

## PRESENTATION

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At the beginning of book IV of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argues that “The term ‘being’ is used in various senses”.<sup>1</sup> Speaking like this he refers to the plurality of kinds of beings indicated in the *Categories*: Substance, Quantity, Quality, Relation, Place, Time, Posture, Position, State or Condition, Action, Passion.<sup>2</sup> According to Aristotle, the logical-linguistic variety revealed by these categories shows that the real world is complex and multifaceted, multiform and multidimensional, though not anarchic or unstructured because of this. In actual fact, the category of substance acts as the predicative subject of all the other categories. This condition means that substance expresses the “what is” of the thing, while the other categories appear as predicates of the substance because they signify not what is in itself, but what is inherent to the subject. So, for example, if we say “this man runs” or “this man is white”, the term “man” indicates the substance. At the same time, an action such as running or a quality such as whiteness are undoubtedly something real but unable to exist independently of the subject of which they are respectively an action and a quality.<sup>3</sup> The logical-ontological structure revealed by the categories became one of the cornerstones of mediaeval ontology. Through the crucial mediation of Severinus Boethius, translator and commentator of the *Categories* and of Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, the mediaeval Latin tradition consolidated the logical and ontological difference between substance and the other kinds of being, defining the latter as “accidents” (*accidentia*).

To the ontology conveyed by the *Categories*, Aristotle, starting from *Physics*, adds another crucial element: the *hylomorphic* vision of substance. This means that as a subject, substance is not only the principle of inherence but also the stable support of every change involving accidents. Substances, however, are also generated and corrupted. This leads Aristotle to admit the necessity of a subject (*substratum*), which underlies the substance and consequently its accidents. Aristotle calls such a subject of generation and corruption “matter”,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, IV, 2, 1003a34.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Categories*, 4, 1b25-29.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, 2-3, 1a17-1b24.

and the correlative principle that bestows matter with the essential being of the substance “form”.<sup>4</sup>

Several questions arose from this perspective, creating an extremely fertile debate within the Aristotelian Tradition. The questions were: what the ontological status of accidents was; whether they were all real beings or, on the contrary, entities of reason; if God had the power to separate accidents from substance without falling into contradiction, namely, the self-contradiction whereby he destroyed the effect of his own act of Creation; and what the proper subject of accidents might be – whether it be the concrete substance (this man or this horse) or it be matter.

This special issue of «Acta Philosophica», entitled *Substance and Accidents: Views and Developments from the Late Middle Ages to the Modern Age*, provides several contributions dealing with how some prestigious authors, between the end of the Middle Ages and the Modern Age, provided a series of theoretical innovations and conceptual transformations, destined to have a significant impact upon future ways of dealing with these philosophical issues. The first article is that of Joël Biard, entitled *La matière est-elle le sujet des accidents? Un débat au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, which highlights how important the question over the determination of the subject of accidents – in the context of the generation and corruption of a substance – was for the physical debate of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. Biard presents the solutions proffered by Nicole Oresme, Albert of Saxony and Marsilius of Inghen in their *Commentaries on De generatione et corruptione*. None of these authors had yet denied the validity of the typically Aristotelian thesis, according to which the proper subject of accidents was substance, not matter; however, they began to claim that the opposite thesis may have a certain degree of plausibility. It was to be Blaise de Parme who, taking up again the conceptual constructs adopted by his predecessors, came to defend the thesis that matter was the immediate subject of all accidental forms.

The second article *L'Un sans l'être: métaphysique, méontologie et infinité chez Nicolas de Cues*, was written by Hervé Pasqua. He underlines the discontinuity existing between the ontology of Aristotle and that of Nicholas of Cusa. Assuming, to some degree, the inheritance of Meister Eckhart and in his own peculiar way, Nicholas of Cusa seems to have conceived the One as Non-being, while no longer identifying the First Principle with the Supreme, but placing it beyond (or without) Being. According to Pasqua, within this perspective, the ontological status of the entities of creation was not at all that of real things that exist in themselves as finite beings, since they did not receive any real being from God. Therefore, Pasqua considers Nicholas of Cusa's thought

<sup>4</sup> Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, I, 7, 189b30-191a22; ID., *Metaphysics*, VIII, 1, 1042a32-1042b8; ID., *On Generation and Corruption*, I, 4, 319b25-320a2-5.

incompatible with the possibility of attributing to the entities of creation the ontological consistency that Aristotle attributed to concrete things.

Yitzhak Melamed's essay *The Banishment of Accidents from Spinoza's Paradise* shows how Spinoza maintained the notion of substance while abandoning the reference to accidents altogether. Suggestively, his contribution is rendered as the reconstruction of the dramatic story of the fall of accidents from "Spinoza's paradise". Melamed remarks that Spinoza maintained the philosophical reference of accidents in his works up until 1663, while, in his mature works, he produced a systematic elimination of accidents from his ontology. According to Melamed, Spinoza made this theoretical choice to avoid two serious ambiguities which seemed to be involved in the notion of accident. The first concerned the difficulty of establishing whether accidents were separable or not from their subject; the second regarded the difficulty of considering accidents as universals or particulars. Spinoza clearly dismissed the notion of accident in favour of that of mode. According to him, modes cannot be without substance; modes cannot be shared nor considered as universals.

Antonio Petagine's *Congedarsi da Aristotele: John Locke e le nozioni di sostanza e accidente* provides an analysis of Locke's view concerning the notion of substance and accident. The article starts by reflecting on Locke's adhesion to the corpuscular theory and his consequent denial of three cornerstones of the typical scholastic approach to substance: the theory of hylomorphism; the multidimensional ontology of the categories; and the consideration of individual substance as the primary entity. Then, the article seeks to show how the Lockean doctrine of substance appears consistent with these denials. Locke's notion of *substratum* does not correspond to a sort of undifferentiated real thing, a bearer of qualities, as an important part of contemporary scholars and philosophers believed. According to Petagine, Locke's *substratum* is, rather, a conceptual operator, with which our mind codifies a crucial feature of our experience: certain qualities (what Aristotelians call "accidents") are perceived constantly together.

The last article is that of Dario Sacchi and is entitled *Il "rapporto della sostanzialità" in Hegel*. First, Sacchi considers the Hegelian figure of the Thing, and its relation with its properties. Then he considers substance and accidents as presented in the final chapter of the *Doctrine of the Essence* in the *Science of Logic*. The Hegelian consideration of substance and accidents, has a primary dialectical target, that is, Kant's account of substance. Hegel, however, deals also with the doctrine of the substance proposed by some major Modern philosophers like Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Locke. Besides, he seeks to reconceive the substance/matter alternative for what is the subject of the accidents and the problems arising from the Platonic (and mystical) conception of Absolute Being. On the one hand, Hegel conceives the philosophical system of Kant as a synthesis of Modern thought. Consequently, according to

him, the Kantian doctrine of substance considers the diverse determinations of real beings as something falling outside of the reflection on the “Thing in itself”, which acts only as an undetermined base of the consciousness and not as a real ground for the movement and multiplicity of reality. So, Hegel embraces the opposite idea, identifying the real determination of the substance (the “Thing”) in the properties of the substance itself. On the other hand, the substance, in the movement of the accidents, produces itself and is the cause of its own accidents. Kant maintained the “substance-accidents” relation only as a category of the Intellect in order to distinguish the object of possible experience from the “Thing in itself”, conceived simply as an amorph, unknowable and inert base. This initial move of the Kantian argument reveals its final end, namely reserving a space for human freedom. Sacchi explains that Hegel rejects such a Kantian foundation of the possibility of freedom, but maintains the possibility of conceiving substance as a Subject that, avoiding the static version of Spinoza’s Monism and the contradiction of Leibniz’s multiple Monadology, might act as the non-necessary cause of its effect and, therefore, as an Absolute Subject.

The transformations and innovations highlighted by these contributions help reveal that Aristotelian notions like substance, matter, essence and accidents were not simply abandoned by authors who, between the Late Middle Ages and the Modern Age, questioned the Aristotelian doctrine of substance and accidents. Rather than ridding themselves of them, they proposed a radical reform of these notions, relocating them in new perspectives, whose contours are thoroughly distinct from the original Aristotelian mode of thought. We hope that the historical and theoretical inquiry here presented may constitute a basis for further research regarding the legacy of the classical and modern doctrine of substance and accidents in contemporary Analytical and Continental philosophy.