

Aristotle's Division of the World — Notes & Reflections

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1 Aristotle's Main Four-Fold Division of the World

In *Categories* II, Aristotle describes the following central, four-fold division of the World:

	Not <i>said of</i> [a] substratum (particular)	<i>Said of</i> [a] substratum (universal)
Not <i>in</i> [a] substratum (substance)	Primary Substance (<i>e.g.</i> , Socrates, my cat)	Secondary Substance (<i>e.g.</i> , human, animal)
<i>In</i> [a] substratum (non-substance)	Particular non-substance (<i>e.g.</i> , A <i>bit</i> of grammatical knowledge in Socrates' soul)	Universal non-substance (<i>e.g.</i> , knowledge)

Table 1: Aristotle's main four-fold division of the World.

2 Visualizing Aristotle's 10-fold Division & His Varieties of Attribution

Figure 1 allows us to get a visual feel for Aristotle's more fine-grained, 10-fold division, and the ways in which he thinks attributions work (and *don't* work).¹ Here, we are drawing on both the *Categories* readings and the *Topics* readings.²

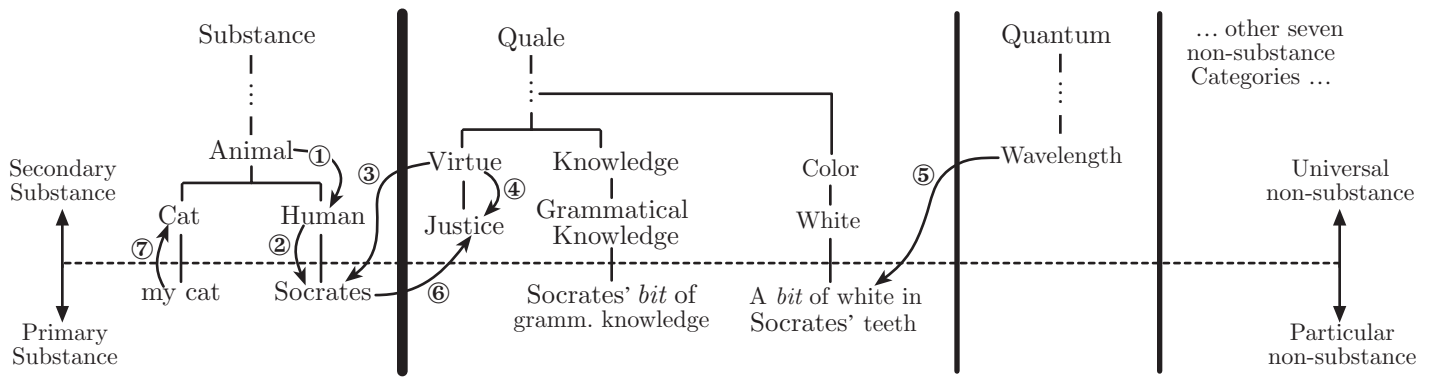


Figure 1: Picturing Aristotle's 10-fold division & varieties of attribution — using trees.

Table 2 describes four different varieties of Aristotelian attribution which we can use to classify the attributions in Figure 1.

	Attribute is substance	Attribute is non-substance
Thing is substance	Synonymous attribution (①, ②) (says what thing <i>is</i>)	Paronymous attribution (③) (says what thing <i>has</i>)
Thing is non-substance	<i>Not a genuine attribution</i> (⑥)	Synonymous attribution — <i>if</i> thing & attribute are in the same non-substance category (④) <i>Otherwise</i> , this will be Paronymous attribution (⑤)

Table 2: Four varieties of Aristotelian attribution.

¹In Figure 1, the arrows represent attributions. For instance, “Human → Socrates” (*i.e.*, attribution ② in Figure 1) is to be understood as the attribution “Socrates is [a] Human.” Not all of the arrows drawn in Figure 1 represent *genuine* attributions within Aristotle's theory. For instance, arrows ⑥ and ⑦ are *not* genuine attributions, as far as Aristotle is concerned. Why not? Can you think of other non-genuine attributions?

²Can you find relevant passages in the *Categories* and/or the *Topics* which justify (or *refute!*) each of the claims made in this handout?

Table 3 is useful for further clarifying the nature of (genuine) attributions *within* and *across* Aristotle’s categories.

Attribute & thing are in the same category (e.g., ①, ②, and ④ in Figure 1)	Attribute & thing are in different categories (e.g., ③ and ⑤ in Figure 1)
Attribute says what thing <i>is</i> .	Attribute says what thing <i>has</i> .
Attribution is <i>essential</i> .	Attribution is <i>accidental</i> . ³
Attribute and thing are <i>synonymous</i> .	Attribute is said <i>paronymously</i> of thing.
Whatever is said of attribute is said of thing.	What is said of attribute <i>cannot be</i> said of thing.
Definition of attribute applies to thing.	Definition of attribute does <i>not</i> apply to thing.

Table 3: Attribution *within vs* attribution *across* Aristotle’s categories.

3 The Ambiguity of “Exists” Across Aristotle’s Categories

In *Topics* IV, Aristotle tells us that:

... the species partake in their genera, while the genera do not partake in their species ...

and

... if someone gives a genus for being or one ... it will turn out that the genus partakes in the species. For being and one are predicated of all beings. . .

From these two quotes, we may infer that there can be no genus for being or one. Indeed, the readings we have already done support the even stronger contention that — for Aristotle — there can be no single, all-encompassing sense of “exists” which cuts across *any pair of* Aristotle’s categories.⁴ This important *ambiguity* in “exists” can be illustrated by considering the following two lines of Aristotelian “what is it?” questioning:

<i>Q.</i> What is Socrates?	<i>Q.</i> What is this <i>bit</i> of white?
<i>A.</i> He is [a] human.	<i>A.</i> It is [a] color.
<i>Q.</i> What is [a] human?	<i>Q.</i> What is [a] color?
<i>A.</i> [A] human is [an] animal.	<i>A.</i> [A] color is [a] quality.
⋮	⋮
<i>A.</i> It is [a] substance.	<i>A.</i> It is [a] non-substance.

Table 4: Two lines of Aristotelian questioning which illustrate the ambiguity of “what is it?”.

It does no good at this point to ask the Aristotelian “what is [a] substance?” and “what is [a] non-substance,” in the hopes that one might find some single, *overarching* sense in which *both* substance *and* non-substance “exist.” For an Aristotelian, *there is no such thing*. In fact, as I mentioned above, there can be no such thing (for the Aristotelian) as a single sense of “exists” in which both *quale* and *quantum* exist or both *where* and *when* exist, *etc.*

³Strictly speaking, this case includes *both* accidental attribution, *and* another kind of *non-essential* attribution Aristotle calls *proprium* (see *Topics* I.5). What is the distinction between *accident* and *proprium*? And, is this distinction, ultimately, very important to the Aristotelian?

⁴Can you find textual evidence for (or *against!*) this claim?