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ARISTOTLE'S CORRESPONDENCE THEORY OF TRUTH AND WHAT DOES NOT EXIST

Abstract. While nowhere does he use the term to refer to his own theory, Aristotle is often thought to exemplify an early correspondence theory of truth. In the paper, I examine the textual evidence used to support the idea that Aristotle holds a correspondence theory of truth, and to infer the nuances of this theory. I hold that Aristotle's theory of truth can account for terms that signify non-existent things, i.e., that on Aristotle's account, an assertion is not automatically false given its subject term's "failure to refer". Terms do not refer for Aristotle, they signify (and his use of the concept of signification extends far beyond linguistic reference).

Keywords: Aristotle, Correspondence, Non-Existence, Reference, Signification, Isomorphism.

1. The Problem

Aristotle is often referred to as holding a correspondence theory of truth.[1] The basic tenet qualifying a theory of truth as a correspondence theory is that on it a statement is true if and only if it corresponds to something that exists. It therefore seems problematic to claim that we can make a true statement about anything that does not exist, for there is nothing to which the statement might correspond. The relation of correspondence, however, is a strange one that is never made explicit in Aristotle, "correspondence" being a word modern scholars have used to describe the relation Aristotle invokes. In this paper, I demonstrate the difficulty

[1] See, for instance [8, 9, 10, 14] and [18].

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in applying a correspondence definition of truth to non-existent objects, and demonstrate how Aristotle in fact avoids these difficulties.

I should state, first of all, that part of the motivation for writing this paper is the analytic interpretation of Aristotle as claiming that any declarative with a subject term signifying something does not exist is false due to its failure to refer.[2] The idea that Aristotle cannot account for non-referring subject terms does not accurately represent the rigour with which Aristotle incorporates non-existent subjects into his linguistics and logic.

Nor does he ever call his theory of truth a "correspondence" theory. In order to determine what a correspondence theory is, and whether Aristotle holds one, I first the textual evidence used in support of the claim that Aristotle holds a correspondence theory of truth, concluding that Aristotle's theory of truth does qualify as a correspondence theory, but using a weak sense of "correspondence".[3] What factors correspond, in this relation, are the word and what it signifies. Since words that symbolize things that do not exist do signify, I maintain that it is possible to make true statements about things that don't exist, in the way earlier specified—for example, that a goat-stag is part-goat and part-stag, and that Homer is a poet.

2. Defining "Correspondence"

Any concept of correspondence demands that we conceive of two things in relation to each other. If there is a correspondence between a statement and something existing, a basic correspondence theory labels that statement as true. Truth, in this sense, would therefore be a relational property of a statement describing its correspondence to a state of affairs. Conceiving of truth as a relational property, a statement may become true or false depending on what it signifies and how that changes (for instance, when Socrates is sitting, "Socrates is sitting" is true; when Socrates gets antsy and stands up, "Socrates is sitting" is false, and

[2] This interpretation is based on Aristotle's *Categories* 13b27–36. For the better scholarly discussion of this passage, see [1, 12] and [19].

[3] While a weak correspondence theory necessitates only that what is and what is said hold some kind of dependence relation, a strong correspondence theory assumes that what exists and what is said about it are independent, insofar as they can be described and analyzed separately, and then compared. See [14].

"Socrates was sitting" is now true). The truth-value has the potential to change without any change to the thing of which it is a property (the statement). That is, the statement "A goat-stag is a mythical creature" may be true at one time, and false at another, while the statement remains identical—it is the things that change, the things which are or are not in the relation described by the statement.

In the case of statements about things that don't exist, we would have to allow for those things that don't exist to be relata, at least on the assumption that every relation must have (at least) two relata. Otherwise, where a perception or utterance is related to something that does not exist, the existence of that relation comes into question, and it would be impossible to say anything true or false about something that does not exist. But we know it is possible to make some kind of true statement about something that does not exist. Aristotle describes all negative statements where the subject term signifies to something that does not exist as "true"; for if Socrates does not exist, he is not sick, neither is he healthy. If it is possible to say anything true or false of something that does not exist, such statements have to exist in relation to something, given that for Aristotle, truth is dependent on existence: if truth is a relational property, and it is possible to make true statements about what does not exist, then what does not exist must have the potential to be a relatum. And while a non-existent thing can be a relatum, a word can signify something that does not exist.

3. Textual Support for Ascribing to Aristotle a Correspondence Theory of Truth

In order to determine whether Aristotle's theory of truth is a correspondence theory, I turn to the recent literature claiming that Aristotle does hold a correspondence theory, and examine the textual evidence cited in support of this statement. M.V. Dougherty ascribes a simple correspondence theory to Aristotle:

> When the division or combination of subject and predicate corresponds to a division or combination of a state of affairs (ta pragmata), the proposition is held to be true, and when there is a non-correspondence, the statement is held to be false.
>
> [10, p. 590]

Dougherty gets this theory from looking at *Metaphysics* 1051b2–9, *De Interpretatione* 19a33, and *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098b11–12, which I will discuss in turn. The first of these three passages is the following:

> The condition of this in the objects is their being combined or separated, so that he who thinks the separated to be separated and the combined to be combined has the truth, while he whose thought is in a state contrary to that of the objects is in error. This being so, when is what is called truth or falsity present, and when is it not? We must consider what we mean by these terms. It is not because we think that you are white, that you are white, but because you are white we who say this have the truth.[4] [5]

So, for Aristotle (i) combination is a precondition for attributing a truth-value to something (at least in language and thought), (ii) truth is dependent on existence, and (iii) thinking something does not make that thing exist, as Aristotle maintains in the *De Interpretatione*. Here, Aristotle refers explicitly to true thoughts as well as true statements. It doesn't seem to make a difference whether one is talking about a belief or about a statement; the truth conditions are identical.[5] On the basis of this passage, it does seem that Aristotle subscribes to a correspondence theory of truth in the weak sense, according to which truth depends on how things are. But it is not enough just to say that the truth of a statement depends on how things are. We require, in addition, some statement of what the agreement is between the statement and what exists in order to define what the "correspondence" is between them. Without this additional relation, we have no way to differentiate between an affirmation and a negation whose truths both depend on the same state of affairs.

The second passage Dougherty cites is from *De Interpretatione*:

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[4] Metaphysics 1051b2–9: τοῦτο δ' ἐπὶ τῶν πραγμάτων ἐστὶ τῷ συγκεῖσθαι ἢ διῃρῆσθαι, ὥστε ἀληθεύει μὲν ὁ τὸ διῃρημένον οἰόμενος διῃρῆσθαι καὶ τὸ συγκείμενον συγκεῖσθαι, ἔψευσται δὲ ὁ ἐναντίως ἔχων ἢ τὰ πράγματα, πότ' ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστι τὸ ἀληθὲς λεγόμενον ἢ ψεῦδος· τοῦτο γὰρ σκεπτέον τί λέγομεν. οὐ γὰρ διὰ τὸ ἡμᾶς οἴεσθαι ἀληθῶς σε λευκὸν εἶναι εἴ σὺ λευκός, ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸ σὲ εἶναι λευκὸν ἡμεῖς οἱ φάντες τοῦτο ἀληθεύομεν [3].

[5] Hamlyn also refers to this passage, making the comment, "This at least makes clear that the truth of a proposition is dependent on the facts, although Aristotle uses no general word like 'fact'." [11, p. 194].

> ... statements are true when they are similar to things ... [5][6]

This statement is pulled from a larger one in the text, in the context of Aristotle's discussion of the sea battle in *De Interpretatione* 9. Aristotle uses this claim to support the idea that if what exists now admits of contraries, then it is not necessary that one or the other of those contrary (or contradictory) states of affairs already exist or not exist. Cut apart in this fashion, it seems to be a basic statement of how truth depends on existence, with the added condition that the statement and state of affairs are similar. As I argued above, this similarity is to be expected, if a statement or belief is about something that exists. That is, given that the representation (in language or thought) is causally dependent on things that are, and is in its inception intended to be representative, the structural similarity between the representation and what it represents occurs as a natural result of the fact that the representation is of what is being represented. It is not an accidental similarity noted after the fact, i.e., if the representation and what is represented were assumed independent and then compared.

The final passage Dougherty uses is this one, from the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

> ... for with a true view all the facts harmonize, but with falsehood truth quickly disagrees. [5][7]

When taken in isolation, this passage seems if anything to support attributing to Aristotle a coherence theory of truth, rather than a correspondence theory (due to the terminology of "harmonizing" used in conjunction with "disagreeing").[8] However, this passage is, like the one above from *De Interpretatione*, also taken out of a larger context. When we take into account this context, we see that the harmonizing occurring here is between "our conclusion and our premises" and "what is

[6] *De Interpretatione* 19a33: ἐπεὶ ὁμοίως οἱ λόγοι ἀληθεῖς ὥσπερ τὰ πράγματα [6].

[7] *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098b11–12. τῷ μὲν γὰρ ἀληθεῖ πάντα συνᾴδει τὰ ὑπάρχοντα, τῷ δὲ ψευδεῖ ταχὺ διαφωνεῖ τἀληθές. Greek from [2] ὑπάρχοντα might be better translated as "that which already exists" or "that which really exists". "πάντα τὰ ὑπάρχοντα", translated as "all the facts", would therefore apply if what exists is equivalent to a "fact", though in common usage "fact" is often used to denote a statement that is true or false, rather than what exists.

[8] Other translations of συνᾴδει, "harmonize" are "agree with", "accompany (as with a musical instrument)", or "sing together", which hardly help to eliminate the poeticism evident in this statement of a theory of truth.

commonly said". As far as providing textual support for attributing to Aristotle a correspondence theory of truth, this passage seems the least useful so far.

J. Davidson quotes some of the same passages, [9] but also adds several more to the list as evidence that Aristotle held a correspondence theory of truth. Notably, these include a famous passage from the *Metaphysics* that seems to provide the strongest evidence for the existence of a correspondence theory in Aristotle:

> This is clear, in the first place, if we define what the true and false are. To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true; so that he who says of anything that it is, or that it is not, will either say what is true or what is false. [5][9]

[9] *Metaphysics* 1011b24–29. δῆλον δὲ πρῶτον μὲν ὁρισαμένοις τί τὸ ἀληθὲς καὶ ψεῦδος. τὸ μὲν γὰρ λέγειν τὸ ὂν μὴ εἶναι ἢ τὸ μὴ ὂν εἶναι ψεῦδος, τὸ δὲ τὸ ὂν εἶναι καὶ τὸ μὴ ὂν μὴ εἶναι ἀληθές, ὥστε καὶ ὁ λέγων εἶναι ἢ μὴ ἀληθεύσει ἢ ψεύσεται· ἀλλ' οὔτε τὸ ὂν λέγεται μὴ εἶναι ἢ εἶναι οὔτε τὸ μὴ ὄν. Greek text is from [3].

Christopher Shields notes two similar passages from Plato in [18] These are from Cratylus and the Sophist. *Cratylus* 385b5–9:

Socrates: Then some statements are true, while others are false?

Hermogenes: Certainly.

Socrates: And those that say of the things that are that they are, are true, while those that say of the things that are that they are not, are false?

Hermogenes: Yes. ([16])

ΣΩ. Οὐκοῦν εἴη ἂν λόγος ἀληθής, ὁ δὲ ψευδής;

ΕΡΜ. Πάνυ γε.

ΣΩ. Ἆρ' οὖν οὗτος ὃς ἂν τὰ ὄντα λέγῃ ὡς ἔστιν, ἀληθής· ὃς δ' ἂν ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν, ψευδής; ([15])

Sophist 263a11–b10:

Visitor: We also say that each piece of speech has to have some particular quality.

Theaetetus: Yes.

Visitor: What quality should we say each one of these has?

Theaetetus: The second one is false, I suppose, and the other one is true.

Visitor: And the true one says those that are, as they are, about you.

Theaetetus: Of course.

Visitor: And the false one says things different from those that are.

Theaetetus: Yes.

Visitor: So it says those that are not, but that they are.

Theaetetus: I suppose so. ([17])

ΞΕ. Ποιὸν δέ γέ τινά φαμεν ἀναγκαῖον ἕκαστον εἶναι τῶν λόγων.

ΘΕΑΙ. Ναί.

ΞΕ. Τούτων δὴ ποῖόν τινα ἑκάτερον φατέον εἶναι;

ΘΕΑΙ. Τὸν μὲν ψευδῆ που, τὸν δὲ ἀληθῆ.

This is the most often quoted passage of Aristotle's used to support the idea that he maintained a correspondence theory. However, it does not support attributing such a view to him in any strong sense. There is no mention of correspondence here; any notion of correspondence in this passage is implied by the reader's identifying what Aristotle says with some familiar notion of correspondence, and we should be wary of how this could lead to misinterpretation. The passage as written does not explicitly mention any specific relation between what is and what is said; it gives a definition of truth on which the truth of a statement depends on how things are, but there is nothing to indicate that there is a correspondence relation between statements and things, such that if the things and the statement are in this relation the statement is true, and if the things and the statement are not in this relation the statement is false. Adding this (correspondence) relation to what is said here tends to connote other conceptions than an unspecified isomorphism (I gave several examples of these other conceptions in the previous section). This passage gives the impression that if what we say happens to be the case, the statement is true. This does imply that truth is dependent on existence, so that what we say is true if it happens to be the case.

Turning to the *Categories*, we find additional nuances in Aristotle's concept of truth:

> For it is not because they themselves receive anything that statements and beliefs are said to be able to receive contraries, but because of what happened to something else. For it is because the actual thing exists or does not exist that the statement is said to be true or false, not because it is able itself to receive contraries. [5][10]

ΞΕ. Λέγει δὲ αὐτῶν ὁ μὲν ἀληθὴς τὰ ὄντα ὡς ἔστιν περὶ σοῦ.
ΘΕΑΙ. Τί μήν;
ΞΕ. Ὁ δὲ δὴ ψευδὴς ἕτερα τῶν ὄντων.
ΘΕΑΙ. Ναί.
ΞΕ. Τὰ μὴ ὄντ' ἄρα ὡς ὄντα λέγει.
ΘΕΑΙ. Σχεδόν.
EPM. Ναί. ([15])

[10] *Categories* 4b6–10. ὁ γὰρ λόγος καὶ ἡ δόξα οὐ τῷ αὐτὰ δέχεσθαί τι τῶν ἐναντίων εἶναι δεκτικὰ λέγεται, ἀλλὰ τῷ περὶ ἕτερόν τι τὸ πάθος γεγενῆσθαι· —τῷ γὰρ τὸ πρᾶγμα εἶναι ἢ μὴ εἶναι, τούτῳ καὶ ὁ λόγος ἀληθὴς ἢ ψευδὴς εἶναι λέγεται, οὐ τῷ αὐτὸν δεκτικὸν εἶναι τῶν ἐναντίων ([6]). One might argue that the usage of εἶναι in this passage is better translated in the veridical sense than in the existential; however, this would

There are two major points to take from this passage. The first is a reiteration of the idea that the truth of statements is dependent on actual things. The second gives us something new to say about Aristotle's concept of truth, which is that the truth of a statement does not change of its own accord, but only when the things it signifies change. (The truth of "Socrates is a man" does not change if he changes location, but only if his manliness changes.) If we accept this minimal dependence between what is and what is said, it seems that truth must be a relational property for Aristotle; for if a property can change without any change to that of which it is a property (the statement), then that property is a relational property.

Relations, according to Aristotle, "are spoken of in relation to correlatives that reciprocate" [Cat. 6b27]. The idea of reciprocation is explicitly defined further on in the Categories with specific regard to the reciprocity of truth and existence:

> For there being a man reciprocates as to implication of existence with the true statement about it: if there is a man, the statement whereby we say that there is a man is true, and reciprocally—since if the statement whereby we say that there is a man is true, there is a man. But whereas the true statement is in no way the cause of the actual thing's existence, the actual thing does seem in some way the cause of the statement's being true: it is because the actual thing exists or does not that the statement is called true or false. [5][11]

Here again, Aristotle states that truth is causally dependent on actual things, and specifies the reciprocity condition of being a relative. The distinction noted here between relational reciprocity in general and causal reciprocity in particular recalls how it seems Aristotle contradicts his own claim that reciprocity is a necessary quality of relation, by specifying in *De Interpretatione* that the truth of "Homer is a poet" is no

make the passage read as if Aristotle is supporting the view that something is true because a thing (πρᾶγμα) is true; truth would be dependent on truth as opposed to existence. I argue against this (Crivelli's) interpretation in what follows.

[11] *Categories* 14b14–22. τὸ γὰρ εἶναι ἄνθρωπον ἀντιστρέφει κατὰ τὴν τοῦ εἶναι ἀκολούθησιν πρὸς τὸν ἀληθῆ περὶ αὐτοῦ λόγον· εἰ γὰρ ἔστιν ἄνθρωπος, ἀληθὴς ὁ λόγος ᾧ λέγομεν ὅτι ἔστιν ἄνθρωπος· καὶ ἀντιστρέφει γε, —εἰ γὰρ ἀληθὴς ὁ λόγος ᾧ λέγομεν ὅτι ἔστιν ἄνθρωπος, ἔστιν ἄνθρωπος·— ἔστι δὲ ὁ μὲν ἀληθὴς λόγος οὐδαμῶς αἴτιος τοῦ εἶναι τὸ πρᾶγμα, τὸ μέντοι πρᾶγμα φαίνεταί πως αἴτιον τοῦ εἶναι ἀληθῆ τὸν λόγον· τῷ γὰρ εἶναι τὸ πρᾶγμα ἢ μὴ ἀληθὴς ὁ λόγος ἢ ψευδὴς λέγεται [6].

assurance of the existence of Homer, while claiming in the *Categories* that only negative statements about a non-existent subject may be true. To solve this difficulty, we need only recall that the problem with asserting existence from a true statement is that the "is" is accidentally predicated of a subject in a true affirmation, and therefore the statement cannot simply be truncated to "Homer is". That Homer is, is still not a result of there being a true statement about him.

4. Correspondence-as-Isomorphism

According to Paolo Crivelli, Aristotle's theory of truth "can be regarded as a correspondence theory of truth in that it can be regarded as taking the truth of an assertion to amount to a relation of isomorphism to reality." [8, p. 129] On Crivelli's view, this isomorphism is not between the structure of the statement and the structure of some state of affairs. Rather, the state of affairs is considered a single object isomorphic to the assertion as a whole. This makes Crivelli's interpretation of Aristotle's theory of truth similarly applicable to all simple and complex things (*pragmata*), "mental items... and linguistic items". [8, p. 45] This allows Crivelli to claim that for Aristotle the existence of a thing is equivalent to its truth. However, since Aristotle describes false, existent things in *Metaphysics*, IV.29, 1024b17–26, Crivelli's interpretation must be rejected.

But first let's unpack what Crivelli takes "correspondence-as-isomorphism" to mean. Crivelli asserts that the correspondence-as-isomorphism theory of truth describes a theory meeting three specific conditions:

> ... first, it provides a classification of beliefs (assertions); second, it maps one-to-one the classes of beliefs (assertions) onto characteristics that can hold of the item or items a belief (assertion) is about; third, it states that a belief (assertion) is true when and only when the characteristic on which the class it belongs to is mapped holds of the item or items it is about. [8, p. 23]

Crivelli adds soon after that there is a stricter conception of a correspondence theory of truth, which Aristotle also holds:

> Aristotle's theory of truth is a correspondence theory of truth also according to a different, stricter conception. This is because

> Aristotle's theory of truth describes each class of beliefs, or assertions, in such a way that each belief, or assertion 'mirrors' the characteristic on which the class to which it belongs is mapped. [8, p. 24]

Crivelli's "correspondence-as-isomorphism" description of Aristotle's theory of truth, I believe, is tenable, at least when applied to beliefs and assertions, for it describes just that there is an isomorphism between a belief or assertion and what exists. This adequately accounts for the combinations as truth-bearers. When these are related in ways that mirror one another, a correspondence relation holds between what is and what is said. The addition of "mirroring" to this definition is descriptive not only of linguistic truths but also of the looser definition of truth that Aristotle applies to perceptions and *phantasmata* (more like accurate representation, or a mirroring between the content and the cause of a mental representation). This definition of Crivelli's is, however, revised later on in the book, where he expands the definition to include not only beliefs and assertions, but all "composite and non-composite items"; while Crivelli claims that the later definition can cover predicative assertions as well as existential (the condition to which Tarski claimed Aristotle's correspondence theory could not hold), it results in a circularity where truth is defined according to truth, and falsity according to falsity. Crivelli writes:

> The definition can then be paraphrased as follows: 'To say of a (composite or non-composite) item which in fact "is" in the sense of being true that it "is not" in the sense of being false, or of a (composite or non-composite) item which in fact "is not" in the sense of being false that it "is" in the sense of being true, is false; to say of a (composite or non-composite) item which in fact "is" in the sense of being true that it "is" in the sense of being true, or of a (composite or non-composite) item which in fact "is not" in the sense of being false that it "is not" in the sense of being false, is true.' [8, p. 135]

Crivelli is here thwarted by his commitment to the idea that simple objects as well as their representations have truth-values. While I believe we can expand the correspondence-as-isomorphism definition of truth to representations as well as beliefs and assertions, we must

stop short of simple objects.[12] If Crivelli's interpretation of Aristotle's definition of truth is intended to apply to all of objects, mental items, and linguistic items, then it is, in effect, describing a relation of truth to truth, as opposed to a relation of truth to existence. In his description of correspondence-as-isomorphism, Crivelli makes the truth of beliefs and assertions dependent on a "mirroring" of what exists. However, by equating existence and truth in the case of objects, Crivelli makes the truth of beliefs and assertions just a mirroring of the truth of a thing. But if the quality of the thing is identical to the quality of the belief or assertion, I see no mirroring at all, assuming that a thing's being itself is not equivalent to its "mirroring" itself. Crivelli is committed to the theory that being = truth even so far as to say that the being of a state of affairs is a similar relational property to the truth of a statement, such that the being or not being of a state of affairs might change without any change to the state of affairs itself.

> For whatever arguments show that an assertion can be true at one time and false at another without changing should be transferable to states of affairs and thus establish that a state of affairs can 'be' in the sense of being true at one time and 'not be' in the sense of being false at another without changing. [8, p. 197]

In order to support this interpretation, Crivelli has to distinguish between the constituents of the state of affairs and the state of affairs itself. He uses the example of someone seated getting up, in such a way that it is not the state of affairs that gets up, but the individual. [13] The absurdity of the idea that a state of affairs could itself get up or

[12] Crivelli's definition here would also allow for individual words (assuming they are "items" to have a truth-value, despite Aristotle's assertion at *De Interpretatione* 16a11 that they do not: "even goat-stag signifies something but not, as yet, anything true or false–unless 'is' or 'is not' is added". [5] Signification by a word is not a "mirroring", in the sense that a word would correspond to an object and therefore be true or false. In the case of beliefs and assertions, it is the relation between subject and predicate that is mirrored or corresponds, or doesn't; i.e., the difference between saying of what is that it is, as opposed to that it is not.

[13] "... the change responsible for the assertion or belief that somebody is seated being true at one time and false at another is the getting up, and what gets up is not a state of affairs but the individual to which the assertion or belief refers," [8, p. 197]. Crivelli maintains that the state of affairs 'Socrates is seated' is composed of the individual 'Socrates' and the universal 'seated'. The negative predication concerns the same state of affairs, [8, p. 12]. The truth of a predication about the state of affairs depends on whether the state of affairs is or is not combined, [8, pp. 12–13]. He uses

not makes this interpretation seem prima facie a good one. But it isn't. According to Aristotle, we must always be able to replace our terms with their definitions to avoid mistakes of homonymy, and in the case of these states of affairs, *Socrates-sitting-down* and *Socrates-standing-up*, the difference is obvious. In the case of statements, on the other hand, the syntactic complex, "Socrates is sitting down" has not changed from one situation to the other, though its truth or falsity has. In the case of states of affairs, it really is the state of affairs that changes when one particular state of affairs (for example, Socrates-sitting) moves from being to not being—*what is* has changed. Existence is not an additional predicate on some ideal state of affairs which is at times exemplified and at times not; there is no ideal state of affairs *Socrates-sitting* in addition to a particular man, Socrates, who is sitting. The interpretation stating that there is makes a state of affairs just like a natural kind, which, according to Crivelli, exists always. [8, p. 19] Thus Crivelli is committed not only to the (already contentious) view that for Aristotle natural kinds exist eternally, but also to the unappealing view that for Aristotle states of affairs have basically the same ontological status as natural kinds.

5. Correspondence and Things that Do Not Exist

We could claim, as later philosophers have, that the things signified by these problematic terms have a sort of quasi-existence, but Aristotle is clear on the fact that they do not exist; to do so would be outside of the bounds of possible interpretations of Aristotle. When we consider Aristotle's correspondence theory of truth in relation to things that don't exist, the question quickly arises: to what does the truth-bearer correspond? If truth is dependent on existence, and truth and falsity are determined by a correspondence (or isomorphism) relation to what exists, then it would seem impossible that anything should be true that signifies something that does not exist. But I argue that Aristotle avoids this problem by holding that the correspondence relation, in speaking of non-existent things, is not between language and external objects, but between language and an affection of the soul. As a result, for Aristotle, it is possible to make both true and false statements about some general concept of a goat-stag; about the putative goat-stag *pragma*, however,

this to posit that, "a state of affairs can 'be' in the sense of being true at one time and 'not be' in the sense of being false at another without changing," [8, p. 197].

it is only possible to make true denials—defined as a statement denying something of something, where the latter something is a goat-stag. [14]

The significatum of the subject term is not a mind-independent thing that does not exist, but rather a thought, which *does* exist (though it is a thought of something that does not exist). As Aristotle states in the *De Anima* starting at 430a3, "Thought is itself thinkable in exactly the same way as its objects are. For in the case of objects which involve no matter, what thinks and what is thought are identical" ([4]).

Although it may seem that for Aristotle a truth-bearer depends on what does not exist for its truth, it does not. When Aristotle speaks of things that do not exist, we should interpret him to mean things that do not exist in our contemporary ordinary sense, that is, as external, mind-independent material objects. the truth-bearer does not directly depend for its truth on a thing of this kind (which, after all, does not exist), but rather on the thought—which *does* exist. ("Mental" does not mean "non-existent".) This necessitates that we rethink how Aristotle uses the concept of signification. Aristotle uses the term "signify" (σημαίνω) in many different contexts throughout the corpus. It is not only words that signify; he also applies the term to anything that is a sign of something else. For instance, in the *Categories*, substances signify a certain 'this', and Aristotle uses "substance" here interchangeably with a word signifying a substance;[15] in the *Posterior Analytics*, both names and accounts

[14] To be clear, the concept of a goat-stag does exist; the goat-stag does not. When I say that a goat-stag does not exist, I mean that there is no extra-mental animal, the goat-stag. What a goat-stag *is*, is a concept; what it is not is an animal running around in the world. As regards complex statements, for instance, "If there were goat-stags, they would have antlers", we would have to take each statement form on a case-by-case basis to determine what can be truly and falsely stated concerning something that does not exist.

[15] *Categories* 3b10-16: "Every substance seems to signify a certain 'this'. As regards the primary substances, it is indisputably true that each of them signifies a certain 'this'; for the thing revealed is individual and numerically one. But as regards the secondary substances, though it appears from the form of the name—when one speaks of man or animal—that a secondary substance likewise signifies a certain 'this', this is not really true; rather, it signifies a certain qualification—for the subject is not, as the primary substance is, one, but man and animal are said of many things." ([5]).

Πᾶσα δὲ οὐσία δοκεῖ τόδε τι σημαίνειν. ἐπὶ μὲν οὖν τῶν πρώτων οὐσιῶν ἀναμφισβήτητον καὶ ἀληθές ἐστιν ὅτι τόδε τι σημαίνει· ἄτομον γὰρ καὶ ἓν ἀριθμῷ τὸ δηλούμενόν ἐστιν. ἐπὶ δὲ τῶν δευτέρων οὐσιῶν φαίνεται μὲν ὁμοίως τῷ σχήματι τῆς προσηγορίας τόδε τι σημαίνειν, ὅταν εἴπῃ ἄνθρωπον ἢ ζῷον· οὐ μὴν ἀληθές γε, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ποιόν ἄνθρωπον ἢ ζῷον· οὐ μὴν ἀληθές γε, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ποιόν τι σημαίνει, ([6]).

signify,[16] and what an account signifies is different if the thing exists or does not; there, he also specifies that it is possible to signify things that do not exist;[17] in *Problems*, Aristotle discusses how frogs signify that the season is moist. For my purposes, it is important to take away that what does not exist is properly signified, according to Aristotle, as he states in the *Posterior Analytics*, and of which he gives the example of the goat-stag in *De Interpretatione*: "'goat-stag' signifies something", in the same way that "human being" does.[18] I argue in favour of the authority of *De Interpretatione*, where Aristotle states that what a name signifies is an affection of the soul, rather than the extramental thing; [19] otherwise, terms referring to non-existent things would not signify.

The truth of a perception or thought, on the other hand, depends on its accurately representing—exemplifying an isomorphic correspondence

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See also *Posterior Analytics*, 83a25-35

[16] *Posterior Analytics* 92b6-8: "you may know what the account or the name signifies when I say goat-stag, but it is impossible to know what a goat-stag is." ([5]).

ἀλλὰ τί μὲν σημαίνει ὁ λόγος ἢ τὸ ὄνομα, ὅταν εἴπω τραγέλαφος, τί δ' ἐστὶ τραγέλαφος ἀδύνατον εἰδέναι

[17] *Posterior Analytics* 92b28-29: For, first, there would be definitions even of non-substances, and of things that are not—for one can signify even things that are not. ([5]).

πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ καὶ μὴ οὐσιῶν ἂν εἴη καὶ τῶν μὴ ὄντων· σημαίνειν γὰρ ἔστι καὶ τὰ μὴ ὄντα.

[18] *De Interpretatione* 16a16-18: A sign of this is that even 'goat-stag' signifies something but not, as yet, anything true or false—unless 'is' or 'is not' is added (either simply or with reference to time). ([5]). σημεῖον δ' ἐστὶ τοῦδε· καὶ γὰρ ὁ τραγέλαφος σημαίνει μέν τι, οὔπω δὲ ἀληθὲς ἢ ψεῦδος, ἐὰν μὴ τὸ εἶναι ἢ μὴ εἶναι προστεθῇ ἢ ἁπλῶς ἢ κατὰ χρόνον. ([6]). 16b28-30: I mean that human being, for instance, signifies something, but not that it is or is not (though it will be an affirmation or negation if something is added) ([5]). λέγω δέ, οἷον ἄνθρωπος σημαίνει τι, ἀλλ' οὐχ ὅτι ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν (ἀλλ' ἔσται κατάφασις ἢ ἀπόφασις ἐάν τι προστεθῇ)· ([6]).

[19] Boethius has a similar interpretation in his commentary on *De Interpretatione*, where he assumes that names and verbs signify affections of the soul. There he argues that by an affection of the soul, Aristotle meant only to include objects of thought, rather than both objects of thought and of perception. This quotation is included as a fragment in [5]: "In his work On Justice he [sc. Aristotle] makes it clear that nouns and verbs are not sounds that signify objects of perception; he says: 'the objects of thought and the objects of perception are from the start distinct in their natures'." Latin from [7, p. 406]: "Sensuum quidem non esse significativas voces nomina et verba in opera de justitia declarat dicens: φύσει γάρ διηνεχθησαντατε νοήματα καὶ τὰ αἰσθήματα, quae interpretari Latine potest hoc modo: Natura enim sunt diversa intellectus et sensus."

relation with—the *pragma*.[20] Where what is thought or perceived is identical to what exists (that is, in the case where what is thought or perceived does exist and is accurately perceived or thought), whether we measure the assertion against the things or the thought does not matter, as they should be identical. If, however, the assertion's subject term signifies something that does not exist, the divide between its putative existence as a pragma and its real existence as a concept makes itself clearly evident. There is a thought of a goat-stag about which I can make true or false statements, whereas there is no goat-stag about which I could do the same.[21]

6. Conclusion

While there are many definitions of a "correspondence" theory of truth in modern philosophy, Aristotle's correspondence theory seems to represent only a weak version, a correspondence-as-isomorphism. That is, truth is a relational property holding between a statement and what exists—a relation of isomorphism. Aristotle's theory of truth does, in fact, allow for statements about non-existent subjects to be true. In these cases, the subject term signifies a thought, which is an existing thing which I can both think about and signify in language.

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[3] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 2 vols, W. D. Ross (ed.), Clarendon Press, Oxford 1924 (repr. 1970; of 1953 corr. edn.).

[20] Where there is no *pragma*, i.e., in the case of something that does not exist, it is not possible to have an accurate perception or simple thought of it. Such perceptions and thoughts would be false. However, the term "goat-stag" itself is not false unless something is predicated of it. It is possible, therefore, to have a term that is not false symbolizing what is impossible to perceive except falsely—that which does not exist. This is a mere linguistic confusion. The term is judged to be false on a different standard than is the perception.

[21] When I make the claim, for instance, that "a goat-stag has four legs", I am speaking truly of the concept of a goat-stag, one that has four conceptual legs. To attribute extramental material legs to the concept of a goat-stag would be to speak falsely.

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