

# Accidents: Real or Not?

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# Overview

## Reminder & background

- Accidents

## Ontological status

## Theological problems

- Eucharist

- Deflationism

- Real accidents

## Implications

# Reminder: Matter and Form(s)

What are substances composed of?

- **integral parts**: elements.
- **metaphysical parts**: parts that aren't integral parts.
- substance = prime matter [is it extended? is it real?] + substantial form(s) [how many?] (+ **accidents (accidental forms)**)
  - the accidents aren't part of the ("thin") substance, strictly speaking

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What are these accidental forms?

- reminder: the **10 Aristotelian categories**: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, having, action, passion.
- all but substance are so-called ‘accidental categories’: e.g., being tabby (“possessing the form of tabbyness”), weighing 12 pounds, being curled up on the sofa, etc.
- **Some questions about accidental forms**: what’s their relation between accidental forms and the substance or substantial form of a thing? Can accidents exist without a substance? Can a substance exist without (any and all its) accidents?

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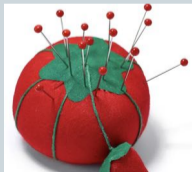
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# Accidents: Inherence and Sub-Standing

## Accidents *inhere*: but in what?

- “Standard View” (Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, etc.): they inhere in the substance; a substance *sub-stands* its accidents.
- Some late scholastics (Gregory of Rimini, etc.): accidents inhere in prime matter directly (continuity problem). This may seem implausible (we don’t say that prime matter is cold but that water is cold!)
- Some other late scholastics (Thomists): accidents inhere in the accident of quantity, which inheres in prime matter.

Substances also *explain* their accidents and the constant conjunction of certain accidents (think hedgehog instead of pincushion!)



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# The Ontological Status of Accidents

A brief history:

- Aristotle (probably); 13th-century scholastics: **deflationary view**; accidents are not ontologically robust; it's only the cat that exists in the primary sense, not its colour.
- 14th-century dominant view: **accidents are *real***; they exist just as substances exist.
- 17th century: **eliminativism**; no accidents

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- 1 **Eliminativism**: there are no accidental forms; an accident is just a mode of perceiving a body.
  - argument: all change is explainable by the motion of bodies; no need to postulate anything else
  - popular later (Hobbes, etc.); no medieval philosopher advocated for it (save perhaps for Autrecourt)
- 2 **Deflationary (but not eliminativist) view**: accidents = a substance's existing in a certain way
  - Albert the Great, Aquinas, etc.: when we say that accidents “exist” the term ‘exist’ should be understood analogically (equivocally but in a connected sense).

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# Theological Problems

- Why should we worry about theological problems in the first place? — if something is logically or metaphysically impossible, then on most accounts, not even God can make it happen
- There is no place for “miracles” in Aristotle’s framework — but can we stretch it enough so as to make place for them?



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# Eucharist & Homeless Accidents

- Theological doctrine: at the uttering of certain words by the priest, *transubstantiation* happens: the *substance* of the bread and wine turn into the body and blood of Christ, while the *accidents* remain numerically the same.
- Is this possible, metaphysically speaking?
- What do the accidents inhere in, in this case?
- If it belongs to the notion of an accident that it's something inhering, then self-subsisting accidents are contradictory, and this cannot happen even by an omnipotent God.



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- ① **The Deflationist** (e.g., Aquinas): accidents don't *have to* inhere in something, they just tend to do so naturally.
- we include inherence in their definition because we concentrate on the natural cases
  - but God can still create a non-inhering accident (as opposed to, say, creating prime matter on its own!)
  - this means that an accident can change its mode of existence / ontological status [— is this plausible?]

There are some varieties of this account; you may think that. . .

- accidents have no natures at all on their own (close to eliminativism);
- they have natures but no existence — e.g., because their existence needs to be fleshed out in terms of how the substance exists, or their existence is somehow “diminished” (Henry of Ghent)

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- ② **Real accidents** (Scotus): things in all 10 categories exist in the same way. I.e., (1) accidents have their own existence, and (2) this existence is of the same kind as that of a substance.
- what marks off accidents from substances are various kinds of priority relations.
  - accidents are genuine, irreducible entities, existing in their own right even when they inhere in a subject
  - it explains transubstantiation very well (perhaps too well?).

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# Scotus's Argument for Real Accidents

## Scotus's argument for real accidents

- 1 Accidents play certain roles: e.g., principles of acting, objects of sense and intellect; the endpoints of change.
  - 2 Accidents could not play these roles if they did not, properly speaking, exist.
- ∴ Accidents, properly speaking, exist.

- This is a very important, agenda-setting argument: do we really need all 9 Aristotelian accidental categories? Do they *all* play these roles?
- New principle: if and only if a certain accidental form plays a fundamental explanatory role, then we must regard it as a real, genuinely existing thing.

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# Scotus's Argument for Real Accidents

- 17th c.: there is no such role that the accidents would play; motion of bodies can explain everything.
- Scotus aims to establish the reality of accidents on purely philosophical grounds

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What are accidents then, for Scotus?

- they are absolute ontological items
- **aptitude vs manifestation:**
  - accidents do have *aptitudes* (natural tendency) to be housed in a substance
  - but sometimes this aptitude is not manifested
  - what aptitudes something has, is not up to the divine will (in case of essential aptitudes); but whether it is manifest or not, *is* up to the divine will / God's "policies".
- Aristotle was right that accidents usually inhere; but he was wrong in supposing that this is necessarily so.

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# Some Implications

- ① **Accidents and Inherence:** If you think accidents are real, you'll need some robust theory of inherence — how are all these real entities (substance, accidents) related?
  - Scotus: appeal to some further metaphysical part (“glue & paste” theories); inherence is a kind of relational or second-order accident (= not separable). — Will this lead to a deluge of additional metaphysical parts? Why not?
  - **Inherence without glue** (e.g., Auriol): accidents have real existence, but they are essentially incomplete
  - **corpuscularian view:** in terms of spatio-temporal relationship only (does this mean you can “shake off” your colour??)
- ② **The composite:** is the composite (the “thick substance”) a mere aggregate? What is really the difference between substance and accident? (Scotus: accidents *depend* on substance, just not in the existential sense.)

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