An Attempt to Understand the Problem of Universals

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v0.8

> *This paper is certainly a work in progress and requires much*
> *more elaboration before it is ready for a hardcover-publication. The talk was held*
> *at Gdańsk University on May 26th 2008 where I received many interesting criticisms*
> *for which I am grateful.*

> He's five foot two and he's six feet four
> He fights with missiles and with spears.
> He's all of thirty one and he's only seventeen
> Been a soldier for a thousand years.
>
> *(Donovan, Universal Soldier)*

0. Solutions and Dissolutions

Asking questions is considered to be one of the central philosophical virtues. Nowadays, if philosophers do give answers at all, their answers are preferably conditional and many, and often only a temporary state before they become the subject of further doubt. Questions on the other hand do not always face as strictly a scrutiny as answers do.

There have of course been philosophers who very successfully criticised questions. Berkeley was one of them and certainly Kant, too. Questions especially had a hard time under the ausices of analytic philosophy especially with regard to the theories of Carnap. But the doubters are all modern and (what is very interesting) either argue from an idealistic or a linguistic standpoint. Outside this period, however, in the much longer period of ancient and medieval philosopy, problems have generally been treated quite indulgently. This is why questions, or so-called „problems", had been much more stable entities in the history of philosophy than theories.

There is one problem in particular that has always puzzled me since my undergraduate days: the problem of universals. You hardly can study philosophy without stumbling over this problem that haunted the Middle Ages so much. But ever since I stumbled over it, I have failed to understand it. This paper is another attempt to tackle this problem.

A teacher of mine (and probably not only he[1]) once introduced us to the Problem of Universals in the following way. He wrote the letters „B A A" upon a blackboard and asked: „How many letters do you see here?". Of course we were supposed to disagree on whether it is three or two. But the adequate answer to this question is simply: „2 or three 3 – depending on whether you count types or tokens". So where is the problem?

This is of course polemic, and does not do justice to the thousands of pages that have been written by hundreds of philosophers. Rumours have it, that there have even been literal brawlings about this problem, because of which the the philosophical faculty of the University of Tübingen was provided with two different entrances so the opponents would not even meet.

So what was this about? Is there a real problem (whatever that means) behind it ? And if not: what made people believe that there was one?

One side-remark before I start: Also a historian's answers are usually many - there is of course not *one* problem of universals[2]. There is a whole bucket of them, if you have a closer look at the ever-changing discussions from the fifth to the fifteenth century. Yet most of these problems are related. They depend on each other, like problem of individuation, that sometimes replaced the one of universals in late medieval ages. And they were related in the way of family resemblances, to use a Wittgensteinian wording.

We are lucky, however. Because there are some texts, that tower high over of the changing tides of discourse, not just because of their quality but because they have remained reference-points for centuries. It is these texts that I want to throw some spotlights on.

1. Porphyry and the Ancients

In historic terms there is a very exceptional thing about Problem of Universals: it is quite easy to say when the whole thing started. Ok, it did not genuinely start there (along the lines of Whitehead all philosophical problems are anyway mere footnotes to Plato[3]), but we can clearly determine the point when it became a conscious problem and a starting point for a discussion. This point is the *Isagoge* of Porphyry. This text is an introduction to the main terms of *Aristotle's Categories,* and it afterwards became simply *the* textbook on that matter. And this book contains the following lines:

> I shall beg off saying anything about
> (a) whether genera and species are real or are situated in bare thoughts alone,
> (b) whether as real they are bodies or incorporeals, and
> (c) whether they are separated or in sensibles and have their reality in connection with them.
> Such business is profound, and requires another, greater investigation.[4]

Porphyry clearly points out a problem – the problem of universals -, but does not attempt to solve it. This of course is a most tempting situation for all the commentators to follow.

We can however see that Porphyry does indeed give some answers: after all the second question includes an answer to the first: and it would also not make sense to ask it, if the first one would not be answered positively. And the same accounts probably for the second with regard to the third question, too.

According to the terms that we find in textbooks on the Problem of Universals we can call Porphyry a „realist": he affirms the question, whether universals are real. Opposed to this would be „conceptualists", who claim that universals were only in the mind and

1   Rosefeld; compare also Spade's preface in *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham.* Translated and Edited by P.V. Spade, Hackett 1994
2   see Alain de Libera: *Der Universalienstreit. Von Platon bis zum Ende des Mittelalters.* München: Fink 2005 (*La querelle des universaux*, 1996).
3   The problem of universals is often traced back to the disagreements between Plato and Aristotle about the role of the universal as substance. But whether this reflects the constellation of problems during the Middle Ages is not my topic here.
4   Porphyry, *Isagoge*, in Spade 1994, p. 1

„nominalists", who reduce them to mere words[5]. On textbook levle these terms are further modified with adjectives like „moderate" or „extreme" in order to describe finer differences of various philosophical positions.

So far for the propaedeutics for the Problem of Universals.

2. Understanding Boethius

In order to move a little closer, let us turn on another spotlight, 250 years later: Anicius Manlius Torquatus Severinus Boëthius, the so-called „last Roman". He stands at a turning point of the history of philosophy, for he was one of the last ones who knew the ancients well and had full access to their texts. He translated them from Greek to Latin and commented them extensively. He intended to eventually cover the entire corpus of Aristotelian works, but unfortunately this endevaour was interrupted by a death sentence, which Boethius suffered as an influential political actor at the court of Theoderich. This unfortunate event played a part in the decline of the following centuries, when a lot of materials were lost and the Greek texts vanished from the occidental world. The problem of universals, however, was not lost – nor was the solution, that Boethius offered.

Boethius' solution to the problem of universals is considered to be an Aristotelian one – rather a conceptualist than realist one. Boethius' answer is two-fold, however: incorporeal things, he claims, can be directly be understood by the human mind as what they are. As for corporeal things however, universals are an incorporeal part of them separated from them by the human mind.

The Boethian solution I find puzzling for many reasons. First I think that there cannot be a double way: one solution for incorporeals and one for corporeals. Universals must be described in general - or what we get is not a theory of universals insofar they are universals.

Furthermore incorporeality can mean two different things: on the one hand there are *incorporeal individuals* – souls or angels are the chief protagonists for that in the Middle Ages. This means, individuals, that are not visible, solid or do not have a location. On the other hand there are the peculiar characteristics of universals that might also be described as incorporeality: they also do not have a location, they are even timeless and are not on the same plane with individuals. However this does not seem to be the same kind of incorporality: because the very features that render universals incorporeal are the features that differenciate them from individuals. Thus if Boethius aims at the features of universals to explain the understanding of individuals this is not a sufficient. However, if he means universals only, this is easy, or even more: this is more or less the theory that I would support, but for different reasons and under different circumstances: because it would account for understanding corporeal and incorporeal individuals likewise. We will come back to this.

3. Two Arguments

Let us first turn to part two of Boethius' solution. This usually the more central part (perhaps because there are comparably more widely acknowledged examples for corporeal individuals than for incorporeal ones?). Here we have the Aristotelian solution: universals are only an abstraction, formed by and in the mind.

So why does Boethius deny realism in the case of corporeal entities? The argument he gives is very important, and it is typical for a whole strand of similar arguments. It is the first of two Arguments I want to discuss in this talk:

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5   sometimes the term „nominalism" includes both of the latter groups, sometimes „conceptualism" is reserved for the particular position of Abaelard alone – these two terms have never been very stable.
    We could also add a fourth group, the „vocalists", who believe universals to be „flatus vocis", mere words without meaning. But if this is the case then we could not even discuss whether there is a problem of universals.

I. The Argument of Unity (Boethius, Avicenna, Albert the Great, Ockham)
A universal is said to be one, and yet is in many things – which is contradictory. Universals cannot exist because everything that exists is one – and a universal is in *many* things. It cannot be one and many at the same time[6]. The same argument has been repeated often in later medieval discussions and reappears in Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Albert the Great and William of Ockham's reflections on the matter.

II. The Argument of Contradiction
This argument is the one that is so emphatically shown in Donovans song, quoted above. We find it in Abaelard, a philosopher from the 12th century, who has been one of the most influential refuters of realism. Abaelard claims that a universal cannot be in different individuals[7] because then it would have all the properties of these individuals – and this would include contradictory properties: the universal man, being in me an you would both be a talking and a quiet man at the moment, both be standing and being seated. And even worse, since the man is our substance, we would even be substantially identical – and so we all would be one thing – which is obviously nonsense. Berkeley later provided an addition to refute the most obvious reply: that universals do not share these properties.

a. (Abaelard, Berkeley): A universal sharing the properties of its instances is contradictory.
b. (Berkeley): If a universal is considered to not share these properties, it is nothing at all, for there are no entities with indesignate properties.

4. The Analogy
To me both of these arguments seem not very convincing. Of course they are perfectly true: no one thing can be in many things. At least no individual thing can. But it is the very idea of universality that it can do so – *or we cannot even discuss a possible problem of universals*. It is the constitutive feature of universals that they are *instantiable[8].* Therefore universals are not themselves instances, not on a par with individuals. Thus some rules do not apply for universals that apply for individuals.

This is the main point of my talk. The arguments I mentioned – and many others of the same type - ignore the very characteristics that render universals universal: the relationship of instantiation.

Let me describe this relationship a little more in detail[9]: individuals are fully designate and noninstantiable, universals are partly indesignate and instantiable. Universals are „had" by individuals and this is what makes individuals materially distinct. And I think this is a primitive relationship.

The above arguments make a universal a *quasi-individual* – and then they are puzzled how their relationship is. They replace the relationship of instantiation with relationships that only apply to individuals – and then the problems start. At once we cleanse our idea of universals of any such false analogies, there is no space for neither of the questions that Porphyry has raised. In short, I think, that *the problem of universals along the lines of Porphyry stems from a false analogy between universals and individuals*.

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6   Boethius: „Glosses on Porphyry", Spade 1994, p.21f
7   Of course he refutes seveal views of which „in things" is only one. His counterarguments however draw always from this pattern: either people locate the universal in individual things or they should do so, and both is wrong. He denies any theory of universals as things as opposed to universals as functions of words.
8   I am grateful for the hint that I must say something about the fact that universals also instantiate other universals (in Porphyrian trees). This topic requires a more thorough discussion, but I think it does not change anything about the principal difference of universals (all of them) being partially indesignate and individuals being designate (noninstantiable).
9   Ultimately it is not explainable, because I consider it a primitive relationship. If someone doubts it, it is thus as difficult to explain the concept, just like if someone doubts the modus ponens or the law of contradiction. However it is quite likely that it is impossible to doubt the idea of instantiation without making use of it. In this case the same kind of argument applies as Aristotle mentiones it in his *Metaphysics* with regard to the law of contradiction.

There is one indicator of this false analogy in language. This is when universals are referred to by a singular expression and all the more when this includes a designate article. Medieval texts often talk about „homo" or „equus" meaning universals - translated „*the* man", „*the* horse", or „*the* leaf"[10] in modern languages.

I do not want to chide a linguistic pattern alone. To quote the late Wittgenstein: if there is no problem arising from it, then it is prefectly ok[11]. But this very linguistic pattern *expresses* a problem. The wording implies that such entities are „somewhere", perhaps in a „platonic heaven", even if this „somewhere" is not located in our empirical space. It becomes a kind of devine space – like the space we know in sensuality, just *not* the space we know in sensuality. And this is the false analogy.

This is one instance of the analogies I mean. For what is in space is definite, real. Space is for individuals, where they can change and move[12] - and thus a spacial analogy makes universals quasi-individuals.

Individuals are fully realised entities, fully definite – it is difficult to imagine how one could be instantiated in the other. Thus we end up with the problem of universal and individual being two different entities whose relationship seems strange. They now look as two entities that *have* something in common. This however means that there must be yet another universal idea that they both share and which refers to their similarity. But since this idea must itself be a separate entity it requires yet another universal to provide for the connection and so on..

This is the famous 3rd man argument of Aristotle. When there is a universal man and an individual man, we need yet another universal to explain their similarities. I think Aristotle did a great job pointing this out. It does however not discredit universals as such, but only their quasi-individual counterparts. Whenever the argument works, it is an indicator that a false analogy has sneaked in. The problem is that the idea of two separate and comparable entities does not grasp the the idea of instantiation – because it is (usually considered to be) a relationship among instances.

Applied to the Arguments

I. As for the argument of unity (the universal cannot be one and many), let us have a look at what Avicenna says in *Metaphysica*, Cap. XII:

> „It is commonly said that all humans are one with regard to their humanity. So [defenders of realism] conclude correctly that there must be a „humanity" outside of the mind, that exists in the same way in all singular men."[13]

This shows how the relationship of instantiation is replaced by describing an entity – „the man" – that somehow exists „in" many things. This is either absurd, as long „the man" is in any way understood as an individual, or it is a very awkward way of explaining the idea of instantiation. Strictly speaking, however, it is not correct to say that the individual men are one in humanity. They are instances of it, but they are not unified in any sense that candle-flames or countries are unified. Also the wording „being in individuals" does not correctly describe what is the case. It must not imply any idea of being a part of – thus it is either wrong or very awkward to say, that universals are „in" individuals or individuals unified in universals.

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10 This is by the way also present in Nietzsche and his infamous essay „Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne", where he tries to dispell universals as mere metaphors and arbitrary, man-made ideas.

11 cf. *Philosophical Investigations* §693

12 Thus space is often considered a principle of individuation, cf. Strawson

13 Hans-Ulrich Wöhler (Hrsg.): *Texte zum Universalienstreit*. Bd 1. Berlin: Akademie 1992, p.263, my retranslation from the German text.

II. As for the argument of contradiction the case is different: it is not awkward but plainly wrong to to ascribe the specific properties of individuals to universals. It is wrong to link different universals to each other just because they happen to be had by the same individual. It is accidental for a universal in which individuals they are instantiated, and what distinguishes these individuals. The very idea of an universal is that it leaves open slots for instantiation, slots for different specific properties – like the universal „man" leaves a slot for where the man lives, what his haircolour is and so on.

To say that a thing with indesignate properties does not exist, as Berkeley puts it, it flat denial but no argument. And again this presupposes individuals: if Berkeley means that only things that are fully real, designate, that have no open slots exists – then this is circular: noninstantiability and existence become synonyms. In this case Berkeley is right – but does not say more than „individuals are noninstntiable, universals are instantiable". This is what Albert the Great says when he argues:

„Everything that exists is individual – therefore the universal does not exist."[14].

Again, this is just flat denial without an argument or circular: if I define as existing everything that is fully realised and does not have open slots – everything that is noninstantiable – then of course only individuals are real. But this does not express more than saying „individuals are individuals".

5. Metaphysical Facts
If I am correct with my guesses, then many quarrels between realism, conceptualism, and nominalism are futile. I think that there is nothing that these positions could quarrel about. Universals and Inviduals are quite simple, even primitive in their distinction from each other. And they do what they do: they form the most basic categories of our understanding (or of „the world", if you want to put it more objectively or more traditionally). Obviously there are some basic functions that all positions must eventually provide for, though they might end up there from different starting points. In short: these positions are either wrong or converge in what is the case. I have boldly called this „metaphysical facts". You can hardly quarrel about them because they are already presupposed in discussing (the possibility of) the problem of universals. And beyond them there is not much that must be decided.

I. There is something in common between some (individual and universal) things.
This is what all or all reasonable groups accept – they argue about the „status" of common features. I think that there is nothing like a status to be discussed.

II. Every something is one thing – so also what is common to many is one.
It is impossible to deny that universals are one, at least in the most modest sense of the word. Everything that can be thought of is something, and every something is one thing (the sentence „x is not one" is always contradictory). Thus the fact that universals are one is already implied in the possibility to have a problem with them. No reasonable being can possibly deny this.

But of course there is more than the modest sense of the word. One candidate is the concept of „numeric unity" that was a common term in the later Middle Ages. But numeric unity, such my impression, either is identical with unity in the described sense, or it means individuality (countability in the sense of being fully realised - noninstantiability). The latter is the case when numeric unity means what during the Middle Ages was called subsistence: being a substance. The substance requires the idea of a substrate, which functions as a basis for having properties. As such an idea it carries the notion of individuality: it is not instantiable but the very thing that underlies the having of (or

14 Texte zum Universalienstreit, a.a.O, Bd. II

instantiation of) properties[15].

William of Ockham discusses numeric unity in xx[16] and more specifically defines it as a unity in many. This also falls for the same distinction: it is either a correct but awkward way of putting instantiation or it means inividual reality – comparable individuals, prone to the third-man-argument. [check this xx]

III. What things have in common is logically independent from its instances (whereas the distinct[17] individual is logically depending on the concepts by which it is distinct from others).
This was always the basis for Platonism and for universalia ante rem, as the scholasts called it – for positions that valued universals higher than individuals in an ontologic way. If they do not mean anything more than what the sentence actually says, this is ok. The respective universals are of course not a sufficient reason to *produce* the individual, but merely a necessary presupposition for an individual insofar it has them[18]. This also does not mean that we do not have to acquire universals by abstraction (the basis for the Aristotelian approach). But once they are acquired they behave in the described way.

I think these are the facts that are usually not disputed, facts that all theories, nominalist and universal must provide for. And I think that is the facts in which they so to say converge. I want to show this when we now return to the questions of Porphyry.

6. Answering – or Denying to Answer

a) Are universals „real" or „Do they exist?"

The point is of course, that the answer depends on what you mean by „existence". If „to exist" just means that universals are had by individuals, and that they are logically independent from them (do not presuppose them) then – yes, they do „exist". However we must be careful, because existence is in most of its meanings a genuine feature of individuality: for many philosophers „to exist" means to be fully designate, not to have open slots and to be a substrate base of a bundle of distinct features. So if Albert the Great or many nominalists claim that everything that exists is individual they are perfectly right, but they utter nothing but a mere tautology. If reality means that there is a substrate with designate properties then what exists must be an individual per definitionem.

But is it not a legitimate question whether universals are either in the mind or outside it – as the medieval authors have discussed with regard to the first Porphyrian question? I think it is not. I think that also the difference between „in -" and „outside the mind" only applies to individuals. You might call this a an idealistic, or even Hegelian position (but I dont know enough Hegel to tell whether this statement were true): I think *it makes no sense to differenciate between subject and object with regard to universals*.

To say that they are outside the mind makes sense for individuals only, because there can be error only about individuals. We can err about the existence of an individual: we imagine it but it is not there. However we cannot err about the existence of a universal – we can only err about *whether there are instances of it*. Universals themselves are never right or wrong unless, of course, they are self-contradictory. Thus universals are *possible or impossible* (=contradictory), but not real or unreal. They are best described as a potential[19]. If all their characteristics are compatible and free of contradiction they are what

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15 These two wordings only seemingly switch the perspective. More precisely, they just describe the function of individuals and universals respectively in a relationship of instantiation.

16 cf. Spade

17 This means an individual that is more than a bare substrate.

18 This was one of the main points of my *Die Irrelevanz des Wirklichen*. Alber, Freiburg 2007

19 According to Aristotle the substrate is considered to be pure possibility and is realised by universals „arriving". This is also true and

they are. There is no question for their reference, no possible experience that could correct a universal idea. There might only be error about whether there are cases of it. This means that the universal „pegasus" is not more wrong than the universal „rabbit". It's just the case that no pegasi do exist. But this applies to the cases, not to the universal itelf[20].

Again the indifference between subject and object in universals is shown in wordings: English is not suitable here, but German and Polish are. Polish has, as far as I know, the wording „takie samo" for an individual being of the same type as another one, and the wording „to samo" for „one and the same", the very same individual („das Selbe" and „das Gleiche" in German). This, to the detriment of scholars and linguists, is very often confused in every-day language, where to samo and takie samo tend to be used as synonyms.

When it comes to universals however, the fascinating thing is that these wordings *are* indeed synonyms. Try it for „the same idea", „the same number" or „the same colour": which one does apply: „to samo" or „takie samo"? It doesn't matter. There is just no difference. Of course there is no difference: The difference is used to describe the difference between universals and individuals. Thus it cannot reoccur *within* the realm of universals.

This is what I said about Boethius earlier: that his solution for incorporeal beings is correct just that it applies to all universals and for different reasons. There is no universal in the mind only – because there is no opposite to „in the mind", no „outside the mind" that makes any sense.

b) Are Universals corporeal and incorporeal?
It took me long to answer the first question, but it won't to answer the second for the answer is the same. Of course it would be blatantly wrong to say that universals are corporeal (for every corporeal thing is individual), but it does also not suffice to say that they are incorporeal – for this can mean two different things. But we have dealt with this already: we must not confuse the abstraction that renders universals timeless and locationless with the locationlessness or immateriality that renders souls and angels incorporeal. In the latter sense neither corporeality nor incorporeality do apply to universals.

c) Are universals separate from sensibles?
This question, too, we have already dealt with. Here we have a wording of location, a spacial metaphor. But universals are not separate in the sense that individuals are spatially separate from each other. „Separate", if it makes any sense here, can only mean the logical independence of universals from their instances. It either means this or it is wrong.

7. Historic Reasons: The Dilemma of Form
Now, if the Porphyian questions do indeed not make much sense, then how come that they have had such a successful career in philosophy? The historic answer is certainly manifold. Also the myriads of discussions based upon those questions are far from futile but full of important insights in the logic and ontology of what there is. However I think that there is one central thing that is the main cause of the above difficulties. It is a premiss inherited from the ancients, more precisely from Aristotle, which I will call the „dilemma of

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just a matter of perspective. No contradiction here.
20 But is not a law of nature universal and we can err about it? We do have to claim (and I am not happy about this) that this is inaccurate to say. In such a case individuals do just not behave like it – it does not instantiate.

substance". In short this dilemma consists in two premisses:

> 1. the nature or substance must be what constitutes an individual
> 2. the nature is something universal (and shared by others).

For example the nature of Socrates is, as commonly agreed, that he is a man. And yet his nature is supposed to constitute genuinely him and not what he shares with other men.

Aristotle deals with this in the *Categories*. Here the dilemma occurs between what he calls first and second substances. First Substances are the individuals, the substrate, while second substances are the eidos, viz. the most specific species (the species specialissima). The problem is that a second substance is not sufficient to constitute the individual because it also applies to other substances of the same type. On the other hand first substance which is sufficient to constitute the individual, is not designate without any material characteristics. It is virtually a bare substrate.

In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle has refined his theory in many respects, but the dilemma of substance remains. James Lesher has very well described it and reduces it to three statements, that we find all literally in Aristotle:

> 1. The substance of an individual thing lies in its form.
> 2. Form is universal.
> 3. No universal is a substance.[21]

This dilemma, in either of the two forms, is part of the Aristotelian heritage of the Middle Ages. And indeed the premiss that an individual is *fully constituted* by a universal is the reason for the false analogies that I have described. The idea of a full constitution makes universals congruent with a particular individual (abstract from its accidents) and make the universal an entity „in" individuals. The universal seems to be „out there" as the individual is out there, because it constitutes it. And here the peculiar but simple relationship of instantiation/being in common becomes distorted by quasi-individual ideas: universals become substrates, or start to be discussed in mereological way, that does not adequately express instantiation. Subsequently it seems difficult to explain how the quasi-individual achieves the function an instantiating universal has and as a reaction to the distortion new entities and relationships must be invented, which gives rise to third and fourth men and a whole caleidoscope of distinctions, like the infamous „formal distinction" by which individuals differ from their natura communis. His attempt is arguably one of the best to ease the dilemmatic premisses of Aristotelian Metaphysics. But it is nevertheless a path that could have been avoided, if we would demand less from universals.

I do not want to discredit a metaphysics of substance though. I think that the idea of a constitutive as opposed to an accidental designation of individuals is is possible, even necessary because it is always universals by which we grasp the individual. Yet I think we would need a more modest theory of substance (one that does not provide any material explanations for immortality or for angels and the like). One that is cleansed of analogies between individuals and universals. One that would not make such a tight connection between a substrate and substance. And also one that gives accidents their proper place, since they are the only material differences between two individuals of the same type. And one that also gets the difficult distinctions between subject and object, essence and existence, act and potential right. But this cannot be the topic of this paper.

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21 J.H. Lesher: „Aristotle on Form, Substance and Individuals. A Dilemma". *Phronesis XVI*, 1971