Accidents III: The Ontological Square

The relation of ‘being in’ holds between accidents and substances, and has often been referred to as ‘inherence’. The relation of ‘being said of’, or predication, holds between universals and particulars (in pre-Fregean logic also to other, ‘inferior’, universals). Thus, the four classes have been traditionally known as:

1. universal substances,
2. particular or individual accidents,
3. universal accidents,
4. individual substances.

Thus, in Pacius’s commentary on the Organon of 1598 we read: “rerum divisio quadrupartita, aut enim est substantia universalis, aut substantia particularis, aut accidentem universalum, aut accidentem particularem”.

In Angelelli (1967) the square appears as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>not being in a subject</th>
<th>being in a subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>said of a subject</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man</td>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not said of a subject</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this man</td>
<td>this white</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It may be unclear whether Aristotle fully recognizes individual accidents in the real world in addition to the three other types of entities. However, the acceptance of this fourth type became well established in the Aristotelian and scholastic tradition. There were many ‘axioms’ for individual accidents: ‘individual accidents cannot pass from one subject to another subject’, ‘individual accidents cannot be in two subjects’, etc.

In spite of the clarity of the definitions involved in the theory of the ontological square, the associated terminology has often tended to be dangerously ambiguous (for example, ‘iness’ as a term designating either one of the two basic relations; ‘accident’ as referring both to universal and to individual accidents).

Two powerful ideas have acted against the sharp separation of the four classes of entities:

1. the notion of essence,
2. the view of universals as merely ‘mental’,
so that the only ‘real’ classification has been held by many to be the division between accidents and substances.

In the historical development of the ontological square, interesting discussions have emerged on the possibility of reiterating either of the two basic relations. In the case of ‘being in’ (inherence) this became the issue of whether to admit accidents of accidents (for example: white – an accident from the category of quality – is in surface – an accident from the category of quantity – where the surface in question is in some given individual substance). Here classical ontologists, for example Francisco Suárez (Disquisitiones Metaphysicae, XIV, 4) seem to have favoured parsimony. In the case of the relation ‘said of’, however, the attitude appears to have been, in general, far more liberal: predicates of predicates proliferated and were subject to a sophisticated treatment under the heading of ‘second intentions’.

Curious questions have also been considered, such as for example the general lack of proper names for individual accidents.

A surprising, unusual formulation of the ontological square is found in De veris principiis et vera ratione philosophandi contra pseudophilosophos libri IV, 1533, of the humanist Marius Nizolius (1498–1576), who wanted to replace universals by collections or multitudes. and accordingly had, instead of ‘universal substances’, multitudes singularium substantiarum (sets of singular substances), and instead of ‘universal accidents’, multitudes singularium qualitatum (sets of singular qualities).

Further Reading