

The Integrated Whole of Women's Literature; An Application of the Aristotelian

Substance Model

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When discussing the Aristotelian substance model in an educational setting, the focus typically stays on tangible objects in order to impart a forthright understanding of the concepts within the material. However, after learning the relevant terminology, the breadth of applicability these concepts provide can be seen to include fairly abstract yet commonplace notions or ideas. For instance, by applying the Aristotelian substance model to a literary canon, in this case the literary canon of women's literature, we can see that it fills the requirements necessary to be an integrated whole, and therefore, perhaps, it is a substance-like thing. By defining the features and terminology of the Aristotelian substance model, which includes such terms as substance, parts, mereological change, substantial change, integrated wholes, and aggregate wholes, it becomes apparent that women's literature as a genre is an integrated whole and possibly, therefore, a substance.

Generally, we think of a substantial thing as something that we can touch, see, or perceive in some way- something that is extended to the exclusion of other things. Initially, it seems intuitive to say that a substance must be something like a fundamental particle. That is to say, if everything is made up of smaller things, there must be the smallest thing, of which everything is made from. The argument for a fundamental particle seems logical, except that we have been unable to determine what exactly that might be. We know that things, like a tree, would not exist without the particles that make the tree, making the tree's existence dependent on the particles, but there is, so far, no definitive fundamental particle. However, if this was the case, then all things made up of smaller things fail to be a substance, like the tree. This does not seem right. Perhaps we can say that, instead of a fundamental particle, a substance is simply something that has qualities. In this case, substance must be something that, in a sense, a quality is attached to. If qualities, which are universals, such as colours, and smells, can be said of a thing, we can say

that thing is a substance. However, we also must stipulate that a universal cannot be a substance, otherwise “red” would be a substance. And yet, we are still left without an answer as to what we are talking about when we refer to a particular thing like “the tree in my yard” or “my car”- we have not defined what substance is yet.

A summational approach seems to answer a lot of the challenges associated with this problem. If a substance is the sum of its parts and qualities, we can say that substance is identical with the sum of its parts and qualities. Ergo, our tree is green, as a quality, and has leaves as parts of the tree. However, Aristotle would disagree with this summarization, as he does not think that the substance itself is identical to the sum of its parts. For instance, as Carter describes it, “Individual molecules come and go during the period my tree exists. Trees do not always have the same molecular constituents or parts” and “Therefore my tree cannot correctly be identified with the totality” of parts (Carter 74). Simply put, we can recognize one tree to be itself regardless if it is summer, and therefore covered in leaves, or winter, when the tree has no leaves. If the summational approach to substance were true, each time a part or quality of the substance changed, the substance as it is would cease to exist. The tree would be a different tree every time it lost a leaf or grew a new one. Aristotle believes that a thing, which is substance, is that which is greater than the sum of its parts.

To illustrate what this means, Carter uses the example of the comedic team Laurel and Hardy. Before Laurel and Hardy were a team, they both still existed individually, meaning that although all of the parts of the team did exist, they were not the whole, or team of Laurel and Hardy. It was only when Laurel and Hardy became the team of Laurel and Hardy, rather than the pair, that something more than the sum of its parts came to be what it is. Say for instance, that the team of Laurel and Hardy was to break up , and several years later the two individuals found

themselves sitting on a bus together. The pair of Laurel and Hardy still exist, and yet the team of Laurel and Hardy do not- for neither the sufficient or necessary conditions have been met for the team Laurel and Hardy to be the team Laurel and Hardy (Carter 74). There is something *more* that makes the pair Laurel and Hardy into the team Laurel and Hardy.

In the instance where a thing is only the summation of its parts and qualities, it is called an aggregate whole. An aggregate whole is a collection of parts that do not necessarily need to make the whole, even if in this instance they do. For example, a pile of socks is an aggregate whole wherein each part is independent of the other. While it may be a pile of socks at that moment, the pile of socks may change, making the pile itself a different pile. To put it another way, the pair Laurel and Hardy would not be the pair Laurel and Hardy if it was Laurel and John- it becomes a different pair. Aggregate wholes function in a similar way. Because there is no unity, togetherness, or logical tie in the parts of an aggregate whole, it undergoes substantial change when a part is added or removed. Substantial change is when something ceases to be what it is. In the case of an aggregate whole, this occurs if parts are added or taken away, as demonstrated with the example of Laurel, Hardy, and John. However, in regards to the team Laurel and Hardy, we define that type of substance as an integrated whole.

An integrated whole is composed of parts, wherein the change of which does not change the whole itself. Each part is required for the whole to be what it is, and there is unity, togetherness, and linkage between these parts. An integrated whole can survive mereological change, which is when a part is lost or gained by the whole. A deciduous tree survives mereological change in the fall when it loses its leaves. These are conditions that were lacking, in Aristotle's view, in defining a substance in a summational manner. The thing that is greater than the sum of its parts is an integrated whole, and therefore a substance.

In the study of English literature, we often discuss something called the literary canon. It is a collection of literature that is incredibly influential to society, often defining or creating genre's and fields of study. If the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, can we extend that phrase to encompass abstract, intangible things? If so, can the whole be a literary genre or field of study within a genre? I can argue that women's literature is an integrated whole, with relevant works such as "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Ill Effects of a Morning Walk" by Sarah Anne Curzon, and others taking place of the "greater than" while the books themselves would be parts of that whole. The books have substance, as they are extended to the exclusion of other things. Furthermore, the contents of the books exist outside of our minds once they are written down. Women's literature as an integrated whole can survive mereological change, as some books that would fit in this genre have surely been lost or forgotten, such as it may be that they would have been included at one time, or books that were once accepted into the women's literary canon have now been removed. The books are all integrated through intertextual referencing, wherein one author reads the work of another and includes some kind of reference or inference to it in their newer work. Even though all of the books are independent, they all rely on each other to be the thing that it is. Together these books are a sum of parts that contribute to make the whole, women's literature, what it is.

To summarize, women's literature is an integrated whole as it is made of parts, books, which are independent of each other. These books are organized into a whole of necessary and sufficient parts wherein academic study is the organization, and the literary canon within women's literature would be the aspects of necessary and sufficient for the thing to be what it is. It can survive mereological change such as in the instance of books being lost, forgotten, or purposefully removed. And lastly, the genre exhibits unity, togetherness, and linkage through

intertextual referencing and academic study. Ergo, women's literature as a genre is an integrated whole within the framework of the Aristotelian substance model and therefore a substance-like entity.

Some objections to this conclusion may include questions of content, whether it is the books themselves or the thoughts within them that allow the literary canon to be an integrated whole, as well as whether we may be able to even call it a substance, even though we may agree that it is real. Perhaps it is not a substance, but rather something real but intangible, like a number? I argue that the thoughts within the books is precisely what allows for the literary canon to be an integrated whole. A collection of books without the entanglement and intertextuality of either academic study or references in other publications reduces itself to be an aggregate whole. If it were simply a collection of books produced by various authors on a myriad of subjects such as quantum physics and animal husbandry, it would lack the cohesion enjoyed by something as specific as a genre with a literary canon. In this sense, the literary canon is necessary for the genre of women's literature to be an integrated whole. In regards to whether we can truly call it a substance, we must first identify the issues we must overcome to do so. We can agree that the books themselves are substantial, but to say that books from around the world, and possibly separated by centuries, are involved in a substantial whole may seem like a reach. I argue that the literary canon of women's literature is not like a number. A number carries a specific value that is not open to interpretation; it is similar to a singular letter in this sense. While it is used, in conjunction with other numbers, to convey ideas through description or formulae, it is not identical to the ideas themselves, but rather communicates them. The interpretations of these ideas, to be published and reviewed, is what differentiates the literary canon from numbers, and makes them substance-like, rather than simply real.

Works Cited

W. R. Carter, *The Elements of Metaphysics*, (McGraw-Hill Publishing) 1990, p 63-89