

ARISTOTLE, METAPHYSICS H, 2.

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Can we follow G.E.L. Owen and sort out three different existential uses of the verb "to be" in Aristotle's writings, namely as a predicate of individuals, as a predicate of classes or universals and as a predicate of such things as time, place, the void and mathematical?¹ The answer to this question depends to a great extent on which interpretation of *Met. H, 2* we are willing to adopt, for it is there that Professor Owen believes to have found the chief evidence for the first order existential use of *einai*.² His exegesis of this chapter, however, rests upon what seems to be an undiscussed assumption, namely that the expressions *to krystallon einai* (1042 b 27-28) and, more fundamentally, *aitia (aition) tou einai* (1043 a 2-4) have to be understood existentially.³

In the present paper I would like to challenge this assumption and claim (a) that the use of *einai* involved in such expressions could well be the existential one but that our choice is not limited to this single option, and (b) that in the context of Books Z and H there is sufficient evidence to show that in H, 2 Aristotle is not dealing with the existential use and its alleged multiplicity of senses.

In order to buttress my first claim I would like to examine briefly three passages in which what I take to be the key expression, viz. *aition tou einai*, is involved.

(1) In *Nic. Eth. VIII, 11 1161 a 16-17*⁴ Aristotle speaks of the father in relation to his child as *aitios tou einai* as well as *trophes kai paideias*. There can be little doubt that this means that the father is the source of the existence, the nurture and the upbringing of his

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¹G.E.L. Owen, "Aristotle on the Snares of Ontology" in R. Bambrough, *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, London: Routledge, 1965, pp. 69-95. Cf. p. 90 and 92.

²Owen, p. 76.

³Owen, p. 76, note 1.

⁴Cf. further 1162 a 6, 1166 a 4-5, and 1170 a 19 in conjunction with 1170 a 34.

children. *Einaí* here means "to be" in the sense of "to be alive" and nothing prevents us from saying in this sense that Owen is and Cornford is no more, illustrating thus something coming very close to a first order existential use of "to be", the one that Charles Kahn has called "the vital use." But this is not the whole story.

(ii) In *Cat.* 14 b 1-22 while analysing the notion of priority, Aristotle says that "of things which reciprocate as to implication of *einaí*, that which is in some way *aition tou einaí* for the other might reasonably be called prior by nature." Ackrill⁵ translates *einaí* in both cases existentially and is thus forced to face the difficulties that flow from Aristotle's example, i.e. the relation of priority and posteriority that holds between a fact and a statement about it (14 b 14-15). Ackrill writes in his commentary "It is odd to call this a reciprocal implication of *existence*: we should not say that the existence of there being a man implies and is implied by the existence of the true statement that there is a man" (Ackrill's emphasis). I am afraid that this is not only odd but outright absurd. There must be something wrong somewhere. As far as I can see, an elegant way out of the absurdity is to abandon the idea that *einaí* when connected here with *logos* must be taken in its existential sense. In fact, we have a clear indication to this effect provided by Aristotle himself (14 b 13-20): the cause of being for a statement, namely the fact, is the cause of its being *true*. To interpret *einaí* and consequently *aition tou einaí* in the veridical sense is, of course, guaranteed by *Met* Δ, 7: one of the senses of "to be" explicitly listed there is "to be true" (1017 a 31-35).

(iii) A third type of use of *aition tou einaí* can be illustrated adducing passages taken from Aristotle's polemic against Plato. My space budget does not allow me to elaborate on this point but I am sure most scholars will grant that the expression *aitia tou einaí tois allois* when applied to an Idea (e.g., 1090 a 5-6) is elliptical for "the cause of other things being *F*."⁶

Aristotle clearly distinguishes the role of Ideas as causes of being and causes of becoming (991 b 3-9). In the latter case, the case coming closest to something like an explanation of existence, the Ideas are taken by Aristotle as a substitute for the efficient cause, i.e., they purport to explain why a thing *becomes F*. In the former case, the Ideas are akin to the Aristotelian Form, they explain why a thing *is F*, or as he puts it elsewhere (988 a 10-11): *ta eide tou ti esti aitia tois allois*, "the Ideas are the causes of the what-is-it for other things."

⁵J.L. Ackrill, *Aristotle's Categories and De Interpretatione*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963, pp. 39-40 and 111-112.

⁶Cf. G. Vlastos, "Reasons and Causes in the Phaedo," in Vlastos (ed.),

If this is correct, it follows that *aition tou einaí* can also reflect a predicative elliptical use of the Greek verb "to be."

Summing up then we can hold that three different uses of "to be" within *aition tou einaí* have been traced in Aristotle's writings: (1) a first order existential use, (ii) a veridical use, and (iii) a predicative elliptical use. Which of these is the one that Aristotle is taking pains to illustrate at H, 2? Professor Owen, as we saw, thinks it is the first one.

In order to decide the issue let us take a look into the context of H, 2. Book H opens with a summary of the content of Book Z,⁷ hence it is not unreasonable to expect to find there some clue as to Aristotle's intentions in our chapter. Z, 17, in fact, makes a fresh start within the inquiry into the question what is *ousia* selecting as starting point precisely the idea that *ousia* is some kind of principle and cause, indeed the first cause of being (1041 a 9-10, 1041 b 27-28). But, as I have argued elsewhere,⁸ Aristotle makes it fairly clear at 1041 b 25-28 that what has turned out to be the *ousia* of each thing, namely its Form, is not the cause of its existence but of its being the kind of thing it is. *Aition tou einaí* is nothing but a generalization from particular instances such as "the cause of this being flesh and of that being a syllable" (1041 b 26-27). Form is for each thing the cause of its being *F*, hence the use of *einaí* implied is (iii), the predicative elliptical use.

Let us now turn to H, 2. The explicit intention of the chapter is to discuss substance, in the sense of actuality, of sensible things. Aristotle introduces his topic rejecting Democritus' doctrine that there are only three differentiae and offers instead a large variety of examples to convince us that there are many types thereof. "For instance some things are characterized by the mode of composition of their matter, e.g., the things formed by blending, such as honey-water; and others by being bound together, e.g., a bundle; and others by being glued together, e.g., a book; and others by being nailed together e.g., a casket; and others in more than one of these ways; and others by position, e.g., threshold and lintel (for these differ by being placed in a certain way); and others by time, e.g., dinner and breakfast, and others by place, e.g., the winds," etc. (1042 b 15-21, Oxford trans.).

From these and other examples Aristotle concludes that the word "is" is used in a corresponding variety of ways (1042 b 25-26). Does he mean that the verb "to be" in its existential role or roles can

Plato I, *Metaphysics and Epistemology*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), p. 144.

⁷Cf. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924, II, 226.

⁸"Aristotle's hypotheses and the Euclidean postulates", *Review of Metaphysics* 30 (1977) 430-439.

have many senses, as Owen held? The acceptance or rejection of this suggestion stands or falls with the interpretation of the next three lines (1042 b 26-28). Professor Owen translates them as follows (his emphasis): "A threshold *is*, in that it is situated thus and so: 'to be' means its being so situated. And that ice *is*⁹ means that it is solidified in such and such a way" (p. 76). He informs us that in the last example he has supplied *auton* by analogy with *auto* in the previous line (1042 b 27). This explains why "it" in "it is situated" and "it is solidified" is taken by Professor Owen to refer back to "threshold" and "ice" respectively.¹⁰

I doubt whether this is correct. In the first place, it is far from clear that the neuter *auto* in 1042 b 27 refers back to the masculine *oudos*. It is more probable that Aristotle had *xylon* or *lithon* or simply *to hypokeimenon soma* (1042 b 12-13) in mind, for, secondly, Aristotle's conception of change commits him to the idea that what can be subject to a change in position and hence become, say, a lintel instead of a threshold is not the threshold but the underlying piece of wood or stone. In fact, he stresses this later on in the chapter (1043 a 7-8): "if we had to define a threshold we would say 'wood or stone in such and such a position.'" The same holds for the other instance: it is not ice that is solidified but water (1043 a 9-10).

If these considerations are correct, it means that we have to take "threshold" and "ice" at 1042 b 26-28 as predicates and supply something to mark the ellipsis of the subject term.¹¹ This brings us close to Sir David Ross' translation though not to his paraphrase (II, 228) of the crucial lines. I would translate them as follows: "(A thing) is a threshold because it (sc. the thing) is situated thus, and (for it) to be (a threshold) means that it is situated thus, and (for a thing) to be ice (means) that (it, sc. the thing) has been solidified in such and such a way."

Hence, what we have in the central part of H, 2 is not an analysis of the existential use of "is" but of its predicative use showing that it varies widely in use as the paraphrases by means of differentiae indicate. The differentiae do not explain why something is in existence but rather why different subjects have different attributes.

Against this it could be objected that since for Aristotle to be is always to be something or other, we do in fact have both an analysis

⁹I agree with Owen (p. 76, note 1) that there is no reason to read *to kryttaloi* (Dat.) *einai*, an emendation of Bonitz adopted by Jaeger.

¹⁰Owen, p. 76 note 1. Cf. further pp. 79-80: "Following the natural and usual reading of that text (sc. H, 2) we took it to be dealing with statements of the form 'So and so exists.' To say of a piece of ice that *it* still exists is to say that *it* is keeping *its* solidity" (my emphasis).

¹¹For a parallel cf. *Top.* 102 a 22: *anthropos estin*, "he is a man" (Forster trans., Loeb edition). Owen considers and abandons this solution on p. 81.

of the predicative *and* of the existential use. This seems to me implausible. It is not at all clear that Aristotle would accept the aforementioned principle ("to be is to be *F*") under the interpretation that reads the first occurrence of "to be" as "exists." The principle could well be a reasonable formulation of Aristotle's conviction that "being" behaves like "one" in that both are "substantive-hungry" words, to borrow Austin's label.¹² Whenever someone says "x is" or "y is one" we are entitled to ask "Is what?" "Is one what?" because, as Aristotle puts it "the one is one something" (1054 a 7) and "being is nothing apart from substance or quality or quantity" (1054 a 17-18). This, it seems to me, holds exclusively of the predicative use. The existential use is both in English and in Greek a syntactically complete use.

But even if we grant the existential interpretation of the first "to be" in "to be is always to be *F*", it still does not follow that in H, 2 Aristotle is dealing with existence and possession of attributes at the same time. The simultaneous analysis simply cannot take place because the alleged subject of "to exist" does not coincide in any of the instances with the subject of "to be *F*."

Moreover, under the existential interpretation, as I have suggested above, Aristotle would probably reject the principle altogether. His analysis of the existence of attributes is not such that he would expand it to the possession of, presumably, second order attributes. For health to exist is not for it to be such and such, but rather health exists if and only if a particular man is healthy (Cf. 1070 a 22-24). The existential statement is reduced to a predicative one.

In H, 2 Aristotle takes it for granted that there are bits of water and pieces of wood and meals. Their existence requires no explanation. What needs to be accounted for is why this bit of water is ice, why this log is a threshold and why this meal is breakfast and not dinner. The differentiae (solidification, position, time) provide the answer.

Finally, in 1043 a 2-7 some conclusions are drawn. In accordance with the foregoing results they can be paraphrased thus: "Since the *ousia* is the cause of each thing's being *F*, it is among these things (i.e., differentiae such as the ones just mentioned)¹³ that we must look for the cause of each thing's being *F*," on the assumption, of course, that we want to determine what is, in each case, the *ousia* of a thing. Aristotle warns us, though, (1043 a 4-5) that none of the aforementioned differentiae is a genuine *ousia* not even when

¹²Cf. Owen, p. 94. Aristotle's arguments against the Eleatics in *Phys.* I, 2, 185 a 20 — 185 b 5 are based on this conviction.

¹³I follow Ross in taking *en toutois* (1043 a 3) (and *touton* 1043 a 4) as referring back to differentiae in spite of the discrepancy in gender.

coupled with matter, yet they provide a useful analogy for understanding the inner structure of substances. Just as the peculiar position of this stone explains why it is a threshold, so too the soul of an individual explains why these bones and sinews are a man (cf. 1041 b 6-7). The soul is "a cause and principle of being" (*tou einai*, *De. An.* 415 b 12-14).

For the present purposes it is not necessary to comment on the rest of the chapter. The essentials of 1043 a 5-12 have been touched upon already and 1043 a 12 *in finem* elaborates on the idea that there are three types of definition corresponding to matter, to form or actuality, and to that which is composed of these two, respectively.

My overall conclusion, then, is that we have failed to discover in *Met. H*, 2 bona fide evidence of an attempt to explain first order existential uses of "to be." Whether or not Aristotle attempted an analysis of existence as instantiation of general properties or universals can only be settled by a detailed interpretation of *An. Post.* II, 1-2. But this cannot be given here.¹⁴

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¹⁴Cf. my "The so-called question of existence in Aristotle, *An. Post.* II. 1-2", *Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1980) 71-89.