

The Homonymy of Predicative Being*

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Abstract. Aristotle famously claimed that “being is said in many ways.” This has traditionally been understood as a claim about *existence*. However, the interpretation of Aristotle's theory of being under this assumption has proven problematic. In this paper, I defend an alternative interpretation according to which the homonymy of being is first and foremost a thesis about predication.

In the *Sophist*, Plato indicates that there is one question which must be answered at the beginning of any ontological inquiry: “τὸ ὄν ... πρῶτον δεῖν διερευνησασθαι τί ποθ' οἱ λέγοντες αὐτὸ δηλοῦν ἡγοῦνται;” (“It is necessary first to examine what those who sometimes say 'being' think they are indicating by it.” – *Soph.* 243d).¹ Aristotle holds that the answer to this question is more complicated than Plato realized, for, according to Aristotle, there is no one thing which is indicated by the Greek words τὸ ὄν: rather, τὸ ὄν is a star example of what Christopher Shields has dubbed “core-dependent homonymy.”² Aristotle states this explicitly and repeatedly (*Met.* Γ2 1003a33-34, 1003b6-7, *Met.* E2 1026a33-34, *EE* A8 1217b25-27, etc.). However, there is not agreement among scholars as to what exactly he means. Shields assumes with hardly any argument that Aristotle means to be claiming that there are many varieties of *existence*, and finds Aristotle's arguments for this claim unsatisfactory.³ Despite recent attempts to defend Aristotle on this point,⁴ I believe that Shields' verdict on the existential interpretation of the homonymy of being must stand. Fortunately for Aristotle, there

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1 All translations are original. In translating Plato, I have consulted Cooper 1997. In translating Aristotle, I have consulted McMahon 1907, Barnes 1984, and Irwin and Fine 1995.

2 Shields 1999, 37 *et passim*.

3 Shields 1999, ch. 9.

4 I am thinking especially of Ward 2008, ch. 4.

are good reasons to suppose that existence is not what he primarily has in mind when discussing τὸ ὄν. In this paper, I shall argue that in propounding his theory of the homonymy of being, Aristotle is primarily concerned with *predication*.⁵ In particular, I shall argue that, according to Aristotle, every variety of being must be understood in terms of the being relations which obtain between particulars and their predicates.⁶ The linguistic correlate of this metaphysical thesis is that the central use of ἔστί is the copula use. I begin by providing some general considerations about Aristotle's linguistic and philosophical context which make such an interpretation preferable, and proceed to examine the main texts from the *Metaphysics* which explicate Aristotle's doctrine of the homonymy of being.

I. Being and Predication

The Greek verb ἔστί, it is agreed on all hands, admits of a wide variety of uses. For present purposes it will suffice to distinguish between only two cases, the *copula* and *absolute* uses.⁷ The copula use occurs when ἔστί is used with a syntactic complement, and the absolute use occurs in the absence of a complement. I shall call the concept or family of concepts ordinarily expressed by the copula use *being-F* and the concept or family of concepts ordinarily expressed by the absolute use *being simpliciter*.

It is clear that being *simpliciter* is the central concern of at least Parmenides and Plato, if not the whole Greek ontological tradition. Furthermore, absolute uses of ἔστί are often correctly translated “there is...” For this reason, it has often been supposed that the Greek conception of being *simpliciter* is equivalent to the modern notion of existence. However, this

⁵ This possibility is considered momentarily then rejected without argument by Shields 1999, 219.

⁶ For a table containing the principal varieties of being to be identified in this paper, see the Appendix.

⁷ This is a vast simplification of the taxonomy of uses developed in Kahn 1973. Kahn's various other uses are surely necessary for a complete account of the Greek verb, but no such complete account is needed here. For the definitions of the copula and absolute uses, see Kahn 1973, 38 and 240, respectively.

assumption has come under fire from a number of scholars. In particular, G. E. L. Owen and Gregory Vlastos have both argued that many absolute uses of ἔστί in Plato are in fact 'incomplete elliptical' uses – that is, they have the same meaning as the copula use, but the complement has been left unspecified.⁸

Charles Kahn and Lesley Brown have gone farther than Owen and Vlastos in questioning whether Greek ontology is about existence at all.⁹ Kahn and Brown deny that the syntactic distinction between the copula and absolute uses of ἔστί corresponds to a difference in the meaning of the verb.¹⁰ Rather, according to what I will call the Kahn-Brown thesis, every absolute use of ἔστί can receive a complement without altering its lexical value.¹¹ To understand this claim, Brown asks us to consider the addition of the word 'French' to the sentence 'Jane is teaching.'¹² The addition of a direct object to this sentence serves not to alter but to *further specify* the meaning of the verb. The same is true for absolute uses of ἔστί.

Kahn's philological survey, along with Brown's study of Plato's syntax in the *Sophist*, suggests that being *simpliciter* is simply predication *abstracted from any particular predicate*, just as teaching *simpliciter* is teaching abstracted from any particular subject. When someone asserts that Jane is teaching, an interlocutor may appropriately ask, "*what* is she teaching?" It is a prediction of the Kahn-Brown thesis that when a speaker of Greek asserts that, for instance, the gods *are*, an interlocutor might reasonably respond by asking *what* they are. In fact, we find throughout Greek philosophy that these two questions are intimately connected,

8 Owen 1970; Vlastos 1965/6. For the phrase 'incomplete elliptical,' see Owen 1970, 254-255.

9 See Kahn 1976; Brown 1986; Kahn 2003, xxxi-xxxii.

10 Kahn 2003, sect. 12; Brown 1986, 56-57.

11 As we shall see, Aristotle identifies at least one use, which I call the 'negative' use, in which the converse is not true: the deletion of the complement necessarily alters the value of the verb. See below, sect. IV.

12 Brown 1986, 54.

and this connection is especially prominent in Aristotle.¹³ The conclusion, then, is that, as a purely linguistic matter, being *simpliciter* is indefinite predication.

Although Aristotle's goal in propounding his theory of the homonymy of being is primarily metaphysical, Aristotle's exposition, discussed below, clearly shows that he believes the normal Greek usage of ἐστὶ to be a reliable guide to the theory of being. If, then, it is predication, rather than existence, which is the central concept expressed by ἐστὶ, this provides some reason to believe that Aristotle's theory of being is primarily concerned with predication.

II. Being in Plato's *Sophist*

As has been previously mentioned, the move by some recent scholars toward the indefinite predication reading of being *simpliciter* in Greek ontology has been motivated in part by issues in the interpretation of Plato. In this section I shall briefly provide some general considerations about the interpretation of Plato's ontology in the *Sophist* which will help to motivate the claim that the Kahn-Brown thesis provides useful insights into the project of Greek ontology. The considerations introduced here should also help to situate Aristotle's theory of being in its historical context.

Plato approaches his ontological inquiry from a linguistic direction: he begins by asking what people think they are indicating by the words τὸ ὄν (*Soph.* 243d). As such, some remarks about Plato's semantic theory and its relation to the theory of forms are in order. The theory is given a very general statement in the following passage from *Parmenides*:

ἕκαστον τῶν ὀνομάτων οὐκ ἐπὶ τινὶ καλεῖς; {—} Ἔγωγε. {—} Τί οὖν; τὸ αὐτὸ ὄνομα εἴποισ ἂν πλεονάκῃς ἢ ἅπαξ; {—} Ἔγωγε. {—} Πότερον οὖν ἔαν μὲν ἅπαξ

¹³ See, e.g., *An. Post.* 92b4-8. This passage is cited in this connection in Brown 1986, 70.

εἴπῃς, ἐκεῖνο προσαγορεύεις οὐπὲρ ἔστι τούνομα, ἐὰν δὲ πολλάκις οὐκ ἐκεῖνο;
ἢ ἔάντε ἅπαξ ἔάντε πολλάκις ταύτῳ ὄνομα φθέγγῃ, πολλὴ ἀνάγκη σε ταύτῳ
καὶ λέγειν αἰεὶ;

Don't you call something by each of the names you use? – I do. – What then?
Could you say the same name either many times or just once? – I could. – If,
then, you say it once, you refer to the thing it names, but if you say it many times
you don't refer to it? Or isn't it rather the case that, whether you utter the same
name one time or many, you must necessarily always mean the same thing?
(*Parm.* 147d)

Two basic assumptions can be discerned in this text:

Entity Theory of Meaning (ETM): Every meaningful utterance of a word picks out some particular entity.

Univocity (U): Every utterance of the same word picks out the same entity.

It is important for us to distinguish these two assumptions because Aristotle attacks (U), but retains (ETM). Given these two assumptions, Plato's theory of forms will follow neatly by an argument like the following:

- (1) Every utterance of the word 'beautiful' picks out some one and the same object.
- (2) No one sensible object is picked out by every utterance of 'beautiful.'

Therefore,

- (3) Some insensible object, The Beautiful Itself, is picked out by every utterance of 'beautiful.'

The same argument will apply for every general term in the language (see, e.g., *Rep.* X.596a).¹⁴ According to Plato's theory of *eponymy*, general terms apply primarily to forms, and secondarily to particulars on account of their relations to forms.¹⁵

The ontological inquiry of the *Sophist* begins as an attempt to apply this general semantic theory to τὸ ὄν. The significance of this has not, I think, been adequately

14 For more on the semantic argument for the forms, see Wedberg 1955, 26-32.

15 On Platonic eponymy and its historical relationship with Aristotelian homonymy, see Ward 2008, 26-42.

appreciated: Plato's semantic theory prevents him from assigning distinct meanings to distinct uses of ἐστί.¹⁶ As such, Plato has an antecedent theoretical commitment to the Kahn-Brown thesis that the addition of a complement to an absolute use of ἐστί need not alter the meaning of that verb.¹⁷ Further evidence for this claim is found in the fact that in concluding his ontological inquiry, Plato transitions seamlessly from an account of being *simpliciter* to an account of being-F, even apparently treating the latter as a conclusion of the former (258e-264b).

There is not space here for a full treatment of the *Sophist* or a solution to all of its problems.¹⁸ What is important for present purposes is that Plato's semantic and metaphysical theories, along with his order of presentation in the *Sophist*, suggest that he takes the one form of Being to be picked out by *all* uses of ἐστί, both copula and absolute.¹⁹ Furthermore, both the linguistic facts and Plato's own discussions suggest that the central use of ἐστί is predicative.²⁰ It is against this backdrop that Aristotle develops his theory of being.

III. “As Many Ways as the Types of Predication”

Metaphysics is the name a later compiler has given to Aristotle's “ἐπιστήμη ... τὸ ὄν ἢ

ὄν” (“science of being *qua* being” or “science of that which is, insofar as it is” – *Met.* Γ1

16 Owen 1970, 258 at least recognizes that “Plato's remarks upon [the] syntax [of ἐστί] are taken to mark out different tasks, or different possibilities of combination, of a single undifferentiated form, being.”

17 In fact, Plato is committed to the stronger thesis that the addition of a complement can *never* change the meaning of the verb, for the simple reason that the verb has just one meaning, namely, Being Itself.

18 For detailed interpretations of the *Sophist* along the general lines sketched here, see Owen 1970 and Brown 1986.

19 Plato seems to come close to asserting this very thing at 255c-d. See Brown 1986, 68-69. However, Owen 1970, 255-256 argues that the distinction is not between being *simpliciter* and explicit predication, but between predication and identity.

20 See *Soph.* 257d-258b, where Plato tries to show that Not-Being *is* just as much as anything else, by showing that things which *are* not-beautiful *are* (*simpliciter*) just as much as things that *are* beautiful. If being *simpliciter* were a totally different concept from predication, this would be a red herring. On the univocal reading, we can say that things that are not-beautiful *are* just as much as things that are beautiful in the same way that those who teach not-French (i.e. teach subjects other than French) are nevertheless said to *teach* in just as strong a sense as those who teach French.

1003a21). Aristotle in other places denies that there can be a science of τὸ ὄν, which has led some interpreters, including Owen, to argue that Aristotle had simply changed his mind on this point (*EE* A8 1217b25-35).²¹ However, Christopher Shields is right to have called our attention to the qualifier ἢ ὄν.²² Aristotle had previously denied that there could be a science of being on the ground that being is not a genus.²³ No science, then, can be the science of all the things that are. Here, however, Aristotle wants to develop a science which considers all the things that are *just insofar as they are* – not a science of all beings, but a science of *being*.²⁴ Although there is not one genus which contains all the things that are, there is, Aristotle argues, a genus of being in another sense: a genus whose species are the varieties of being. It is the job of the science of being qua being to investigate these species (*Met.* Γ2 1003b21-22).²⁵ In this way, Aristotle is asking much the same question as Plato – “what do those who sometimes say 'τὸ ὄν' think they are indicating by it?” – though, as we shall see, he comes to radically anti-Platonic conclusions. In particular, Aristotle rejects Plato's semantic assumption (U) and develops in its place a theory according to which ἐστί can pick out any member of a certain structured family of being relations.

The claim that τὸ ὄν λέγεται πολλαχῶς (“‘being’ is said in many ways”) is repeated

21 See Owen 1960.

22 Shields 1999, 224.

23 On Aristotle's argument that being is not a genus, see Lewis 2004, 11-18.

24 This is not the conclusion Shields draws from this point. In fact, he explicitly denies “that Aristotle is concerned ... with the general question about the general semantic function of ‘is’” (Shields 1999, 219). Shields says that the falsity of this claim “should already be clear” (*ibid.*), but nothing he says in the preceding pages does anything to make it clear. The only reasons Shields provides for supposing that Aristotle is not concerned with this sort of linguistic analysis are (1) that a differentiation of ‘is’ along these lines would be “philosophically bland” and (2) that such a differentiation would not motivate the claim that ἐστί is homonymous across the categories (Shields 1999, 218). Ward similarly focuses on the existential interpretation because it is “more philosophically compelling” and therefore “worth defending” (Ward 2008, 105). The literature cited in section I above shows that many philosophers do not find this question ‘bland’ at all, and I see no reason to suppose that Aristotle found it ‘bland’ either. Furthermore, Aristotle makes a habit of writing at great length about a great many subjects that might be regarded as “philosophically bland.” Shields' second objection is a more serious one and will be dealt with in the remainder of this section and returned to in section VII.

25 Ward 2008, 168-177 comes to a similar conclusion.

several times in the *Metaphysics*, progressively adding new layers of homonymy and more clearly identifying the core.²⁶ The doctrine is first introduced as follows:

τὸ ὄν λέγεται πολλαχῶς μὲν ἀλλ’ ἅπαν πρὸς μίαν ἀρχήν· τὰ μὲν γὰρ ὅτι οὐσίαι, ὄντα λέγεται τὰ δ’ ὅτι πάθη οὐσίας, τὰ δ’ ὅτι ὁδὸς εἰς οὐσίαν ἢ φθοραὶ ἢ στερήσεις ἢ ποιότητες ἢ ποιητικὰ ἢ γεννητικὰ οὐσίας ἢ τῶν πρὸς τὴν οὐσίαν λεγομένων, ἢ τούτων τινὸς ἀποφάσεις ἢ οὐσίας· διὸ καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν εἶναι μὴ ὄν φαμεν.

'Being' is said in many ways, but all relative to one principle. For some things are called 'beings' because they are substances, but others because they are affections of substances, others because they are a way into substance or corruptions or privations or qualities or productive or generative of substance or of things said relative to substance, or negations of some one of these or of substance. This is why we assert that even not-being is not-being (*Met.* Γ2 1003b5-10).

The list of 'beings' here is quite similar to Aristotle's lists of categories (*Cat.* 4 1b25-2a4, *Top.* A9 103b20-27). In fact, later in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle is quite explicit: “καθ’ αὐτὰ δὲ εἶναι λέγεται ὅσαπερ σημαίνει τὰ σχήματα τῆς κατηγορίας” (“‘to be in themselves’ is said in as many ways as the types of predication” – *Met.* Δ7 1017a22-23; see also E2 1026a33-36, Z1 1028a10-13, Θ10 1051a34-35). Of the uses of ἔστι identified by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*, this is the most repeated and least explained.²⁷ If one supposes that the core notion of τὸ ὄν for Aristotle is existence, then this prominent assumption is puzzling. However, if we suppose, as a hypothesis supported by the linguistic and philosophical background, that the varieties of being which Aristotle divides according to his doctrine of categories are varieties of *predication*, then it is perfectly clear why Aristotle appeals to the categories and why he does not believe he needs an argument for this appeal: the categories just are varieties of predication.²⁸ It is therefore necessary to examine the *Categories* and determine whether the

²⁶ This is not intended as a claim about the development of Aristotle's thought, but only about the order of exposition in the text of the *Metaphysics*.

²⁷ For a treatment of previous attempts to derive the homonymy of being from the categories, see Shields 1999, 244-260.

²⁸ This interpretation of Aristotle's categories is famously defended by Michael Frede. See Frede 1981. Frede

varieties of predication analyzed there actually amount to different varieties of being as Aristotle claims in the *Metaphysics*.

Early on in the *Categories*, Aristotle distinguishes two sorts of relations which can be designated by ἐστί:

Τῶν ὄντων [1] τὰ μὲν καθ' ὑποκειμένου τινὸς λέγεται, ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ δὲ οὐδενί ἐστίν ... [2] τὰ δὲ ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ μὲν ἐστίν, καθ' ὑποκειμένου δὲ οὐδενὸς λέγεται ... [3] τὰ δὲ καθ' ὑποκειμένου τε λέγεται καὶ ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ ἐστίν ... [4] τὰ δὲ οὔτε ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ ἐστίν οὔτε καθ' ὑποκειμένου λέγεται.

Among beings, [1] some are said of some subject, but are not in any subject ... [2] others are in a subject, but are not said of any subject ... [3] others are said of a subject and are in a subject ... and [4] others are neither in a subject nor said of a subject. (*Cat.* 2 1a20-b4)

This passage identifies two different relations which can be designated by ἐστί, and discusses which items can occupy the subject and predicate position in each relation.²⁹

Although the πρὸς ἓν locution for core-dependent homonymy does not occur in the *Categories*,³⁰ Aristotle does argue there that all uses of ἐστί are dependent upon uses which have a primary substance as the subject:

τὰ δ' ἄλλα πάντα ἤτοι καθ' ὑποκειμένων λέγεται τῶν πρώτων οὐσιῶν ἢ ἐν ὑποκειμέναις αὐταῖς ἐστίν ... μὴ οὐσῶν οὖν τῶν πρώτων οὐσιῶν ἀδύνατον τῶν ἄλλων τι εἶναι.

All other things are said of subjects which are primary substances or are in subjects which are primary substances ... Therefore, if the primary substances were not, it would be impossible for the other things to be something. (*Cat.* 5 2a34-b6)

This passage, it should be noted, contains the first absolute use of ἐστί in the *Categories*, and it certainly appears to be tied up with predication: in order for beings other

discusses the derivation of the homonymy of being from the doctrine of categories on pp. 43-44.

²⁹ Bostock 1994, 45-52 (esp. 47) expresses puzzlement about the relationship between these two uses of the copula and the homonymy of being. The Kahn-Brown thesis neatly clears up this confusion.

³⁰ It is widely held that Aristotle had not yet developed the notion of core-dependent homonymy. See Owen 1960, 172-179; Ward 2008, 76. However, Ward 2008, 62-64, 74-75 insists, as against Owen, that this development does not reflect a discontinuity in Aristotle's thought.

than primary substances to *be* anything they must be predicated of primary substances.

Therefore, if the primary substances 'were not' – i.e. if nothing could be truly predicated of them – the other beings would not be anything at all. The reason for this is that it is simply in virtue of, for instance, animal being predicated of particular humans that it is predicated of the species human (*Cat.* 5 2a36-2b1). What Aristotle is advertising here is an analysis of the being relations which obtain between secondary substances or non-substances and their predicates in terms of the more fundamental being relations which obtain between primary substances and their predicates. In our example, the relation between the species human and the genus animal is analyzed in terms of the relations between individual humans and the genus animal. This analysis will also apply to being *simpliciter* as Aristotle explicitly asserts (*Met.* E2 1026a33-b2).

The claim that being *simpliciter* (ἁπλῶς) is homonymous just as being-F is suggests that Aristotle is implicitly committed to what I have called the Kahn-Brown thesis: namely, that the addition of a complement need not change the meaning of ἐστί. If ἐστί could not take the same meaning in absolute and copula uses, then the varieties of being-F would be irrelevant to being *simpliciter*. Aristotle surely does hold, as Owen has observed, that “‘to be’ means ‘to be so-and-so’;”³¹ though he nevertheless distinguishes knowing *that* something is from knowing *what* it is (*An. Post.* B7 92b4-8). Thus when we say that some X is *simpliciter*, we may mean either that there is some P such that P is said of X, or that there there is some P such that P is in X. There are values of X for which one or the other of these is true, and values for which both are true. Furthermore, some entities can be substituted either for X or for P, in appropriate combinations, but others – namely primary substances – can be

31 Owen 1965, 78.

substituted only for X in these being relations. The core uses of ἐστί, according to the *Categories*, are those uses which take a concrete particular as the subject.

It might be supposed that the homonymy of existence could be defended along similar lines. Indeed, Julie Ward proposes this very thing.³² Ward believes that Aristotle can show that being (existence) is homonymous by showing that the being of non-substances depends on the being of substances, a doctrine which he defends in the *Categories*. However, without an account of the relationship between existence and predication, it is far from clear how this would work. For instance, the heat of a pot of boiling water depends (causally) on the heat of the stove, yet the pot and the stove are synonymous with respect to 'hot'. What is needed is not an argument that the being of non-substances depends on the being of substances, but an argument that the real definition of the being of non-substances makes essential mention of the being of substances. What Aristotle's discussion in the *Categories* does is to tie the being *simpliciter* of non-substances to the being-F of substances. On the assumption that being *simpliciter* and being-F are the same concept, this completes the argument; without that assumption, an additional step is needed, and neither Aristotle nor Ward has clearly presented this additional step.

Ward discusses several more Aristotelian arguments for the homonymy of being, and there is not space here for detailed commentary on all of them. However, it is worth noting a couple of puzzling features in Ward's reconstruction which can be solved by the present proposal. First, Ward argues to the homonymy of being from the definitional priority of substance over non-substance. Thus, "the account of the 'what it is' of a quantity, such as being three feet long, will include ... that this quantity belongs to some substance thus

32 Ward 2008, 115-116.

modified."³³ However, the fact that the account of the 'what it is' of (e.g.) quantity makes reference to substance will not show that the account of the *being* of a quantity makes reference to the *being* of substance unless being *simpliciter* is elliptical for the predication of the 'what it is'.

Second, Ward argues that those who defend the univocal predication of being across the categories are unable "to specify what property is had in the same way by all existing things."³⁴ This amounts to the claim that we have no cognitive or definitional grip on any unified property of existence. However, if existence in general is mysterious, it does not seem to me that existence in a particular category is any less mysterious, and Aristotle is no help on this point. Predication, however, is a concept he analyzes at great length in a number of texts, and is, indeed, the area of inquiry for which the categories were developed. Thus much of the mystery will be resolved if the homonymy of being is connected to predication rather than existence.

Let us now return to the introduction of the homonymy of being in the *Metaphysics* and connect it to the doctrine we have identified in the *Categories*. The relations specified in *Metaphysics* Γ do not include either 'being said of' or 'being in.' Rather, we are told that entities can be said to 'be' "ὅτι πάθη οὐσίας, τὰ δ' ὅτι ὁδὸς εἰς οὐσίαν ἢ φθοραὶ ... ἢ ποιότητες ἢ ποιητικὰ ἢ γεννητικὰ οὐσίας ἢ τῶν πρὸς τὴν οὐσίαν λεγομένων" ("because they are affections of substances, or because they are a way into substance or corruptions ... or qualities or productive or generative of substance or of things said relative to substance" - *Met.* Γ2 1003b7-9).³⁵ These correspond directly to just two of the categories: πάθη, being a particular static affection of a substance, corresponds to ποιὸν (quality), as does ποιότητες;

³³ Ward 2008, 118.

³⁴ Ward 2008, 123.

³⁵ I postpone discussion of 'στερήσεις' and 'ἀποφάσεις' until the next section.

ὁδὸς εἰς οὐσίαν, φθοραὶ, ποιητικὰ, and γεννητικὰ are actions on a substance and so correspond to πάσχειν (being affected). The qualifying phrase οὐσίας ἢ τῶν πρὸς τὴν οὐσίαν λεγομένων should probably be read as modifying the entire list, beginning from φθοραὶ. The reference is not to the category πρὸς τι (relative) but to non-core beings: for instance, the notorious dormitive faculty of opium *is* because it is productive of an affection of a primary substance. All of the being relations in which the dormitive faculty stands must be analyzed in terms of this one.

Aristotle has not, in either the *Categories* or the early part of the *Metaphysics* established his thesis that ἐστὶ has a different meaning in each of the categories. He has, however, established two levels of homonymy: 'being in' is opposed to 'being said of,' and the being of concrete particulars is opposed to the being of universals. The core being relations can obtain only between primary substances and their predicates, and the relations which obtain between universals or non-substances and their predicates must be understood in terms of these.

IV. Affirmation and Denial

In addition to the relations discussed above, the *Metaphysics* passage includes “στερήσεις ... οὐσίας ἢ τῶν πρὸς τὴν οὐσίαν λεγομένων, ἢ τούτων τινὸς ἀποφάσεις ἢ οὐσίας” (“privations ... of substance or of things said relative to substance, or negations of some one of these or of substance” – *Met.* Γ2 1003b8-10). Aristotle goes on to specify that it is on account of this that “καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν εἶναι μὴ ὄν φαμεν” (“we assert that even not-being *is* not-being” – *Met.* Γ2 1003b10). Here we have another division of being orthogonal to the categories. In this case, what appears in the surface grammar to be an assertion of being

turns out in fact to be a *denial* of being. Thus, for instance, when an Augustinian asserts that evil is a privation, she is actually asserting that evil is not. Similarly, when we assert that not-being *is* not-being, we assert that it is not. This is the use to which Aristotle appeals in the *Sophistici Elenchi* to show that there are instances in which it is fallacious to deduce a subject's being *simpliciter* from its being-F (*Soph. El.* 166b37-167a6).³⁶

The failure of entailment from negative being-F to being *simpliciter* should not be taken as undermining the Kahn-Brown thesis, for that thesis claims only that every absolute use of ἐστὶ may be completed without changing the meaning of the verb. In the case of negative being-F, the converse does not hold: the deletion of the complement changes the meaning of the verb. Thus the sophistical argument relies on an equivocation: all true predications which take τὸ μὴ ὄν as their subject are privations or negations, whether implicitly or explicitly. However, omitting the complement obscures this fact, deceiving the listener into supposing that τὸ μὴ ὄν *is* in the affirmative sense.

Core uses of ἐστὶ are *affirmative* uses with concrete particulars as subjects. The negative use is defined with reference to the 'core' in that every negative ἐστὶ sentence is understood as the negation of a positive ἐστὶ sentence.

V. Accidental and In Itself

The next distinction between varieties of being in the textual order of the *Metaphysics*

³⁶ This passage is cited in this connection by Owen 1965, 77. The other passage Owen cites there, *De Int.* 21a24-28, can also be treated as a fallacy of equivocation, as Owen recognizes in his subsequent distinction between Being* and Being** (Owen 1965, 85ff.; also see Shields 1999, sect. 9.5). However, it seems to me that in the conclusion of that fallacious argument ἐστὶ is used in the 'vital' sense of Kahn 1973, 233-235 rather than the special temporal sense Owen identifies: the argument erroneously proceeds from 'Homer is a poet' to 'Homer is alive' because in Greek 'Homer is alive' can be expressed as 'Homer is.' (Kahn 1976, 326 also reads the example sentence 'Homer is' in this way.) Although Aristotle does not explicitly identify the vital sense, there are clear examples of it in literature with which Aristotle was familiar (see Kahn 1973, 241-244), so we can be confident that he understood it.

is as follows: “Τὸ ὄν λέγεται τὸ μὲν κατὰ συμβεβηκὸς τὸ δὲ καθ’ αὐτό” (“being’ is said both accidentally and in itself” – *Met.* Δ7 1017a7-8).³⁷ Aristotle then goes on to identify three cases of accidental predication:

τὰ μὲν οὖν κατὰ συμβεβηκὸς εἶναι λεγόμενα οὕτω λέγεται ἢ διότι [1] τῷ αὐτῷ ὄντι ἄμφω ὑπάρχει, ἢ ὅτι [2] ὄντι ἐκείνῳ ὑπάρχει, ἢ ὅτι [3] αὐτὸ ἐστὶν ᾧ ὑπάρχει οὗ αὐτὸ κατηγορεῖται.

Therefore, things that are said to be accidentally are spoken of in this way either because [1] they both belong to the same being, or because [2] it [i.e. the subject] belongs to that being [i.e. the predicate], or because [3] the thing to which it belongs, of which it is predicated, is. (*Met.* Δ7 1017a19-22)

Note that here both the subject and the predicate are said to be just on account of the relationship of 'being' which obtains between them. This is because any word which may appear in predicate position with ἐστὶ may also appear in subject position.

We have here three distinct varieties of accidental predication:

(1) “X is Y” = $\exists Z(X \text{ ὑπάρχει } Z \wedge Y \text{ ὑπάρχει } Z)$

(2) “X is Y” = $X \text{ ὑπάρχει } Y$

(3) “X is” = $\exists Y(X \text{ ὑπάρχει } Y)$

Aristotle elsewhere seems to assert that the ὑπάρχει construction is just equivalent to the copula use of ἐστὶ, with subject and predicate reversed (*An. Pr.* A36 48b2-8, A37 49a6-9).³⁸ However, in our text Aristotle seeks to analyze a certain predicative use of ἐστὶ in terms of ὑπάρχει, implying that he intends them differently. The context suggests that ὑπάρχει is intended to represent the inverse of being καθ’ αὐτό (“in itself”), which is defined as being according to the types of predication – that is, what has previously been identified as Aristotle’s core sense of ἐστὶ (*Met.* Δ7 1017a22-23).

³⁷ As Aristotle’s examples make clear, this is not the same essence/accident distinction he uses elsewhere. See Bäck 2000, 65-70.

³⁸ See Bäck 2000, 124-130.

In the case of (1), Aristotle gives the example, “τὸν λευκὸν μουσικὸν” (“the pale one is musical” – *Met.* Δ7 1017a15). On the surface, this appears to predicate a quality of a quality, which is permissible in certain cases, such as “white is a color.” However, since it is nonsensical to say “white is musical” (which is one grammatically permissible translation of this example), it must be interpreted as referring not to a quality but to some individual having that quality. Hence we give the analysis, “some individual is pale and is musical.” For (2) Aristotle’s example “τὸν μουσικὸν ἄνθρωπον,” (“the musical is human” – *Met.* Δ7 1017a9-10) may be used. In this case, it appears that human is predicated of a quality. Either the species human or an individual human could be intended. The former is permitted as a predication in the primary sense, but the latter is not (*Cat.* 5 2a11-19). If the species human is intended, then the interpretation is “the musician is a [variety of] human.” However, this is not the only reading of the sentence. A second reading takes the statement as particular: “the musical one is a human.” Here the surface syntax predicates a primary substance (an individual person) of a quality, which is not permitted by the *Categories*. In order to account for the permissibility of this interpretation in Greek, Aristotle must claim that the relation picked out by ἐστὶ here is not one of the two discussed in the *Categories*. The analysis he offers is that this locution simply reverses subject and object: what one *really* means in saying that “the musical one is a human” is that “the human is musical.”

Aristotle gives an explicit example of case (3): “οὕτω δὲ λέγεται καὶ τὸ μὴ λευκὸν εἶναι, ὅτι ᾧ συμβέβηκεν, ἐκεῖνο ἔστιν” (“thus even the not-pale is said to be because the thing to which it is accidental is” – *Met.* Δ7 1017a18-19). In type (3) accidental being, being is transferred from the subject to the predicate.

Being in itself is clearly intended here as the core usage, and is identified with the

being “according to the types of predication” discussed in section three. It is further noted here that this type of being is implicit in ordinary cases of predication, including those in which ἐστί does not appear, and that its affirmation signifies truth and its negation signifies falsehood (*Met.* Δ7 1017a27-35).³⁹ Core being is the *affirmative, in itself* being of a concrete particular. Accidental being is defined with reference to the core in each of the three ways outlined above.

VI. Actual and Potential

Aristotle next distinguishes between 'actual' and 'potential' being (*Met.* Δ7 1017a35-b9). He give several examples, among which is the following: “τὸ ἐπίστασθαι ὡσαύτως καὶ τὸ δυνάμενον χρῆσθαι τῇ ἐπιστήμῃ καὶ τὸ χρώμενον” (“likewise, both that which is able to use knowledge and that which is using knowledge is said to know” – *Met.* Δ7 1017b3-5). Although the verb ἐστί does not appear in this example, Aristotle has just pointed out that every predication can be paraphrased to use ἐστί (*Met.* Δ7 1017a27-30). The point here is that when knowledge is predicated of an individual, the individual may bear either of two relationships to knowledge: she may have the *potentiality* to use knowledge, or she may be *actually* using knowledge. Either of these relations can be indicated by ἐστί. Aristotle intends the point to be generalized to all capacity terms, as is demonstrated by his other example, ὁρῶν (seeing).

Aristotle also discusses cases in which substances are said to be *simpliciter* potentially: “Ἐρμῆν ἐν τῷ λίθῳ φαμὲν εἶναι” (“we assert that Hermes *is* in the stone” – *Met.* 1017b6). In

³⁹ On the 'veridical nuance' (as it is called in Kahn 1973, 331-333), see also *Met.* E2 1026a34-35 and especially Θ10 1051a34-b2 where ἐστί is said to signify truth “κυριώτατα” by which Aristotle presumably means to identify this with the 'core' sense. There is, however, a textual problem here: the phrase “κυριώτατα δὲν” is bracketed as uncertain by Ross 1924, though not by Jaeger 1957.

the primary sense, the statue of Hermes is not *simpliciter*: no predicate *actually* applies to it.

Core being has thus far been identified as the *affirmative, in itself, actual* being of a concrete particular. Potential being is defined with reference to the core in that it denotes that the predication is *potentially* true in the core sense.

VII. Primary Substance as the Core

In the passages from the *Metaphysics* which we have so far examined, Aristotle begins from the doctrine of being in the *Categories* and works outward, defining new varieties of being in terms of the core being relations identified there. However, the *Categories* does not identify core being as clearly as one might like: in that work, *being in* is distinguished from *being said of* and the being of particulars is distinguished from the being of universals. The being of particulars is identified as the core and the being of universals is defined in terms of it. However, Aristotle is not explicit as to whether being in or being said of should be regarded as the core being relation. Furthermore, Aristotle speaks as if each of the categories represents a different variety of being, yet he has not described how the meaning of *ἔστι* is supposed to differ across these cases. In book Z of the *Metaphysics*, he returns to these issues and attempts to define the core usage more clearly:

τοσαυταχῶς δὲ λεγομένου τοῦ ὄντος φανερόν ὅτι τούτων πρῶτον ὄν τὸ τί ἐστίν, ὅπερ σημαίνει τὴν οὐσίαν ... τὰ δ' ἄλλα λέγεται ὄντα τῷ τοῦ οὕτως ὄντος τὰ μὲν ποσότητες εἶναι, τὰ δὲ ποιότητες, τὰ δὲ πάθη, τὰ δὲ ἄλλο τι. διὸ καὶ ἀπορήσειέ ἂν τις πότερον τὸ βαδίζειν καὶ τὸ ὑγιαίνειν καὶ τὸ καθῆσθαι ἕκαστον αὐτῶν ὄν ἢ μὴ ὄν⁴⁰ ... οὐδὲν γὰρ αὐτῶν ἐστὶν οὔτε καθ' αὐτὸ πεφυκὸς οὔτε χωρίζεσθαι δυνατόν τῆς οὐσίας ... ταῦτα δὲ μᾶλλον φαίνεται ὄντα, διότι ἔστι τι τὸ ὑποκείμενον αὐτοῖς ὠρισμένον (τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶν ἡ οὐσία καὶ τὸ καθ' ἕκαστον), ὅπερ ἐμφαίνεται ἐν τῇ κατηγορίᾳ τῇ τοιαύτῃ· τὸ ἀγαθὸν γὰρ ἢ τὸ καθήμενον οὐκ ἄνευ τούτου λέγεται. δῆλον οὖν ὅτι διὰ ταύτην κάκεινων ἕκαστον ἔστιν, ὥστε τὸ πρῶτως ὄν καὶ οὐ τὸ ἄλλ' ὄν ἀπλῶς ἢ οὐσία ἂν εἴη.

40 There are some minor textual discrepancies in this clause; I have followed the text of Jaeger 1957.

Although being is said in this many ways, it is clear that the primary being among these is the what-it-is, which signifies the substance ... Other things are called 'beings' because they belong to [lit. 'are to'] this: some are said to be quantities, others qualities, others affections, and others are said to be something else of this sort. This is why someone might be puzzled about to walking, being healthy, and sitting – whether each of these is a being or not a being ... For none of these comes about by itself or is able to be separated from substance ... These things appear as beings because there is some definite subject of them (but this is the substance and the individual), which appears in this sort of predication, since 'good' or 'sitting' is not said without this. Therefore, it is clearly because of this [substance] that each of these is, so that being in the primary sense is not just *any* being but simply the being that the substance may be.⁴¹ (*Met.* Z1 1028a13-31)

This passage is Aristotle's clearest explication of the difference in the meaning of ἐστί applied across the categories. The beings in each category *are* by being related to substance in a particular way, and cannot *be* apart from this. However, Aristotle claims, the items in each category *are* in virtue of a *different* relationship to substance. It is surely plausible to claim that, if one has a sturdy three foot pole, sturdiness is related to the pole in a different way than being three feet long is related to the pole. In both cases, however, the same verb, ἐστί is used to indicate the relation. Among these relations, there is one which is primary: the relation between a particular and “the what-it-is” - the essence of that particular.⁴²

Unfortunately, Aristotle does not show how to define the other categories by reference

41 In Barnes 1984 this last clause is translated as “that which is primarily and *is* simply (not is something) must be substance.” Similarly, Irwin and Fine 1995 have “what is in the primary way – what is not something, but is without qualification a being – is substance.” These translations take the second occurrence of ὄν as a circumstantial participle with τὸ as its object in order to read Aristotle as applying being *simpliciter* only to substances. My reading takes τὸ as an adjective modifying ὄν which is taken as substantive. McMahon 1907 also reads the grammar this way: “Wherefore, that which is primarily entity, and not any particular entity, but entity simply or absolutely, will constitute substance.” However, it is not at all clear how substance could fail to be a 'particular entity.' I therefore take τὸ ὄν to mean “just any being” as distinguished from the narrower primary use of 'being.' Ross 1928 gives a translation which is consistent with my interpretation of this passage, but it is unclear how he interprets the grammar: “that which is primarily, i.e. not in a qualified sense but without qualification, must be substance.”

42 I take it that the first category is *not* substance in the sense of ultimate subject (*Met.* Δ8 1017b10-14), but substance in the sense of essence (*Met.* Δ8 1017b21-23), and this is why that category is called 'what it is' both here and in *Top.* A9 103b20-22. See Frede 1981, 36ff.

to essence.⁴³ As a result, he has not shown that being is truly homonymous “relative to one” (πρὸς ἓν). He has, however, achieved the more modest result of developing a coherent theory according to which being is homonymous relative to ten. There are ten primitive relations – the relation of an individual substance to its essence, quantities, qualities, etc. – divided into two classes: *being in* relations, and *being said of* relations. All other varieties of being must be defined in terms of these.

Anything which is the predicate in a true ἐστί statement thereby acquires type two and type three accidental being. However, the analysis of accidental being will differ across the categories, since it will be analyzed in terms of a different core being relation. As a result, the entities in each of the ten categories possess a different variety of being. In this passage Aristotle even shows how to formulate a copula sentence with the predicate in subject position in virtue of the use of ἐστί in a Greek idiom for possession.⁴⁴ In this way too Aristotle shows how the being of individual instances of quantities, qualities, etc., must be defined in terms of the being of substances, so that only individual substances *are* in the core sense.

VIII. Conclusion

Aristotle successfully identifies several varieties of predication in which the relation of the predicate to the subject is plausibly construed differently. If any meaning is to be attributed to ἐστί, its meaning must be the relation which obtains between subject and predicate. The core being relations in terms of which the others are defined are the relations which obtain between individual substances and their predicates. Each of the ten categories is such a

43 It is possible that Aristotle does not intend to show anything like this. It may be that essence is said to be 'first' in this discussion because of the special relation between being *simpliciter* and the predication of essences described in *Met.* H2.

44 On this construction, see Kahn 1973, 265-271.

relation. If being *simpliciter* is taken as unspecified predication, then it too will exhibit this sort of homonymy, just as Aristotle suggests (*Met.* E2 1026a33-b6). By interpreting the theory primarily in terms of predication, Aristotle's account of the homonymy of being can be read in a way that is coherent, and perhaps even plausible.⁴⁵

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⁴⁵ The author would like to thank Gerasimos X. Santas, Frank A. Lewis and Ronald Polansky for helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper.

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Appendix: Table of Predications

The following table lists the principal varieties of predication identified in this paper and their relations to one another. Examples are in English for convenience. This table does not differentiate between the cases in which each of the ten categories is predicated of a primary substance or a universal, but includes all of the other distinctions that have been made. In every case except negative being, truth is preserved by the deletion of the predicate.

Variety	Example(s)	Paraphrase(s)
IS _c (Core Being)	X IS _c Y "Socrates is an animal."	
IS _u (Universal Being)	X IS _u Y "Human is an animal."	Xs ARE _c Y "Humans are animals."
IS _{a1} (Accidental Being 1)	X IS _{a1} Y "The pale one is musical." "The animal is rational."	Z IS _c X and Y "Socrates is pale and musical." Z IS _u X and Y "Human is an animal and rational."
IS _{a2} (Accidental Being 2)	X IS _{a2} Y "The musical one is a human." "The rational one is human."	Y IS _c X "The human is musical." Y IS _u X "Human is rational."
IS _{a3} (Accidental Being 3)	X IS _{a3} to Y "Animality is to [i.e. belongs to] Socrates." "Animality is to [i.e. belongs to] human."	Y IS _c X "Socrates is an animal." Y IS _u X "Human is an animal."
IS _p (Potential Being)	X IS _p Y "Socrates is a seeing thing." "Man is a seeing thing."	X potentially IS _c Y "Socrates potentially is seeing." X potentially IS _u Y "Man potentially is seeing."
IS _n (Negative Being)	X IS _n Y "Not-being is not-being." "Socrates is featherless."	X IS _u not Z "Not-being is not anything." X IS _c not Z "Socrates is not feathered."