

A Substance Metaphysics Primer

Abstract This chapter provides a summary of the similarities between Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian accounts of the category SUBSTANCE and substances. I assume that Lowe’s account is the best candidate for a comprehensive neo-Aristotelian account. I clarify Lowe’s theory of SUBSTANCE in the context of his four-category ontology to better understand the plausibility of developing a successful substance metaphysics.

Keywords Aristotle · Neo-Aristotelian · Substance · Ontology
Four-category ontology

2.1 SUBSTANCE METAPHYSICS

The emphasis on the category SUBSTANCE¹ has led many philosophers to develop what can be characterized as *substance metaphysics*—a branch of metaphysics that understands reality to be fundamentally comprised of discrete countable substances. In answering the ontologist’s question of how many things exist, the substance metaphysician will respond with an account of the number of substances.

Although we can identify Aristotle as being one of the founders of substance metaphysics, substance metaphysics is not merely a relic of antiquity. Instead, we can understand substance metaphysics to be the *received view* among metaphysicians. In particular, there has been a recent surge of

metaphysicians appropriating Aristotle's projects to develop what is called *neo-Aristotelian metaphysics* (Tahko 2012). These neo-Aristotelians adopt the substance framework to make contributions to our understanding of the fundamental categories of existence. Despite these contributions, there remain reasons for questioning the key components of neo-Aristotelian metaphysics, which I will discuss in subsequent chapters.

The present chapter will focus on Lowe's (2006) account of substance. He treats SUBSTANCE as being the most general and fundamental of the ontological categories. Not all neo-Aristotelians agree as to what the number of ontological categories is or should be. For example, Bird (2012) and Heil (2012) defend the view that there are only two categories: PARTICULAR and UNIVERSAL. Simons (2012) defends a factored ontology that requires more than four categories, although it is not clear how many more are needed. Furthermore, not all neo-Aristotelians agree on what counts as a member of SUBSTANCE. For example, Lowe (1998) divides substances in terms of *stuffs*, *organisms*, and *artifacts*, while Hoffman (2012) divides substances in terms of *soul* and *body*. Despite these disagreements regarding the details of substances, the depth and extent to which the disputes have taken place indicate that substance plays a crucial role in developing a neo-Aristotelian metaphysics.

Given the impact of Lowe's own account on our understanding of other neo-Aristotelian accounts of substance, we have good reason to call into question those accounts if we find Lowe's account to be implausible. Furthermore, since I assume neo-Aristotelianism to be the best formulation of substance metaphysics currently available, the suspending of judgment to neo-Aristotelian accounts of substance places a heavier burden of proof on those who wish to continue developing a substance metaphysics. Put simply, if we find Lowe's account to be problematic, then the general tenability of substance metaphysics is weakened.

The main difficulty with Lowe's account is that he adopts the neo-Aristotelian method of using common sense as a starting point for establishing metaphysical theories. This preference for commonsense observations to theoretical claims is an extension of Aristotle's own criticism of theoretical claims that conflict with common sense, which I discuss more thoroughly in Chap. 4 when addressing the extent to which, if at all, neo-Aristotelianism is naturalizable. The adoption of common sense as a methodological starting point results in Lowe being ensnared in results that come into conflict with common sense. In particular,

Lowe's substance metaphysics is found to be implausible when we consider how his account of substance is unable to accommodate our commonsense intuitions of what an adequate account of change should possess. Furthermore, the key, interrelated attributes of substance, being that substance is taken to be ontologically fundamental, independent, and non-relational, are dependent upon assumptions that lack sufficient support from common sense.

The present chapter is intended to clarify Lowe's account of SUBSTANCE. Toward this aim, I first discuss some of the similarities between the Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian accounts of SUBSTANCE (Sect. 2.2). I then discuss Lowe's theory of SUBSTANCE in the context of his four-category ontology (Sect. 2.3). By clarifying Lowe's account, we are in a better position to assess the plausibility of his account and, in effect, more generally, substance metaphysics.

2.2 NEO-ARISTOTELIAN SUBSTANCES

Neo-Aristotelians take their lead from Aristotle's own development of metaphysics, or *first philosophy*, in pursuing the questions *What is being?* and *What is substance?* (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Z 1028b2-4). In particular, Lowe (2006) treats first philosophy as being the "science of essences." *Essences*, however, for neo-Aristotelians, depend upon substances. By assessing the metaphysical status of substances, we can assess the tenability of essences, which, in effect, allow us to evaluate the general acceptability of neo-Aristotelian metaphysics.

What counts as a substance is contentious, which is partly a result of Aristotle's own account of substance being unclear. As Gill indicates, there are at least three issues with Aristotle's account that prevent the establishing of a comprehensive account of substance (Gill 1991, 127). First, it is unclear what the relation is between substance and matter. Specifically, it is unclear if matter is distinct from substance or if substances are capable of being proper parts of other substances when Aristotle writes, "If then matter is one thing, form another, the compound of these a third, and both the matter and form and the compound are substance, *even the matter is in a sense called part of a thing, while in a sense it is not*, but only the elements of which the formula of the form consists" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Z 1035a-4; emphasis my own).

Second, it is not obvious in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* if matter is taken to be part of the form of something when he states that "For the form, or

the thing as having form, should be said to be the thing, but the material element by itself must never be said to be so” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Z 1035a5-9). In particular, it is unclear if Aristotle is concerned with the relationship between the material that makes up a thing, and the form that is taken by the thing or the material, and the thing that is taking the form.

Third, there is further confusion in understanding Aristotle’s account of substance insofar as it is not clear whether substance is prior or posterior to a thing: The “parts which are the nature of matter, and into which as its matter a thing that is divided are posterior; but those which are the nature of parts of the formula, and of the substance according to its formula, are prior, either all or some of them” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Z 1035b11-14). In thinking about Aristotle’s *four causes*, being *formal*, *material*, *efficient*, and *final*, it would seem that the matter of which a thing is comprised must exist as part of the thing prior to the completion of the thing (Aristotle, *Physics* 194b17-20). The legs of a table do not exist *qua* legs of a table until the table has been constructed; otherwise, they are pieces of wood that *could* be the legs of a table (or a chair, and so on). However, we would not be able to construct the table without those parts existing. In one sense, then, we may be inclined to think that substances as parts of an object exist prior to the thing, while, in another sense, we might think that those substances only exist as such posterior to a thing.

This is not a book about Aristotle, though. For this reason, I will not attempt to further clarify Aristotle’s account or resolve the above issues with understanding Aristotle’s account of substance, nor will I provide commentary on the debates of how to appropriately interpret Aristotle. My purpose for addressing the above points is to illustrate why there should be little surprise in the lack of a currently available comprehensive account of substance given our difficulties in understanding Aristotle’s own formulation.

More importantly, though, these difficulties prevent the neo-Aristotelian from simply appropriating Aristotle’s own formulation. If the neo-Aristotelian conception of substance “is one that is an extension of and/or is in imitation of Aristotle’s views about substance” (Hoffman 2012, 140), and Aristotle’s account of substance is unclear, then the neo-Aristotelian will need to clarify both hers and Aristotle’s meanings of “substance.” Toward this aim, Hoffman (2012) offers seven characteristics of a neo-Aristotelian account of substance.

First, the category of SUBSTANCE is neither eliminable nor reducible to any other category. To allow for the possibility of a substance

being eliminable is to allow for substances to not be fundamental components of an ontology. Given that neo-Aristotelians are substance ontologists *par excellence*, the possibility of substances not being fundamental components of an ontology runs antithetical to the neo-Aristotelian account. Furthermore, to reduce a substance to some other category is to relegate SUBSTANCE and to allow there to be categories more fundamental than SUBSTANCE. “Thus, a neo-Aristotelian theory of substance is *essentially* one that maintains that substances are neither reducible to any other category of being nor eliminable from our ontology” (Hoffman 2012, 145; emphasis in original).

Second, substances are ontologically fundamental, basic, or primary. While Hoffman acknowledges that these components of the view of substance are inherent to Aristotle’s account, he does not believe them to be defensible (Hoffman 2012, 145). Hoffman goes on to claim that given the indefensibility of these characteristics, he does not maintain that they are part of the neo-Aristotelian account of substance. I am, however, suspect of this dismissal. I agree that these characteristics are problematic for the neo-Aristotelian account of substance. In subsequent chapters, I discuss at length the impacts that these difficulties have on the neo-Aristotelian account. However, if something is difficult to defend, it does not mean that it is not an essential feature of the general account. Furthermore, in addition to Aristotle having described substances as being ontologically fundamental, basic, or primary, neo-Aristotelians, for the most part, disagree with Hoffman and maintain Aristotle’s view of substances. (This claim will become evident in the next section when I discuss the reception of Lowe’s account of substance.) Last, Hoffman does not offer clear reasons for accepting some tenants of Aristotle’s account of substance while dismissing others.

Third, substances are not defined in terms of relations. In particular, they are mind-independent, objective, and nonrelativistic. These features of substances make substance metaphysics a realist ontology. In offering a realist account of substances, the neo-Aristotelian has the burden of offering evidence that extends beyond mere armchair speculation for the purposes of establishing a substance metaphysics. In adopting an account of substance from Aristotle, Oderberg writes “all we need to extract from the relevant...passages where Aristotle discusses relations is his fairly clear adherence to the proposition that not everything that exists is essentially relational because *substances* are not relational” (Oderberg 2012, 211; emphasis in original). There are some relational substances (e.g., *hand*),

but these are derivative and not fundamental substances for the (neo-) Aristotelian. It is their non-relational nature that allows substances to have determinant identity conditions, which will play a role in assessing the extent to which substances can undergo change.

Fourth, the category of SUBSTANCE is the widest scheme of ontological categories. The neo-Aristotelian can then be said to endorse something akin to Aristotelian category theory.

The fifth point is a methodological one: Start from common sense and the theory about substances should most closely conform to common sense. Following Aristotle, Hoffman suggests that the neo-Aristotelian starts with a “commonsense concept of a substance and strives to retain as much as possible of that concept—one’s theory of substance should hew as closely as possible to common sense” (Hoffman 2012, 145). As Hoffman correctly observes, *closeness* is a relation that comes in degrees (unlike *sibling*). Given the closeness relation, it is unclear to what extent a theory of substance and our commonsense understanding of substance must converge. Hoffman, however, identifies some features of substances that make up our theoretical understanding of substance that result from common sense (Hoffman 2012, 145–146): There are more than one substance; they are material; they persist through intrinsic change; they have properties, which are either accidental or essential, and those properties are unified by the substance; substances are contingent; and they are a combination of form and matter.

Sixth, SUBSTANCE is itself an analyzable concept. Hoffman does not believe that analyzability of substance should be essential to the neo-Aristotelian account. Yet, Hoffman does not offer an argument for why we should think of the concept of substance as being primitive. Aristotle himself followed the Socratic method of offering analytic definitions, which other neo-Aristotelians have adopted.

Seventh, substances have ontological independence. Hoffman suggests, however, that it is not necessary for the neo-Aristotelian to uphold the view that substances are ontologically independent (Hoffman 2012, 147). This suggestion, however, is at odds with his own account of substance: “By a substance, I mean an *individual thing or object*, and not merely a quantity of stuff” (Hoffman 2012, 140, n. 1; emphasis my own). Hoffman’s recommendation that it is not necessary for the neo-Aristotelian account to require that substances be ontologically independent is a response to Aristotle’s own difficulties in providing a cogent case for the ontological independence of substance (as evinced by the

above passages from *Metaphysics Z*). Many neo-Aristotelians would disagree with Hoffman. As Hoffman is aware, “many neo-Aristotelians have attempted to improve the case for the independence of substances” (Hoffman 2012, 147). The reason that many neo-Aristotelians have made these attempts is due to them agreeing with Lowe in understanding substance as being ontologically independent.

Lowe understands metaphysics as being concerned with studying “the most fundamental structure of reality” (Lowe 1998, 2). Substance is what is most fundamental: “A substance ontologist certainly does not take states of affairs to be the basic building blocks of reality: rather, it is *substances*, of course, that are taken to have this status” (Lowe 2006, 109; emphasis in original). Lowe provides insight to what is most significant for the neo-Aristotelian’s understanding of substance. He writes, “And what is a substance? Well, that is a very long story, as long indeed as the history of western philosophy. But, without a doubt, one of the key ideas in the notion of substance is the notion of *ontological independence*” (Lowe 2006, 109; emphasis in original). Furthermore, Lowe states, “it may be agreed by all substance ontologists that, in some suitable sense of ‘ontologically independent’, substances are ontologically independent entities” (Lowe 2006, 109).

Despite Hoffman’s suggestion that ontological independence is not necessary for the neo-Aristotelian account of substance, many neo-Aristotelians follow Lowe in maintaining that an adequate account of substance requires substances being ontologically independent. For these reasons, it is not a misconstrual of the neo-Aristotelian accounts of substance, including Hoffman’s, to state that their account involves substances being ontologically independent.

To summarize, neo-Aristotelians understand substances to have many shared aspects with Aristotle’s original account. Although there is disagreement as to how we should flesh out the details of ‘substance’, there are at least three shared aspects: Substances are fundamental, independent, and non-relational. Each of these aspects may be understood independent of one another, but I am not assuming that they are *necessarily* independent. For the purposes of evaluating these aspects, it is useful to allow the possibility that they are interrelated since, as I will argue below, that if something is not ontologically non-relational, it is not ontologically independent, and, therefore, not ontologically fundamental—in at least the way that neo-Aristotelians characterize substances.

2.3 LOWE AND SUBSTANCE

There are at least two benefits to analyzing Lowe's account of substance. First, as I mentioned earlier, Lowe's account of substance captures the main aspects of many other neo-Aristotelian accounts of substance. By assessing these attributes as they function in his account, we are also able to make general claims with respect to other neo-Aristotelian accounts of substance. In doing so, we are in a better position to critique substance metaphysics itself.

Second, Lowe is concerned with his ontology providing a foundation for the natural sciences (as evinced by the subtitle of his manuscript *The Four-Category Ontology: A Metaphysical Foundation for Natural Science*). Although the neo-Aristotelians already mentioned above share Lowe's interest in the relationship between science and metaphysics, Lowe is centrally concerned with this relationship. For this reason, his account is readily open to naturalistic considerations, which will serve as an entry point to my assessment in Chap. 4 of neo-Aristotelianism. Before analyzing his account, though, I will briefly clarify Lowe's account.

Lowe (2006) develops a four-category ontology, comprised of individual substances (*objects*), substantial universals (*kinds*), non-substantial universals (*properties*), and attribute instances (*modes*). Lowe understands the category of substance to be the most fundamental since it is the most general and broad (Lowe 2006, 20). The generality of the category of SUBSTANCE is a result of the categories being arranged hierarchically and distinguished by their members' existence conditions (Lowe 2006, 6), which are identifiable a priori (Lowe 2006, 20).

In the case of the category of SUBSTANCE, the existence conditions for *objects* (a term that Lowe uses interchangeably with 'substance') involve being the bearer of properties (or attributes), but not being made up of those properties (Lowe 2006, 9). Although the object's properties do not require a substratum, the properties are ontologically dependent upon the object that *exemplifies* those properties. This is the very nature of an object (substance) insofar as it exemplifies the non-substantial universal (attribute), which the property is an instance (mode). For example, a black coffee cup that appears as being black exemplifies these relations: The property of being black is itself an instance of the non-substantial universal, while the non-substantial universal is itself exemplified, but not instantiated, by the cup.

Lowe, however, does not develop an argument for how objects are able to provide support for properties or exemplify non-substantial universals. Instead, he appeals to our intuitions that result from reflecting on our commonsense observations of individual objects. He writes,

There is no mystery as to *how* individual substances can perform this ‘supporting’ role, for once we recognize the category of individual substance as basic and irreducible and the category of property-instance as correlative with it, we can see that their having such a role is part of their essential nature. Explanation—even metaphysical explanation—must reach bedrock somewhere, and this, according to the four-category ontology, is one place where bedrock is reached. The idea that some more fundamental explanation is somehow available, if only we can probe reality more deeply, is, I think, just an illusion born of...some...confusion. (Lowe 2006, 28; emphasis in original)

More needs to be said; it is not obvious that “there is no mystery” to why we should believe that substances are supportive in the way that Lowe describes.

Maintaining that there is no mystery results in an incomplete and problematic account. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Lowe’s account of substance is problematic for intuitive and conceptual reasons—notably, issues arise in light of our commonsense understanding of the changes that medium-sized objects undergo. Without further explanation, the mystery of how substances provide foundational support remains.

NOTE

1. Words written using all capitalized letters delineate categories.

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