

Aristotle's Categories

This little work is very important in the history of philosophy. In it, Aristotle elaborates an **ontology** while giving an account of **predication**. Ontology is the study of being, of what is. Predication is our saying something about something else. In doing this, Aristotle is undercutting Plato's Theory of the Forms.

Aristotle begins (Ch. 2) by distinguishing things that are said *in combination* ('man runs') and *without combination* ('man' 'runs'). It should be clear that those things that are said in combination are *statements*, while those said without combination are merely *terms* or *words*. Now, a term can be either:

- a subject (*hypokeimenon*): what a statement is about; or
- a predicate (*katēgoroumenon*): what a statement says of the subject.

Now, skip for a moment to Chapter 4, where Aristotle tells us that those things that can be said without combination (terms or words) signify

- Substance
- Quantity
- Quality
- Relative
- Where
- When
- Being arranged
- Having on
- Doing
- Being affected

These are Aristotle's categories. And Aristotle's point is that anything that *is* belongs to one of these categories (though some things will only have being in a derivative sense, as we shall see). When combined, terms from different categories can constitute an assertion, which can be true or false. E.g. 'Bob is pale' combines (individual) substance with quality.

Returning to Chapter 2, Aristotle makes a distinction between "saying of" a subject and "being in" in a subject.

A. **Said of** a subject.

- (1) *P* can be said of *S* when *P* and *S* belong to the same ontological category. For example:
 - (i) Bob is a human being. (I.e. 'human being' is said of Bob.)
 - (ii) A human being is a mammal.
 - (iii) A mammal is an animal.
 - (iv) Pink is (a shade of) red. (Quality)
 - (v) Red is a color. (Quality)
 - (vi) Two cubits is a length. (Quantity)
 - (vii) Length is a measure of space. (Quantity)
- (2) But, note, that this is a *transitive* relation. So, given (i)-(iii), we can also say "Bob is an animal"; given (iv)-(v) "pink is a color"; given (vi)-(vii) "two cubits is a measure of space."
- (3) This is important, for Aristotle, because it allows us say things about the *essence* of a thing. That is, when we say that "Bob is a human being," we are speaking of an *essential attribute*.

B. **Present in** a subject.

- (1) P is present in S when P is ontologically dependent upon S . If P is present in S , then P belongs to S “not as a part, and cannot exist separately from what it is in.” (1a24) For example, when we say “Bob is pale,” we are saying that *pale* (or *paleness*) is *in* Bob, but paleness cannot exist independently of Bob.
- (2) This relation is a cross-categorical relation. That is, those things that are said to be present in other things belong to a different ontological category (see above).
- (3) Such predications are *accidental* to subjects. That is, they do not express the essence of the subject.

This means that there will ultimately be four categories of things for Aristotle:

(a) Said of a subject, but not present in a subject e.g. man Universal (secondary) substance	(c) Said of a subject, and present in a subject e.g. knowledge Universal non-substances
(d) Not said of a subject, And not present in a subject e.g. this man, this horse Individual (primary) substance	(b) Not said of a subject, But present in a subject e.g. this knowledge of grammar Individual non-substance

All of this sets up the crucial claims of Chapter 5 relating to the nature of substance. Aristotle begins by distinguishing primary substances (particulars) and secondary substances (universals relating to the species and genera of the primary substances). He writes, “Substance in the most proper sense of the word, that which is *primarily* and most of all called substance, is neither said of any subject, nor is it in any subject... What is called *secondary* substances are both the species which the things primarily called substances fall under and the genera of these species.” (2a13-16) Ultimately, according to Aristotle, all things depend upon primary substances for their existence:

All other things are either said of primary substances as subjects or in them as subjects. This is evident from a consideration of cases. For example, animal is predicated of man, and therefore of the individual man (for if it were predicated of no individual man, it would not be predicated of man at all.) Again, color is in body, and therefore in an individual body (for if it were not in any individual, it would not be in body at all). Thus, all other things are either said of primary substances as subjects or in them as subjects. Therefore, if there were no primary substances, there could not be anything else. (2a34-b7)

He goes on to say that it is characteristic of substance not to have a contrary. (3b25) That is, no particular individual x has a contrary $\sim x$ (Bob and anti-Bob). However, “most characteristic of substance seems to be the fact that something one and the same in number can receive contraries.” (4a10-11) So, for example, although x is F now, x can become $\sim F$. (Bob was pale two weeks ago, but went to Florida over spring break and is now tan.) This is important, for it is the basis of the account of change to be given later.

Finally, it should be clear why this work is in general so important. Aristotle is arguing against Plato’s ontology of Forms, according to which the Forms are the most real beings and those things that appear F here and now are merely participating in F -ness. For Aristotle, it is individuals, particular substances, that are ontologically primary, and universals exist only in a derivative way.