

ARISTOTLE ON EXISTENCE

GARETH B. MATTHEWS

There is no such kind of thing as *the things that there are*; that *there is such a thing as it is* is not *what* anything is.

G.E.M. Anscombe's paraphrase of *An Post* 92b13–14¹

“‘To be’ is said in many ways’ is one of Aristotle’s favourite sayings. But how many is ‘many’? In exactly how many ways did Aristotle think ‘to be’ is said?

Sometimes the answer seems to be ‘About ten’. For sometimes, for example in Chapter 1 of *Metaphysics Zeta*, Aristotle backs up his claim by adding that ‘to be’ is said in as many ways as there are categories. And he seems to have thought there were about ten of those. Thus he lists ten categories in his early work, *The Categories*, and, although he sometimes gives lists of fewer than ten categories in his later works, he never lists more than ten.

In *Metaphysics Delta* 7 Aristotle tells us, with a different set of distinctions in mind, that there are four ways in which ‘to be’ is said: (1) an accidental way, (2) a *per se* way, (3) an ‘is true’ way, and (4) an ‘is potentially’ way. If we add these four ways to the previous ten we get fourteen for a total. If we suppose that one set of distinctions is generic to the other, we should multiply four times ten to get a total of 40 ways in which ‘to be’ can be said. That begins to sound unmanageable, and implausible.

Yet that isn’t the worst of it. In one passage, at *Metaphysics H2* at 1042b25, Aristotle completely outdoes himself in telling us in how many ways ‘to be’ is said. ‘To be’ is said, he tells us there, in an indefinitely large number of ways. This claim is both startling and unsettling. I shall call it ‘the unsettling claim’.

G.E.L. Owen in his paper, ‘Aristotle on the Snares of Ontology’,² offers this combination of paraphrase and translation to put the unsettling claim in its context:

Some things are distinguished from others by the way their materials are put together, by blending or tying or gluing or nailing, for example; some by their position, for instance, a threshold and a lintel; some by their time, such as dinner and breakfast; and some by a combination of such marks. ‘Plainly, then, the word “is” is used in a corresponding variety of ways. A threshold *is*, in that it is situated thus and so: “to be” means its being so situated. And that ice *is* means that it is solidified in such and such a way. Of some things the being will be defined by all these marks... For yet other things, to be is to be mixed, and not to be is the opposite...’ (ibid. p. 76)

¹ G.E.M. Anscombe and P.T. Geach, *Three Philosophers* (Oxford 1961) 21.

² Renford Bambrough, ed., *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, (London 1965) 69–95. Reprinted in Martha Nussbaum, ed., G.E.L. Owen, *Logic, Science and Dialectic*, (Ithaca 1986) 259–78.

According to Owen's way of reading Aristotle, 'It looks as though a new sense of the verb "to be" will have to be conjured up for each sort of thing we want to talk about...' (*ibid.* p. 77). Thus on Owen's reading, the unsettling claim comes to this: 'to be' is said in as many ways as there are kinds of things to talk about.

The unsettling claim, understood in Owen's way, has as an implication that frogs, for example, could be said to exist only in a sense of 'exist' different from that in which toads are said to exist. 'There exist frogs and toads' would be guaranteed to be false. Worse still, tree frogs could be said to exist only in a sense of 'exist' different from that in which bull frogs are said to exist, so that 'There exist tree frogs and bull frogs' would also be guaranteed to be false. Surely that result couldn't be the view of any sensible person. In particular, it couldn't be Aristotle's view.

Owen, recognizing the absurdity of the claim he attributes to Aristotle and supposing that its absurdity would also have been obvious to Aristotle, suggests that Aristotle's way out of the absurdity lies in an appeal to the theory of categories. 'Ultimately, [Aristotle] holds,' according to Owen, 'to be is always to be either a substance of a certain sort, or a quality of a certain sort, or a quantity of a certain sort...' (77).

The suggestion seems to be that, in addition to the maximally specific senses of 'exist' that go with each kind of thing said to exist, there are also, in Aristotle's view, generic senses of 'exist'. In particular, Owen suggests, there is a maximally generic sense to go with each category of things said to exist. So there is a 'substance sense', a 'quality' sense, and so on for the rest of the categories.

Now, as I have already indicated, it is certainly Aristotle's view that 'to be' is said in as many ways as there are categories of things said to be. But whether these categorical senses of 'to be' are super-generic senses under which are ranged ever more specific senses all the way down to maximally specific senses to go with each *infima species* is another matter. On this Owenite interpretation of the unsettling claim, Aristotle would have to agree that although, in a sense — that is, in a generic sense — there *are* both men and mice, in a sense there are not men and mice (for the 'specific' sense of 'to be' in which there can be said to be men is not one in which there can also be said to be mice). Worse: in a sense there are both bullfrogs and tree frogs, though in a sense there are not, since in the *infima*-specific sense of 'to be' in which there can be said to be bullfrogs there cannot also be said to be tree frogs. That certainly seems a silly view. I know of no place where Aristotle even discusses it, let alone accepts it.

Can Aristotle's unsettling claim be read in a different and more plausible way? In particular, can it be read in such a way as to yield an interesting and defensible doctrine that is in harmony with other views we take him to have held? I think so.

Aristotle begins *Metaphysics* H2 by announcing that his subject will be 'substance [or being: *ousia*] as the actuality [*hōs energeian*] of sensible things' (1042b10–11). He goes on to say that, whereas, according to Democritus, things differ with respect only to three features of their underlying matter, in fact there are really many differences. Some differences have to do with composition of matter, e.g., mixture, for honey water; being bound together, for a bundle; being glued together, for a book; being nailed together, for a casket. Other differences, he goes on, have to do with position (the threshold being at the bottom of the opening in the wall, the lintel at the top). Others have to do with time (dinner being late in the day; breakfast, early), and so on. After a few more examples comes the troubling line, 'Clearly then "is" is said in as many ways'.

Owen reads the continuation of that line this way: 'a threshold is, in that it is situated thus and so: "to be" means its being so situated.' Thus on Owen's reading Aristotle is interested in, for example, this claim:

(1) A threshold exists.

And according to Owen, Aristotle offers this schematic analysis:

(2) A threshold is situated thus and so.

Filling out the 'thus and so' we might come up with something like this:

(3) A threshold is situated at the foot of an opening in a wall.

I certainly agree that in *Metaphysics* H2 Aristotle is interested in (1) as a specimen existence claim. I also agree that he wants to offer an analysis of (1). But I think we should be sceptical about the assumption that he wants to offer an analysis of (1) by providing a substitutable paraphrase for 'exists' in (1) that will display its sense.

Owen, by contrast, seems stuck on the idea that Aristotle is trying to analyse (1) by offering a substitutable paraphrase for 'exists' (or for the existential use of the Greek verb for 'to be' that 'exists' in (1) translates). As I hope to make clear, that is a rather unpromising project.

The only evidence that Owen gives for supposing that Aristotle would be prepared to supply substitutable paraphrases for such an incredibly large number of different senses of 'exist' comes from *Topics* A15. At the relevant point in that chapter (107a39ff) the topic is homonymy.

It seems plausible to say that, according to Aristotle, any word used homonymously is also said in more than one way. But we are not required to make the reverse inference. We need not suppose, that is, that Aristotle supposes any term said in many ways is therefore used homonymously. We are free to suppose that 'said in many ways' is a looser classification — one that includes, but is not restricted to, cases of genuine homonymy. Only if there is genuine homonymy need we suppose that Aristotle would require substitutable paraphrases to bring out the different senses.

Let's return to Owen's paraphrase for (1). Suppose the product of the desired analysis were indeed (3). We would need to know how to read (3). Here it is important to remember that (1) is, and is meant to be, an existence claim. The paraphrase shouldn't, then, simply tell us what it would be for there to be a threshold, if there were one. It should bring out the claim that, in fact, there is at least one. To make that existential force clear we need to read (3) this way:

(4) Something is a threshold situated at the foot of an opening in a wall.

Now, of course, the substitutable paraphrase is totally otiose, since (4) is equivalent to

(5) Something is a threshold.

The problem is perfectly general. We could call it 'the problem of the vanishing paraphrase'. If one seeks to show what 'exists' means in the context, 'an F exists' by substituting 'is G' for 'exists' (where 'G' is to stand for a definition of what 'an F' replaces), one will end up with 'an F is a G' where that must mean 'some F is a G', that is, 'there exists an F that is G'. Since, in the imagined circumstances, 'x is G' will follow from 'x is F', the result will amount to no more than 'there is an F' or 'an F exists', which is what we had at the beginning. The paraphrase has vanished.

Is there another way of reading this passage, and another way of understanding the unsettling claim — perhaps a way that makes it less unsettling? I think so.

In the paragraph under discussion Aristotle is talking about whether the differences between the actuality of things can be reduced to only three basic differentiae of their matter, as Democritus maintains, or whether there are more than three. There are *many* more, Aristotle maintains. Thus a natural way of reading the continuation of 'plainly, then, "is" is used in a corresponding variety of ways' is this:

A threshold is [i.e., exists] because [the relevant *matter*] is situated thus and so. Aristotle's idea is that the difference between

(1) A threshold exists

and

(6) A lintel exists

lies in the situation of some relevant matter, say a beam. Whereas (1) amounts to

(7) Some matter (e.g., a beam) is situated at the foot of an opening in the wall of a house

(6) amounts to this:

(8) Some matter (perhaps the very same beam) is situated at the *top* of an opening in the wall of a house.

Platonic reasoning — all too familiar to Aristotle — would move us to say that if a threshold and a lintel can both be truly said to exist, it must be by virtue of their participation in existence. Plato tries out that move explicitly in the *Sophist*, where he makes *being* one of the 'greatest kinds' — something, presumably, that all and only existent things participate in.

Aristotle's move in *Metaphysics* H seems to be an explicit rejection of the idea that being is a greatest kind, in which all and only existent things participate and which is, somehow, the meaning of the verb 'to be' when it is used existentially. Rather, Aristotle says in this passage, what it means to say that F exists varies with the replacement for F. But we needn't take that to mean that 'exists' has an indefinitely large number of senses; rather it has no independent sense at all. It is syncategorematic, to pick up later, medieval terminology. Like 'all' and 'no', its meaning is a function of what it is conjoined with.

The situation is a little like the one Russell faced when he developed his famous theory of descriptions. Suppose we want to know what 'the' means in

(9) The rose over there is pink.

It doesn't just mean 'at least one', since (9) is not equivalent to

(10) At least one thing is a rose over there and it's pink.

Nor does it mean 'at most one', since (9) doesn't mean

(11) At most one thing is a rose over there and it's pink.

According to Russell, (9) is equivalent to the conjunction of (10), (11), and this:

(12) Whatever is a rose over there is pink.

If one asks, 'But what exactly is the meaning of 'the' in (9)?' we have to say that there is no paraphrase that can be substituted for 'the' in (9) that will preserve the sense of (9). The best we can offer, according to Russell, is a *contextual* definition, that is, a paraphrase (a rather cumbersome one, at that) of the whole statement.

A Russellian could also say, mimicking Aristotle, that 'the' in expressions of the form 'the F is G' is said in as many ways as there are kinds of F said to be G. But this approach to the meaning of the definite article does not assign to it an impossibly large number of senses. Rather it gives us a way of coming up with a statement that is (or so Russell claims, anyway) equivalent to any given statement in which 'the' appears though, of course, the new equivalent does not itself contain the word 'the'.

On my interpretation Aristotle's claim is somewhat similar. It isn't that 'exists' has as many senses as there are different substitutends for it in statements of the form, 'An F exists'. Rather statements of that form can be paraphrased, according to Aristotle, with a statement to this effect: some appropriate matter has the form of an F. It is for this reason that 'exists' is said in as many ways as there are kinds of substances and substance-like entities (thresholds, lintels, books, breakfasts, and so on) that can be said to exist.

Why did G.E.L. Owen insist on giving Aristotle's unsettling claim its fully unsettling reading, rather than the undisturbing interpretation I have argued for? He certainly recognized that the latter part of *Metaphysics* H2, at least from 1043a12 on, if not already at 1043a7, invites my interpretation.

For one thing, as I have already mentioned, Owen thought that *Topics* A15 committed Aristotle to the view that a term cannot be considered to be said in many ways unless a substitutable paraphrase can be supplied to distinguish each of those several ways. I have suggested that, whereas Aristotle might have wished to enforce such a requirement for genuine homonymy, he could have understood 'is said in many ways' as making a looser claim than 'is homonymous'.

No doubt the other reason Owen thought we are bound to read Aristotle as making such a perverse and implausible claim lay in what Aristotle says immediately after the statement that 'is' is said 'in as many ways'. In Owen's translation Aristotle goes on:

(13) A threshold *is*, in that it is situated thus and so: 'to be' means its being so situated. Owen understands (13) to mean:

(14) A threshold *is*, in that that threshold is situated thus and so: 'to be' [for the threshold] means its being so situated.

It is worth pointing out that the occurrence of 'it' in (13) has been supplied by the translator. Moreover, the use of 'its' renders the neuter pronoun, *auto*, as if it took the masculine word for 'threshold' as its antecedent. To be sure, such sloppiness in the gender of pronouns cannot be ruled out. But, in view of the horrendous consequences of reading Aristotle's Owen's way, I suggest it would be better to take Aristotle's use of the neuter pronoun as license for reading the sentence more loosely, this way:

(15) There exists a threshold because [something] is situated thus and so; 'to be' means its being so situated.

On my reading, the analysis of H2 complements nicely the claim in, for example, *Metaphysics* Z1, that 'is' is said in as many ways as there are categories. When Aristotle makes the latter claim, he generally adds that the use of 'is' for substance is primary. What he seems to mean is that things in other categories exist if, and only if, they are the qualities, quantities, places, and so forth, *of substances*. In this way the existence of things in other categories is parasitic upon the existence of substances.

The idea seems to be this. Suppose we want to say,

(12) White is (i.e., exists).

White, being a quality, is a 'how', a *poion*. So

(13) White is how some substance is.

Four-foot, by contrast, is a quantity, a *poson*, a 'how much'. Thus

(14) Four-foot is (i.e., exists)

just in case

(15) Four-foot is how much some substance is.

All these analyses of existence claims take the existence of substances for granted. They bring out the Aristotelian idea that the being of substance, as Aristotle so often insists, is primary.

If the existence of substances is primary, is there no way to analyse the claim that some substance, say a horse, or some substance-like artifact, such as a threshold, exists? Of course there is. But this analysis will not underwrite a substitutable paraphrase for 'is' in 'A horse is' or 'A threshold is'. Instead it will underwrite a paraphrase of the whole existence claim as a claim about some matter's having relevant form. But since the matter of a substance is individuated by reference to the substance it constitutes, rather than the other way around, it will still be the case that the existence of substance is primary.

University of Massachusetts, Amherst