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Demetra Sfendoni-Mentzou

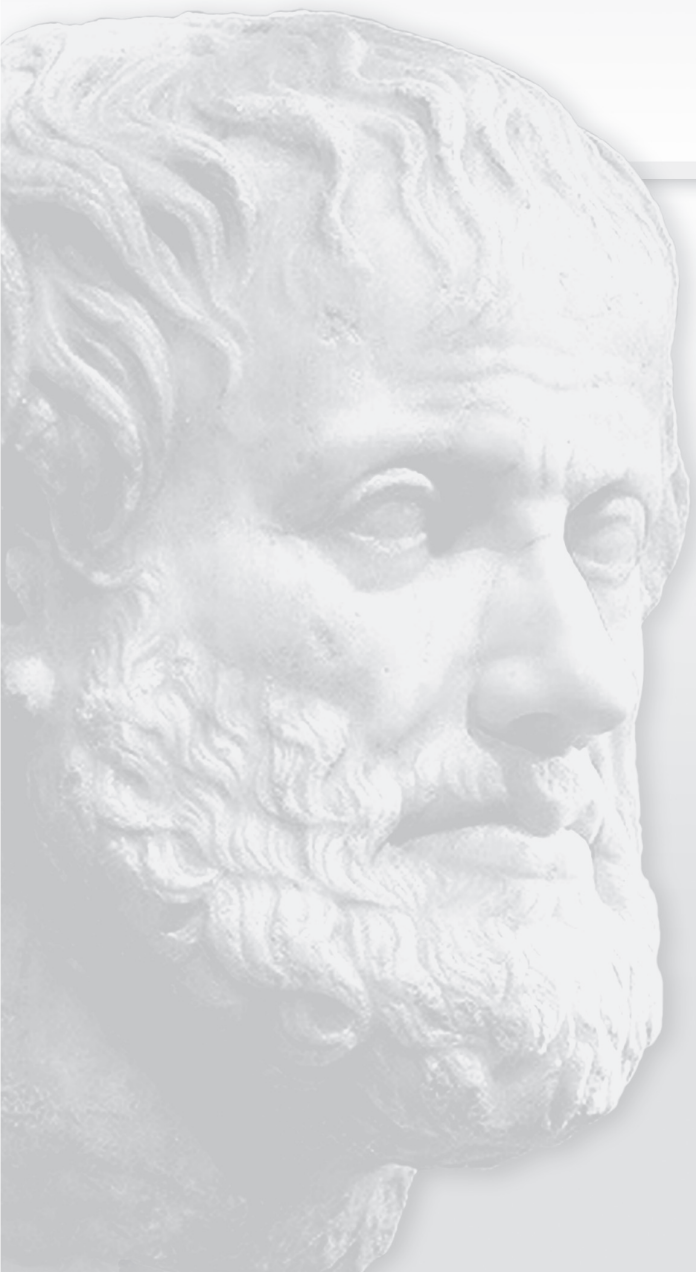
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Demetra Sfendoni-Mentzou

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## “Being” (τὸ ὄν) as Said of Predicates in the Critical Text of Aristotle, *Metaphysics Lambda*

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λέγομεν γοῦν εἶναι καὶ  
ταῦτα, οἷον ἔστιν  
οὐ λευκόν (*Lambda* 1. 1069a25)

### Introduction

In this paper, I will be focusing on seeming anomalies in the use of the verb “to be,” as found in several passages in *Metaphysics Lambda*, once it is restored in a critical edition. At least a couple of times (4. 1070b25 and 7. 1072a25f.), instead of the standard subject agreement, the participle “being” shows agreement with the predicate noun. Such a peculiar feature is clearly attested in the most ancient textual witnesses, but was corrected in later Byzantine manuscripts and regarded as scribal mistakes by editors in the 19th and 20th century. In fact, the matter deserves close scrutiny, since it seems to be justified by Aristotle’s introductory statement at *Lambda* 1. 1069a25 (here *in exergo*): predicate nouns (which typically include not self-subsisting ones, e.g., “not-white”) are, in a sense, “beings.” No previous editor or translator seems to have paid attention to such a peculiar feature, which definitely calls for an explanation. Given this lack of previous literature, I am putting forward a first, and no doubt provisional, attempt to make sense of it, based on the Greek text of *Metaphysics* strengthened by Aubenque’s relevant remarks. In my view, such occurrences of “to be,” a concept that Aristotle expresses through the participial form (τὸ ὄν), testify for the very same interest in language analysis which lays at the origin of the much-debated theory of the “being *qua* being.” According to my proposed reconstruction, this theory, which emerges in the central books of the *Metaphysics*, is then summarized, and further developed, in book *Lambda*, but not entirely finalized, either there or anywhere else in the corpus.

In Aristotle’s times, Greek grammar was not yet established and canonized as a system. Aristotle could still deal with the syntax of the Greek verb “to be” and of the relevant participle, “being” (ὄν, οὔσα, ὄν), as an open field for research. Indeed, the theoretical relevance of thinking about “being” as such had become a *topos* in philosophical literature since Parmenides and Plato; however, Aristotle could not yet make a fully coherent system out of it and its various agreements with nouns.

Apparently a kind of failure in agreement between words, the alleged passages indirectly testify for Aristotle’s effort on this path, and in language analysis as a relevant tool. This sheds some light, albeit indirectly, upon his leading interests when he conceived the books which we now call the *Metaphysics*.

### 1. An Issue at Stake, Concerning the Method of Aristotle’s Ontology

Scholarly tradition in modern times has been handling Aristotle as an eclectic, curious, clever man no doubt, but also a pedant one after all. Since the XIX century, such an image is too easily contrasted with Plato’s. If Plato shines as a kind of a pre-Kantian genius for his intuition about a hopeless gap between human perception and the deepest reality of things, Aristotle is assigned a laborious empiricism. None denies the subtlety of his analytical skills; but his attitude has appeared sometimes too naive, because of the alleged absence of a reflec-

tion of what the reality will be beyond what men perceive and communicate with one another.<sup>1</sup>

Only about half a century ago Wolfgang Wieland has debunked the idea, indeed unlikely, that Aristotle found his doctrine of the four causes of natural phenomena looking straightforwardly at nature, and has shown that this doctrine is made of the analysis of the different ways Greek speakers answer to the basic question "why" (διὰ τί). He regards the four Aristotelian causes without hesitation as *Reflexion Begriffe*, "in a Kantian sense"—he adds.<sup>2</sup>

Wieland's discovery, if one allows it to be one (as I do), while being often accepted concerning the theory of the four causes in the *Physics*, did not significantly affect the current understanding of the *Metaphysics*, even not of those sections of it which are drawing from the *Physics*, being concerned with the theory.

Hence the question: what is the consequence for our understanding of the *Metaphysics*, if one considers that the foundations of Aristotle's relevant theories lay not in the direct observation of natural phenomena but in the analysis of the way natural phenomena are spoken of and explained? It seems to me that this still allows for further inquiry, especially when the central theory of being is concerned.

Aristotle's theory of being in the *Metaphysics* clearly focuses on substance (οὐσία). Substance (οὐσία) is there regarded as a focal meaning of being (τὸ ὄν): this is clearly stated and argued for, *passim* in the *corpus* and especially in *Metaphysics Zeta* 1-2 and in *Lambda* 1. However, the way "substance" has to be taken, far from being clear in itself, is largely undetermined, or, as some say, underdeter-

mined.<sup>3</sup> It is often taken as a direct, albeit conceptualized expression of *what reality is*.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, being *qua* being (τὸ ὄν ἢ ὄν), whose focal meaning substance is established to be in the *Metaphysics*, tends to be taken, dialectically or not, as some kind of comprehensive being existing in itself. By the way, this understanding of being as existent presupposes that Aristotle's "being," as a verbal noun, refers to the subject of the relevant verb to be, just as it happens in modern languages as well. We shall see that this does not need to be always true.

Such a reading of being as existent is not without connection with the widely spread image of an empirical Aristotle, which, while being correct in a sense, is only a part of what can be said of Aristotle's theoretical philosophy which is largely based on analytical methods of research. Moreover, one has to take into account the general framework. When the verb to be is concerned, the context is given by the use of the verb "to be" in Greek. In the latest decades, the Greek verb to be has been put in the middle by Kahn and by others. Similarities and differences with modern languages have built a whole field for research. The existential use of the verb "to be," if there is one, is proper of its absolute or "complete" use, as opposed to the "incomplete" use, i.e., as a copula. This is why if "being" means "existent," not only "being" must refer to the subject of the verb "to be," but this has to be used absolutely, i.e., in a complete sense, as opposed to the copula, which needs to be completed by a predicate.

As it is well known, and we are about to recall it, Aristotle was sometimes in condition to contrast a complete vs. an incomplete use of the verb "to be." How far could he make a system of the different uses of the participle of the verb to be (τὸ ὄν) as referred to its incomplete use, is nonetheless a partly open question. This is due not only to the different role to be can play in a different context, but to a larger issue concerning the difference in role between subject and predicate once the two are connected by the verb to be as a copula. It is not obvi-

1. See e.g., E. Benveniste ["Catégories de la langue, catégories de la pensée," in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966)], with P. Aubenque's reaction ["Aristote et le langage," *Annales de la Faculté des Lettres d'Aix* 43 (1967): 85-105, "Appendice"]. I am grateful to dr. Vittorio Bonzi and to Francesco Borsatti for their useful remarks. The present research was developed during my grant at Università della Calabria, LISE Department, 2016/2017.

2. See Wolfgang Wieland, *Die aristotelische Physik: Untersuchungen über die Grundlegung der Naturwissenschaft und die sprachlichen Bedingungen der Prinzipienforschung bei Aristoteles* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1962), 89ff. See, moreover, 187, 202ff., 261, 337; Id., "Aristotle's Physics and the Problem of Inquiry into Principle," in *Articles on Aristotle. 1: Science*, eds. M. Schofield et al. (London: Duckworth, 1975), 135ff.

3. The idea occurs in A. Laks, "Metaphysics Λ 7," in *Aristotle's Metaphysics Lambda*, Symposium Aristotelicum, eds. M. Frede and D. Charles (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 207-243.

4. See discussion and bibliography in F. Leight, "The Copula and Semantic Continuity in Plato's *Sophist*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 34 (2008): 105-122.

ous that Aristotle's theory of being intended to focus on the former as opposed to the latter. It is probable that this affects the general meaning of the science of being *qua* being which is spoken of in *Metaphysics Gamma* 1 and *Epsilon* 1.

## 2. Tò "Ov in the Middle

Aristotle's inquiry over being *qua* being is basically analogous to the methodological parts of his physics. Aristotle focuses on ὄν in the philosophical sense, which is Plato's theory of principles as still practiced within the Academy and inherited from the pre-Socratic tradition especially from Parmenides. Now, there is no proof that either Parmenides, or Plato had an existing "something" in mind when dealing with τὸ ὄν.

As a matter of fact, when analysing the various uses of the verb "to be," Aristotle seems mainly to deal with its copulative function, i.e., on its role as copula. I especially refer here to Aristotle's doctrine of categories in the *Metaphysics* and to *Metaphysics Delta* 7.

But, whether Aristotle distinguishes this copulative role as such and as opposed to different ones or not is an open issue in current literature.

Texts of reference favourable towards the first option are rare. One of them is in *Metaphysics Epsilon* 1 (1025b16, 18, see also 1026a27). There Aristotle distinguishes, while using the verb "to be," two tasks and questions which must be dealt with, concerning any given subject for research: the εἰ ἔστι and the τί ἔστι. The εἰ ἔστι seems to be an absolute use of "to be," i.e. (possibly) existence. Does it exist? Whereas the τί ἔστι, by contrast, is meant to express the actual content of it. And what it is? The two tasks share common features: one and the same inquiry deals with both issues altogether. Both answers are susceptible to be described through the relevant participle, τὸ ὄν. However, the two questions are dealt with by two kinds of assessments. These are clearly distinguished in the *Organon*, e.g., *Posterior Analytics*<sup>5</sup>

5. Arist. *An. post.* 89b32-5: (we seek) "if a centaur or a god is or is not (I mean if one is or not simpliciter and not if one is white or not). And knowing that it is, we seek what it is (e.g., so what is a god? or what is a man?)." Trans. J. Barnes, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 42.

and *Sophistici elenchi*<sup>6</sup> as it is well known from standard reference works.<sup>7</sup>

This, therefore, one may assume, shows that Aristotle does distinguish as such the copulative use of ὄν, or, at least, the way the ὄν is used to describe how and what the subject is (the τί ἔστι).

From this perspective, the question whether Aristotle recognizes the copula as such would appear to be settled from the outset.

Still, it has been argued that it is unsafe to suppose to ancient standard Greek or even to philosophical Greek our distinction between a complete and a non complete use of the verb "to be," as codified in modern grammars. The problem needs to be considered anew.

I will put forward the following hypotheses:

- Aristotle is aware of the importance of the distinction, as the aforementioned *loci* show;
- He is especially interested in the copulative use, i.e., to the power the verb "to be" has when connected, on the one side to the subject, on the other, to the predicate.
- One *could* say therefore that Aristotle, when dealing with being *qua* being sought for grammar (in our terms), and for syntax especially.<sup>8</sup>

6. Arist. *Soph. El.* 5. 167a1-2 (as a sample of a fallacious inference): "as if one were to assume, for instance, that since what is not is thought about, what is not is. For it is not the same thing to be something and to be simpliciter." Trans. W.A. Pickard-Cambridge, in *The Works of Aristotle, Translated into English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928). Such passages are well known from standard reference works, such as Lesley Brown's seminal article, see the following note. See also Ch. Kahn, *The Verb "Be" in Ancient Greek* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003).

7. See L. Brown, "The Verb 'To Be' in Greek Philosophy," in *Language*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 212-236, in part. 233-236; this is a starting point whose conclusion one could slightly diverge from, see in particular her p. 234: "In general Aristotle believes (I think) that the inference from 'X is F' to 'X is' is a perfectly safe one (just like that from 'Jane teaches French' to 'Jane teaches') but that for some values of F (being thought about, being dead) the inference is unsafe, but the blame, as if were, lies on the particular value of F, not on the move from one meaning of 'is' to another."

8. In this sense, Aristotle could hardly be satisfied by the γραμματική τέχνη of his time, which was a mere writing technique. Indeed, this technique was not without charm on Aristotle as on Plato. One was struck by the mysterious relationship between the elements and the compound, and especially by the radical otherness of the compound with the mere sum of additional elements. See F. Ildefonse, *La naissance de la grammaire dans l'antiquité Grecque* (Paris: Vrin, 2008).



This must not be underestimated, especially in a time when no actual grammar rules were fixed yet. Aristotle sought for the definition of those immanent, albeit general rules, which lay at the basis of human thought and communication. This struggle of his led him to regard the participle of the verb "to be" as a key to predication in general (καθόλου, as *Epsilon* 1 says, 1026a24): by abstraction, Aristotle classifies the ways of predication as expressed by the different uses of the verb "to be," and by their own classification.

### 3. The Role of Language Analysis

No one would deny that in the *Metaphysics*, the ways of being are then distinguished through linguistic analysis. This is pretty obvious—otherwise, they would not be called *categories*, i.e., types of predications.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as *Metaphysics Delta* shows, the analysis of "being" (τὸ ὄν) in chapter 7 clearly parallels the analysis of the different ways in which all considered terms *are said*. The key word is λέγεται, "it is said" (1017a7, 18, 20, 22, 24).<sup>10</sup> As in every good dictionary, the basis is the standard *language*. On this regard, Ackrill probably expresses a common view which also applies to the *Metaphysics*, when he remarks "Aristotle relies greatly on linguistic facts and tests, but his aim is to discover truths about non-linguistic items."<sup>11</sup>

As common as the view can be, I find it unfair, because Aristotle is indirectly charged with a serious mistake. Accordingly, not without subtlety, he

9. I need to emphasize that my present remarks are not referred to the *Categories* as an Aristotelian work—whose authenticity is by the way not unsuspected [by myself and by others, cf. M. Achard, "Tradition et histoire de l'aristotélisme. Le point de vue des indices externes dans le problème de l'authenticité du traité des *Catégories*," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 56/2 (2000): 307-351; R. Bodéüs, *Aristote: Catégories*, texte établi et traduit (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001), esp. xc-cx]. As a result, my analysis is hardly compatible with those who seek to reconcile the underlying ontology at work there with the relevant parts of the *Metaphysics*.

10. Ross' standard translation of λέγεται, "(it) means," is fluent, but not perfect (see the *Oxford Translation [Aristotle's Metaphysics, Oxford Classical Text (1924; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953)]*).

11. J.L. Ackrill's alleged reasons [*Categories and De interpretatione* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 71] concerns *Categories* as a (supposed) Aristotelian treatise, see however note 8 above.

is also indirectly opposed and postponed to Plato. By contrast, I would be glad to celebrate our Aristotelian jubilee while rescuing the fundamental validity of Aristotle's perspective, which consummates Plato's theoretical experience on several regards, keeping though a remarkable degree of independence.

As I might say in a formula: Aristotle *sought desperately for grammar*, and for syntax especially. He aimed to grasp the definition of the verb "to be" when connected, on the one side to the subject, on the other, to the predicate.

I say "desperately" because no grammar in our sense, including syntax (as opposed to grammar as a mere writing and copying technique,) was available yet, neither would for a period after Aristotle. Indeed, Aristotle tried to grasp the role of human thought and language through the capacities and the potentiality of the verb "to be" and of its participle, τὸ ὄν. However, even if he regarded the Greek usages of the participle "being" as a crucial issue, it seems that he still could not make out a fully coherent system out of it.

### 4. A Few Interesting Anomalies and Aubenque's Remark (2005)

Hence the interest of a series of samples, which did not attract attention so far and built the factual novelty of my present paper. They will deserve some attention in what follows, so to prompt some original interpretation of Aristotle's understanding of the very participle of the verb "to be," τὸ ὄν which he seems to refer not only to the subject but also to the predicate. This produces some interesting anomalies in construction.

I refer for example to *Lambda* 4. 1070b25 and 7. 1072a25f.

In the first passage, manuscripts readings play a role. Unlike previous editors, we need to read this passage according to manuscripts of the so called  $\alpha$ -family J and E (Vind. phl. Gr. 100 and Paris. gr. 1853).<sup>12</sup>

12. On the textual transmission and my proposed guidelines for a future critical edition, S. Fazzo, "Lo stemma codicum della *Metafisica* di Aristotele," *Revue d'Histoire des Textes* 12 (2017): 35-58; Id., "Aristotle's *Metaphysics* - Current Research to Reconcile Two Branches of the Tradition," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 98/4 (2016): 433-457.

Aristotle speaks of the moving cause, and describes it as

what produces movement or stillness, which is a king principle.

In Greek:

τὸ δ' ὡς κινουῦν ἢ ἰστὰν ἀρχή τις οὔσα.

Note that the participle οὔσα is female, in agreement with ἀρχή and not with the neuter subject.

I come now to my second example. We are at the conclusion of the main argument of the book, when Aristotle says:

“there is therefore something that moves without being moved, which is eternal and is the substance and is in action.”

ἔστι τι ὃ οὐ κινούμενον κινεῖ, αἰδῖον καὶ οὐσία καὶ ἐνεργεῖα οὔσα.<sup>13</sup>

Once more, the participle οὔσα which is female, and is in agreement with a predicate, οὐσία, and not with the neuter subject.

Such anomalies are not insignificant, as some further parallels will show (see below). They testify Aristotle's focus on the predicate, and not only on the subject of the sentence.

Conceptually speaking my reading is not unprecedented. Its validation could reinforce a recent suggestion by Pierre Aubenque.<sup>14</sup>

In Aubenque's 2005 view, the participle (τὸ) ὄν, as it occurs in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, refers to the predicate rather than to the subject of the phrase. By contrast, such an interesting idea did not appear in Aubenque's 1962 reference work.<sup>15</sup> This fact suggests that Aubenque takes now into account several decades of reading experience on the *Metaphysics*.

13. I follow my own critical edition of this book: *Il libro Lambda della Metafisica di Aristotele* (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 2012), ad loc. On ἐνεργεῖα at 1072a25 as opposed to ἐνεργεία, printed by former editors, see my “Unmoved Mover as Pure Act or Unmoved Mover in Act? The Mystery of a Subscript Iota,” in *Metaphysics Lambda - New Essays*, ed. C. Horn (Boston-Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 181-205.

14. See P. Aubenque, “La fonction de l'aporie dans la *Métaphysique*,” in *La Métaphysique d'Aristote. Perspectives contemporaines*, eds. M. Narcy and A. Tordesillas (Paris-Brussels: Vrin-Ousia, 2005), 13.

15. See P. Aubenque, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962).

Still, despite the centrality of the issue, it is difficult to find an interpretation of the *Metaphysics* where each occurrence of “being” (ὄν) – as the participle of the verb “to be” which plays there such a central role—is examined with such a pre-grammatically-focussed perspective.

## 5. *Rhetoric* Γ.5:

### Tὸ Ἑλληνίζειν at Stake

Concordance in endings is seen in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as a relevant part in the essence of ἑλληνίζειν, or “good Greek speaking.” At *Rhetoric* Γ 5. 1407b6-11, concordance in gender and concordance in number are given as fourth and fifth of five requirements for a correct Greek style. Sophists are counted among predecessors: Protagoras is acknowledged with the distinction of feminine nouns as such. Actually, ending agreement in a sentence construction may appear to us an obvious requisite.

The striking fact is that in spite of his concerns, anomalies in inflexion are eventually found in Aristotle's use of the participle ὄν, οὔσα, ὄν. In the few passages seen above, Aristotle apparently gets gender concordances wrong, at least from our grammatical point of view.

Indeed, such anomalies have easily been normalized by editors who revised the Greek text. If they survive textual criticism, they are labelled as *constructio ad sensum*.

Still, we may wonder: are those anomalies contraventions violations, or errors? Are not all these judgements affected by anachronism?

Thus we wish to focus on such peculiar features of a few sentences of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, trying to make sense of them. Generally speaking, we know that there are two ways and reasons for violating the rules of agreement in classical languages: the inflexion is determined either by the closest noun, or by semantics, i.e., *ad sensum*. Both criteria apply to some of our case studies—which is fair enough. However, this does not say anything about their deepest *ratio*, so some further thoughts will not be superfluous. As we are about to see, our case is a special one since the contravention of what would be required by grammar has its own positive weight in theoretical construction.

Still, the general phenomenon does not seem to affect any modern translation, nor to have attracted attention so far.

## 6. Looking at *Metaphysics Lambda*, ch. 1

This can be judged quoting from the onset of the book *Lambda* (1069a20-24):

I propose the following translation:<sup>16</sup>

[...] and even in this way, substance is first, then there is quality, or quantity. But at the same time, these latter are not even being in the full sense, but are qualities and movements [of substance]; otherwise, even the not-white and the not-straight would be. *Indeed, about such <predicates>, we also say that they are, for example: "is not-white."*

The phrase contains, hidden as it is, a tricky and troublesome sentence, whose words are italicized.<sup>17</sup> This reads in Greek:

λέγομεν γοῦν εἶναι καὶ ταῦτα,  
οἷον ἔστιν οὐ λευκόν.

How can this be held? Why predicates, such as "not-white," are beings?

As dialectical as the point can be (it is an argument by *modus tollens*), how is it possible that when I say that something black is not white, I also claim that "not white" *is*? Elsewhere, as in the well-known passages quoted above, Aristotle expressly denies that if X is Y, then X is. Here by contrast if X is, then Y *somehow* is as well.

There is a crucial grammatical issue inside this phrase, which is usually overlooked in textual exegesis. Indeed, the main issue is clear at any rate: substance is prior among beings. However, there is a problem concerning the logical connection of ταῦτα with the verb "to be" (εἶναι). Aristotle does not appear to distinguish sharply whether ταῦτα is the subject, or the predicate noun of εἶναι instead.

16. Ross' translation (op.cit.) is different here, partly because of a different critical text at 1069a21; see *contra* already M. Frede, "Metaphysics Λ.1," in *Aristotle's Metaphysics Lambda*. Symposium Aristotelicum (Oxford, August 26-30, 1996), eds. Michael Frede and David Charles (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 53-80, ad loc.

17. The sentence is tricky because "not-white" is the predicate, not the subject; Ross' *Oxford Translation* (op.cit.) "there is a not-white," is not literal enough.

## 7. Predicate as Being

Looking more closely, we wonder what is the reason which allows to talk about predicate as being?

We would possibly expect Aristotle to use an existential argument, like: if a man is white, white is because a white man is (i.e., white is inherent to a man, which exists).

However, this is exactly what Aristotle denies elsewhere: one cannot infer, from the premise that a chimera so coloured as snow is white, that such a chimera exists, nor that white exists for such a reason.

After all, this is the overall sense of Aristotle's argument, already at 1069a23f., when it says,

otherwise, non-white would also exist.

The argument is clear enough so far. Already by Plato's Academy negative qualities are a standard sample that no existence can be proved through predication. What is not obvious, within our standard way of talking about subject and verb, is the further, allegedly explanatory remark:

λέγομεν γοῦν εἶναι καὶ ταῦτα,  
οἷον ἔστιν οὐ λευκόν.

As a matter of fact, once more, Aristotle settles the being of the predicate based on language analysis. In English the above reads:

X is not-white, so in a sense, not-white is, i.e., not white can be regarded as *being*.

The argument, if I take it well, applies whether X exists or not. What distinguishes the way of being of non white from the being of an existing substance does not depend on concreteness.<sup>18</sup> It depends on how the verb "to be" works within such a standard assessment as:

X is Y.

Here, "is" (ἐστί) is related not only to X, on the one side, but also to Y on the other, so that Y as well can be spoken of as *being*.

So far we followed *Lambda* 1, where our standard distinction between subject and predicate seems to be ignored. It is not that Aristotle overlooked the

18. It is not as if one were to argue that I can paint and make white a wall which exists already and not one which never came to be, and does not exist yet.



problem or did not get interested in it; on the contrary, he did spend special attention to it in different contexts and made a big deal of it. For this purpose he settles his "science of being *qua* being."

Aristotle sought for grammar as an internal law and system for human language and thought. He invented the core of the metaphysics.

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