

Aristotle on What There Is

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Recall that Aristotle based his philosophy on his perceptions of the material world, on what he could observe. In this tutorial, we will consider Aristotle's *Categories*, which provide his account of what we can infer about reality, based on what we can observe.

This tutorial investigates Aristotle's conclusions about the nature of reality in five parts:

1. [First Philosophy: Ontology](#)
2. [Universals and Particulars](#)
3. [Substance](#)
4. [Aristotelian Essences](#)
5. [Hylomorphism](#)

1. First Philosophy: Ontology

Throughout history, philosophers have discussed *first philosophy*. This is a pedagogical concept, indicating what must be studied and learned first in order to advance in the field of philosophy. Philosophers have defended different candidates for first philosophy—many believed that it is logic. It has been asserted that Plato's rule was that no one could become a student of the Academy until he or she had first mastered mathematics. Much later, Descartes said that epistemology was first philosophy. Aristotle's selection, however, was **ontology**.

Ontological questions center around what kinds of things exist, and how they exist. "Does x depend on y in order to exist?" is an ontological question. Ontology is, therefore, a good candidate for first philosophy. Knowing what kinds of things exist is a good place to begin for anyone who wants to advance in any field. This is especially important if you consider the nature of truth. What makes a statement true? Most people would answer that it is because the statement corresponds with reality in some way. What makes "Don is bald" true? Most would think that it is because a person named Don exists, and this person lacks hair on his head. If our interest is in truth, then we must give an account of what is.



TERM TO KNOW

2. Universals and Particulars

Consider this assertion: “The chair is broken.” What is required in order to be able to say that this statement is true? You would need to assert that there is an object that it is a chair, and that it exists in a certain state. But notice that three things have been asserted in saying that the chair is broken:

- There is a specific object that exists
- That object is a chair
- That object (the chair) exists in the state of brokenness

You need two concepts, the concept of “chair” and the concept of the state of “broken”, and you need an existence claim, that the chair exists in this state, in order to make this assertion.

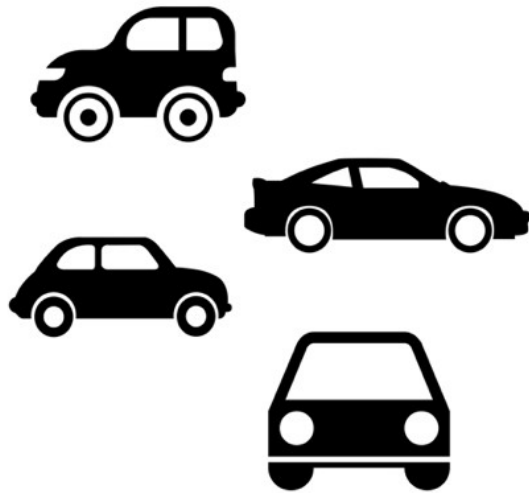
Let’s set aside brokenness and focus on the claims involved in saying “there is a chair” (i.e., “there is an object that exists, and it is a chair”). To say “there is a chair” is to say that this specific object matches the concept of a chair. To say there is a chair, you therefore need “this object (chair)” and also the concept, “chair.” In terms of philosophy, this illustrates the difference between a particular and a universal, where:

- A **particular** is a concrete, extant entity.
- A **universal** is an ontological category that is common to multiple particulars.

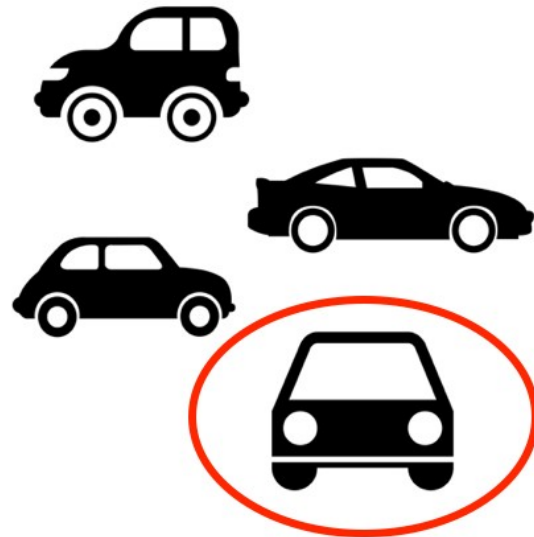
Aristotle’s definition of a particular is a little simpler than the one above. He called a particular a “this,” which seems vague and unhelpful until you think it through. We can refer to “chair” (the universal entity that applies to multiple chairs) or *this* chair (a particular chair). “Human” or “this human,” and so on. We can even talk about properties, such as the universal “blue,” versus the particular, “this blue.”

As a result, a “this” is very helpful in thinking about particulars. Take any concept for which we have a general term (e.g., “car”), and put “this” before it (i.e., “this car”). When you do so, you move from referring to the universal concept to the particular. Note that “universal,” in this instance, means “more than one,” not “all” or “every.”

The universal, “car,”
applies to all of these.



The particular, “this car”
applies to one.



This diagram helps to visually differentiate between universals and particulars. While the universal "car" refers generally to cars, the particular "car" refers to one specific car.

All of this is to say that, if we grant that it is true that the chair is broken, we have entered three kinds of things into our ontology: particular chairs, the universal chair, and the universal quality of being broken. All are required in order to say that the statement is true. Similar categories are involved whenever we make a claim to truth. Consider claims like, “humans are rational.” We posit particular humans, humanity, and rationality. As we continue to make claims to truth we will notice a pattern.



TERMS TO KNOW

Particular

A concrete, extant entity

Universal

An ontological category that is common to multiple particulars

3. Substance

We should notice that these simple statements contain a subject and a predicate.



Dust off those grammar skills! Remember that subjects and predicates are parts of a sentence. The subject of a sentence is what (or who) the sentence is about. The predicate tells you what the subject is doing or has done or will do. In this sentence—“The chair is broken.”—the chair is the subject, and “is broken” is the predicate. The subject and predicate are used to describe reality accurately.

Likewise, in reality, we have a thing, and a property attributed to that thing. To accurately describe that property as belonging to that thing is to speak truly. Therefore, our ontology includes a collection of things. The technical term Aristotle used for this category is “substance,” which indicates any subject. Shoes and ships and sealing wax are substances, as are you and I. There are also ways (states or conditions in which) those things can be: dented, blue, over 12 feet tall, etc. Aristotle established nine categories of ways things can be:

Ways of Being	Example
Quantity	Five
Quality	Blue
Relation	Greater than
Place	In front of the TV
Time	Last year
Position	Sitting
State	Unarmed
Action	Reading
Affection	To be read

Anything that can be said to exist falls into one of these ten categories, either a substance or a way of being. However, substance has *ontological primacy* over the other nine ways of being. That is, substance can exist without the other nine, but they cannot exist independent of substance. They are, therefore, *ontologically dependent* on substance.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** There can be a fender without a dent, but there cannot be a dent without a fender. Blueness cannot exist by itself: There are only blue things.

Note that by making individual substances ontologically primary, Aristotle disagreed significantly with Plato. Plato posited a Form of goodness, for example, that is independent of any individual good person. Aristotle asserted that there cannot be goodness without any good individuals.

4. Aristotelian Essences

Aristotle’s ways of being are related to his notion of essence. As an example, consider the essence of humanity. Since it applies to many humans, it must be a universal entity. However, since you can truly assign properties to

the universal humanity (as in the assertion that “humanity is rational”), the universal humanity must be substantial. But because humanity, like blueness, cannot exist independently, the human essence (i.e., humanity) must exist in individual humans. Unlike Plato, Aristotle discovered humanity in people.

Aristotle’s ontology provides us with an easy way to identify an essence—a way to quickly identify what Plato agonized over. If we want to discover and describe the human essence, all we need to do is isolate two things: a *genus* and a *differentia*. The *genus* tells us what kind of thing it is. The *differentia* tells us what sets it apart from other things of the same kind. Let’s take a look at two examples:

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Suppose we want to identify the essence of a hammer. We can ask, what kind of thing is it? Our answer would be that it is a tool. Next, we might ask, what distinguishes hammers from other tools? The answer in this instance might be that they are used for pounding. Our investigation leads us to conclude that the essence of a hammer (i.e., what makes a hammer a hammer) is that it is a tool used for pounding.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Let’s try another example and identify the essence of a professor. What kind of thing is a professor? A professor is a teacher. What distinguishes professors from other teachers? They teach at the collegiate level. Therefore, to be a professor is to be a college-level teacher.

So what kind of thing is a human? A human is a biped (i.e., walks on two legs). What separates humans from other bipeds? Rationality separates humans from other bipeds. Therefore, a human is a rational biped (or a rational animal, depending on whether Aristotle was writing about philosophy or biology).



MAKE THE CONNECTION

If this sounds familiar, it is because we still use Aristotle’s concept in biology. In the system of binomial nomenclature, an organism is named with a *genus* and a *species*. *Homo sapiens* is Latin for rational biped, or wise man, which distinguishes them from Neanderthals, Cro-Magnons, and other hominids. We still use *genus* and *differentia* to determine what kind of thing an organism is.

5. Hylomorphism

What *is* a human? According to Aristotle, a human is a union of form (essence) and matter. This is an instance of **hylomorphism**, which is the metaphysical theory that posits being as a union of form and matter.

This is the foundation of the concept, but more needs to be understood to define it fully. Although we have been using humans as an example, this is a theory of *being*. It therefore applies to everything, to every Aristotelian substance: any subject—animal, vegetable, or mineral; any individual item that is an instance of a natural kind (i.e., species, in Aristotle’s system).

As a theory of being, hylomorphism involves an intimate, possibly essential, relationship. The standard interpretation of Aristotle’s theory is that existence is a package deal: You don’t have formless matter waiting to be shaped. Instead, you get matter *and* form, or nothing at all. There is no formless matter, we can only talk about it conceptually (when doing so, it is referred to as “prime matter”). There is no matterless form either. There is no such thing as humanity independent of individual humans (despite Plato’s assertions).

Aristotle explains this by using an analogy with wax. Conceptually, we can separate wax into its matter, the stuff of which it is composed, and its shape. However, this distinction is purely conceptual. There is no such thing as shapeless wax (meaning that it has no shape whatsoever), and there is likewise no such thing as shape without something to be shaped.

Based on this overview of hylomorphism, it is evident that there can be interpretive difficulties with this theory. First, we need to inquire as to the nature of the form. Is the form of a living thing *just* a structure (i.e., a blueprint for producing humans, like DNA), or is it more than this? In living things, Aristotle equated "form" with "soul." However, it would be wrong to assume that Aristotle used "soul" in the same way we use it today.

The ancient Greek word he used was "*anima*," which is etymologically related to "animal" and "animate." Aristotle's notion of soul/*anima* is that which makes a living thing alive: an animating force. When considered in this way, it is clear that he did not intend to define hylomorphism in quasi-religious terms. Aristotle was not convinced that there was an afterlife (though in some of his works, he left open the possibility that intellectual thought may survive physical death because thought does not belong to any part of the body, but is somehow independent of it). However, that only tells us what the anima is not. We know that souls provide an organizing principle. We don't know what else, if anything, they provide.



TERM TO KNOW

Hylomorphism

The metaphysical theory that posits being as a union of form and matter



SUMMARY

In this lesson, we discussed **First Philosophy: Ontology, Universals and Particulars, Substance, Aristotelian Essences**, and **Hylomorphism**. Aristotle held that first philosophy was ontology: that we must determine what kinds of things exist in order to progress in our studies. As grounds for truth, he posited ten categories of being, of which substance was the primary category. One important kind of substance is species, which is a universal entity that exists in particulars (e.g., universal humanity existing in particular humans). An easy way to identify these essences is to discover the *genus* and *differentia*, a technique so useful that it is one of the few that have continued to be used in science for over two millennia.



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**Hylomorphism**

The metaphysical theory that posits being as a union of form and matter

Ontology

The branch of metaphysics that examines the nature of being

Particular

A concrete, extant entity

Universal

An ontological category that is common to multiple particulars