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Analysis on the Significance and Defects of Aristotle's Theory of Substance

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Abstract

Aristotle's theory of substance classifies being as ten kinds, i.e. ten categories, among which substance is a independent and key category, and the others are dependent and secondary categories. There is a relation of being depended on and depending on, and of being expressed and expressing between substance and other categories. Aristotle's theory of substance has at least two points of academic significance: rectifying concepts and founding logic; implying that mankind cannot understand and hold the world beyond cognitive relation, and that being and thinking have identity. Taking as case, the paper holds that the proposition which argues that a white horse is not a horse is fallacious. The greatest defect in Aristotle's theory of substance is the classification that which is the first substance and which the second one, and the contradiction and confusion of his views on general and individual and their relations. The paper argues, that as substance general and individual cannot be classified the first or the second respectively, that from an ontological perspective both general and individual are objective reality as well as concepts, and that from an

epistemological perspective general may be of the same starting points of cognition as individual.

Keywords: Aristotle; substance; a white horse not a horse; general and individual

I. The Main Contents of Aristotle's Theory of Substance

Theory of substance is the basis of Aristotle's philosophy, which is expounded in *Categories* centrally,^[1] and in *Metaphysics* sporadically. Its basic content can be summarized as follows:

i. Aristotle classifies being as ten kinds, i.e. ten categories: substance, quantity, quality, relations, where, when, posture, state, acting, suffering. These ten categories have their importance of being and the logical sense differently, among which substance is the independent and key category, and the others are dependent and secondary categories. Only is substance being firstly, then other categories will to be.

ii. Aristotle defines substance in *Categories* as follows: In the strictest, most primitive and most fundamental sense, substance is something that does not depend on or express a subject. According to this definition, individual is substance in a strict sense, i.e. the first substance, and genus (or species) is substance not in a strict sense, i.e. the second substance. However, in *Metaphysics*, Aristotle puts forward a very contrary view to the one mentioned above concerning which is the first substance and which the second.^[2]

iii. Substance is original in any sense whether by definition, by cognition or by time. There is a relation of being depended on and depending on, and of being expressed and expressing between substance and other categories. Substance remains single in quantity, and may have the opposite in quality, which are the most outstanding characteristic of substance.

Before Aristotle, Parmenides had already used the category of being. What is being? However, Parmenides did not give a clear definition of being. The main opinion of Parmenides on being is that being is a thing which is eternal and real; therefore, thought is being, and the variable and perceptual things are not being or non-being. After synthesizing the various theories of former philosophers, and basing on perceptual experience, Aristotle

holds that anything which is real and can be expressed by “einai” (to be) is “on” (being) , and that being as something is the object of research of concrete disciplines, while being as being is the object of research of philosophy. However, such being is taken as archer (origin), its meaning is vague and confused. For example, this pond of water is real, water is real, the quantity of water is real, and the flow of water is real, so they are all being; but, are they all archer? what relation is there between being as archer and being as concrete something? Aristotle holds that these questions cannot be answered clearly by only using the category of being, therefore the theory of substance has to be advanced to improve the theory of being. In his opinion, this pond of water is archer more than water, and water is archer more than the quantity of water or the flow of water. According to Aristotle’s theory of substance, the quantity of water or the flow of water depends on and expresses water or this pond of water, so the former is dependent category, the latter substance category; water expresses this pond of water, so the former is the second substance, the latter the first substance. Dependent categories, the second substance and the first substance, their the most fundamental generality is being, so being is archer. Aristotle’s theory of substance retains being as archer the metaphysical property, meanwhile it reduces being archer to substance archer; as the relation between substance archer (category) and other being (categories) is being depended on and depending on, thus the relation between being as archer and being as concrete something can be expounded clearly.

Logically speaking, Aristotle holds that the being category is too wide in range of extension to be a genus category, while substance is a genus category, and is the supreme one. Today, the matter category in philosophy of Marxism is similar to being category in Aristotle’s theory of substance. In philosophy of Marxism, every objective thing, attribute of thing, relation of thing and so on, is all called matter; thus the reasonable species and its differentia may not be found in matter category, therefore, matter is not a genus category either. The doctrine on matter in philosophy of Marxism lacks a theory like the theory of substance in Aristotle’s philosophy, which cannot but be a theoretical defect. If there is the supreme genus category (substance) in philosophy of Marxism, the relation of being between the supreme philosophical category (matter) and species categories or concrete things would

be expounded better.

II. The Significance of Aristotle's Theory of Substance

The academic circles discuss the significance of Aristotle's theory of substance mostly from the perspective of its influence in history of philosophy. Unconventionally, this paper from the perspective of analyzing Aristotle's theory of substance itself, holds that it has two significant implications at least.

i. By classifying categories of being, Aristotle establishes the core position of substance category among all categories of being, and points out that substance category and other categories of being have a relation of being depended on (or being expressed) and depending on (or expressing), which establishes substance the position of archer logically, and makes logic come into being so that from then on metaphysics and other disciplines have developed on a logical way. By Aristotle's theory of substance, we know that expression can be made only between the first substance category and the second substance category, substance category and categories of depending on this substance, and species categories and genus categories of the same kind. The key sentence pattern of expression is that S is P, basing on which logic is founded. Logic plays an important role in rectifying concepts, standardizing expression and clarifying thought.

For example, a white horse not a horse (白马非马) is a well-known proposition, which has caused an endless debate in academia of China. Up to now, some scholars argue in favor of it, whose argument is that "not (非)" means "to differ from (异)". According to this argument, a white horse not a horse means that the concept "white horse" differs from the concept "horse".^[3] However, according to the original of *On White Horse* and the usual usage of "not(非)" in judgment sentences of ancient Chinese prose, "not(非)" means "not to be (不是)", therefore, "a white horse a horse (白马非马)" means "a white horse is not a horse (白马不是马)".^[4] However, "a white horse is not a horse" does not correspond with facts and logic (logic is also the reflection of facts by laws of cognition), which is admitted by most scholars. Even so, "not (非)" means "to differ from (异)", if people want to express that

“white horse” and “horse” are two different concepts completely, the expressions should be both “A white horse is not a horse (白马非马).” and “A horse is not a white horse (马非白马).” As everyone knows, “white dog” and “horse” are two different concepts completely, so the expressions are “A white dog is not a horse.” as well as “A horse is not a white dog.” However, according to Aristotle’s theory of substance, “white” is an attribute of substance “horse”, and “white” depends on and expresses “horse”, so “white horse” belongs to “horse”, thus a white horse is a horse. As “horse” is a genus concept, besides “white horse”, “black horse”, “yellow horse” and so on, are all its species concepts. Thereby, “white horse” and “horse” are relations of species and genera ontologically and logically, not two equal concepts completely, but two containing as well as differing concepts, so the proper expression to their this kind of relation is “A horse is not a white horse (马非白马).” not “A white horse is not a horse (白马非马).” Therefore, as two containing and differing concepts, “white horse” and “horse” have their relations expressed properly as “A white horse is a horse” or (and) “A horse is not a white horse”. So, “A white horse is not a horse” is false.

ii. Aristotle’s definition of substance implies that man cannot understand and hold the world beyond the cognitive relation between man and the world, which means the identity of thinking and being. In order to indicate the primacy and independence of substance, it is enough to do it that Aristotle only says “not to depend on a subject”. Why does Aristotle says “not to express a subject” in addition? The definition of matter given by Lenin also has similar expression, which is expressed as follows: “Matter is a philosophical category that marks the objective reality, which is sensed by man’s sensory organ, whose being does not depend on our sensations, and which is duplicated, taken a photograph and reflected by our sensations.”^[5] In order to indicate that matter is a category different from consciousness, expressing “Matter is a philosophical category that marks the objective reality, whose being does not depend on our sensations.” is all right. Why does Lenin express “The objective reality is sensed by man’s sensory organ, and is duplicated, taken a photograph and reflected by our sensations.” in addition? (In opinions of George Berkeley and so on philosophers, these words expressed by Lenin “The objective reality is sensed by man’s sensory organ, whose being does not depend on our sensations.” are obviously contradictory in front and

behind, or belong to dogmatism, which is beyond the topic of this paper.) In my opinion, man is a rational animal, and reason presents itself thought language by man's thinking that is a kind of cognitive activity. Only within cognitive relation can people understand and hold the world. Philosophically speaking, to found ontology needs dealing with epistemology necessarily, vice versa, to found epistemology needs dealing with ontology necessarily. However, cognitive relation is a kind of relative relation of subject and object, and in this sense, absolute objective reality is not being. In the history of philosophy, some philosophers took a firm position against materialism and converted them to idealism. One of the reasons is that materialism asserts there is a primary, absolute and objective world. George Berkeley, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer and so on philosophers, all believe that the world which people understand and hold depends on the understanding of people to it. Logically, only the world that is not understood and held by people may be an absolute objective world; nevertheless, in fact, if it is really being absolutely and objectively is not knowable, because it is not understood and held by people.

III. The Defects of Aristotle's Theory of Substance

There are also defects in Aristotle's theory of substance, the greatest one of which is the classification that which is the first substance and which the second, and the corresponding contradiction and confusion of his views on general and individual and their relations, which permeate his whole philosophy.

In my opinion, as subject both individual and general are substance, and each of them as substance has no classification of the first or the second in level and degree. As to the distinction of them as substance, individual refers to this or that thing, and general refers to a species (or genus) of things. As to the relation of them as substance, every individual contains general, whereas general resides in every individual. Both of them as individual, general expresses individual, which is a reflection of gradation series of being of substance in cognition, and does not mean that substance (individual and general) can be classified to the primary or the secondary, and which differs from that dependent categories expresses

substance categories, here dependent categories the secondary and substance categories the primary. For example, someone is man. Here, someone is substance, and man is substance as well. Then, what on earth is there someone or man primarily? Which is substance even more? When someone is, man is; on the other hand, while man is, someone is; therefore, there is no the primary or the secondary between them, and there is also not that which of them is substance even more. Furthermore, substance has no difference in level and degree, and substance is substance only relative to dependent categories which are not being as subjects. The essential characteristic of substance is independence; individual is independent as this or that thing, and general is independent as a species (or genus) of things.

As to individual and general, there is an ontological misunderstanding, which holds that individual is something of objective reality, and general is a subjective concept. In history of western philosophy, the nominalists and some materialists generally think so. In my opinion, the right understanding on them is that individual and general are both concepts and things of objective reality. The reasons that cause the misunderstanding are two hands: on the one hand, individual concept owing to be proper name is liable to be neglected its property(or form) of concept, while general concept owing to be common term is liable to be regarded as concept only; on the other hand, just through sense perception alone may people hold individual so as to regard individual as something of objective reality, while still through the rational indispensably can people grasp general so as to regard general as subjective concept. For example, Lu Xun has been dead for more than 80 years, which means as individual something of objective reality Lu Xun had already disappeared in world a long time ago; nevertheless, while Lu Xun the two words are mentioned now, why do people still know who they refer to? Just because as an individual person, Lu Xun not only had ever been something of objective reality, but also has always been a concept of proper name. Of course, individual may be known and held through sense perception alone, but in most cases it is through proper name that people know and hold individual. No doubt, usually it is through the rational (e.g. common terms) that people know and grasp general, but the objectivity of general is as the same as the one of individual.

As for individual and general, there is an epistemological misunderstanding, which holds that

cognition begins with individual, and knowing from individual to general means deepening cognition. In history of philosophy, epistemology of materialism generally thinks so. In my opinion, the right understanding on it is that cognition may begin with individual or general, and both cognition of individual endless and cognition of general endless deepen cognition. Individual as substance, its attributes, relations, models and so on are limitless; therefore, cognition of individual is also limitless, and the difficulty of deepening cognition of individual is not inferior to that of general. As general resides in every individual, deepening cognition of individual is just the entrance deepening cognition of general; conversely, deepening cognition of general also strengthens deepening cognition of individual, as every individual contains general. Usually, people know the quality of things (general) first, then know the quantity of things (individual), which deepens knowing of things. For example, people know a certain kind of metal first, then find out its specific gravity. At the same way, sometimes people know general first, then know individual; both knowing individual and knowing general deepen cognition. For instance, people see a stretch of forest (general) first, then make out there are pines (general), then again discern a pine tree (individual), and finally find out the pine oil on a pine tree (individual). By the way, sometimes animals also make out general first, then distinguish individual. For instance, the cat A is bitten by the dog B; while the dog C come in front of the cat A, the cat A is still frightened and run away, which means that the cat A may not distinguish between the dog B and the dog C (individual), but can make out them a same kind of animal (general).

The problem of general and individual and their relations, has perplexed people's cognition for a long time, which is one of the greatest puzzles in history of western philosophy. The argument of nominalism and realism in Middle Ages philosophy, the argument of empiricism and rationalism in modern philosophy, Hume's puzzle of induction, Kant's a priori synthetic judgment, and Hegel's substance being subject, may be accounted for all being caused by the problem of general and individual and their relations, or try to solve the problem. It is regret that until Hegel this puzzle had not been solved, which is one of the important academic reasons why after Hegel many people despair of or detest the traditional metaphysics, and which makes the traditional western philosophy turn to the contemporary philosophy, most

schools of which resist the traditional metaphysics. Though such turn has some active significance, it does not really solve the puzzle of philosophy; on the contrary, it makes philosophy non-philosophizing, and leads to pluralism, relativism and nihilism prevailing.

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