There are two major views on what is Aristotle's principle of individuation: one is that matter, the other that form, individuates an entity. My concern in this paper is to argue that neither of these views is a possible one, that there is in fact no principle of individuation in Aristotle's metaphysics, and that it is superfluous to invest it with one.

A problem which has beset many who have treated of this issue is that of specifying the precise question or questions to which a principle of individuation is supposed to provide the answer. Some of these reflect a conception of the problem as mainly an epistemological one, for example: (i) How do we know an individual when we see one? (ii) What is it about a description that enables it uniquely to identify an individual? (iii) How do we distinguish one individual from another? Other questions, however, disclose a conception of the problem as a metaphysical one: (iv) How does an individual differ from a universal? (v) What makes an entity the same throughout change? (vi) What makes an individual a unit, e.g. one man, as opposed to two legs, two arms, etc.? (vii) What in the nature of specifically identical individuals makes them numerically different?

It follows that to discover whether Aristotle enunciated, in however elliptical or implicit a fashion, something which we may label his "principle of individuation," one must first be clear which of these questions it is to which an answer is desired. I delimit the scope of this study to an examination of two answers which have often been

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1 There are others, for example the view that it is the conjunction of matter and form which is the principle of individuation; cf. W. D. Ross, Aristotle's Metaphysics (Oxford, 1924), Vol. I, p. cxv.

given to question (vii). Since the problem is to account for the uniqueness and non-repeatability of each and every individual substance of the same kind, we take the expression “to individuate” to mean “to give uniqueness or singularity to (= make different from everything else),” and the expression “to be individuated” to mean “to be given uniqueness or singularity (= to be made to be different from everything else).” Given this conception of the problem, we hope to show that neither form nor matter (nor, indeed, anything else) individuates an entity for Aristotle; rather, an entity is individual as given, and no principle of its individuality is either necessary or possible.

I

The view that matter is the principle of individuation is the “orthodox” interpretation of Aristotle. Texts commonly given in support of this thesis include the following from the *Metaphysics*:

1. things are one in number whose matter is one, in species whose form is one, ἀριθμὸς μὲν ἄν ἡ δλη μία, εἰδει δ' ἄν ὁ λόγος εἶς (1016 b 32-3, cf. 1054 a 34)
2. ‘man’ and ‘horse’ and what applies to individuals in this way, but universally, are not substance but a composite of this formula and this matter taken universally; an individual is composed of the last matter (ἡ ἐπίδρατης τῆς δλης), Socrates for example, and similarly in other cases (1035 b 27-31)
3. Those things which are many in number have matter (for one and the same formula is of many, for example ‘man’, whereas Socrates is one). (1074 a 33-5)
4. When the whole has been generated, such a form in this flesh and in these bones, this is Callias or Socrates; and they are different on account of their matter (for it is different) (καὶ ἐπίδραν μὲν διὰ τὴν δλην (ἐπίδρα γάρ), but the same in species (for the species is indivisible). (1034 a 5-8)

3 In his recent paper “Aristotle and the Principle of Individuation,” Phronesis 17 (1972), W. Charlton takes the question “‘what makes one individual differ from another at the same time,’” to be that which “most people mean when they say that for Aristotle matter is the principle of individuation,” pp. 239-40. We understand this question to be the same as our question (vii).