INDIVIDUATION WITHIN THE LIMITS OF AN ARISTOTELIAN FRAMEWORK

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In the following essay, I wish to treat the problem of individuation as it occurs in Aristotle's thought. That is to say, I wish to work with and, hopefully, build upon certain foundations set by Aristotle. As I understand it, individuation is a necessary feature of what is real and an issue that Aristotle addressed in terms of the concept of matter in his theory of Being. However, I am persuaded that the problem needs further treatment.

Let me begin by outlining the problem. For Aristotle, that which is real is the particular being given in experience; this is designated as being (ousia) in the primary sense. It is this world of individual being among which we live and make our way that Aristotle considers real, as opposed to Plato's realm of Ideas. Nature, according to Aristotle, embraces the variety of individual beings but not at the expense of making it unintelligible. Individual beings are not absolutely unique but possess something essential which determines what kind of individual being is, or, in other words, is responsible for their being what they are. The world is intelligible because knowledge, for Aristotle, is of the causes of an individual being what it is. As may be recognized in the experience of a pine forest, for example, there are many individual beings (pine trees) which are the same in as much as each is a pine. We may even say that they are identical since the essence of each tree is identical. It is the essence which enables us to recognize, identify, and to know each as being what it is. Thus, the trees are essentially the same, but in as much as they are many, they are distinct individuals.

These two apparently conflicting points make up the problem of the One and the Many, from which arises our present question of individuation. This question is the result of Aristotle's conclusion that the essence is what is most properly designated as being (ousia).[1] Put explicitly, the problem is: If individual beings of a specific kind are essentially identical, how may there be many individuals, a fact on which Aristotle is equally firm? Or, put another way, what principle of individuation accounts for the fact given in experience that there are many individuals of identical essence, of the same kind of being?

Aristotle's solution rests basically upon the claim that it is the matter of the individual being that individuates each and accounts for the fact that there are many beings of the same kind.[2] Therefore, Aristotle concludes that such beings are a unity of matter and form, a principle of individuation and a cause of their being what they are. I believe though, that matter recreates the problem at its level and is therefore, inadequate by itself as a principle of individuation.

Aristotle further explains that we have knowledge (episteme) of the individual being in so far as we recognize what it is, i.e., know what kind of being it is.[3] This requires that we abstract the essence of the individual being. Yet, we cannot, says Aristotle, do the same with matter. We are thus left knowing the individual being only qua being and not qua individual. Our knowledge of the individual being qua being is knowledge of the real, as far as it goes. But since we cannot know the matter, our knowledge can never be of the individual being qua individual. Our knowledge must therefore remain incomplete. However, of this conclusion I remain unpersuaded.

There are, then, two different, though related, problems: (1) that matter alone is inadequate as a principle of individuation, and (2) that our knowledge (episteme) must in principle be incomplete. It is hoped that the proposal offered below will resolve both difficulties.

Aristotle was aware of the first problem, at least to some extent, for he distinguished several kinds of senses of matter in terms of what function is performed with respect to the kind of change undergone.[4] He even follows through and posits prime matter, or that which remains after all qualities and determinations have been removed. It lacks all form; thus being nothing in particular, i.e., prime matter is pure potency. Thus, we may ask, with respect to matter, what individuates, determines, and thus enables us to distinguish between these various kinds of matter? And in terms of our alternatives, matter and form, our answer must be that it is the fact that, or the degree to which, each kind of matter is informed. Hence form (essence), that which determines to what degree the matter is informed, what kind of matter each is, seems to function as the principle of individuation with respect to matter. In other words, it is form which sets matter apart from itself (e.g., matter informed to a degree from prime matter).

Perhaps my point will be clearer if we move closer to the level of individual beings. Earlier we said that the form of each tree was identical and that the matter of each is what individuated, hence distinguished one tree from another. Here, however, things seem turned around and we ask, what distinguishes between the matter of one tree and another? Aristotle would explain that the matter of each tree is different. But apart from the essence of each, what

individuates the matter which is allegedly different in each instance of tree? We could put the problem back to the level of the "proximate" matter of each, i.e., the matter informed to a degree. But this move itself requires us to fall back upon form as the individuating principle, as opposed to matter alone. It might be suggested that what distinguishes one tree from another is the fact that one is over here and the other is over there. But there is reason to doubt that this is what we mean by matter. For the latter are spatial determinations fixed by the individuals which occupy them. Furthermore, as Aristotle argues in the *Physics*, though matter and place (space) never exist apart from each other, they are not identical.[5] It seems, therefore, that matter alone is inadequate to function as the principle of individuation. We must invoke a formal principle of inviduation as well.

It is of some interest to observe the following in connection with our thesis. Since deity, for Aristotle, is pure form, its individuality must rest in form and not in matter as the principle of individuation.[6] This admission I take as further reason for considering form as necessary to the resolution of the problem of individuation within an Aristotelian framework.

In the above, I have emphasized form in its role as principle of individuation. However, the above treatment, as far as it goes, remains incomplete; for the dynamic aspect of individual being is largely neglected. Still, it is latent in the above in so far as formality involves finality.

The problem, at this point, which I hope to solve by involving finality, may be seen more clearly if we make a new beginning. Above we began by finding the individuation of essential being in matter, a discovery which reversed itself and led us to seek the individuation of matter in form. Neither could stand alone as the sought for principle. Yet, with the emphasis on form and particularly in reference to our remarks on God, the weight of our argument seems to be on the side of form.

Individual beings can be described as being real in so far as they "have a career of their own".[7] Now, by career, I understand a carrying-on of the individual being in its existence; more accurately, a progressive development of the individual being towards its actualizing what it potentially is. That towards which a being progresses is its end, what a being is when it is most fully actualized.

Since the end of a being is what it is in its completion, what we are referring to is the "whatness" of a being, hence, form. It must be added, though, that this progressive actualization is from what a being potentially is. The latter cannot be pure potentiality since that is potentially all things. How, then, are we to understand potentiality of a being? Only in terms of what it actually becomes, i.e., its whatness. Thus, we are thrown back again upon the

formal as that which not only determines and individuates matter but also determines the potentiality of an individual being.

To illustrate my point, we might argue that the child is no less an instance of man than the father since they both possess the essence, man. They are identical in essence, to speak statically of what each is. Yet, they are different, individuated in so far as the father is more fully actualizing his end of being completely what he is to be. It seems, therefore, that the formal has the function of individuation, and again that matter and potency by themselves are inadequate.

The above amounts to a rejection of Aristotle's explanation of individuation. But this rejection is not thorough-going; for what I wish to propose is an account of individuation in terms of the Aristotelian *arche* retained, i.e., the formal and final causes. In this sense, I remain within an Aristotelian framework. Still, the pressing question before us is: If matter cannot be unequivocally appealed to, how can the individuation of essence be accounted for in a way that is at once functional, illuminating and knowledge preserving?

Above, there were two ways of dealing with this question suggested: one by the phrase "career of its own," and the other by the example of the child and father. Both emphasize the final cause and may merge. These are drawn out below.

The phrase, "career of its own," suggests a temporal dimension in the sense that an essence is individuated in the course of its history by the sequence of events that characterize it or the various turns in its development. Thus, in this sense, perhaps time can function as the principle of individuation. However, I do not believe that this proposal will work.

To speak of the history of an essence is paradoxical if not impossible, since an essence is formal, hence does not undergo change, and thus is not in time. Yet this must be overcome in some way that does not neglect time, if we are to make sense of individuated essences. The problem is with how this is to be accomplished.

Time, like space, is too broad a condition to sere as a principle of individuation since it is conceived to be a series of moments analogous to space conceived as a series of locations of events or occupants. On this view there is nothing specifiable about a moment as such whereby two moments are distinct. If we argue that one moment is distinguished from another by the different events occurring at each, then this presupposes that the events are already distinct. But since it is events (or the becoming of beings) the individuation of which is, on assumption, provided by time, we only argue in a circle; individuating beings by moments and moments by beings.

On the other hand, should we merely posit that a temporal series is in principle a plurality, we seem likewise to beg the question by merely pushing the issue back one step. if we assume that it might do to appeal to the infinite divisibility of time to justify the claim that time is in principle a plurality, it becomes difficult to see how a moment (or moments) can individuate. For if we hold that a moment individuates, then beings would have only a momentary existence. This seems to be plainly false. To avoid this, we might hold that a set of moments individuates, so as to allow for the extended duration of beings. But this position is also troublesome. For by the infinite divisibility of time, there is another moment between any two moments, thus implying that a being is individuated by an infinite plurality of moments. To say the least, it is paradoxical to individuate by means of that which is a plurality of indistinguishable moments.

Such talk is reminiscent of Zeno and McTaggart, but is not intended to refute the existence of a plurality or of the reality of time. My point is simply that time in this sense will not do as a principle of individuation.

Suppose we stress the historical rather than the serial sense of time. If the history of a being is conceived as the succession of events or episodes in the course of an individual's career, then we seem to be back at the problems outlined above. This is due to the serial character of the "succession of events." But there are other difficulties.

One of these is that events, episodes, and accidents that characterize the career of one individual may equally well pertain to another individual. Such characterizations as these are, nonetheless, alterations of properties or complexes of such and thus retain the possibility of occurring more than once. Therfore, they are not unique or individuating.

Another problem is that if the individuation of a being consists in its complete history, then paradoxically, it is not individuated in any sense that uniquely determines its singularity until it has ceased to exist. At this point there is no question of the individuation of a being or essence, since there is nothing to individuate.

But if time, in either sense, is not the principle of individuation, this does not mean that time is irrelevant to the problem. For the notion of the final cause has a temporal connotation. Yet, though indiviudation is not *by* time, it does not follow that it is not *in* time. Time remains as a condition for the possibility of individuation.

Now it might be held that in spite of the above, we may watch for and appeal to divergences in the history of two beings and thereby fix upon a practical criterion for our being able to tell the two apart. But this is not the problem at hand. Our question is not over how we can tell two things apart from each other, e.g., identical twins. If that is all we are concerned with, we can simply

insist that the twins always dress in different colors. Our problem is what makes them two indiviuals in the first place so as to give rise to the practical problem of how we are to tell them apart.

The following proposal goes some of the way toward a solution to our problem. This second proposal is that ratio (or proportion) is the principle of individuation. What is stressed here is neither a thing nor a quality, but a relation. It is the relation between two aspects that can be distinguished within the same being, i.e., its formal and its final causes. These are not two separate components of the being; rather they are *archai* which specify what a being actually is, and the range of what it can become. As such, both are formal and set limits which determine a being, so that it belongs to one class rather than another. But as formal, neither principle alone individuates a being since they specify the properties that any number of beings must have in order to belong to the same class. Thus, as Aristotle recognized, a third condition must be appealed to. Ratio, I propose, is this third condition, conceived as the relation of the formal to the final cause, essence to end.[8] This proposal meets many of the criteria that matter was intended to, with the additional advantage that ratio is intelligible rather than being in principle unknowable. There are several ways to put this.

Ratio, like matter, is different from both essence and *telos* in that it does not state *what* a being is nor *what* it can become. But this is only a negative way of putting it. Along more positive lines, ratio serves to unite the essence and the *telos*, being the relative degree to which the essence of an individual at any given stage of its career approximates its *telos*. This point may be more fully expressed in terms of potentiality, a principle which Aristotle associates but does not identify with matter.

Restated, ratio is the proportion of actuality to potentiality at any given stage in an individual's career. Potentiality refers to the properties which it is *possible* for an individual to possess or exhibit and which are specified within the limits of an individual's essence and *telos*. For example, an infant son and its father both are male human beings and are thus determined by that essence, i.e., the set of properties that specify what it is to be a male human being. That set includes the property of being a father. However, in the case of the infant that property is merely a potentiality, while for the father it is no longer merely potential but an actuality. Though both are male human beings, the father more fully approximates the *telos* in the sense of actualizing more of the possibilities specified within the range of what it is to be a male human being. Certainly, being a father does not exhaust that range. But the point is simply that what the father is is in closer proximity to what he was to become than is the child. In this example, it is the ratio or proportion of actuality to potentiality of

the father that differentiate him from the son.

It might be objected, however, that since ratio characterizes more than one being it is in some sense formal and no more able to individuate than were essence or *telos*. In response, I can only reply "yes," but with the qualification that this is so only if one *assumes* that the ratio exists apart from the conditions it relates. But such an assumption seems unjustified since a ratio which relates nothing is itself nothing. Thus, if ratio is to have any significance, it must be conceived in the context of its terms. And in regard to the issue at hand, that context is the relation of essence to *telos*.

If this proposal holds, its merit consists in its being able to fulfill the several functions that matter was originally assigned without generating the paradoxes of matter. It further consists in having substituted an intelligible for a surd principle.

If this proposal does not hold, then perhaps we should conclude that there is no principle of individuation. But this seems hasty since it is not certain that all options have been examined. Perhaps we should conclude that the problem has no solution but this I am unwilling to concede until either all options have been examined and found wanting or else a proof is discovered to demonstrate its unsolvability. Or, if the proposals I have presented are our only two alternatives, perhaps we have grounds for denying, paradoxically, the reality of individuals. But upon looking around and noting what there is to see, this conclusion is too hard to swallow.

Notes

1 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1031a 15-19.
2 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1034a 5-9.
3 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1031b 19-23.
4 Aristolte, *Metaphysics* 1036a 10.
5 Aristotle, *Physics* 212a 1.
6 *Metaphysics* 1071b 20-21.
7 A phrase borrowed from Prof. Brian E. O'Neil.
8 Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* 1013a 27-33. Here Aristotle refers to the Formal cause as $\tau\grave{o}$ $\epsilon\~i\delta o\varsigma$ and $\tau o\~v$ $\mathring{\eta}$ $\mathring{\eta}\nu$ $\epsilon\~i\nu\alpha\iota$, and to the final cause as $\tau\grave{o}$ $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda o\varsigma$.