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THE HISTORY OF THE THEOLOGICAL TERM 'SUBSTANCE': PART I.

A MERE word is the common symbol for everything that is transient and unsubstantial. And yet words survive the men who coin them, and have a history of their own. It is often said that they lose force as time goes on, and fail to do the work originally required of them. But this is only part of the truth. They also gain. And they gain not by mere accretion, or by the accidental growth of various associations: they are capable of gradual change of environment, adaptation to new circumstances, and therefore of continually renewed life.

The purpose of the present papers is to trace the history of one word which, with its Greek and Latin equivalents and certain other words allied to it in significance, has had a lasting and vital influence on two important branches of theological thought. The word *substance* is not by nature a theological term: it had already grown old in the service of philosophy before it appeared in the theological vocabulary. With all these associations upon it, it was used to help in the determination of a vexed question as to the Nature of God. In later days, and in very different circumstances, it was used as a means towards a precise formula of Eucharistic doctrine. In both uses it has still a considerable importance for us. It still stands in the Creed that is repeated at every celebration of Holy Communion: and it is still heard in the controversy that rages over the exact meaning of the Eucharistic gift. A history such as this contains no dramatic situations or striking events: it may serve a purpose, if it helps to clear up the meaning of a term which we all use as an inheritance from our predecessors.

The history of a word or group of words is, of course, unintelligible apart from the ideas with which they have been connected; and it will therefore be necessary to go back upon the well-worn

story of Greek philosophy, in order that we may approach our present question from the right point of view. The greatest names in this as in every other inquiry of this kind are those of Plato and Aristotle. But these require some slight introduction for the special purpose before us, and to this we proceed.

The Greek philosophers concerned themselves with nature as an object of perception, and their questions were all of them affected by this fact. It is true that they strove to introduce some principle or order and unity into the world and, as we say, explain it; but the chief interest of their speculation was to distinguish clearly the true from the false. It required but little observation to show that the reports of the senses were not all equally to be trusted, and they needed to know when they were in contact with reality and when they were under the influence of delusion. They dealt with these questions in the light of certain principles that seem to have been rather taken for granted than fully argued and verified. It seemed clear to them that Truth—that which was real and trustworthy—was one thing and not many: and was permanent and changeless, not subject to change. These principles lie at the root of the efforts of the earlier Physical philosophers to find one form of matter out of which all else had come: they are still more prominent in the Eleatic School: and the negative philosophy of Heracleitus as well as the scepticism of Protagoras depended upon the despair of ever finding any one existence which was unaffected by diversity and change. It is clear that these principles might have received metaphysical treatment only: it might have been the sole object of the philosophy of Greece to search for the one underlying reality. But the work of Socrates, if we may trust Aristotle in regard to it, brought in a new point of view, and one of the highest significance. Socrates, by his demand for universal definitions[1], initiated a new method of investigation, the logical method. He seems to have held it as an axiom, not only that the real being of a thing was one and unchangeable, but also that thought was in a measure competent to attain to it, provided it could attain a definition which absolutely satisfied all possible cases or individual instances of the thing defined. Hence he criticises the definitions offered him by suggesting puzzling cases,

[1] Ar. *Met.* i 6 p. 987 b. 1–4.

and a definition is held to have proved inadequate, if it fails to cover the difficult case suggested. On the other hand, a man who could produce a definition which survived this test would have thereby demonstrated that he possessed real knowledge and not mere opinion on the thing in question. To Socrates, as to others, reality was one and unchangeable: and not only this, but the test of possessing knowledge of this reality was found by him, unless he is misrepresented, in the possession of a consistent idea of it. When Socrates raised his questions as to the nature of things, he asked always *τί ἐστὶν ἕκαστον*[1], and the like: the answer which was to define the real being of the subject under discussion, would have stated its *οὐσία*. This is the first word of which we must consider the history.

We are now at this point. A definite philosophical interest has grown up, the object of which is the establishment of a clear criterion between reality and mere appearance. Certain definite views are in existence as to the nature of reality, and the signs of imperfect untrustworthy reality. And the name for the real being of things is *οὐσία*. It is clear, therefore, that the word *οὐσία* and any other terms that are connected with it will vary in meaning according to the varying views adopted of Reality. We have seen that Socrates, dealing with the problem of knowledge, made a consistent idea to be the type of true knowledge. Plato goes a step further than this: the clear and consistent idea is not merely true knowledge, it is a knowledge of truth[2]. He has passed from the region of criticism upon the ordinary facts of knowledge, into the region of metaphysics. His aim is more systematic: the result of his labours, if it were to be achieved, would be a system of philosophy, a scheme of all reality. There are many questions involved in any statement as to Plato's thought: his various works present very different points of view from time to time. We cannot discuss them at length, and by parenthesis: they require a separate treatise to themselves. But we may, perhaps, say without fear of contradiction that Plato never departed very far from the position at which he had arrived by reflexion upon the teaching of Socrates: he sought the real being of things always in their general character, not in their

[1] Xen. *Mem.* iv 6 1.

[2] Zeller, *Gesch. d. griech. Phil.* vol. ii pp. 470 ff.

particular manifestations; reality was for him always a system of principles or thoughts of a universal kind, which were expressed with more or less loss of fullness in the world of ordinary experience.

There is no room for question as to this point in the dialogues representing the Ideal Theory. The Ideas are sharply contrasted with their copies in the world, and the latter are allowed to possess only a kind of relative reality [1]. Though never attained by bodily sight they have been the object of vision to the Soul in an ante-natal state [2]: and the things of sense come into being by partaking in the Ideas, and are capable of giving rise to real knowledge by recalling to the soul the memory of its past experience of the Ideas [3]. They form a system or whole culminating in the Idea of Good [4].

It is obvious that Plato, if he had done nothing else but put forward this theory, would have given the movement of thought a strong bias in one direction. There are, however, certain other positions of his which have had an effect in later speculation. It would seem—if the prevailing modern theory of Plato's mental history be a true one—that he became in later days highly dissatisfied with the Ideal Theory. The dialogue *Parmenides* represents the criticism and rejection of the theory. Plato still is disposed to find the real Being of things in their abstract and universal aspect: but he is aware of the grave difficulties involved in the cruder form of the Ideal Theory. A form of conceptualism is suggested [5], but it is immediately rejected: and therefore speculation proceeds upon the old assumptions. The dialogue leads to no positive conclusion. But in its course various primary conceptions emerge in connexion with Unity—Existence, Difference, Sameness, Otherness, Time. A host of dialectical difficulties are presented in regard to them, with which we are fortunately not concerned. What is important for us is that a list of fundamental ideas appears in the *Sophist*, the *Theaetetus*, and the *Timaeus*, which are closely similar to those just named in the *Parmenides* [6]. It would appear that these lists are a kind of

[1] Cf. *Phaedo* 78 D–79 A and 65 D, where the ideas are said to be *ἁπάντων ἡ οὐσία*.
[2] Cf. *Phaedrus* 247 D E.
[3] *Phaedrus* 250. *Phaedo* 100 D.
[4] Cf. *Rep.* 517 B C.
[5] *Parm.* 132 B.
[6] Existence, Sameness, Otherness, Motion, Rest, *Soph.* 250–256 D; Existence,

anticipation of schemes of Categories like those of Aristotle, but they are not necessarily mere general terms. Plato speaks of them in the *Sophist* as γένη, but in the *Philebus* he says πάντα τὰ νῦν ὄντα ἐν τῷ παντὶ διχῇ διαλάβωμεν (23 C) when he is introducing his list: in the Timaeus (35 B) they are the ingredients of the Soul, and are described a few lines above as εἴδη οὐσίας. Thus, though Plato may be said here to anticipate schemes of Categories, he in no way approaches a conceptualist point of view. The various fundamental principles form by their combination the things of experience, but they are the ultimate realities.

We have said that Plato transformed Socrates' principle from a test of knowledge into a metaphysical principle conveying access to reality. This change has had important results. It gives, of necessity, a peculiar value to merely logical method, and tends to place thought somewhat unduly under the control of language. This may be illustrated in several ways. It is difficult to believe that Plato could have seriously regarded the method of division (διαίρεσις) as a means of discovery, after the manner pursued in the *Sophist* and *Politicus*, unless he had attributed an excessive value to the mere logical process. And again the prolonged discussion of the meaning of τὸ μὴ ὄν, of negation, of false opinion, is really governed and made possible by the necessary conditions of language. It is possible to make a confusion between existence and non-existence, between the Many and the One, by what we can hardly help calling verbal jugglery—like those who jest, who say when they are crumbling a thing 'We are making many things of one' (*Meno* 77 A). And there is a real philosophical problem involved. Plato dealt with it mainly under the forms of logic, and this was made easier for him because of the nature and origin of his theory of real Being—the meaning he gave to οὐσία. We may mention here that there is in one place (*Rep.* 509 B) a sign of a tendency towards a negative theory of Being, such as might easily arise out of a method of dialectical criticism, like that, for instance, in the *Parmenides*. The Idea of the Good—the climax of all existing things—is said to be ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας.

Likeness, Unlikeness, Sameness, and Otherness, *Theaet.* 186; Existence, Sameness, Otherness, *Tim.* 35 B. In the *Philebus* a somewhat different list of principles appears: the Limited, the Unlimited, that which is combined of both, and the cause of the combination, which last is ultimately identified with reason, 23 C D, 30 E.

That is, it transcends all known modes of existence and at the same time makes them possible: just as the sun in the visible heavens not only gives to all things the power of being seen, but also their birth, growth, or sustenance, though it is not itself γένεσις. So the Idea of Good gives to the objects of knowledge not only the being-known, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ εἶναί τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν αὐτοῖς προσεῖναι, οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἀλλ' ἔτι ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβείᾳ καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχοντος. We shall meet with this idea again. At the same time, though it is possible to maintain that Plato's thought is unduly under the influence of his language, yet he is not without a theory of language, and of the relation of words to thoughts and things. A word is said (*Crat.* 431 D) to be διὰ συλλαβῶν καὶ γραμμάτων τὴν οὐσίαν τῶν πραγμάτων ἀπομιμούμενος: it is an εἰκών or image of a thing, and may be good or bad according as it imitates well or badly the thing of which it is a copy. But it always must fall short of the reality of the thing, otherwise it would cease to be an image altogether (*Crat.* 432 B C.)[1]. On the other hand a word is said to be διανοίας ἐν φωνῇ ὥσπερ εἴδωλον (*Theaet.* 208 C)—the vocal expression of a previously complete process of thought. οὐκοῦν διάνοια μὲν καὶ λόγος ταὐτόν· πλὴν ὁ μὲν ἐντὸς τῆς ψυχῆς πρὸς αὐτὴν διάλογος, τοῦτ' αὐτὸ ἡμῖν ἐπωνομάσθη διάνοια . . . τὸ δέ γ' ἀπ' ἐκείνης ῥεῦμα διὰ τοῦ στόματος ἰὸν μετὰ φθόγγου κέκληται λόγος (*Soph.* 263 E). Thus language stands between thought and things in these two passages, and is said to imitate or reproduce both: but there is no consistent and regular theory of their relation. The word λόγος is extremely shifting in meaning: it covers everything from a simple word up to a definition or explanation—a sense of it which brings us back again to Socrates and his demand that people should be able λόγον διδόναι of what they held and said.

There is, we think, little doubt that Plato looked for ultimate reality always in the Universal, and that the οὐσία of a thing to his mind was not the individual. There is practically no doctrine of Personality in his writings, and he does not seem to have been troubled by the desire to form one. It is not quite the same

[1] In *Tim.* 92 C the whole physical world is said to be an εἰκών of that which is the object of reason: θνητὰ γὰρ καὶ ἀθάνατα ζῷα λαβὼν καὶ ξυμπληρωθεὶς ὅδε ὁ κόσμος, οὕτω ζῷον ὁρατὸν τὰ ὁρατὰ περιέχον, εἰκὼν τοῦ νοητοῦ θεὸς αἰσθητός, μέγιστος καὶ ἄριστος κάλλιστός τε καὶ τελεώτατος γέγονεν, εἷς οὐρανὸς ὅδε, μονογενὴς ὤν.

with Aristotle. He, too, is without a formal doctrine of Personality: but the individual holds a very different place in his writings to that assigned to it by Plato. We must pass on to consider his usage of *οὐσία* and kindred words.

There are difficulties in dealing with Aristotle, as with Plato. The chronology of his works would afford matter for serious discussion, if it were not that the question of their history and genuineness were more pressing still. We cannot deal with these by the way, and must again adopt a general line of policy, treating the main works as, at least, trustworthy sources of information as to the Aristotelian philosophy, and leaving all minute questions entirely aside.

Plato had begun his course of speculation with the opposition of the One and the Many, the Changeless and the Changeable. And there was little doubt on which side he placed real Being. But his analysis failed, because it left the two sides of the antithesis in unmodified separation: there was no way of explaining their relation. Moreover, Plato looked askance on the contingent: his ideal was rather mathematical method than that which involved uncertainty or imperfect and probable conclusions. In all these respects, Aristotle departed from the pattern of his master, and took a new line of his own. In the first place, he had a very wide view of the importance of all facts. In the treatise on the Parts of Animals (Bk. I, ch. v, pp.644-5) he deprecates the contempt which some were, apparently, inclined to pour on such studies. *δεῖ μὴ δυσχεραίνειν παιδικῶς τὴν περὶ τῶν ἀτιμοτέρων ζώων ἐπίσκεψιν· ἐν πᾶσι γὰρ τοῖς φυσικοῖς ἔνεστί τι θαυμαστόν.* This principle—and it would be hard to find a better one for the pursuit of Natural Science—involved a method of collecting and dwelling upon hard facts, which could not but affect the conception of real being. A man who started with an unprejudiced interest in all facts, and who felt, as the passage above referred to shows, the pleasure of discovery in this region, could not fail to believe in and appreciate the reality of the contents of daily experience. He would be unlikely to arrive in the position of possessing two worlds, one of absolute reality, another of mere appearance. But with all this, Aristotle's interest, like that of Plato, was in the fundamental nature of things, their *οὐσία*, and this he affirms is the proper interest of the

philosopher (*Met.* Γ. ch. iii, p. 1005, a, b). But the precise definition of it is not easy.

There are three aspects from which Aristotle regarded the things of experience. There is the material aspect, the substance or matter out of which they are made; the formal aspect, that is, the principle or law of their structure; and there is the empirical aspect, the composite individual result of the combination of form and matter. At different times Aristotle gives the name of *οὐσία* or real being to each of these. There is a further almost grammatical sense of *οὐσία* in which it stands for a subject of a sentence, and is most completely satisfied by the case of a proper name. This is called *πρώτη οὐσία* in the Categories: and is opposed to *δευτέρα οὐσία*, the names of the species or genera to which the *πρῶται οὐσίαι* belong[1]. It would be easy to illustrate the various senses indicated above from the main works of Aristotle: a very large portion of his writing is occupied with the discussion of *οὐσία* in various connexions. It is not so easy, but is more important at the present point, to try to ascertain whether there is any consistent idea running through all the uses of the word. At first sight the whole matter seems to be involved in utter confusion. Aristotle accepts as Plato did a contrast between form and matter, between the universal formal principle and the dead material upon which the form is imposed: and it is easy to see that he understands and appreciates the reasons which led Plato to find reality in the form. He himself identifies *εἶδος* or *μορφή* with *οὐσία* in a host of passages. He was, of course, gravely dissatisfied with Plato's disposition to separate the formal principle from the empirical manifestation of it. But the desire to correct this will not by itself explain the usage which we actually find in the works. If we may venture to offer an explanation, it is that he thought of *οὐσία* as a *process* rather than a mere *substance*, and gives the name to aspects or stages in it which are parts of a whole.

If the philosophy of Plato was governed by logical preconceptions, Aristotle was mainly under the influence of physical

[1] *Cat.* c. p. 2 a. 11 *οὐσία ἐστὶν ἡ κυριώτατά τε καὶ πρώτως καὶ μάλιστα λεγομένη ἣ μήτε καθ' ὑποκειμένου τινὸς λέγεται, μήτ' ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ τινί ἐστιν . . . δεύτεραι οὐσίαι λέγονται ἐν οἷς εἴδεσιν αἱ πρώτως οὐσίαι λεγόμεναι ὑπάρχουσι, ταῦτά τε καὶ τὰ τῶν εἰδῶν τούτων γένη.*

ideas. His attention was arrested by the phenomena of growth or becoming, the process by which a thing becomes something other than it was and yet retains its identity. A given matter (*ὕλη* or *ὑποκείμενον* or *οὐσία*) is the permanent substratum upon which change takes place. This is conceived mainly on general lines, in which matter is the basis of all change[1]. Matter is the contingent, that which is capable of taking on various shapes: in this sense we find it called *οὐσία*[2]. But here enters a very important and significant idea. Matter, though in itself indifferent, and defined in none of the ways which are possible to it, yet *is δυνάμει* all that it may become in fact (*ἐνεργείᾳ*). That is, there is a close relation between the undeveloped indifferent stage in the theoretical process and the condition of realization. It is not that a perfectly alien and dead matter is stamped from without as it were *ὥσπερ ἐκμαγεῖον* with form: the process of reality consists in the manifestation of determinate realizations of what was otherwise merely possible. The process is, of course, not one in time. There is no time at which matter exists in pure indeterminateness and then proceeds to take on form: but the actual manifestations in experience are analogous to a process such as has been described. If this is the real meaning and drift of Aristotle's thought, it becomes easy to see how he can identify *οὐσία* with so many different ideas. It is the matter out of which things come: but it is also the form in which the potentiality of the material substratum is realized. For the form and the matter are not combined accidentally as two irreconcilable opposites: they have a natural affinity for one another; the entry of the form is the due exposition of the capacity of the matter, and the result, *τὸ σύνολον*, is the end of the process in which its earlier stages are explained. This also may, therefore, be called *οὐσία*. Again, the process may be regarded under the Category of Cause, and here we find the same usage in regard

[1] *De Gen. and Corr.* I iv p. 320 a. 2 *ἔστι δὲ ὕλη μάλιστα μὲν καὶ κυρίως τὸ ὑποκείμενον γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς δεκτικόν, τρόπον δέ τινα καὶ τὸ ταῖς ἄλλαις μεταβολαῖς, ὅτι πάντα δεκτικὰ τὰ ὑποκείμενα ἐναντιώσεων τινῶν.*

[2] *Met.* A. iii p. 983 b. 8 *ἐξ οὗ γὰρ ἔστιν ἅπαντα τὰ ὄντα, καὶ ἐξ οὗ γίγνεται πρώτου, καὶ εἰς ὃ φθείρεται τελευταῖον, τῆς μὲν οὐσίας ὑπομενούσης, τοῖς δὲ πάθεσι μεταβαλλούσης, τοῦτο στοιχεῖον καὶ ταύτην ἀρχὴν φασιν (οἱ πλεῖστοι τῶν πρώτων φιλοσοφησάντων) εἶναι τῶν ὄντων.* So we find Aristotle speaking of the four elements as *οὐσίαι*, *De Cael.* III i, p. 298 a. 29.

to *οὐσία*. It may be identified with the material cause, or with the formal—the principle governing the development of the thing—, or with the final cause—the end for which it exists. Or further, more comprehensively, the whole nature of a thing, *ἡ φύσις*, may be described as the *οὐσία*. It is a fatal error to make *τὴν φύσιν ἐπεισοδιώδη ἐκ τῶν φαινομένων, ὥσπερ μοχθηρὰ τραγῳδία*, *Met.* N. iii p. 1090, b. 19, 20: the process must be continuous from end to end and cover all that occurs within it; and then from time to time various aspects of it, all equally necessary to the whole, may be treated separately and given predominance.

It would seem that in the end Aristotle follows Plato in dropping out the material element from the most perfect type of existence. The Life of God, the supreme Reality, is indeed a process, but is pure form: it is reflexion upon reflexion, *νόησις νοήσεως*, *Met.* Λ. ix p. 1074 b. 34. And this conception of ideal perfection affects his estimate of the world, especially in regard to human life. Thus, though the physical principles are largely used in the theoretical exposition of the State, yet the imitation of the Divine life is set out as an ideal for human aspiration. And this would mean a tendency to disparage the material side of life, *Eth. N.* X viii.

The philosophy of Plato and Aristotle is difficult to present with any accuracy in a short form, because of the wealth of material. It is hard to make any statement that is beyond controversy, and it would be impossible within the present limits of space to discuss all that can be said on the subject, or to give all the references. The philosophers who followed Plato and Aristotle have met with a less kindly fate. There is comparatively little remaining of their works, and that little is in a fragmentary form: in fact, until we come to Plotinus, there is no philosopher of the first rank at all complete, unless Sextus Empiricus be so called. In many cases it is probably true that the world has not lost much: but considering the effect which Stoic philosophy had upon later generations, it is greatly to be regretted that its remnants are so fragmentary.

Zeller notes, as a ground for disbelieving the story of the total disappearance of the writings of Aristotle on the death of Theophrastus, the strong influence exercised by his philosophy

upon the Stoics[1]. The Stoics, it seems, were pure materialists. The opposition between Matter and Form ceased to trouble them seriously: and they spoke of a primary matter without qualities (ἄποιος ὕλη) which gradually under the influence of right Reason or God took definite shape, in the four elements first, and then by a process of evolution in the visible world. This seems to be an exaggeration of the Aristotelian doctrine already noted of the ὑποκείμενον. The whole of this process was one of material change. God, or Reason, was also material, a form of etherealized fire. Thus οὐσία to the mind of a Stoic must have meant matter and nothing more. The Stoic position seems to have depended on the principle that anything capable of action and reaction was material[2]: and they extended their materialism to qualities and habits of the mind, the only exception being the λεκτά[3]. The Reason or Divine Power which governed the world (sometimes called λόγος) implanted fragments of itself in the world (σπερματικοὶ λόγοι): under this guidance the world passed through a series of recurring cycles: there was an evolution upwards from the ἄποιος ὕλη, which after passing through ἐκπύρωσις or destruction by fire, recurred exactly in the same form as before[4]. The Stoics seem to have used all the regular phraseology of Greek philosophy: they spoke of αἴτια, of the Soul and its capacities, and the like: but they gave a materialistic interpretation to all such phrases, and their evolution was one that could easily have been expressed in terms of the integration of matter and the dissipation of motion, if they had had such ideas at command. But as we read discussions of Stoic philosophy or note the influence of their terms, we cannot but feel that their terms were largely independent of their physical theory, and had effect upon thinkers who did not accept a materialistic view of οὐσία.

We have thus far a threefold association with the word οὐσία. It brings to mind the contrast of the ideal with the phenomenal world: in precise opposition to this it suggests material being:

[1] Zeller, *Gesch. d. griech. Phil.* vol. ii p. 146.

[2] Cf. Plut. adv. Sto. c. 30 ὄντα γὰρ μόνα τὰ σώματα καλοῦσιν (οἱ Στωϊκοί) ἐπειδὴ ὄντος τὸ ποιεῖν τε καὶ πάσχειν.

[3] Cf. Zeller, iv pp. 152–6. For the materiality of ἕξεις cf. Philo, *Quod Deus Imm.* p. 298.

[4] Cf. Stob. *Ecl. Phys.* i (ed. Heeren), pp. 60, 66, 178, 312–16, 370; Diog. La. vii § 132 &c.

and through Aristotle it is connected with the ideas of Form and Cause, Purpose and Nature, as well as with the material substratum. From the point of view of a history of a theological term, it will not be necessary to dwell at any length on the Sceptics or the Epicureans. The latter, the godless Epicureans as they were called, held a physical theory of the world and explained the physical order by means of an atomic philosophy. They did not therefore contribute a new point of view, and their theories as to the gods made theologians shy of adopting their views or even reading their works. Thus the liberal-minded Origen, who put his theological pupils through a course of Greek philosophy, deemed it unnecessary to lead them to the works of Epicurus and his school[1]. And in like manner the Sceptics, as represented by Sextus Empiricus, were too negative in their doctrine to be of service to our purpose. They introduced no new view of reality, but with great acuteness and subtlety they pointed out the difficulties in the old ones. Their aim was strictly negative: tending not to a positive theory at all, but to suspense of judgement as regards all theories.

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[1] Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Oratio Panegyrica*, c. xiii.