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Being in a Subject: Aristotle's Theory of Properties in the Categories

In the *Categories*, Aristotle distinguishes between two ways in which something can be said to have a property, that which is *said or predicated of* a subject and that which is *in* a subject, and these correspond to two metaphysically distinct ways in which something has properties.¹ The focus of this paper will be on the latter sort of property possession, and the debate regarding the nature of properties that are *in* subjects. Much of this debate, as such, centers around the definition Aristotle provides at 1a24-25: “By ‘in a subject’ I mean what is in something, not as a part, and cannot exist separately from what it is in.”² It is the latter conjunct, referred to as the inseparability requirement, that has spurred the debate. Clearly, Aristotle is establishing the non-Platonic nature of this category of properties, that is, that they are metaphysically dependent for their existence on the substances in which they inhere; however, it is unclear what the precise nature and consequences of this dependence are, viz., whether Aristotle’s definition requires these properties to be taken as tropes, i.e., unrepeatable, individual, particular instances, or as instantiations of repeatable, but non-Platonic universals. In this paper I will assess some of the views put forward in the midst of this debate, and conclude with a defense of one particular view offered for a trope theory interpretation of 1a24-25.

The traditional view interprets the inseparability requirement as expressing the claim that the property *in* the subject cannot exist at all without *that* subject in which it inheres, and thus,

¹ To clarify, these are *not* two distinct ways of having *any* properties: some of a thing’s properties are *predicated of* it, while others are *in* it; none are both *predicated of* and *in* it. Some properties are only *predicated of* subjects, others can only be *in* subjects, but there are some that can be *predicated of* some things and *in* others. It is generally agreed that properties that are *predicated of* a subject are those that are essential to it, while those that are *in* it are accidental. I will favor the use of “*predicated of*” over “*said of*” only because, for contemporary usage, the former is more familiar to us regarding the meaning of these phrases.

² Translation from J. L. Ackrill.

properties are tropes. This is to say that the phrase “what it is in” falls within the scope of the quantifier “something” in the first conjunct; in other words, the definition is understood to mean that there exists a particular thing *in* which a particular instance of that property (a trope) inheres, and that that particular property cannot exist separately from that particular something *in* which it inheres. A consequence of the trope theory of properties is that, no matter how seemingly identical in color two pieces of paper are, they are not really *the same color* at all, for the color that inheres in each is a trope belonging only to the single piece of paper in which it inheres.³ Arguably, the apparent absurdity disappears once a proper analysis of “the same color” is offered, and the fine-grained metaphysical distinctions blurred by such a phrase are sorted out.

G. E. L. Owen⁴, against the traditional⁵ view, argues for a different reading of the inseparability requirement that does not construe Aristotle as a trope theorist:

It can indeed be read as saying “Z is in something...and Z could not exist without this thing to contain it”, but it can equally well be read as saying “Z is in something...and Z could not exist without something to contain it”. That is, the phrase “separately from what it is in” can be taken generally, in a way that is matched by the familiar phrasing of Aristotle’s other complaints at Plato’s separation of the universal.⁶

While the definition certainly *can* be read this way, one might well wonder why it *ought* to be. One point Owen makes is to claim that it could not be the case that the existence of, say, ‘white’ is dependent upon the particular white things that in fact exist⁷, since surely there might have been things other than those that actually exist⁸, and they would no more or less be instances of

³ Stranger still is that two separate brushstrokes from the same jar of paint are not the same color! And so on...

⁴ Owen, G. E. L. “Inherence.” *Phronesis* 10 (1965), pp. 97-105.

⁵ Owen consistently refers to the traditional view as “the dogma”, but I shall not promote his abusive terminology.

⁶ Owen, pp. 104.

⁷ Presently exist? It is well worth noting the metaphysical tangle we might get into when wondering what implications temporality has on the issue. But only to note, since such is far beyond the scope of this paper.

⁸ Owen, pp. 104.

‘white’.⁹ I think the thrust of his point here is to say that there must be something other than the actual instances of ‘white’ that establish there being instances *at all* of ‘white’, even though it must still be true that ‘white’ as a property does not exist at all without *some instances or other*, and consequently, that uninstantiated properties are impossible.

This argument is directly related to an earlier one in which he argues that the traditional view implies that, while tropes of color inhere only in a single subject and depend for their existence on that object alone, the species and genera of color in Aristotle’s categories do not.¹⁰ And this contradicts what Aristotle says about color at 2b1-3: “color is in body and therefore also in an individual body; for were it not in some individual body it would not be in body at all.” Essentially, Owen draws the conclusion that Aristotle has established that the species and genera of properties do not depend for their existence on the *particular* subjects *in* which their instances inhere, and so can exist apart from *them*, even though they are *in* them; and yet, they *do* depend on the existence of the species and genera of the subjects *in* which the instances inhere, since uninstantiated properties are impossible, and thus, *do* depend for their existence on some particular subjects or other. Owen does little to flesh out this theory, but such is the plight of any metaphysician who endeavors to argue for non-Platonic universals, and the impossibility of uninstantiated properties. Regardless, Owen’s point is worth considering.

A second challenge that Owen makes against the traditional view regards the *denial* of some property to a thing. If I say that, of all of the doors in my house, none of them are red, I am not saying that each one of them lacks some particularly distinct property that is different from

⁹ I should say that in Owen’s essay, he speaks of the existence of ‘man’ not being dependent on the particular men that exist, since other men could have existed. It is curious why Owen uses this example, since ‘man’ is a species of substance, that is, a secondary substance, and is not the sort of property that is *in* its subjects, but is *predicated of* them. I won’t explore whether this skews his point, but I won’t dismiss that a deeper exploration into the metaphysical landscape might find significant differences between substances and non-substances in this respect. In the effort of being charitable, I think his basic point regarding modality is worth consideration for its plausibility.

¹⁰ Owen, pp. 100.

the particular property that each of the others lacks; rather, I am denying from all of them something singular in nature.¹¹ If we take it that a property such as ‘red’ exists only insofar as there being some particular instance of it, in the sense that we can only speak of *that* red in *that* thing, then to deny that my door is red, I must be denying some particular instance of red that is particular only *to it*, the problem being that no such instance of red exists. In the generalized statement of denying the property of red to all of the doors in my house, I would have to be denying a different thing from each, but, it is claimed, this is clearly absurd. If so, then denial should be no different from affirmation, and thus, in affirming that all of the doors are in fact white, I affirm of them all the *same* property, not to each a particularly distinct instance of ‘white’. Owen does not himself argue for the principle that, “what holds good of denying holds good of asserting, too,”¹² except in drawing up a similar example, in which the reader is supposed to find the absurdity obvious. Again, I think his point is well taken for consideration, even if the validity of the argument is still in question. These two main points, of the current and previous paragraphs, seem to me to be Owen’s strongest positive claims in support of the alternative reading of the inseparability requirement, and for thus attributing a theory of non-Platonic universals to Aristotle instead of a trope theory.

In opposition to Owen’s argument, R. E. Allen¹³ argues for the trope theory: “an item present in an individual subject is itself individual, and numerically distinct from items present in other individual subjects.”¹⁴ Allen responds directly to the first of Owen’s arguments above, specifically in regards to Aristotle’s statement at 2b1-3 that color, as a genus, is *in* body, and thus, *in* an individual body. The solution Allen provides is that the sense of “*in*” that Aristotle

¹¹ Owen, pp. 102.

¹² Owen, pp. 102.

¹³ Allen, R. E. “Individual Properties in Aristotle’s Categories.” *Phronesis* 14 (1969), pp. 31-39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 31.

means when he states that the genus of color is *in* an individual body is not precisely the same technical sense he means when speaking of particular instances of properties being *in* their subjects. “Why should not Aristotle assume that if S is predicable of x, and x is present in y, S is in y? The sense of ‘in’ here differs between its first and second occurrences, but the senses are related, in that the first must obtain if the second is assertible.”¹⁵ The suggestion is vague, and Allen makes no attempt to explicate how it fits in with the trope theory he is arguing for, rather than supporting Owen’s position.

Allen attacks Owen’s interpretation of the inseparability requirement, claiming that his interpretation cannot explain the special relationship between a property and the subject *in* which it inheres that accounts for the inherence. If we suppose that ‘white’ is *in* this piece of paper, then it is not *predicable of* it, and it cannot exist apart from anything. However, both of these conditions obtain whether or not ‘white’ is in *this particular* piece of paper, and thus, nothing about the definition that Owen provides can account for that special relationship between a property and the thing possessing it.¹⁶ Allen may be right about this, but certainly not as his argument stands, for his mention of the property is ambiguous between the individual instance and the species, which is something Owen does *not* ignore and does discuss,¹⁷ even if his discussion is not itself entirely clear either. Given Aristotle’s distinction between the individual instance of a property, such as his mention of “the individual white” at 1a27, and the species and genus to which it belongs, disambiguation is crucial, and it may be that both Owen and Allen have not sufficiently sorted out the matter—Owen attempts to, but Allen seems to do no more than handwaving. As a final note, Allen points out that Owen’s view suffers from the Dilemma

¹⁵ Allen, pp. 35.

¹⁶ Allen, pp. 36.

¹⁷ Owen, pp. 98-99.

of Participation, to which any theory of universals is prey and must tackle. Since this is not a problem specific only to Owen's theory, and since it is a rather serious problem for this type of theory in general, I shall not, for purposes of length, treat of it here.

Barrington Jones¹⁸ offers criticisms of both Owen's theory and the traditional view. Jones points out that Owen's overall interpretation of *being in a subject* can account for Aristotle's claims that color *qua* genus is *in* a body, while the traditional view cannot, but at the cost of an unnatural reading of 1a24-25. Owen's interpretation implies that, "when [this page] ceases to be white, it is quite possible for the individual instance of white that is in this page to continue to exist, provided, that is, that some other object is this specific shade of white."¹⁹ While Jones here expresses what is attractive about the trope theory, i.e., avoiding the seemingly absurd notion that particular instances of properties can persist while the objects in which they inhere cease, I find this to be a slightly misleading characterization of Owen's theory, but one that happens to have the consequence of successfully pointing out a confusion in Owen's essay.

What is misleading is the use of the phrase, "the individual instance of white" in reference to a property that continues to exist, and is also, presumably, that which is shared amongst other objects in possession of the same property. The phrase so used begs the question against a theory of universals in general. It is unlikely that Owen would accept (or he shouldn't) that an *instance* of white continues to exist when the page ceases, for on such a theory as his, technically speaking, the nature of an instance of some property is not analogous to that of the opposing theory, and thus, they cannot be spoken of in the same way.²⁰ Owen might rather

¹⁸ Jones, Barrington. "Individuals in Aristotle's Categories." *Phronesis* 17 (1972), pp. 107-123.

¹⁹ Jones, pp. 110.

²⁰ Such a distinction may not be helpful in deciding the outcome of the overall debate in metaphysics regarding the nature of properties, but it is a careful distinction to make both in being charitable and clear on what each theory precisely claims, and particularly in hopes of avoiding merely talking past one another in the debate.

accept (or he should) that, once the page ceases to exist, the property of white, *that* white that *was in* the page, *no longer inheres* in it. In other words, on a theory of universals, the analog of an individual instance of a property is the *inherence* or *inhering in* some object of a universal property, which is ontologically more akin to an event than to an individual entity. This may not allay other objections to the theory, especially regarding the ontological status of universals themselves, but it does clarify how one ought to understand the theory.

Jones's criticism brings out a confusion in Owen's essay at which he tries to make sense of Aristotle's references to particular individuals of color. I think the confusion becomes quite clear when one considers how Owen has tried (or might try) to respond to the kind of criticism that Jones launches against him as stated above. Ultimately, his discussion leaves us with no clearer sense of the nature of individuals under the genus of color than which we started with in Aristotle's own text. He uses the example of a particular shade of pink: "Call the specimen shade 'vink'. Then vink is an individual in the category of quality, analogous to Socrates in the category of substance."²¹ Owen is trying to establish that, as an individual, vink is not predicable *of anything*, for then it could not be an individual at all, but it can be *in* a subject. Owen makes his analogy between vink and Socrates very clear: "Socrates is a particular specimen of man and vink is a particular specimen of the colour pink."²² However, he seems to betray his own analogy, and I find it hopelessly ambiguous whether vink is an individual actually analogous to an individual man, or vink is a specific shade (class) of pink that cannot be further divided: "vink, or its name, is not predicable of any less general shade of pink. To say 'That shade is vink' is to name the shade, not to bring it under a wider class of colours: vink is a wholly determinate specimen of its class"; "To say that vink is a particular colour is to say that it, or its

²¹ Owen, pp. 98.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 99.

name, cannot be predicated: it is not to say that it cannot be found in more than one subject. And particular shade of pink is of course reproducible.”²³ The problem lies in his uses of “shade” and “specimen”, for they do not seem to express the same meaning: the latter clearly means a particular individual, but the word “shade” when used for a particular color does not mean an individual, but only a more finely discriminating class of color. What is worse is his use of “specimen shade”, for it would seem that one would choose to use the word “specimen” when one meant to say that something is a specimen of some shade of pink, that is, an instance of it. Again, I think Owen’s analysis here leaves us with as much confusion as we started with.

Jones presents a rather unique argument²⁴ for the trope theory based entirely on his interpretation of what Aristotle means by phrases such as, “individual and numerically one” used frequently throughout the *Categories*. Pulling from others of Aristotle’s works, Jones interprets Aristotle to be using a notion of number based on counting, that is, a notion of number understood to be “a divisible plurality of objects.”²⁵ A number, as a measured aggregate of things (of a particularly specifiable kind), is divisible into parts, and specifically, small enough parts, that are indivisible and serve as the units by which, being countable, the aggregate is measured. “This is why [Aristotle] often says that a number consists of ones,”²⁶ for each is individually countable, one by one, since each is an individual and indivisible unit. Under this notion of number, the phrase “numerically one” can be understood to mean that which is indivisibly individual and unitary, and a single part of a measurable plurality. In other words, an individual that is numerically one is actually a single member of a class of a kind of thing. And

²³ Owen, pp. 99.

²⁴ For reasons of space in this short paper, I will not be able to do his argument justice with a fulfilling explanation, but have to instead resort of a rather superficial gloss of his theory.

²⁵ Jones, pp. 111.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 112.

so, to speak of an individual property, such as “the individual white,” is to speak of a member of the class of things with that property.

But individually countable members of a class require that such members are, in fact, individuated; for otherwise, they could not be distinct so as to be counted apart from each other. There is no question as to whether primary substances are individuated from one another, since Aristotle establishes them to be so by definition at 3b11-12: “As regards the primary substances, it is indisputably true that each of them signifies a certain ‘this’; for the thing revealed is individual and numerically one.” The relevant question for the issue at hand is how properties *in a subject* are individuated. For some type of property *in* a subject, there is nothing about *that individual instance* of the property in and of itself that individuates it from an *individual instance* of the same type of property *in another* subject; in fact, their being instances of the same property would make them indistinguishable from each other in and of themselves. What distinguishes them from each other is the fact of their being in separate, individual substances; as Jones states, “the basis of the individuality of non-substantial individuals is to be sought in the individuality of the substantial individuals in which they are present.”²⁷ It follows from this, he argues further, that a non-substantial individual’s being *that* particular individual that it is, is dependent on its being *in* the substantial individual it is in, and therefore, that a numerically distinct non-substantial individual cannot exist apart from the substance *in* which it is, “for what it was that made it that individual property was precisely the fact that it was in that substance.”²⁸

While I have no specific argument against Jones’s theory, since this would rely on scrutinizing his references to others of Aristotle’s works with regards to his understanding of ‘number’ in both those places and in the *Categories*, I find his position, as it stands, to be

²⁷ Jones, pp. 115.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 115.

plausible for consideration. However, Jones seems to do little to flesh out how his trope theory answers to many of the traditional concerns and questions about properties in the *Categories*.

What seems to me to be significantly lacking in all of these attempts to explicate Aristotle's theory of properties that are *in* subjects is that there is little or no attention paid to the contrasting way in which subjects possess properties, that is, by being *predicated of*, and the distinctions and relations between these two ways in which substances are said to have properties. Insight into one would surely provide some insight into the other, for together, they form part of a general metaphysical picture. It is for this reason that I find the arguments of James Duerlinger²⁹ most convincing, for he explicates the nature of both *predicated of* and *being in a subject*, and carefully lays out precisely how they coherently work together in a general metaphysical theory. Duerlinger lists three reasons Aristotle might have for making his distinction between predication and inherence: (i) to explain why it is appropriate to name things by only some universals and not others, (ii) "in the first a particular is mentioned and the nature or part the nature of that particular is specified, while in the second a particular is mentioned and the nature or part of the nature of another particular *which is present in it* is specified,"³⁰ and (iii) "universals *predicated of* primary substances are not particulars existing apart from each and every primary substance of which they are predicated, and universals *present in* primary substances are simply universals *predicated of* particulars which cannot exist apart from the primary substances in which each of these particulars is present."³¹

²⁹ Duerlinger, James. "Predication and Inherence in Aristotle's *Categories*." *Phronesis* 15 (1970), 179-203. For purposes of length, I will not lay out in detail the portion of his theory regarding the nature of predication, but I will focus only on inherence.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 181.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 182.

Duerlinger takes note that in 1a20-1b9, in Aristotle's list of the different kinds of things, (a) and (c) are universals while (b) and (d) are particulars; furthermore, from his examples, it is clear that Aristotle claims that particulars and universals can each be present *in* both particulars and universals.³² The central claim of his argument is that there is a primary sense of *in* that Aristotle defines at 1a24-25, and that there are other, derivative uses of *in* that seem to violate the definition, but in fact, do not, so long as it is made clear how those uses derive from the definition. The violation that seems to be frequently made by Aristotle is of the inseparability requirement; but Duerlinger argues, via the derivative connections between these different uses of "*in*", that they are not violations of the requirement, and rather can be shown to depend on it. The conclusion is that all universals can be shown to depend for their existence on the primary substances, and thus, that the trope theory is correctly applied to Aristotle's metaphysics.

There are four different uses of "*in*" that Duerlinger lists, the first of which is the one that Aristotle defines.³³ In the following, "*a*" and "*b*" are particulars, while "*A*" and "*B*" are universals; each of the senses of "*in*" is subscripted according to the number by which it is listed in order to distinguish it from the other three.

(1) *a* is $in_1 b$ if and only if neither *a* nor *b* is predicated of anything and *a* is not a part of *b* and *a* is inseparable from *b*.

(2) *A* is $in_2 b$ if and only if *A* is predicated of *a* and *a* is $in_1 b$.

(3) *a* is $in_3 B$ if and only if *B* is predicated of *b* and *a* is $in_1 b$.

(4) *A* is $in_4 B$ if and only if for some *x* and for some *y*, *A* is predicated of *x* and *B* is predicated of *y* and *x* is $in_1 y$.³⁴

Duerlinger provides the additional element of the nature of inseparability:

³² Duerlinger, pp. 183.

³³ Recall that Allen had offered at least a second use of "*in*" as a solution to a problem posed by Owen against the trope theory. Allen's failure was in making any effort beyond mere assertion to explicate some different but related sense of "*in*".

³⁴ Duerlinger, pp. 185.

(6) If a primary substance in₁ which a particular is present did not exist, then the particular in₁ it could not exist.³⁵

As is clear, (2)-(4), in relying on (1), rely on the inseparability requirement of Aristotle's original definition; but it is only when a property (*qua* a particular) is in₁ a subject that that property is directly dependent for its existence on *that* subject. Since each of the other senses of "in" derive from in₁, there will always be a relation, either direct or indirect, of the dependence of the existence of a property (whether particular or universal) on *some* particular subject. In this way, Duerlinger's analysis of *being in a subject* fully captures and supports the trope theory of properties, but in addition, it manages to capture what Owen tried to argue for what he saw as obvious, that is, that a universal is not dependent for its existence on the particular individuals in which the property in fact inheres, since different individuals in possession of the property might have existed instead of those that actually do, and the universal would still exist nonetheless. In other words, this analysis successfully captures both kinds of existential dependence, dependence on particular individual(s) and that on some individual(s) or other.

According to these four related senses of inherence, we can make sense of the various examples Aristotle makes, such as color being *in* body, and *in* an individual body, that is, how a universal is *in* another universal as well as a particular of that universal. Color is in₄ body, and so, by inference using (2), color is in₂ an individual, particular body; further, by way of (1), we can see that color does depend for its existence on being *in* particular individual bodies, for otherwise, as Aristotle claims, there would be no color at all.³⁶ But since the inference here began with (4), which does not make mention of specific individuals in which the universals inhere, but rather picks out *any* existing individuals in which those universals inhere, the reliance

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 187.

³⁶ Duerlinger, pp. 186.

of the universal color is not tied to specific individuals, but whatever individuals happen to exist in which some particular color inheres. Furthermore, we can also see how this analysis satisfies the important feature of a particular instance of a property as clearly picked out by Jones's theory, namely, that what individuates a particular instance of a property (non-substantial individual) is the fact that it inheres in a particular substance, and that individuality is entirely dependent on the existence of that individual substance and the presence of that property in it.

The relevant role of predication for Aristotle, as Duerlinger points out, is that of defining the essential features of a particular thing. As Aristotle states at 2a20, "if something is said of a subject both its name and its definition are necessarily predicated of the subject;" and further, at 2a29-30, "as for things which are in a subject, in most cases, neither the name nor the definition is predicated of the subject." In other words, predication has to do with the *nature* of a thing, as briefly pointed out above in (ii) of the reasons Duerlinger gives for why Aristotle may have needed to distinguish predication and inherence. What is *predicated of* something, whether stated as a particular or a universal, is to say *what it is*, either in part³⁷ or in whole, that is, what defines it as distinct from other things. Since *what a thing is* applies to both substances and non-substances, since both kinds of things require their own definitions, then properties are predicated of both substances and non-substances. As such, predication plays an implicit role in inherence, as Duerlinger describes the latter, "a particular is mentioned and the nature or part of the nature of another particular *which is present in it* is specified."³⁸ From this, and from the four senses of "*in*" listed above, predications of non-substantial individuals not only ultimately rely on the existence of primary substances, those *in* or *in*₁ which the non-substantial individuals are,

³⁷ By "in part" I do not mean that one picks out a part of the thing, but that one picks out one or more essential *aspects* of a thing amongst many without picking out all of them, for picking out all of them would say what it is in whole.

³⁸ Duerlinger, pp. 181.

but such predications also reveal something about those primary substances. It is in this way that we can begin to make sense of such statements in Aristotle as what we find at 2a35 and 2b5-6: “All the other things are either said of the primary substances as subjects or in them as subjects...if the primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist.”

While there is more to Duerlinger’s theory to unfold, I have provided at least enough to demonstrate how he manages to fully capture and carefully explicate many of the positive features that various philosophers have offered for the trope theory as a correct explanation of Aristotle’s theory of properties in the *Categories*. But furthermore, Duerlinger’s theory is also able to capture what Owen originally found the trope theory to be lacking, and thus, being able to solve the problems Owen posed against the trope theory. Duerlinger is able to make sense of how it is that a property (*qua* universal) continues to exist despite that a particular individual in which the property inheres ceases to exist; in other words, that universals are dependent for their existence on individual subjects only insofar as *some subjects or other* exist in which those properties inhere. Since Duerlinger is able to coherently talk about universals, he is able to respond to Owen’s challenge regarding the denial of some property from things without committing himself to contradiction. Lastly, Duerlinger makes an effort in trying to make sense of both predication and inherence in Aristotle’s theory, how they fit together and work together, rather than merely focusing on one or the other, as if they could be understood distinct from each other.