CHAPTER SIX

ALEXANDER OF APHRODISIAS ON PARTICULARS
AND THE STOIC CRITERION OF IDENTITY

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One could claim that for an Aristotelian philosopher, particulars are not a philosophical problem—at least not an epistemological one. For an Aristotelian philosopher daily confronted with Stoic theories of Providence and individuation, however, this was a haunting question. After all, what did Aristotle have to say on the status of the particulars not \textit{qua} belonging to a species, but \textit{qua} pure singularities taking place within the world? I would like to show that even if Alexander is too much of an Aristotelian to have a real theory of the particular, his reaction to his historical context leads him to new insights on this topic. These insights, in turn, constitute a starting point out of which Avicenna and Leibniz developed their ideas about how fatalism could be avoided without giving up the principle that the entire effect corresponds to its full cause. I will try to sketch, in the following pages, the main phases of this long and intricate story.

1. \textit{Some preliminaries: Dexippus on the \textit{idios} ποιόν}

The problem of the particulars in the Aristotelian tradition seems to me best understood if we start with a strange passage taken from Porphyry’s \textit{Isagoge} (7.16–19). I quote Jonathan Barnes’ recent translation (Barnes 2003, 8):

\begin{quote}
... a most general item is said of everything under it—genera and species and individuals; a genus which comes before a most special item is said of all the most special items and of the individuals; an item which is only a species is said of all the individuals; and an individual is said of one only of the particulars.
\end{quote}

\footnote{All my thanks to R.W. Sharples, who invited me to present this paper at the Seventh Keeling Colloquium, and to Peter Adamson, Riccardo Chiaradonna, Richard Sorabji and Kevin Tracy for helpful discussions on different aspects of it. The errors are mine.}
In the translation, “individual” stands for τὸ ἄτομον and “particular” for τὸ κατὰ μέρος. The doctrine expressed here has already struck readers as un-Aristotelian. I should mention in particular A.C. Lloyd, R. Chiaradonna and R. Sorabji:² how is it possible to explain that contrary to the strict separation between primary and secondary substance we find in the Categories, and to the fact that the individual cannot be an object of predication, Porphyry applies the structure of predication until the last ontological level? Why does he not respect the boundary between the general and the particular so clearly drawn by Aristotle himself?

It is not my purpose today to scrutinize all the intricacies of Porphyry’s doctrine of predication. I only want to lend emphasis to the distinction he draws, at the lowest level, between the individual, which in this sense is to be assimilated to some sort of predicate, and the particular which represents the logico-ontological subject of the ultimate predication. Or, more exactly, Porphyry seems to envisage the individual under a double aspect, first its sensible existence, which is a simple and obvious fact (which is much more problematic for Plotinus) and secondly its verbal formulation. By this, I mean its formulation as a particular individual, and not as a member of a species or a genus. I think that Chiaradonna has definitely shown that this text must be understood in the light of a declaration of Dexippus, in his commentary on the Categories (30.20–26), about the possibility of differentiating between some particulars belonging to the same species. Let us quote this text in the translation of (Long and Sedley 1987, text 28J, vol. 1, 169):

But if form is that which is predicated in the category of essence of a plurality of numerically different things, in what does single individual differ from single individual, seeing that each is numerically single? Those who solve this difficulty on the basis of the peculiarly qualified—that one individual is distinguished, say, by hookedness of the nose, by blondness, or by some other combination of qualities (συνδρῆμα τῶν ἰχθυῶν), another by snubness, baldness, or greyness of the eyes, and again another by other qualities—do not seem to me to solve it well.

² Cf. (Lloyd 1956), (Chiaradonna 2000) and (Sorabji 2004, vol. 3, 165–168). According to Sorabji, Porphyry borrows from the Theaetetus (209c), not some Stoics, the idea that an individual person is a quality or a bundle of qualities. His reason would be to spare beginners the details of matter and form, which he omits only for paedagogical reasons. Be this as it may, that commits him to what will interest us here, that the individual person, being qualities, can be predicated of something else. See also (Sorabji 2006, 137–153).