

SYRIANUS ON SUBSTANCE IN ARISTOTLE

Eric Omazu

Department of Philosophy,
National Open University of Nigeria

Abstract

In this paper, I intend to examine Syrianus's commentaries on Aristotle's Metaphysics regarding the nature of substance. I shall rely on Syrianus' surviving work On Aristotle's Metaphysics 3-4 & 13-14 and on the testimonies of ancient authors on some of his lost works. I establish that Syrianus' position on the idea of substance in Aristotle was a polemical work intended to establish the non-relevance of Aristotle's idea of substance in the discussion about the nature of reality. To achieve his aim, Syrianus undertook to: (1) present the extent of divergence between Aristotle's idea of substance and Platonic philosophy (2) demonstrate that the extent of the divergence demonstrate the failure of Aristotle's attack on Platonic philosophy and (3) subordinate the entire Aristotelean concept of substance as inferior to Platonic philosophy. In this paper, I will highlight Syrianus' interpretation of Aristotle's idea of substance in order to discover the extent to which his intention was realized.

Introduction

Philosophical discussions about the status of Aristotle's works polarized ancient scholars. The Pythagoreans, Platonists and Neoplatonists disagreed among themselves on the philosophical relevance of Aristotle's works. Ancient philosophers like Lucius, Eudorus, Nicostratus, Atticus, and Atthow, for instance, criticized Aristotle's works and held that they had no philosophical importance (Karamanolis 101). Among those ancients who appreciated Aristotle's work, they did so:

because they thought that Aristotle recasts Platonic doctrines in a more systematic and articulate way than Plato did in his own dialogues, and secondly because they believed that Aristotle expounds doctrines which, in their view, were prefigured already in Plato's work and which Aristotle later discusses in some details, for instance the doctrine of the

Categories. Plutarch exemplifies this tendency among Platonists. He explicitly argues, for instance, that the categories are clearly foreshadowed in Plato's Timaeus , and hence that the Aristotelian doctrine is in a sense Platonic {De an. procr. in Tim. 1023e}. Similar arguments can also be found in Alcinous' Didascalicos and the anonymous commentary on the Theaetetus, both of which attempt to trace the Aristotelian categories to various parts of Plato's work. Such arguments aim to justify their interest in this specific Aristotelian theory rather than to trace it to its origins. That is, these Platonists want to suggest that their object of study remains essentially a Platonic theory. Yet they would not have credited Plato with such a theory in the first place, unless they found it philosophically attractive and valuable in and of itself (Karamanolis 102-103).

Syrianus, one of the philosophers of Late antiquity considered Aristotle's works as important studies among ancient Platonists. He succeeded Plutarch as the head of Platonic School in Athens in 432 AD. He was originally from Alexandria where he began his philosophical studies.¹ His movement to Athens was to enroll as a student of Plutarch under whose direction he received tutelage in the then prevailing Platonist tradition. It was as head of the Platonic School in Athens that he became the teacher of Proclus with whom, over the course of two years, he read all the works of Aristotle. Some of the works credited to Syrianus include: *A Commentary on Homer*, 7 books, *On the Republic of Plato*, 4 books, *On the Theology of Orpheus*, 2 books, *On the Gods in Homer Concordance of Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato*, *On the [Chaldaean] Oracles*, 10 books, *Commentary on Aristotle's Categories*, *Commentaries on Plato's Timaeus and Parmenides*, *On Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 3-4 & 13-14.

¹ Syrianus' year of birth is approximated to 375 AD and he died in 437 AD.

While only the commentaries on *Aristotle's Metaphysics 3-4 & 13-14* survived among all the works of Syrianus, evidence of the lost ones is found in the works of other ancient writers who referenced them. Fragments of *Metaphysics 26* is found in *Commentary on Metaphysics* by Asclepius.² It is not clear whether Syrianus was the direct author of the works attributed to him or whether the works attributed to him were recorded in the course of his oral lectures on the subjects of concern. This confusion is said to have arisen following the listing, by Suda, of all the works listed for Syrianus among the works of Proclus. Thus, there is a disagreement about who authored the works. Praechter, for instance holds that Syrianus was the author whereas Zeller attributes them to Proclus. (Cardullo 113). Dillon, therefore, suggests that the only way to resolve the confusion is to assume “the possibility that all of the above works were at least edited by Proclus, perhaps only from Syrianus’ lectures. – and certain other works of commentary.” (Dillon 3).³

The Platonists’ and Neoplatonists’ interests in Aristotle have been accounted by the claim that Aristotle’s works were considered as “‘minor mysteries’ preparing the initiation of the student into the ‘major mysteries’, i.e. a reading course in Plato’s dialogues.” (O’Meara 1)⁴. The reason for this consideration, in the case of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, is that it was considered to lead to

² Asclepius. In *Aristoteles Metaphysicorum libros A-Z commentaria*, ed. M. Hayduck (Berlin, 1888) [= CAG V1/2]

³ Dillon, John. wrote the Introduction to *Syrianus: On Aristotle Metaphysics 13-14*.

⁴ O’Meara, J. Dominic wrote the Introduction to *Syrianus: On Aristotle Metaphysics 3-4*.

knowledge of divine beings which were the central topics of Pythagorean, Platonists and Neoplatonists philosophers. In his Preface to his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 13-14, Syrianus positively described Aristotle as a benefactor of mankind on the strength of his works in Logic, Ethics and Physics. It is possible that Karamanolis was prompted by this consideration into viewing Syrianus' disposition towards Aristotle's works as constructive rather than polemical stating that Syrianus' intention was to introduce Aristotle to Platonists (101). This claim is not particularly true of the *Metaphysics* where Syrianus exhibited an unmistakable attack not only on the work but also on the person of Aristotle. The reason for this is that:

Syrianus finds Aristotle seriously lacking in regard to theological science (metaphysics), to the extent in particular that he attacks the metaphysics of the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition, especially in Metaphysics books 13 and 14. Aristotle's criticisms of Pythagorean-Platonic metaphysics, Syrianus suggests, could have the effect of inducing in the student a contempt for 'divine realities and the inspired philosophy of the ancients' (80,23-5). It is therefore necessary to show that Aristotle's criticisms fail and this is what Syrianus undertakes to do in his commentary on Metaphysics books 13-14. (O'Meara 4).

Syrianus' rating of Aristotle is also visible in the manner in which he referred to him as "demonic" Aristotle. This image is contrasted with that of "divine" Platonists and Pythagoreans. The relevance of Aristotle could therefore be as an exemplification of wrong philosophical disposition that should be guarded against. It is only after weeding off the negative influence which the pupil, in this case,

Proclus, could guard against that he “was led by the master (Syrianus) into the core of Plato's mystagogic doctrine.” (Cardullo 113). This paper therefore examines Syrianus’ view on Aristotle’s understanding of substance. The paper is divided into five sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two discusses the methodology of Syrianus’ Inquiry. In section three, I undertake expository discussion of Aristotle’s idea of Substance. In Section four, I highlight the points of Syrianus’ arguments about Aristotle’s idea of substance. In section five I undertake a critical examination of Syrianus’ arguments about Aristotle’s idea of substance.

Syrianus’ Philosophical Method of Inquiry

Syrianus intended his commentaries on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* as an *elenchi*. *Elenchi* as a philosophical method of investigation entails refutation, disproof or criticism. In the history of philosophy, refutation has manifested itself in many forms. Among the Presocratics it manifested itself as critical rationalism (Popper 275). The Pre-Socratics exhibited an unprecedented distrust of human knowledge. Thus, they were critical of any form of human knowledge bearing in mind the various limitations that impede knowledge. Xenophanes, for instance asserts that:

And as for certain truth, no man has seen it, nor will there ever be a man who knows about the gods and about all the things I mention. For if he succeeds to the full in saying what is completely true, he himself is nevertheless unaware of it; and Opinion (seeming) is fixed by fate upon all things (Fragment 34).

Xenophanes places so much weight on opinion. Thus, what is regarded as knowledge is mere opinion and chance plays a role in which opinion is accepted. Thus, the role of the *elenchi* is to continuously question opinions, interrogate the ground upon which they are held. Popper regards Socrates’ method of refutation, the *elenchus*, as the height of critical rationalism in the ancient period.

Socrates applies the method by claiming not to know. He raises questions to demonstrate to his interlocutors that they also did not know. “At the start, they believe that they know all about a subject (virtue, for example); and then Socrates shows them with the help of concrete, experiential instances - of counterexamples - that they do not.” (Popper 4). The Socratic method involves the invocation of counterexamples in order to portray the nonsense of a particular opinion and in doing so effectively undermine the other’s standpoint.

This undermining of the other’s standpoint is required in order to either reinforce an existing counterexample or to birth a new one. The necessity of this manifests itself in situations where the existence of two standpoints will entail a contradiction. Thus, a refutation seeks to resolve contradictions and to make thoughts clear.

Syrianus adopts Aristotle’s method of refutation in his study of Aristotle. In his commentary of *Metaphysics* 4-5, he writes about this method and holds that Aristotle has shown that:

it is right for a philosopher to raise problems: by becoming as it were an unprejudiced and impartial arbitrator of opposing arguments, the philosopher will choose what fits better with true knowledge (theôria). Following these prefatory remarks, Aristotle first presents the problems (aporiai), after which he elaborates the difficulty of these problems, for each of them providing support for each side of the opposing arguments. (Arist. Met 3-4. 1, 15-20).

As far as Aristotle’s extant works are concerned, Syrianus followed faithfully, this method of investigation laid down by Aristotle in studying Aristotle. He would first of all identify the problem he wanted to investigate. He would state it clearly and then raise

appropriate questions about them. By way of criticism he examines the merits of Aristotle's arguments on the question under consideration. Where there are other contending views he states them and then takes his own position either in support of the contending positions or as a new thesis.

The Idea of Substance in Aristotle

Aristotle's treatment of substance (*ousia*) is nuanced. This is because two apparently inconsistent senses of the term are conveyed in two of his writings, the *Categories* and the *Metaphysics*. Starting from the 19th up to the early 20th Century AD, scholars who felt uncomfortable with the inconsistencies in the two works dismissed Aristotle's authorship of *De Categories* (Wedin 1). The idea of the Substance is first espoused in the *Categories* and it privileges individual things. "A substance—that which is called a substance most strictly, primarily, and most of all—is that which is neither said of a subject nor in a subject, e.g. the individual man or the individual horse." (Cat. 2.11-12). Aristotle identifies the characteristics that a thing must possess before it is regarded as a substance. The first of these is that it must not be kind, attribute, or mode of anything else. Secondly it must also be such that occurs naturally and not man-made. Aristotle's own example of substances is the individual man and the individual horse. Daniel, as an individual man is an example of a substance. Individual orange which you have picked from your orchard is in this way regarded as a substance. You may name this orange NGE. So NGE is a substance. One of the characteristics of primary substances conceived in this way by Aristotle is their equality. According to this, the individual man, say, Daniel has no more substance than an individual orange, say NGE, and NGE has no substance than the individual horse, say the horse of Emir of Kano. Substance conceived in this way as an individual natural entity cannot serve as predicate and is not said to be relative to

anything else. Thus, in any discussion wherever it is found the substance viewed as a naturally occurring individual entity is always treated as a subject and never as a predicate of a sentence. “We call relatives all such things as are said to be just what they are, of or than other things, or in some other way in relation to something else. (Cat. 6. 36-37).

Elsewhere still in the *Categories* Aristotle still finds the definition of substance according to which he viewed it as something that is not relative or defined in relation to another insufficient. “But if it was not adequate, and if those things are relatives for which being is the same as being somehow related to something, then perhaps some answer may be found. (8a 3 1-32). Aristotle reconsiders his position and notes that there are instances in which substance stands relative to something else.

Aristotle also made a distinction between primary substance and secondary substance. In this case, the individual man, Daniel, is a primary substance, Secondary substances is another type of substance. And it relies on the primary substance for its existence. The secondary. The secondary substances are definitive of the primary substances. They are what are said of the primary substances whenever we say what they are. Daniel is an individual man. Any definition of Daniel will speak about his being a man (his species species) and will also say that as a man he is an animal since all men belong to the genus called animal. Thus, species and genera which primary substances belong to are what is called secondary substances. This represents a movement from individual entities to their aggregates.

In the example that we have given above, both man (species) and animal (genus) are secondary substances. They are both abstractions

definitive of a particular individual man (Daniel). But there is also a gradation of them according to their relation or closeness to the primary substance. In this case, Aristotle holds that the species possesses more substance than the genus.

Of the secondary substances the species is more a substance than the genus, since it is nearer to the primary substance. For if one is to say of the primary substance what it is, it will be more informative and apt to give the species than the genus. For example, it would be more informative to say of the individual man that he is a man than that he is an animal (since the one is more distinctive of the individual man while the other is more general) ; and more informative to say of the individual tree that it is a tree than that it is a plant. Further, it is because the primary substances are subjects for all the other things and all the other things are predicated of them or are in them, that they are called substances most of all. But as the primary substances stand to the other things, so the species stands to the genus: the species is a subject for the genus (for the genera are predicated of the species but the species are not predicated reciprocally of the genera) . Hence (or this reason too the species is more a substance than the genus. (Cat. 2b7).

The preceding view of the meaning of substance taken from the *Categories* differs greatly from the meaning of the term in the *Metaphysics* XXVI. There is therefore a movement from the consideration of the substance as real objects or real beings to its consideration as essential being. In the *Metaphysics* the real individual man, for example, is no longer presented as the primary substance, it is his form, his essence that assumes that role. Thus, the individual man is now defined by his essence. These particular individual entities which were said initially to be definitive of substance and therefore of being acquires new identity as composite

beings. (Meta VIII.1 1042a26–32 1028b8–13, and VIII.1 1042a6–11.). As such they are said to be composed of matter and form. The reason why Aristotle equates substance with essence at this point is due to his thinking that when a thing is defined it is the essence or the form that is abstracted and defined. This does not include the matter which is part of the entire composite being. Reasons have been adduced on why Aristotle seems to have varied his understanding of substance in the *Categories* and the *Metaphysics*. “This supposed change of doctrine is sometimes put down to the need to provide a satisfactory account of change, one that is consistent with the belief that nothing is ever either created from nothing or wholly annihilated.” (Lowe 190). Wedin sees a unity instead of difference in the positions of the two works. He writes that:

In effect, Metaphysics Z asks in virtue of what are c-substances the sorts of things they are, that is, in virtue of what do they have the central features mentioned in, but not explained by, the Categories? Ever the anti-Platonist, Aristotle requires that it be in virtue of an internal structural component of the object itself. So it must be the form of the c-substance, its matter, or the compound of its form and its matter. Thus, the lead question of Metaphysics Z, “What is substance?” is equivalent to the question “What is the substance-of c-substances?” Aristotle will answer that the substance-of a c-substance is its form. Furthermore, because he means to ask in virtue of what, primarily, do c-substances have the features they do, form is primarily the substance-of c-substances and, hence, merits claim to the title of primary substance.

Syrianus’ Commentary on the Substance

Of Syrianus’ works, only his Commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* 3-4 & 13-14 survive in its entire form. All the others are considered

lost, and we only see traces of them in the writings of other ancient scholars. Neither his commentary on the *Categories* or the one on *Metaphysics XXVI* survive as a text. Thus, in discussing Syrianus' view of Aristotle's substance I shall rely on the fragments of those lost works, *Commentary on the Categories and on Metaphysics XXVI* cited by other ancient sources who referenced them. And of these, his Commentary is said to have many ancient testimonies giving the impression that his work on it was extensive. I will also rely on his extant works on *Aristotle's Metaphysics 3-4 & 13-14*.

Syrianus' searchlight focuses on Aristotle's apparently inconsistent claims in Cat. 6. 36-37 where substance is defined as an entity that is not relative to anything and 8a 3 1-32 where it is said to be relative to something. This makes it difficult to determine whether substance is a category of relation or not. Syrianus' intervention attempts to resolve the inconsistency involved in holding the two positions. The direct quotation of Elias on this states that:

The great critic Syrianus says that the first descriptive definition in no way differs from the second, but one is an explanation of the other. Why, in fact, are relative things all those things whose being coincides completely with being said of something else? Because, in fact, they have their being in relation to something else. And why have they their being in relation to something else? Because they, in that they are what they are, are said to be of something else. (Elias trans & cited by Cardullo 116).

Syrianus' resolution highlights the difficulty of definition which the first sense of substance in Cat. 6. 36-37 as an entity that is not relative to anything poses. This sense renders substance indefinable for even though it can be seen nothing can be said of it since it is unrelated to

anything. Thus, Syrianus views the second sense in *Cat* 8a 3 1-32 where substance is said by Aristotle to be relative to something as not conflicting but complementing the first sense. This is because in defining a thing we explain the type of thing it is, that is the class of being it relates to. While doing this the thing being defined is also meant to stand out in such a way that it is distinguishable from other entities that belong to the same class it belongs. Thus, Syrianus highlights that the question of individual and class identities were inherent in the two definitions. Thus, a substance stands out on its own as an individual entity irrespective of the class to which it belongs. Also, its understanding and definability is possible only in relation to other entities with which it shares a class.

In his Commentary on *Metaphysics* 13-14 Syrianus exhibited his disapproval of Aristotle. In his response to Aristotle's claim about the difficulty of reconciling form as a universal substance and as a particular substance. Indeed, Aristotle thought that these were irreconcilable. (Met 13, 1086a29-35), But Syrianus seized the opportunity to launch a polemic at Aristotle. He writes:

It is not surprising that they seem to you to say this, since you postulate that individuals are the only substances. They, on the other hand, rising to an almost incomprehensible superiority over your sort of substances, postulate as substances the Forms, and declare that they actually embrace universals and in a unitary mode comprehend at a higher level the causes of both universals and individuals, being neither universals in the manner of the reason principles on the level of soul nor individuals and mathematically one in accordance with the appearances of the lowest level of images in Matter. (Syrianus Met 13 160,23ff.)

Syrianus would then go further to hold that Aristotle erred in his assumption that the universals and particulars are not separable. He holds, against Aristotle, that they are separable. Aristotle had invoked Socrates to support his claim that universals and particulars are not separable. Syrianus countered that Aristotle was wrong with his presentation of Socrates. He demonstrated that Socrates did separate the two and also made distinction between the sensible and the divine while effectively subordinating the sensible to the divine.

Syrianus also inveighs against Aristotle's earliest definition of substance as individual existing entities. He holds that there is only one type of substance which by definition is non-extended. This single substance resides "in the image-making faculty (phantasia), that is extended." he holds that Aristotle was wrong in viewing the body also as a substance. A substance should be limited to just the forms and nothing more.

Conclusion

Syrianus exhibits varied noticeable attitudes to Aristotle's texts. His approach in the discussion of the *Category* is remarkably scholarly and objective. While other Neoplatonists would have been in a haste to reconcile Aristotle and Plato, Syrianus is said to have toed the critical line. "Unlike the later commentators, he does not seem anxious to reconcile Aristotle and Plato, but he reads Aristotle's text critically." (Cardullo 118). The point missed by Cardullo is that Syrianus sees no reason to reconcile Plato and Aristotle. Indeed the need for reconciliation does not arise at all in the *Categories* especially as Plato has no work comparable to it. As a result, Syrianus only read the book to understand and wrote his commentary on it as dispassionately critical as possible.

However, the commentaries on Aristotle's *Metaphysics 3-4 & 13-14* was polemical and didactical. It was polemical because Syrianus was unsparing of Aristotle. He critiqued him and pointed out what he considered were the shortcomings of his work. It was didactic because he deployed it as instrumental tool to discourage his students from what he considered was the path of false philosophy.

Works Cited

- Cardullo, R. Loredana. "SYRIANUS' LOST COMMENTARIES ON ARISTOTLE." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, no. 33, Wiley, 1986, pp. 112–24.
- Dillon, John, and Dominic J. O'Meara, translators. *Syrianus: On Aristotle Metaphysics 3-4*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.
- Dillon, John, and Dominic J. O'Meara, translators. *Syrianus: On Aristotle Metaphysics 13-14*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.
- Karamanolis, George. "Porphyry: The First Platonists Commentator on Aristotle" *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement*, no. 83, Wiley, 2004, pp. 97–120.
- Lowe, Edward J. *The Possibility of Metaphysics Substance, Identity, and Time*. Oxford: University Press, 2001
- McTaggart, John M.E. "An Ontological Idealism," in Muirhead, J. H. (ed.). London: George Allen & Unwin, 1924
- Popper, Karl Raimund. *The World of Parmenides: Essays on the Presocratic Enlightenment*. Edited by Arne Friemuth Petersen and Jørgen Mejer, Routledge, 1998.

Wedin, Michael Vernon. *Aristotle's Theory of Substance : The Categories and Metaphysics Zeta*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2000.

Xenophanes' Fragments in Freeman, Kathleen. *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*. <https://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/app/index.htm>. Accessed on 29/6/2020