

Aristotle's Theory of Assertions:

A Reply to William Jacobs

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In a recent article in *Phronesis* (XXIV, 1979, 282-300) William Jacobs attributes to Aristotle a theory of assertions, according to which if the subject of a sentence fails to refer to an actual entity it cannot qualify as an assertion. This attribution is made again in an article in *Philosophical Studies* (37, 1980, 419-428), where Jacobs expands the theory to indicate that the same holds of the predicate as well, and that if, in the case of either term, no actual thing is denoted, there is no assertion. This position of his is based on Aristotle's statement that an assertion "affirms or denies something of something" (**ti kata\apoltinoj**; *De Interpretatione* 17a20-22, 25-26), and on the further premise that for Aristotle 'thing' (**ti**) can only signify an actual entity, not a word or a concept, or a possible or fictional entity. So, for instance, the sentences 'All dogs are mammals' and 'Some men are not white animals' cannot qualify as assertions unless there actually exist mammals and dogs, white animals and men. About this theory and its attribution to Aristotle I would like to make a number of points.

1. When applied to Aristotle the theory is absurd and clearly so, for since assertions are defined by Aristotle as sentences that are true or false (*ib.* 17a2-3), it will follow that any sentence with a term or terms not referring to an actual thing will be neither, including

these: ‘Centaur’s are mythical creatures’ and ‘No dog is a centaur’. The same will be so with such negations of existence as ‘There is no king of France’ and ‘There are no centaurs’ (or, to put them into subject/predicate form, ‘No one is king of France’ and ‘Nothing is a centaur’). All these sentences state something true and it would be absurd to deny the fact, yet this is just what the theory compels us to do. And this is a good reason for not attributing it to Aristotle.

2. The identification of ‘**ti**’ with ‘actual thing’ (leaving aside, for the moment, Jacobs’ arguments for it) is sufficiently refuted by a catalogue of some of the many kinds of assertions we find in Aristotle’s writings. Not only does he make them (that is, say something true or false) about actual things but also about words and concepts (as in the logical works and the *Metaphysics*), about imaginary or opinable objects (as when he says centaurs and not-being are not), about universal natures (as when he talks of the ‘what it is to be’ of something) and even about assertions themselves (for to say that assertions affirm or deny something of something is to make an assertion about assertions). None of these can sensibly be called actual entities. In fact Aristotle makes assertions, like any thinking man, of as many kinds of object as can be thought, and this can only mean, if we are to take his statement about assertions seriously, that far from ‘thing’ (**ti**) being confined to ‘actual entity’, it is, for Aristotle, as unlimited as thought itself.

3. Jacobs’ principal argument in support of his contention about the meaning of **ti** is drawn from *De Interpretatione* 21 a32-33, where Aristotle says: “because not-being is an

object of opinion, it is not true to say that it is something (**οἷ τι**), for the opinion of it is not that it is but that it is not”. Jacobs takes this as showing that Aristotle denied that something opinable or imaginary was a thing, but apart from this showing directly the opposite (for to say of not-being that it is not, as one does if one has an opinion to this effect, is to make an assertion about it, and so to indicate it is a ‘thing’, at any rate according to Aristotle’s understanding of assertions), Jacobs has misunderstood the force of the remark. Aristotle is not saying that not-being is not in any way at all (on the contrary it is as something opinable), but that it is not in an unqualified sense. This is confirmed by *Sophistical Refutations* 167a 1-2 where he says that the argument ‘not-being is opinable, therefore not-being is’ is an example of the fallacy of concluding something simply from a premise that is true only in a certain respect, and hence where he evidently is admitting that in a certain respect, at least, not-being is indeed something.

Jacobs also argues that since for Aristotle, unlike Plato, the being of a universal is dependent upon its being instantiated, where universals occur in assertions, actual individuals must still be denoted. But neither is this so, for when universal natures are talked of in science reference to any actual particulars is excluded since these are only accidentally involved (science, according to *Posterior Analytics* 75 b21-5, is of the eternal and incorruptible and only accidentally of the corruptible, and it is the actually existing particular, as *Metaphysics* 1039b20-1040a2 makes clear, which is the corruptible), and science does not consider what is merely accidental to it (so *Metaphysics* 1026b2-11, 1027a19-20). Universal natures are indeed, for Aristotle, dependent on particular instantiations for actually existing in the world, but not, as the above makes plain, for being thought about and appearing in assertions.

4. The significance of the statement “assertions affirm or deny something of something” is, it seems to me, partly grasped by Jacobs where he says that when Aristotle speaks of predication his attention is on ‘things’ not on words or concepts, and that thus he views predication ‘ontologically’ as a relationship between extralinguistic, not linguistic, entities. Jacobs, however, is too quick to conclude from this that assertions must therefore be about actual things. It is not necessary, indeed, as I have argued, it is false, to interpret Aristotle in this way. In view of the fact that Aristotle does make assertions about words and concepts, besides a good deal else, the point of his ‘ontological’ understanding of predication cannot be that words or concepts, or anything that is not an actual thing, are not capable of being spoken of in assertions. Rather it must be that what is spoken of in them and joined together in the predication, is not the words used in the verbal expression of the assertion or the concepts used in thinking it, but the object or objects so expressed and so conceived (whether this object be itself a word or a concept, or not). In this way predication is of something extralinguistic and ‘ontological’, for it is always of the objects or ‘things’ signified, not of the verbal signs doing the signifying (this is, I think, the force of **ti** in Aristotle’s statement), even if, as does happen, this object is not an actual entity but a possible or fictional one, or even a word or a concept.

Taken in this way, Aristotle’s statement about assertions has an acceptable sense, and saves us from the absurdities and difficulties that Jacobs’ interpretation throws us into.

5. The theory of assertions Jacobs attributes to Aristotle is introduced in the *Phronesis*

article to support his interpretations of *Categories* 13b12-35 and *De Interpretatione* 2 1 a25-28, passages which, as usually understood, contain assertions with subject-terms that fail to refer to actual things. Jacobs wishes to show that this is not so, but his remarks are not only discredited to the extent that they are tied up with his opinions about assertions in Aristotle, they are also incompatible with the text.

The issue in the *Categories* is the meaning of the phrase ‘when Socrates is/is not’, which is usually taken to be ‘when Socrates does/does not exist’, but which Jacobs wishes to be ‘when Socrates is/is not a living thing’ (i.e. when ‘is’ signifies essence not existence, and when, in either case, Socrates is still spoken of as existing). The phrase is used by Aristotle to illustrate the difference between pairs of contraries (‘well/ill’) and pairs of privations and possessions (‘blind/sighted’) on the one hand, and pairs of contradictories (‘well/not well’) on the other. Whereas of the first two pairs it is only the case that one must be true and one false when there is a proper subject for them (when Socrates is not it is false to say he is either well or ill), in the case of contradictories, however, always one is true and one false (when Socrates is not it is still true to say he is not well). It can be seen, I think, that Jacobs’ interpretation is a forced one; the natural sense of the given phrase is that which is usually attributed to it. Moreover he adds nothing, in this way, to the philosophical sense (the same conclusions follow on either interpretation); in fact he takes away from it, since he lessens the contrast Aristotle is concerned to stress. The point of the passage is that while the first two pairs need a proper subject for one to be true and the other false, the third pair, far from needing a proper subject for this purpose, does not need a subject at all. This is lost if Jacobs is right, since then, for contradictories too, if Socrates does not exist at all, neither is predicable of him.

6. In the *De Interpretatione* the remarks: “Homer is something, a poet for example; well then is he or not? The ‘is’ is predicated accidentally of Homer...not *per se*...” are usually understood as meaning that ‘Homer is a poet’ does not imply ‘Homer is’, but Jacobs contends that, in fact, they mean that ‘poet’ is an accident of Homer, and have nothing to do with assertions about non-existent subjects. There is certainly a difficulty with the usual interpretation, since, according to the *Categories* passage, if Homer does not exist it is false to affirm ‘poet’ or anything of him; but Jacobs provides no solution to this, for his interpretation will not stand up to the text.

According to him, at this point in the passage Aristotle is still dealing with cases when from single predications a joint one is inferred (i.e. from ‘ x is y ’ and ‘ x is z ’ to ‘ x is yz ’), and he has just excluded such cases as ‘man is an animal or two-legged, man is a man, therefore man is an animal man or a two-legged man’ on the grounds that here many predicates inhere in the essence of the subject. There are exceptions, however, in the case of single individuals, for one can say ‘this particular man is a two-legged man’. But such predications of a single individual are only true if they are of what is essential, never if they contradict the essence (as ‘dead’ in ‘dead man’, for a dead man is only a man equivocally), and not always if they are accidental (for an accident sometimes does and sometimes does not belong, as ‘white’ of man). The phrase ‘Homer is a poet’, continues Jacobs, is just inserted here to give an example of a predication of something accidental not essential.

But first of all, in his remarks about Homer Aristotle is not talking about the predication of ‘poet’ but of ‘is’, so this cannot be the point of them. Secondly, the rule

that he gives to exclude ‘man is an animal man’ is not ‘when many predicates inhere in the essence of the subject’ but ‘when one predicate is included in the other’ (21a16) as ‘animal’ in ‘man’. Thus it also excludes, as Aristotle intended it should, the other example ‘man is a white white man’ (for ‘white’ is included in ‘white man’), which it cannot do if Jacobs is right (for ‘white’ does not inhere in the essence of man). Thirdly, the rule that allows the exception, i.e. that in the case of single individuals joint predications are permissible if they are predications of the essence, will allow ‘this particular man is an animal man’ and ‘Socrates is a Socrates man’, which Aristotle rejects (21a2-3). Fourthly, the sentence ‘this particular man is a two-legged man’ is not an exception to the principal rule Aristotle lays down, for sometimes ‘man’ includes ‘two-legged’ and sometimes not. It is proper to a man to have two legs, but one can survive deformed without them, and so when ‘man’ is used to describe normal and deformed men, it is taken so as not already to include ‘two-legged’. Thus it is permissible (and not superfluous repetition) to say ‘this particular man is a two-legged man’, for one will be saying he is not a deformed man (something left open here by ‘man’ on its own). In such a case the sentence is not parallel to ‘man is an animal man’ and so is not an exception to the rule; where it is parallel and ‘man’ does include ‘two-legged’, it is superfluous and the rule excludes it.

What Aristotle is, in fact, doing in this passage is changing the question and asking when it is possible to go from joint predications to single ones, i.e. from ‘ x is yz ’ to ‘ x is y ’ or ‘ x is z ’ (this is also the opinion of Ackrill in his *Categories and De Interpretatione*, Oxford 1963, p. 148). This is possible, he answers, except where some contradiction follows (as from ‘he is a dead man’ to ‘he is a man’), and where the

predication is accidental not *per se* (as from 'Homer is a poet' to 'Homer is'). In this context 'accidental', as Ackrill points out (*ibid.*; see also *Metaphysics* 1017a7-22), means something like 'incidental', as when 'musical' is said to be accidentally predicated of 'white' in 'the white is musical'; this is not because 'musical' is an accident of 'white' but because it is an accident of that of which 'white' is also an accident. In other words, 'musical' is said of 'white' not *per se*, because of white itself (because it is musical) but incidentally (because of the subject of white). Accordingly it is not being said here that all assertions of the form '*S is P*' can be true when there is no *S* (as 'Socrates is well' when there is no Socrates); rather 'Homer is a poet' is like other such assertions of historical figures no longer alive as 'Augustus is a Roman emperor', where the 'is' is being used 'timelessly', that is, to state, without implication of present existence, some fact about the person, that he is a poet or emperor, which we happen at that moment to be thinking of. The 'is' is predicated of him not *per se*, because of himself (because he is), but incidentally, because of the fact then being considered about him. That is why, here, 'Homer is' does not follow from 'Homer is a poet'.