

ARISTOTLE ON DISTINCTION BETWEEN SUBSTANCE AND MATTER

Laxmi Kumari

B. R. Ambedkar Bihar University, Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India

Email – laxmi555@gmail.com

Abstract: Aristotle's contribution to many fields makes him remarkable even today. He is regarded as the father of political science. Ordinarily, substance and matter are considered to be the same thing. But Aristotle has a different take on it. It has a philosophical dimension. As we explore and go deeper, we come to know the difference between these two. Later, this forms the basis of advanced concepts, which is beyond the scope of this paper. So, for now, we come to the distinction between substance and matter, in Aristotle's views.

Key Words: Substance, Matter, Form, Particular etc.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Aristotle was both a political thinker and a philosopher. So, we can see their effects on his writings. Moreover, he was hugely influenced by his great teacher Plato, who was in turn a disciple of the great thinker Socrates.

He discussed about Substance and Matter in his book 'Metaphysics' mainly, apart from discussing them in his book 'Ethics'. Generally, substance and matter are understood to be the same thing. But philosophically, they are different.

2. ON SUBSTANCE

Epistemologically, from the definition of substance it follows:

1. that substance is its own cause
2. that it is infinite
3. that it is the only substance
4. that it is eternal

e.g., idea, soul, consciousness, God, respectively have been revered as substance by different philosophers. For Aristotle, substance (ousia), i.e. what is in the fullest sense, is an individual person or thing. Or rather, he normally describes the individual as substance in the primary sense. But logically and epistemologically, the individual is less knowable than the species to which it belongs; this is because the individual is a concrete whole, a combination of form and matter; and only the formal element is constant and definable, and therefore knowable. Hence he often identifies substance with the form or essence of a thing; and this seems to be the outcome of his long and careful discussion in Book 7 of the 'Metaphysics'. He has been accused of not being quite consistent on this point.

For Aristotle as well as for Plato, the general idea is the essence of the particular or thing and may be called as substance. What Aristotle denies is that Ideas exist apart from things. The idea is inherent or immanent in the thing; it is its form, and cannot be separated from it except by abstraction. It is the essence of the particular and with it constitutes an invisible whole. Reality is a concrete thing; it contains constitutive elements, which thought distinguishes, but which do not exist apart from each other. The most important of these elements is the idea or the form, which Aristotle conceives as identical with essence or soul. Matter is merely the support, but it is indispensable support.

3. ON MATTER:

By 'matter' is understood ordinarily physical matter like iron, earth etc. But Aristotle's meaning of matter is much deeper than that. By matter Aristotle understands, that which has no shape, no quality of any type and kind. It is neither red nor green, neither heavy nor light, neither rough nor smooth. Then what is it? It appears to be as good

as Nothing. But it cannot be nothing nor ‘non-being’, for after all, it is something which has to be moulded by the form into Nature, organism and man, i.e., physical matter, life and Conscious Being. Ordinarily we think that lump of clay in the hands of a potter is without any form. But it is not so. All that one can say, of this lump of clay is that it has no ‘definite’ form. But it has no definite form, so it can be formed into a plate or ball. Similarly, primal matter has no form, but it gives way to all things by form. All that we can say is that matter without form does not exist, even when it is not non-being. But it has potentiality of becoming anything. Similarly, form is the most important aspect of any existing thing. For example, we value a chair not because it has wood, but because it has the form either of a dining-chair or of an office-chair. Hence, the form is the real thing about anything in the world. But form by itself is nothing or we can say that it does not exist. Hence neither form nor matter by itself exists. What exists is ‘formed matter’, i.e., matter and form together inseparably. A form is the universal. For example, redness or greenness is universal. But greenness apart from the green thing does not exist.

The second reason why ‘matter’ cannot mean physical matter is that matter is relative to form. A physical matter remains the same e.g., iron remains iron no matter in whichever, shape or size into which it is put. Again, by ‘form’ is not meant mere physical shape. For example, a rectangle remains the same shape, no matter in how many things it is found. But form means much more than shape or size. The reason is that form and matter are relative terms. What is matter in one relation becomes form in another relation. For example, wood is matter in relation to the chair, which is its form. But ‘wood’ is again form in relation to growing tree. From another stand one can say that matter is bare possibility of becoming its ‘various form’. For example, ‘wood’ is the possibility which can be actualized into chair, table, doors or windows. In the same manner, ‘form’ may mean physical shape e.g., shaping the wood into planks. Again, it may mean thought, or, even an object of thought as distinct from sense. It also may mean the plan of the structure of a thing which can be put in the form of a mathematical formula. ‘Form’ also may mean the inner holistic organization e.g., the tendency within a fertilized egg to become a chick. It also may mean function for which a thing is made e.g., the form of a knife means the function of cutting a thing. It also at times means merely the efficient and final causes together, e.g., the final cause in the production of an art. Thus the concepts of ‘matter and form’ are fluid and relative.

4. CONCLUSION:

All non-relativist philosophical systems acknowledge substances in the most generic sense of that term, for that is only to acknowledge that there are some fundamental entities in their system. Most, if not all, philosophers acknowledge that we cannot function without using substance concepts in the narrower sense, for the notion of an enduring particular or individual substance is essential to our making sense of the world as we live in it. For Aristotle as well as for Plato, the general idea is the essence of the particular or thing and may be called as substance. What Aristotle denies is that Ideas exist apart from things. The idea is inherent or immanent in the thing; it is its form, and cannot be separated from it except by abstraction. It is the essence of the particular and with it constitutes an invisible whole. Reality is a concrete thing; it contains constitutive elements, which thought distinguishes, but which do not exist apart from each other. The most important of these elements is the idea or the form, which Aristotle conceives as identical with essence or soul. Matter is merely the support, but it is indispensable support.

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