Aristotle on identity and its problems

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There are certain problematic arguments, collective reference to which is often compressed into the expression, “the problems of identity.” Strictly speaking, of course, there are no problems of identity. But there are problems, if only apparent, for a certain view about identity, namely, the view that identicals are indiscernible. In light of the seeming freshness of these philosophical problems, it is remarkable that we find in Aristotle’s early writings what seems to be a formulation of the view that identicals are indiscernible, as well as a confrontation with certain arguments that raise apparent difficulties for that view. Philosophers have not always been clear about these arguments, and some have taken them to prove the need to qualify the view that identicals are indiscernible. Aristotle is among those who have drawn such a conclusion, but so are some contemporary philosophers. In this paper I examine Aristotle’s solution to certain problems of identity. I attempt to state the solution clearly and indicate the mixture of insight and error that influenced it.

1. Aristotle’s Law

There is a principle that states:

\[
\text{II} \quad \text{If } x \text{ and } y \text{ are identical, then every attribute of the one is an attribute of the other}
\]

Often called “Leibniz’s Law,” or “one-half of Leibniz’s Law,” the principle does not seem to be due to Leibniz at all. Scholarly investigations of late have turned up no evidence that II (the Indiscernibility of Identicals) is among the principles asserted by that philosopher.

Some – myself included – have thought the principle due to Aristotle. Specifically, Aristotle’s discussion of numerical sameness in *Topica* contains some remarks – notably at 152 b 25-29 – which suggest very strongly that he there subscribes to a principle indistinguishable from II. In the passage just mentioned Aristotle declares that, of things

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which are the same in number, whatever is predicated of the one ought to be predicated of the other. What are predicated are attributes (τὰ κατηγοροῦμενα), of which there are said to be four kinds: definition, property, genus, and accident. Aristotle has already declared that every property and every accident belonging to the one belongs to the other, so far as they are the same, and at 152 b 25-29 he generalizes to obtain what might be called the Indiscernibility of Sames:

IS If $x$ and $y$ are the same in number, then every attribute of the one is an attribute of the other

Now these principles (propositions), $II$ and $IS$, are, in my opinion, indistinguishable, and I see no reason why the view that identicals are indiscernible should not be attributed to Aristotle.

Recently a study by Nicholas P. White of Aristotle's views on same-ness has appeared in print, which study contains a brief but edifying discussion of some of the central topics dealt with in this paper. Although White believes that Aristotle's notion of numerical sameness is only "something like" that of identity, he does not deny that in Topica Aristotle announces a principle very much like $II$, and he does not attempt to distinguish this principle from $II$ in his discussion of it. That is, White gives $II$ to Aristotle. Actually, White's formulation of the principle is:

$LL$ If $A$ and $B$ are identical, then whatever is true of the one is true of the other

I assume that "$A$" and "$B$" are variables for White. "Whatever" is a quantifier, and I assume that "$z$ is true of $x$" is equivalent to "$z$ is an attribute of $x$." In short, I assume that $II$ and $LL$ are equivalent.

2. Identity in Substance

But Aristotle does not long subscribe to the view that identicals are indiscernible, if White is right; for Aristotle's solution to a certain puzzle introduced in De Sophisticis Elenchis (written, it is generally believed, at about the same time as Topica) is taken by White to imply a retraction of that view. More exactly, White holds that in De Sophisticis Elenchis (hereafter, "SE"), at 179 a 26-b 7, Aristotle gives up $II$ for a restricted version of $II$. The puzzle is one of the alleged "sophistical

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2 Nicholas P. White, "Aristotle on Sameness and Oneness," Philosophical Review, 80 (1971) 171-197. Subsequent page references to this article are contained in the text.