefore, Aristotle thinks that without the form, matter alone is nothing, so the form is prior to the matter and more real. It is automatically prior also to the compound of both, for the same reason.¹¹ It is to this compound that the searchlight is turned.

Substance as Form and Matter

Aristotle introduced the hylomorphic structure to enable him discuss his concept of reality. For him, substance in itself is a composite of matter and form. The substantial form is the constituting nature that joins the prime matter to form reality.

¹⁰Aristotle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics with an Introduction 6th Edition* (Op. cit.), 93.

¹¹Aristotle, 93.

It is pertinent to treat substance in the four senses stated earlier. Recall that Aristotle took substance to imply essence. His idea of essence can best be understood with a clear knowledge of the etymology of the word beginning with the Latin word *esse*, to be, and the translation of the Greek word *ousia*, or more properly, *to tien einai*, what it was for a thing to be. Aristotle introduced the phrase *to tien einai*. Instead of using the present tense *esti* (is), the Greek expression uses the philosophical imperfect *en* (was), which implies something remaining or eternal, although this implication is interpreted variably.¹²

When essence is conceptualized as “the quality or nature of something that identifies it or makes it what it is,”¹³ it agrees with Aristotle’s description of it as “what it is said to be *propter se*. For being you is not being musical, since you are not by your very nature musical. What, then, you are by your very nature is your essence.”¹⁴ He explains his position using the examples of white and smooth surface. It is difficult to talk about white and smooth. By themselves they mean nothing. It is when the white is of a surface and the smooth is of a surface that it is referred to as a thing. In such a case, it becomes appropriate that to talk of a white surface is to talk about a smooth surface. This implies that “to be white and to be smooth are one and the same thing”.¹⁵ It brings the discourse to the analogy that can explicitly showcase the meaning of essence in what is known as the Church. A Church is a Church not because of the building but because of the people who gather to worship God. Worshippers who come together have become the essence of a church. Therefore, a Church is a Church not only to the extent that it is a place of worship of God by God’s people. If one leaves the interpretation of the Church at the level of a building, it will be difficult to assign a definite design and definite size to a Church. The essence of anything is what it is. In the primary sense only substances have essence, and therefore, only substances have definition.¹⁶ In other words, the essence of a thing is that which determines the definition of the thing.

Inseparability and Participation

Aristotle’s rejection of Plato’s theory of Forms was on the basis that his master conceives essence to be the same as substance. Logically, it clearly shows that the things we perceive in this world are mere reflection of the essence of things which exist in the world of Forms. A critical analysis shows a sense of obscurity. Reality is in the World of Forms. The things that are in the physical world are copies of

¹²Bunnin, Nicholas & Jiyuan Yu., *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 231.

¹³Microsoft® Encarta® 2009. © 1993-2008 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

¹⁴Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics with an Introduction* 6th Edition (Op. cit.), 108.

¹⁵Aristotle, 108.

¹⁶John Ferguson, *Aristotle*, (New York: Twayne Publishers Ltd, 1972), 115

reality. They participate in their essences. The difference between an existent and its essence is demonstrated with the idea of good. The good must be one with the essence of good; the beautiful is one with the essence of beauty. The substance is that which does not depend on something else, it is self-subsistent and primary. The predicable of “a substratum cannot be substance as they only exist by being participated in something else.”¹⁷

Aristotle differs from Plato when he argued that each thing by itself and its essence is one and the same thing. From the preceding arguments above, there is no accident about that which is and its essence. In order to know each thing, its essence must be known. The denial of this position is to agree that a name can be assigned to each of the essences; the one in the world of Forms and that which participated in, but is physically perceived. For example, the essence of horse must necessarily have a second essence.

Apart from using essence to strengthen the resolve that substance is tied to the definition of a thing, the idea of the formula of a thing is an added advantage as it is same with the essence. It is not by accident when it is argued that the essence of one, and the one, are one. This is because, if they were to be different, then the process will go on ad infinitum. Contrary to the claim, two things are possible: (1) the essence of one, and (2) the one, will be distinctive entities. In an attempt to avoid this futility, Aristotle submits that “each primary and self-subsistent thing is one and the same as its essence.”¹⁸ This gave rise to the problem of universals and particulars which forms the bedrock of the next section.

The Problem of Universals and Particulars

Aristotle accepted Plato’s notion of universals with some modifications to suit the particularities to which they refer and without which they are useless. The problem Aristotle wanted to solve was whether universals are substances. At the start of his metaphysics, Aristotle did not accept that universals are substances, simply because they lack concreteness. Aristotle holds that universals are separate entities. The implication of Aristotle’s categorization of substance as that which remains while receiving change is that apart from concrete reality which can be listed as matter, genus and species are considered to be secondary substances. This is because they do not have independent existence, apart from being predicated of or said in relation to the primary concrete substance.

The crux of the matter is that Aristotle’s consideration of substance as universals lies in the fact that universals exist only in concrete reality. For example, “Terfa is fair”. Fairness by itself is nothing; it is only when it exists in a person

¹⁷Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, 113

¹⁸Aristotle, 113

known as Terfa that it can be spoken of. Another example is that of whiteness and goodness. Whiteness and goodness do not exist anywhere in an ideal world. To know and talk about white, it must be related to something like a car, surface or ball. It is only in a car or ball that white can be said to exist, and nothing more. Individuals, therefore, are the true and only manifestations of universals, since universals cannot exist outside the individuals to which they refer and in which they reside.

Substance as *genus* is a kind or class of things that share a common nature and can be predicated of each member within the given class. As genus (plural, genera) it can be divided into sub-classes known as species. The division of a genus into species is specified according to a *differentia*, which distinguishes a defined species from other species within the same genus. In this wise, Bunnin, Nicholas & Jiyuan Yu have argued that “in the *Categories* Aristotle took genus and species as secondary substances because both are predicated of, and reveal, the essence of individuals, that is, primary substances. His ten categories are indeed ten ultimate genera of being.”¹⁹ The point of emphasis is on the content-status of the genus as a substance.

Kater has a ‘what’ i.e. the manness that makes him Kater. The genus is man. The species is Kater; both are substances. To say that Kater is a man is an expression of what the *desinata* of the individual Kater is. It is the genus that defines Kater as a man. This Kater is a particular man with his concreteness as a species. This explains why Aristotle classified all others apart from the concrete being, as secondary substances and then went further to say that a species is closer to the primary substance than the genus, since the name Kater is closer to the concrete being of Kater than *man* as the genus.

Aristotle also discussed substance as substrate or substratum which is the basic underlying reality on which the other nine categories depend on for their existence. It is the bond that unites all the accidents and “is considered to be in the *ousia*.”²⁰ It is the quiddity or the prime matter or what is called in Idoma “Okpo’ochi-kunu” which means that on which other less important categories find their concreteness. This understanding is contrary to Plato’s argument that the substances have their independent existence in the World of Forms.

¹⁹Bunnin, Nicholas & Jiyuan Yu, *The Blackwell Dictionary*, 290.

²⁰Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics with an Introduction* 6th Edition, 128.

The Relevance of the Doctrine of Substance

Aristotle's treatment of substance can be seen to be relevant to contemporary society through his categorization of substance again into *permanence* and *accident*. That which constitutes an essential part of a being or a thing can be said to be permanent of that substance; while that without which a thing or being still retains a true identity is accident. Rationality, for example, is essential to man and hence is permanently substantial, while qualities such as colour, height, etc., can be said to be accidents, since complexion does not determine manhood nor does height determine an individual entity.

Deducible from the foregoing is that, unlike Plato, Aristotle holds that reality is the combination of matter and form. One can, therefore, not talk of one without talking of the other, since both of them are necessary for a proper identity of any reality. He argues "matter and form are correlative notions: something is matter relative to a given form, or form relative to given matter." This is the root of his popular notion of hylomorphism.²¹

Evaluation

A close look at the Aristotle's metaphysics reveals a realist agenda radically different from the idealist construct of Plato his teacher. One sees that his metaphysical position is anchored upon the thesis that "for anything to be considered worthy, it has to be seen to be rationally connectable to generally specifiable empirical phenomena. This explains why he reduced everything that is to matter as "a *principium individuationis* is, or a principle of individuation."²² It was in this light that form is relevant to the extent that it particularizes and confers identity on matter and this is why reality is basically, for him, matter and form.

It was also against this background that Aristotle sees universals, as we discussed above, to be present and made manifest in particulars or individual entities as such have no independent existence anywhere else apart from in concrete physical realities. This applies to essence which is synonymous with form which cannot exist anywhere else apart from residing in the very being of which it is an essence. A thing and its essence are, for him, inseparable, unlike Plato who postulated disconnect between physical world realities and the ideas or forms which are their essences in the world of forms. This Platonic position is not only anti-commonsense; it lacks every bit of logical coherence and is unexplainable. Aristotle

²¹The belief that all material objects are made up of matter, which is only potential and for which makes the object and actuality.

²²Kirby, *Aristotle's Metaphysics: Form, Matter and Identity*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 11.

considers this Platonic position as anti-scientific and haphazard, for it reduces man to a thing among things in the world, given the remoteness of his existence.

We observe that Aristotle's philosophy is systematically ordered such that every posited aspect forms a building ground for a higher argument. He had identified motion and change as the chief qualities of matter and hence man's hope of social and scientific transformation. For this reason, he had to argue a place for matter, form, motion and identity as a passage way for human ingenuity coming to bear on concrete reality. Aristotle fundamentally makes substance the primary preoccupation of his discourse which can manifest itself in four different modes of substrate, genus, universal and essence into a single category – substance.

The most paramount implication of Aristotle's doctrine of substance is the "idea of essentialism"²³ which he has been criticized of implicitly defending, which ordinarily ensnared him into the very web of Platonism he refuted. Essentialism is the philosophical doctrine that things have an essence that is independent and prior to their existence. For example, Plato, influenced by his Orphic-pythagorean believes that the soul is not just a constitutive of essence, but it pre-existed the body. Hence, the soul has an independent existence from the body. Plato; in this light, sees the union of soul and body as an accidental one; whereas Aristotle sees the union as a substantial one, owing to his idea of inseparability of the body, soul and essence.

The metaphysics that Aristotle espoused is the other-worldly. However, he held that a thing is best defined by what is essentially true of it. This does not capture the modern philosophical meaning of essentialism. His position of seeing something precisely as it is, spans from his "Being qua Being" to his conception of truth which can be classically stated thus: "to say of what is that it is or of what is not that it is not is true"; while on the other hand, "to say of what is not that it is or of what is that it is not is false."

Aristotle's metaphysics has again been criticized of in-authenticity or in-originality, not in the sense of the Alexandrian link or the African origin of Greek philosophy. The usage of these terms, like, forms, essence, universals by Aristotle, marked his radical departure from Plato. The problem was not due to the terms he employed but the meaning Plato gave to them. This gave rise to different ontological statuses of the terms for Plato and Aristotle. While Plato talked of transcendent forms, Aristotle talked of immanent forms. This implies that reality is constitutive of the nature around man and not something somewhere else.

²³Vasilis Politis, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle and the Metaphysics*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 16.

Whether it is transcendent forms or immanent forms, the forms are the cause and explanation of things. There is no abstract form of “Tableness”, but only individual tables, each exhibiting the form that identifies something as a table; hence, for Aristotle, “the fundamental reality is the collection of substances we find in our everyday experience.”²⁴ Now, it is clear concerning the ontological status of forms in Aristotle. A striking feature of Aristotle’s metaphysics is its systematicity.

He begins from the more familiar to the less familiar; and so it is at first contact appealing of human rationality and common sense. This is demonstrated in his treatment of *Being* as substances and attributes of substances not for their own sake. This makes everything in the world reasonable only in connection to substances. Marc Cohen lends some credence to this when he posits: “For some things are called beings because they are substances, others because they are attributes of substances, others because they are a road to substance, or because they are perishings or privations or qualities of substance, or productive or generative of substance.”²⁵

This fits in perfectly with what we learned in the *Categories*, where primary substances (individuals) were argued to be the ontologically basic things. Beings in other categories (e.g., qualities, etc.) owe their existence to the substances they inhere in. Qualities are beings, too, but not in the same way that substances are. So, substances are beings in the primary sense of the term ‘being’, the “central cases” of being. The fundamental issues upon which his entire treatment of substance and hence the entirety of his metaphysics is structured are the issues of the *whatness* and the *thisness* of reality.

These translate correspondingly into form and matter. The form gives a peculiar identity to and differentiates things from all other things, but the form can only be a form of matter and exists on matter. Hence, reality is simply matter and form, thisness and whatness respectively. There is no doubt that the generality of Aristotle’s philosophy lacks every bit of haphazardness in his entire philosophical discourse. This led to his assessment of substance not in a single domain but in all of its employments through the power of human reason in thinking as evident in his *Organon* (work on logic); in his *De Anima* where man is conceived as a social and political animal.

This became the basis of his ethics and socio-political thoughts. He worked extensively on language and language use simply for communicative intent. In fact, human beings who live in any society make use of language as a medium of social

²⁴William Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 2nd Edition. (Belmont: Wadsworth Group, 2002), 76.

²⁵Marc Cohen: *Aristotle’s Metaphysics, Zeta 1-4*, Issued 3rd January 2008.

relationships. The systematicity of Aristotle was inherited in its appreciated form by Immanuel Kant who in his *Critique of Pure Reason* “revolutionize philosophy by systematizing epistemology and metaphysics”²⁶ with a view to purging the entirety of philosophy of impurities. Primary in this scientification venture was that of metaphysics. Kant, in his *Prolegomena*, insisted that: “it cannot be permitted them to play with guesses, but rather their assertions must be science or they are nothing at all.”²⁷

Like Aristotle, Kant examined the faculty of reason in all of its employments as reflected in his popular *critiques*. Martin Heidegger is not left out as he demonstrated a colourful Aristotelianism in terms of style and methodical graduation from the more familiar to the less familiar. Like Aristotle, Heidegger addressed the most fundamental challenge in his *Being and Time* where he structured his investigation of being in the order of “the ontic priority; the ontological priority and the ontic-ontological priority.”²⁸ This means an investigation of the human being which is a translation of *Dasein*, which is followed by an investigation into the totality of Being that is ontological and then finally an investigation into the relationship between the ontical and the ontological i.e. the individual and the totality of reality.

One can go on and on in delineating the various philosophical developments that owe their root to Aristotle, not to mention that of Aquinas who completely Christianized Aristotle’s philosophy, and even the linguistic tradition of Wittgenstein and the Logical Positivists. Aristotle’s influence has been very overwhelming, even though one of the foremost translators of his works, W.D Rose, described him as barbaric for some of the terms he used which did not even have Greek equivalence, thereby circumventing the clarity of thought he purported to represent and for which he criticized his master.

Conclusion

A fundamental problematic of Plato’s idealistic metaphysics which Aristotle dealt with, is the reconciliation of his idea of forms with human ingenuity. In other words, following the construct of Plato’s world of forms where essences are detached and have independent existence from the physical realities, humans would lack independent cognitive capacities for making meaning out of their existence. In

²⁶Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*. J. M. D. Meiklejohn. Trans. PSU-Hazleton, Hazleton. ed. PA 18202, (A publication of The Electronic Classics Series, 2013), 16.

²⁷Immanuel, Kant. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will be Able to Come Forward as Science*. Gary Hatfield. Trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 30.

²⁸Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, trans. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001), 31.

other words, man would simply be a passive reality, since his essence is practically somewhere else and controlled by yet another being. Aristotle departed radically from Plato, to bring metaphysics down to man in his treatment of substance as it manifests in various modes. It was in this light that he treated substance as essence, as universal, as genus, and ultimately as substrate wherein the realization of substance as substance is achieved. He parted ways with essentialism in Plato's philosophy and introduced the hylomorphic metaphysics wherein the unity of matter and form is the explanation for every reality. This is not to lose sight of his further classification of substance into primary and secondary, where the substrate is the primary which remains when all others are taken off; and then the other categories such as universals, genus, etc., which can be spoken of only in reference to the substrate, constitute the secondary substance. Aristotle's form differs from Plato's to the extent that immanence differs from transcendence.

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