Chapter Six
Aristotle on Matters of Life and Death

by Mary Louise Gill

A soldier can die heroically in battle at the hand of an opponent, or he can return home, grow old, and die quietly in his bed. The violent destruction of the first situation is due to external force, but the natural destruction of the second, even if accidentally caused by external factors, is primarily due to the entity’s matter. How does the matter responsible for perishability affect the substantiality of the perishable object? Does the matter that accounts for an organism’s death deprive it of the internal unity proper to primary substances? Do organisms fail to be unities, and hence primary substances, because they are perishable?

In the Categories Aristotle identifies individual physical objects, such as a particular man or a particular horse, as primary substances. They are primary substances because they are ultimate subjects (ὑποκείμενα). All other entities, whether nonsubstantial properties, such as quantities and qualities, or substantial species and genera, depend on the primary substances for their existence. Since the primary substances ground the existence of

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1. I am grateful to my commentator, Donald Morrison, for his valuable criticisms. Since several of his objections point to questions that I have ignored in the paper but discuss in my forthcoming book, The Paradox of Unity: Aristotle’s Theory of Matter and Composite Substances (Princeton University Press), I will outline my answers in the notes and refer the reader to that fuller discussion. I also thank an anonymous reader for a number of helpful suggestions.

2. See, for example, Metaph. Z 7, 1032a20-22; cf. Θ 8, 1050b8-28. For Aristotle’s account of the two sorts of perishing, see On Youth and Old Age 4-5.
everything else, their removal would entail the removal of
everything else.\(^3\) The *Categories*, however, fails to mention the
internal components of its primary objects, and outside the
*Categories* we learn that they are composites of matter and
form. So the question is whether Aristotle, once he has intro-
duced the notions of matter and form, can still award priority
to those entities to which the *Categories* had granted a privileged
status.

Many scholars think that in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle demotes
the composite to a derivative status and awards priority to form,
and the conclusion is based in part on Aristotle's insistence that
primary substances are unities. If unity is a criterion for sub-
stantiality in the primary sense, then composites apparently fail
to be substances because they apparently fail to be unities. And
failure of unity seems to occur because form and matter make
distinct contributions to the identity of composite bodies. Hence
composition from matter and form is the source of the failing.

I disagree with this widespread conclusion. I believe that
Aristotle remains convinced that living things are primary sub-
stances and that his task is to show that organisms are unities
despite their composition. But to defend composites as unified
substances he must solve a paradox, which I call "the paradox of
unity." Let me explain.

**I. The Paradox of Unity**

According to Aristotle, all changes involve a continuant,
something that persists through the change. In typical nonsub-
stantial changes—changes of quality, quantity, and place—a
physical object serves as the continuant when its nonsubstantial
properties are replaced. In the *Categories* he remarks that a dis-
tinctive feature of primary substances is the ability to preserve
their identity in contexts of change.\(^4\) Yet Aristotle also envisages
a fourth sort of change, substantial generation and destruction,
and to account for such changes he introduces the notions of
matter and form. Obviously a man does not survive his own
destruction, nor does he preexist or serve as the continuant for
his own generation. But Aristotle thinks that in this case too

\(^3\) Cat. 5, 2a34-b6.  \(^4\) Cat. 5, 4a10-21.