Aristotle I PHIL301 Prof. Oakes Winthrop University updated: 3/14/14 8:48 AM

The Categories

- The *Categories* is one of several important works by Aristotle on metaphysics. His topic here is the classification of beings and the ontological relationships among them.
  - Ontological: of or pertaining to the nature of being
- His information source in the *Categories* is linguistic: he appeals to features of our language, of our talk about being and beings, to classify and characterize being and beings.
  - Note the connection, then, with the rationalist tradition: *logoi* themselves may be investigated for clues to the fundamental nature of reality. Compare Parmenides and Zeno.
- In addition, as above, Aristotle's method is broadly *empiricist*.
  - This means, roughly, that he proceeds by (a) gathering information (data), primarily by sense observation, and (b) distilling from the gathered data such organization as becomes evident.
  - This latter process of classification is facilitated by identifying *similarities* and *differences* among the data. Aristotle's work to identify a biological taxonomy is paradigmatic: among the things that there are, some are living (i.e., have a "soul" or internal principle of change); among these, some are capable only of growth (plants), some are capable of motion and perception (animals), and some are capable of rational thought (humans). Further differences and similarities among these general kinds yield the beginning of the genus-species taxonomy by which we now identify biological kind.
  - In the *Categories*, Aristotle begins by gathering information about *words* (*logoi*). (See the first Aristotle study guide for some further details.)
- More specifically, Aristotle notices two types of predication, that in which we say something *of* a thing, and that in which we say something to be *in* a thing.
  - Predicate: a linguistic form attributing to a subject some quality or property
  - Subject: in a linguistic context, that to which a predicate applies typically a term referring to some thing (object, event, etc.); Aristotle also will also to subjects as the substrate of change (i.e., the thing undergoing change).
- To *say* something *of* a thing is to classify that thing. E.g., we *say of* Barbaro that he was a horse. Thus, Barbaro belongs to the class of horses.
  - Note that the *said of* relation is *transitive:* if *horse* is said of Barbaro and if *mammal* is said of horse, then *mammal* will be said of Barbaro.
  - These relationships determine a hierarchy of beings, for Aristotle. This hierarchy is the origin of our contemporary biological taxonomy.
- That which is *said in* a thing indicates a relationship of *ontological dependence*.
  - Ontological dependence: x is ontologically dependent on y iff x can exist only if y exists.
  - For example, *courage* may be said to be in Barbaro; and if so, then (that particular instance of) courage cannot exist unless Barbaro exists.

- We should distinguish this "in" of ontological dependence from the "in" of spatial location: it is not the same relation as that holding between a mouse and a box, e.g., for a mouse is not ontologically dependent on any box. Nor is it the relation that parts have to wholes: although one's kidney may not be able to function outside one's body, that is not a relation of *ontological* dependence, but rather one of biological dependence. A kidney can *exist* whether it is in a body or not. Courage, by contrast, cannot exist independently of some person (or similar creature).
- Note here the departure from Plato. Aristotle is a *nominalist*, evidently: one who denies the existence of a class of things if none of its members exists.
- The fact of ontological dependence, implicit in the *said in* relation, is of considerable metaphysical significance. It means, for Aristotle, that there will be some things that are ontologically *secondary* with respect to others. That is, not all things that exist can exist independently; some require the existence of other things to exist at all.

## Substances and non-substances

- By further reference to the various ways we have of talking about things (i.e., variety in our words), Aristotle identifies ten categories of being. Primary among these are the *substances*, and Aristotle distinguishes *primary* from *secondary* substances.
  - Primary substances are those things that are neither *said of* nor *said in* anything.
    E.g., individual horses, individual men: *Barbaro* (the name of a famous horse) cannot be said of anything nothing, that is, has "Barbarohood"; there is no class of "Barbaros" not, at least, as we ordinarily use the word 'Barbaro'. Similarly, *Barbaro* is not a quality that inheres in anything, as we ordinarily use the term.
  - Secondary substances, by contrast, are those things that are *said of* but not *said in* anything. Thus, the species and higher "genera": *horse*, *mammal*, and *animal* are all *said of* Barbaro; but none of these things is *said in* Barbaro, as Aristotle has it.
  - Note that Aristotle thinks of *a horse* as being a fully independent if non-specific being. *Horse* and *animal* are not to be understood as *properties* or *qualities* that inhere in something. Rather, they are substances of a certain kind.
  - The various kinds of substance (or non-substance) are determined by the *differentiae* distinguishing one sort of being from another, such as "footed" and "two-footed". (A "differentia" is a property identifying a difference in classes of things.)
  - Substances are always *particular* things, a "this" (3b10). Primary substances (individual horses, individual men, etc.) are particular beings (this horse, this man). We may also pick out particulars by use of species and genus terms i.e., the secondary substance terms.
- The hierarchy of substances, then, for Aristotle, has only "one level", in this sense: it consists of individual things (particular, independent beings) variously classified i.e., those things that cannot be either said of or said in anything. The *classification system* is itself hierarchical. But that is not to say that there are intermediate or lesser substances. (2b24)
- This is despite the fact that species is "closer" to primary substance than genus. But what this tells us is simply that species is "more informative" than are the genera of the nature of a substance. (2b8-14)
- On the other hand, Aristotle does recognize a class of *dependent* beings, things that are real but cannot exist alone or independently. These are the things populating the other nine categories, which are specified by various interrogative pronouns: the how, the where, the how many, the how arranged, the how affected, etc.

0	Quantity	two, three
0	Quality	white, grammatical
0	Relation	double, half, larger
0	Where	in the Lyceum
0	When	yesterday, now, next year
0	Arrangement	lying, sitting
0	Having on	wearing shoes
0	Doing	cutting, burning
0	Being Affected	being cut

- These things can be said of or said in something, but only in virtue of the existence of substances. If there were no substances, there would be no non-substances (quantities, qualities, etc.), either.
- Note that many commentators find Aristotle's specification of the non-substance categories arbitrary.

Particulars and Universals, Essence and Accident

- Aristotle's classification system distinguishes between those things that can be *said of* and those that cannot. Those that can be *said of* a subject are *universals*, as we sometimes call them. (Plato could call them Forms.) I.e., these are predicates that can apply to more than one thing, such as *horse, man, color*, and *red*.
- By contrast, those things that cannot be *said of* anything are what we sometimes call *particulars*. The names of particulars apply only to single things, such as 'Barbaro', 'Sea Biscuit', and 'Secretariat'. We can also use noun phrases ("definite descriptions") to refer to particulars: e.g., 'the first black president of the United States.'
- Notice, too, that Aristotle distinguishes two different forms of predication that we may call *essential* and *accidental*. Predication *within a category* i.e., what may be *said of* a subject is *essential predication*: the essence of a subject is specified by such predication. E.g., Barbaro is a horse, a mammal, an animal, etc., essentially. The categorial predicates applying to Barbaro identify qualities that he cannot fail to have; the differentiae defining the various classes of which he is a member define his essence: four-legged, warm-blooded, capable of motion and sense perception, etc. Notice, then, that both the names (that which is said of) of a thing and its various differentiae are both predicable of it (2a19-26).
- Cross-categorial predication, by contrast i.e., what is said in a subject identifies accidental features of things, i.e., features not essential to the subject's existence. E.g., while courage is said in Barbaro, it is not essential to him: he might have been a cowardly horse (as Aristotle sees the matter). More generally, the precise quantity, quality, location, etc. of a particular thing (substance) are not essential to it but are rather subject to change. (On change, see the *Physics*.)

Properties of Substances

- differentiae
- no contraries
- no more or less
- Change: only substances are capable of undergoing change. (4a10-21) This is owing to the fact, for Aristotle, that only substances can accept contraries. That is, only a substance can instantiate opposite qualities (at different times), such as pale and dark, or good and bad. Non-substance particulars and universals cannot change. A given color, both in general and in the given instance, for example, cannot at one time be dark and at another light. (Compare Plato's assertion that forms are immutable.)

The Dilemma of Participation

- In his dialogue *Parmenides*, Plato posed a number of problems for his theory of forms. (See 130e-135d.)
- One of these problems is the dilemma of participation (130e-131c):
  - 1. Particulars have properties by participation in forms (according to the theory of forms).
  - 2. The particular shares either the whole or a part of a form.
  - 3. If the whole, then a form is "separate from itself" (which presumably is incoherent).
  - 4. If a part, then a form is divisible, and, worse, those things sharing it have nothing in common. (I.e., since it will be one part of whiteness that a given thing has and a *different* part that another thing has, they will have nothing in common. And don't say that they have "whiteness" in common, since that is what their sharing parts of whiteness is supposed to analyze.)
  - 5. Consequently, particulars do not have properties by means of participation in forms. (I.e., the theory of forms is false.)
- Aristotle's theory of being and predication may be seen as an attempt to avoid this difficulty.
  - His solution is to reject "whiteness" as a being distinct from those particulars that "share in it". Rather, he contents himself with saying that the predicate 'white' is *said of* those particular instances of whiteness. That is, whiteness consists in particular instances, themselves located in certain primary substances.
  - Whether this constitutes a satisfactory account of two things both being white is controversial. Aristotle's theory is distinct from Plato's insofar as he rejects the independent existence of *whiteness* as against its instances. But can it simply be *white being said of* two white particulars, *a* and *b* that makes it the case that *a* and *b* are white?
  - In support of Aristotle's position, we might say that, ever the careful empiricist, he wishes simply to report what we do say and know. We recognize the existence of primary substances, such as the man Socrates and the horse, Barbaro. Some of these things are white, so we can recognize the particular bits of whiteness that these things have. How are we to analyze the fact that two given things happen to be white? Aristotle may be reluctant to answer this question directly, satisfying himself with recognizing the fact that we do, in any case, say that whiteness is in them both, or that whiteness is said of both of the colors in them. This may not explain what it is for two things to be white. But it may be as much as we can say, truthfully, about the matter.
- A second difficulty for Plato's theory of forms is the so-called Third Man argument, *Parmenides* 132a-b.
  - The argument appears to be as follows:
    - 1. A given set of *large* things, *a*, *b*, and *c* imply the existence of a form, *largeness*, in virtue of which *a*, *b*, and *c* are all large. (This is an application of the theory of forms.)
    - 2. Since the form *largeness* itself must be understood to be large, we can construct the further set of large things, *a*, *b*, *c*, and *largeness*.
    - But this, as above, will imply the existence of a further form, *largeness\**, in virtue of which all four are similarly large. And this further form, *largeness\**, will of course itself be large\*, as are *a*, *b*, *c*, and *largeness*, so that all five are similar in this respect. Thus, there will be some form *largeness\*\** in respect of which all five are alike, etc., resulting in an infinite regress.

- 4. This regress is vicious, because it entails that no form can be defined in finite terms, making it impossible for a human mind to understand the given form, which makes knowledge impossible, contrary to Plato's supposition.
- If Aristotle's account of being and predication can avoid the Dilemma of Participation, it would seem able also to avoid the Third Man problem, since it is distinguishing a form from its instances that allows both problems to arise.