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Aristotle on Existential Import and Nonreferring Subjects

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Much contemporary philosophy of language has shown considerable interest in the relation between our linguistic practice and our metaphysical commitments, and this interest has begun to influence work in the history of philosophy as well. In his *Categories* and *De interpretatione*, Aristotle presents an analysis of language that can be read as intended to illustrate an isomorphism between the ontology of the real world and how we talk about that world. Our understanding of language is at least in part dependent upon our understanding of the relationships that exist among the enduring πράγματα that we come across in our daily experience. Part of the foundations underlying Aristotle’s doctrine of categories seems to have been a concern, going back to the Academy, about the problem of false propositions: language is supposed to be a tool for communicating the way things are, and writers in antiquity were often puzzled by the problem of how we are to understand propositions that claim that reality is other than it is. Aristotle’s analysis of propositions raises a particular problem in this regard: if the subject of a proposition does not refer to anything, how can the proposition be useful for talking about a state of the world? The problem falls into two separate but related parts: propositions whose subjects are singular terms and hence make claims about some particular thing, and propositions whose subjects are general terms and hence make claims about classes. In this paper I will explain Aristotle’s treatment of each kind, focusing in particular on what has widely been perceived as a problem in his treatment of singular terms. My discussion of his treatment of general terms will be more brief, but will show that his treatment of them is consistent with his treatment of singular terms.

1. Singular terms

In a paper that he called his finest philosophical essay, Bertrand Russell maintained that definite descriptions make implicit existence claims. For example, Russell claims that the sentence “The king of France is bald” tacitly says that there is some person who is presently the king of France. This is usually given in symbols as:

\[ (\exists x) \{ (Kx \& (y)(Ky \supset (x = y))) \} \& Bx \]

where \( K = \) “is the king of France” and \( B = \) “is bald”. Since there is, in fact, no king of France at present (pardon my Republican prejudice), this sentence is false; hence, if this is how sentences containing definite descriptions are to be handled, any sentence containing a definite description as subject will be false if there is no entity fitting the definite description. This result can be seen most

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clearly when we remember that one of the ways of reading the existential quantifier is: “There is some x such that...”.

Aristotle appears to have held a similar doctrine, though he does not enunciate it in terms of definite descriptions. Instead he makes the following claim: any sentence that ascribes a property to some subject entails that the subject of that sentence exists. This can be given in symbols as:

\[ Fa \supset (\exists x)(x = a) \]

This doctrine is most clearly stated at the end of the tenth chapter of the *Categories* (13b12-35; I quote this passage *in extenso* because of its importance to the argument of this paper; to facilitate referencing between the Greek and English I have underscored certain passages in the Greek and their English equivalents in the translation):4

> οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ μάλιστα δόξειν ἂν τὸ τοιοῦτο συμβαίνειν ἐπὶ τῶν κατὰ συμπλοκὴν ἑναντίον λεγομένων, —τὸ γὰρ ὑπαίτειν Σωκράτη τὸ νοσεῖν Σωκράτη ἑναντίον ἐστίν, — ἀλλ’ οὖδ’ ἐπὶ τούτων ἀναγκαίον ἢ θάτερον μὲν ἀληθῆς θάτερον δὲ ψεύδος εἶναι: ὅτως μὲν γὰρ Σωκράτους ἔσται τὸ μὲν ἀληθῆς τὸ δὲ ψεύδος, μὴ ὄντος δὲ ἀμφότερα ψευδῆ ὅπερ γὰρ τὸ νοσεῖν Σωκράτη ὡστε τὸ ὑπαίτειν ἀληθῆς αὐτοῦ μὴ ὄντος ὅλως τοῦ Σωκράτους. ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς στερήσεως καὶ τῆς ἐξεως μὴ ὄντος γε ὅλως οὐδέτερον ἀληθῆς, ὃτως δὲ οὐκ ἢ θάτερον ἀληθῆς: τὸ γὰρ ὅπερ ἔσχεν Σωκράτη τὸ τυφλὸν εἶναι Σωκράτη ἀντικείται ὡς στέρησις καὶ ἔξεις, καὶ ὄντος γε οὐκ ἀναγκαίον θάτερον ἀληθῆς εἶναι ἢ ψεύδος, —ὅτε γὰρ μὴν πέφυκεν ἔχειν, ἀμφότερα ψευδῆ— μὴ ὄντος δὲ ὅλως τοῦ Σωκράτους καὶ οὕτως ψευδῆ ἀμφότερα, καὶ τὸ ὅπερ αὐτῶν ἔχειν καὶ τὸ τυφλὸν εἶναι. ἐπὶ δὲ γε τῆς καταφάσεως καὶ τῆς ἀποφάσεως ἂς, ἐὰν τε ἢ ἐὰν τε μὴ ἢ τὸ μὲν ἔτερον ἔσται ψεύδος τὸ δὲ ἔτερον ἀληθῆς· τὸ γὰρ νοσεῖν Σωκράτη καὶ τὸ μὴ νοσεῖν Σωκράτη, ὅτος τε αὐτοῦ φανερὸν ὅτι τὸ ἔτερον αὐτῶν ἀληθῆς ἢ ψεύδος, καὶ μὴ ὄντος ὁμοίως: τὸ μὲν γὰρ νοσεῖν μὴ ὄντος ψεύδος, τὸ δὲ μὴ νοσεῖν ἀληθῆς· ὡστε ἐπὶ μόνον τούτων ὅτιν ἂν εἰπῃ τὸ οὐκ θάτερον αὐτῶν ἀληθῆς ἢ ψεύδος εἶναι, ὁσα ὡς καταφάσεις καὶ ἀποφάσεις ἀντικεῖται.

It might, indeed, very well seem that the same sort of thing does occur in the case of contraries said with combination, ‘Socrates is well’ being contrary to ‘Socrates is sick’. Yet not even with these is it necessary always for one to be true and the other false. For if Socrates exists one will be true and one false, but if he does not both will be false; neither ‘Socrates is sick’ nor ‘Socrates is well’ will be true if Socrates himself does not exist at all. As for possession and privation, if he does not exist at all neither is true, while not always one or the other is true if he does. For ‘Socrates has sight’ is opposed to ‘Socrates is blind’ as possession to privation; and if he exists it is not necessary for one or the other to be true or false (since until the time when it is natural for him to have it both are false), while if Socrates does not exist at all then again both are false, both ‘he has sight’ and ‘he is blind’. But with an affirmation and negation one will always be false and the other true whether he exists or not. For take ‘Socrates is sick’ and ‘Socrates is not sick’; if he exists it is clear that one or the other of them will be true or false, and equally if he does not; for if he does not exist

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4 The Greek text cited throughout is that of Minio-Paluello’s OCT (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949). All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from John L. Ackrill, *Aristotle’s Categories and De interpretatione* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1963), since that translation represents what I will shortly call the received view.
‘he is sick’ is false but ‘he is not sick’ true. Thus it would be distinctive of these alone—opposed affirmations and negations—that always one or the other of them is true or false.

The most common interpretation of this passage—which I will call the received view—takes Aristotle to be saying the following three things. First, some affirmations affirm predicates that are contrary in nature, e.g. “is sick” and “is well”. When these affirmations are made of a subject that exists, one is true and the other false, but if they are made of a subject that does not exist, then they are both false. Second, some affirmations affirm predicates that are not contradictory but that are nevertheless opposed to one another as possession to privation, e.g. “has sight” and “is blind”. When these affirmations are made of a subject that exists, it is not necessary that one be true and the other be false, since both may be false; it is not possible that both be true, however, and if the subject does not exist, then necessarily both are false. Third, when statements are opposed as affirmation to negation, then necessarily one of them will be true and the other false regardless of whether the subject exists or not. The reason is that the denial will be true whenever the subject does not exist (if something does not exist, then it has no properties at all, so it will be true to say, with respect to some particular property, that the non-existent thing does not have it), but the affirmation will be false because of existential import; and if the subject does exist then the two statements are a variation of the case of affirmations of contradictory properties, and one must be true and the other false. The received view is summarized in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Subject exists</th>
<th>Subject does not exist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contradictory assertions</td>
<td>Necessarily, one false and the other true</td>
<td>Necessarily, both false</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Fa, Ga, where G contradicts sense of F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possession vs. privation</td>
<td>One false and one true, or both false</td>
<td>Necessarily, both false</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Fa, Ga, where G is the privation of F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertions vs. denials</td>
<td>Necessarily, one false and the other true</td>
<td>Necessarily, one false and the other true</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Fa, ~Fa)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most commentators, however, think that this passage from the *Categories* is at odds with what Aristotle says in *De interpretatione* 11 21a25-28):

"όσπερ Ὦμηρός ἐστι τι, οἷον ποιητής· ἃρ' οὖν καὶ ἔστιν, ἢ οὐ; κατὰ συμβεβηκός γὰρ κατηγορεῖται τὸ ἔστιν τοῦ Ὀμηροῦ· ὃτι γὰρ ποιητὴς ἔστιν, ἀλλ' οὖ καθ' αὐτό, κατηγορεῖται κατὰ τὸν Ὀμηροῦ τὸ ἔστιν."

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For example, Homer is something (say, a poet). Does it follow that he is? No, for the ‘is’ is predicated accidentally of Homer; for it is because he is a poet, not in its own right, that the ‘is’ is predicated of Homer.

The received view reads this passage as assuming that the sentence “Homer is a poet” is true, but that “Homer is” nevertheless does not follow from it. The problem is this. If “Homer is a poet” is true, there must be someone named Homer who is a poet; but in this case to say that “Homer is” ought to be true as well. But if Homer is dead or otherwise does not exist (i.e., if it is not true to say that “Homer is”), how could “Homer is a poet” be true given what Aristotle has said in the Categories? Has Aristotle contradicted himself? Most commentators think that he has. Later on I will suggest a reading of the De interpretatione passage that does not attribute such a contradiction to Aristotle, but first I would like to underscore the metaphysical underpinnings of these passages by taking a close look at a rival interpretation by William Jacobs.6

According to Jacobs there is no real contradiction; what has been perceived as a contradiction is really nothing more than an artifact of the received view’s translation of the Categories passage. On Jacobs’ reading of the passage, Aristotle is not claiming that an assertion is false if its subject does not exist. Jacobs claims that the genitives absolute (underlined in the Greek text and the English translation of the Categories passage) that are traditionally translated as “if Socrates exists/does not exist” should not be translated that way at all, but rather as “of Socrates’ being”, where this is understood to refer to Socrates’ essence rather than his existence. Thus, when Aristotle says that neither “Socrates is sick” nor “Socrates is well” will be true if Socrates himself “is not at all”, according to Jacobs what he means is that if Socrates is not what he is—if he is not the sort of entity that his essence picks out, that is, a living being—then neither “sick” nor “well” can truly be predicated of him. The reason for this, on Jacobs’ view, is that “sick” and “well” are predicates that can only be asserted of living beings. The sentences “Socrates is sick” and “Socrates is well” will both be false not because there is no Socrates, but because we can no more predicate “sick” or “well” of something that is not a living thing than we can predicate “odd” or “even” of something that is not a number. So on Jacobs’ account the Categories passage has nothing to do with existential import in singular sentences, and hence cannot be read as contradicting the De interpretatione account. Jacobs is not happy with the received view’s treatment of the De interpretatione passage either, but let me say a word about his analysis of the Categories passage before turning to what he has to say about the De interpretatione.

His analysis rests on his interpretation of the genitives absolute, so it will be necessary to make something of a philological digression here. The genitive absolute, in Greek, bears a passing resemblance to what has sometimes been called the nominative absolute in English, but its usage is far more common. Briefly, the genitive absolute is a clause that stands grammatically apart from the rest of the sentence in which it occurs; normally it consists of a noun and a participle in the genitive case, though it may contain other words in other cases. Standardly the genitive absolute is used to convey information that is circumstantial to that of the main clause, expressing either the time at which the main clause was true, the causes of what is expressed in the main clause, the conditions under which the main clause is true, a concession that limits the sense of the main clause, or the attendant circumstances of the main clause. Most of these categories are reducible to the last.7

Jacobs appears to be claiming that Socrates’ being what he is is part of the attendant circumstances that would make assertions of his sickness or wellness true or false. But this would re-

7 For a full discussion of the nature and use of the genitive absolute, see Raphael Kühner and Bernhard Gerth, Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache (Hannover: Hahnsche, 1904), §485, especially pp. 78-79.
quire that the Greek word ὅν, the present participle of the verb “to be”, have the technical meaning “essence”. This would be unusual for two reasons, one philological and the other philosophical. From a philological perspective such a usage is quite strange: if Jacobs is right, then this is the only place in all of Aristotle where a participle of the verb “to be” in a genitive absolute does not have a non-technical meaning like “to be” or “to exist”. As a matter of fact, it would probably be the only place in all of Greek literature where a genitive absolute consisting of a noun plus the present participle of the verb “to be” would not be existential or copulative in meaning. In other words, what Jacobs is suggesting here would be a hapax legomenon—a linguistic usage with no other attestation than the present passage. If, by some stretch of the imagination, Jacobs has indeed found a strange new use of the verb “to be” in a genitive absolute, we would have to find some way of squaring this usage with the fact that Aristotle uses the subjunctive of the verb to be in 13b28 to express the same idea that he is supposedly expressing with genitives absolute everywhere else; but I fear that the limits of credulity have already been reached.

The philosophical grounds for doubting Jacobs’ suggestion are just as telling. First of all, it would be surprising to find Aristotle using the present participle of the verb “to be” in the technical meaning “essence”: Aristotle has other expressions for “essence”, none of which involve the present participle of the verb “to be”. Second, if Aristotle were saying what Jacobs claims he is saying, it would be inconsistent with what Aristotle elsewhere has to say about essences. Jacobs translates our passage from the *Categories* as follows:

> It might, indeed, very well seem that such happens [i.e. necessarily it will always be the case that one assertion will be true and the other assertion will be false] in the case of those contraries said with combination—“Socrates is well” being contrary to “Socrates is sick”—but not even as concerns these is it necessary always for one to be true and the other to be false. For, on the one hand, of Socrates’ being a living thing, one will be true and one will be false, while, on the other hand, of Socrates’ not being a living thing, both will be false. For of Socrates himself not being a living thing at all, neither “Socrates is sick” nor “Socrates is well” will be true.

Now, it is difficult to imagine what the phrase “of Socrates’ being a living thing, one will be true and one will be false” is supposed to mean. On the one hand, it might mean that “being sick” and “being well” can be predicated of Socrates’ essence, “being a living thing”—one truly and the other falsely. But one does not normally predicate such things of an essence; indeed, according to Aristotle’s own doctrine, you cannot predicate anything of an essence except a higher genus, and it certainly is false to say that “being a living thing” is a species of “being sick” or “being well”. On the other hand, it could mean that “being sick” or “being well” can be predicated truly or falsely of the state of affairs represented by Socrates’ being a living thing—indeed this comes closest to picking out what a genitive absolute might have been intended to capture. But apart from the fact that it is highly unlikely—if not outright impossible—that this is what the Greek actually says, there is the fact that Aristotle does not normally express predications in this way. Normally when one thing is predicated of another Aristotle uses the verb κατηγορεῖν with the genitive; nowhere does he use a simple genitive with no verb of saying or asserting. If Jacobs means that one sentence will be “true of” Socrates’ being a living thing and the other “false of” it, then again he has found a hapax legomenon, for there are no parallel passages of this sort in Aristotle or any other writer. And regardless of how we are to interpret Jacobs here, we will be left wondering what to do with the word ὅν at 13b20, which Jacobs does not bother to translate. It means “at all”, and makes perfectly good sense if the traditional reading is right in rendering the sentence “if Socrates does not exist at all”; but what does it mean to say “of Socrates’ not being a living thing at all”? To all of this may be added
the simple objection that if Socrates did exist he would be a living thing and thus both “sick” and
“well” would be applicable to him even under Jacobs’ interpretation of the genitives absolute, hence
even if Jacobs is going in the right direction by focusing in on Socrates’ essence, it is still the case
that the truth or falsity of any assertion about his state of health is inextricably connected to
whether or not his essence is instantiated, i.e., whether or not he exists.

Finally, it is fair to ask why Jacobs’ reading should be preferred over the traditional one.
There is nothing in particular about the passage in question to suggest that the traditional reading is
impossible, and in light of the way in which Aristotle normally uses such genitives absolute, Jacobs’
interpretation begins to look a little ad hoc. Indeed, Jacobs’ only reason for claiming that the traditional
interpretation is not possible is that it appears to leave Aristotle contradicting himself: he
gives no philological reasons why the traditional reading cannot be right, nor does he offer any basis
for thinking that his own reading is grammatically possible. In short, I suggest that Jacobs’ reading is
insupportable.

As far as the passage from the De interpretatione is concerned, Jacobs is happy enough with
the manner in which it has traditionally been translated, but he takes issue with what the received
view takes to be the philosophical point at issue. According to Jacobs, Aristotle’s point in the De
interpretatione passage is that the sentence “Homer is a poet” is a contingent truth; on his view, the
passage has nothing to do with whether “Homer exists” is entailed by “Homer is a poet”, but rather
is about how essential and accidental predicates are related to their subjects. For Jacobs, the
question “Is he or isn’t he?” of 21a26 means “Is he, or is he not, a poet?” But this seems to me not only
to be an over-interpretation of the passage, but to go so far as to ignore the force of the word καί
at the start of the question. The word καί is a conjunctive particle in Greek that is basically the

There are two points that anyone familiar with Aristotle’s Greek will recognize immediately. First,
the expression ἀρ’ οὖν at the beginning of this question normally indicates an inference; second,
the force of the word καί in the question ἀρ’ οὖν καί ἐστιν, ἢ οὐ... must surely be to emphasize
the ἐστιν. I would render the first sentence of this passage as

Just as Homer is something, say a poet; can we infer from that (ἀρ’ οὖν) that he also is
(kαί ἐστιν) or not?

On Jacobs’ reading the word καί is not translated at all. I suppose that he might suggest that it be
read as “can we infer from that that Homer also is a poet or not?” Yet the point of the first part of
this sentence is that Homer actually is something, in this particular case we are asked to presume that he actually is a poet; so Jacobs would be reduced to saying that the passage means something like “If we presuppose that Homer is a poet, can we then infer that he is a poet, or not?”. Quite apart from the rather unsavory result of attributing puzzlement to Aristotle over the validity of a tautology, this reading has nothing to do with the broader context of the De interpretatione passage, which is about kinds of affirmations. To be fair, Jacobs is not ignorant of this context; but it is curious that he chooses to ignore completely the καί, which seems to me to be crucial in understanding the thrust of the question. In particular, Jacobs’ reading leaves one wondering what is the point of the conclusion of the chapter at 21a32-33:

τό δὲ μὴ ὃν, ὅπι δοξαστόν, οὐκ ἄληθές εἰσεῖν ὅν τι ὀὐκ γὰρ αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν ὅτι ἔστιν, ἀλλ' ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν.

It is not true to say that what is not, since it is thought about, is something that is; for what is thought about it is not that it is, but that it is not.

Thinking about something, having a belief—a δόξα—about something, here seems to be classed as a kind of predication. But if what we are thinking about that something is that “οὐκ ἔστιν”, “it is not”, we are not also thinking about it that “ἔστιν”, that “it is”. Clearly Aristotle is interested not in whether what is predicated is accidental or essential to the subject, but whether the conceptual information contained in the predicate can be broken down into constituent parts corresponding to the parts of the linguistic expression of the predicate to form new predications. I take this to be the crucial sense of this passage, and I will be returning to this point shortly.

We are again left wondering what it is that is supposed to motivate reading the present passage in any way other than the traditional way. The traditional reading does not conflict with any of the surrounding text of De interpretatione 21a18-34, which is about the problem of predicking something of a subject that, taken conceptually with what it is to be the subject, amounts to a contradiction. For example, calling a dead man a man entails a contradiction for, in order to be a man one must be a living thing, but “dead man” does not indicate a living thing and cannot be truly predicated of a genuine man (indeed, the predicate “dead man” (τεθνεώτα άνθρωπον) is itself an oxymoron, on Aristotle’s account; presumably Aristotle means to say that the word “dead”, τεθνεώτα cannot be coherently linked with the word “man”, ἀνθρωπον, either as a subject or as part of a complex predicate). Now if we are to be allowed to infer that “Homer is” from “Homer is a poet”, on Aristotle’s account, then we must be permitted to infer that “Homer is a poet” carries existential import. But Aristotle notes that the “is” of “Homer is a poet” cannot be understood apart from the remainder of the predicate, i.e., it must be understood as a linguistic component of the phrase “is a poet” and should not be taken in a metaphysical sense to be predicking existence simpliciter of him in addition to predicking being-a-poet of him. Indeed, he goes on immediately to say that “where predicates both contain no contrariety if definitions are put instead of names and are predicated in their own right and not accidentally, in these cases it will be true to speak of the particular thing even without qualification”, and this appeal to intersubstitutivity appears to underscore the fact that the predicates being considered have to be evaluated in terms of what they mean; it is not enough to pick a word from a true predicate and create a new predicate out of that word (by some sort of extended paronymy) and then claim that this new linguistic pastiche can also be truly predicated metaphysically of the same subject (for example, we cannot take the true sentence

“Bill Clinton is president of the United States” and claim that, because that sentence is true, it is also true to say: “Bill Clinton is the United States”.

It seems, then, that Jacobs has failed to defend Aristotle from the charge of inconsistency leveled at him by the received view. However, I would like to suggest a way out. My suggestion will not involve any quarrel with the received view’s method of translating these passages; instead I will be content to show that the De interpretatione passage has nothing to do with existential import and cannot reasonably be taken to contradict the Categories passage, which has much to do with existential import.

It should be noted from the start that, whereas Aristotle explicitly says in the Categories passage that the sentences “Socrates is sick” and “Socrates is well” will both be false if there is no Socrates, and that one of them will be true and the other false if there is a Socrates, he says nothing about the truth or falsity of “Homer is a poet”, even though the received view takes him to be supposing, for the purposes of the example, that “Homer is a poet” is true. Indeed, if the received view is correct, it is precisely this assumption (that “Homer is a poet” is true) that leads to the putative contradiction, for by introducing the notion of truth and falsity the received view tacitly injects the question of existential import into the De interpretatione passage in spite of the fact that Aristotle himself has not mentioned it there. Our passage from the Categories is explicitly about how the existence or non-existence of a subject affects the truth values of pairs of sentences that contain contradictory predicates or predicates expressing possessions and privations or statements containing affirmations and denials. Our De interpretatione passage, however, has nothing to do with the existence of the subjects of predications, but rather is concerned with the admissibility of various ways of manipulating subjects and predicates: to the extent that the passage has to do with the proof-theoretical notion of a putative rule of inference with respect to complex predicates, it is a passage that is about the syntax and semantics of predicates and not about existential import.

The chapter can be divided into four closely related parts. In the first Aristotle notes that some complex predicates do not represent metaphysical unities and, hence, count as several assertions if predicated of something that is a metaphysical unity. For example, “white” and “walking” are purely accidental properties when predicated of a subject such as “Socrates”, so to say that “Socrates is a white walking thing” is really to make two assertions about Socrates: that he is white and that he is walking. But if a complex predicate does represent a metaphysical unity, then it can be asserted of a subject as a single assertion. For example, “animal”, “two-footed”, and “tame” are all parts of the essence of “human being”, and so the sentence “Socrates is a tame, two-footed animal” counts as a single assertion even though it has the same grammatical form as “Socrates is a white walking thing”.

In the second part Aristotle notes that some terms can be truly predicated both separately and together of some one thing, others cannot. For example if Socrates is a man and is white it is also true to say that he is a white man, and if he is a white man he is also white and a man; but if Socrates is good and he is a cobbler it is not necessarily true that he is a good cobbler, and if he is a good cobbler he is not necessarily good simpliciter, though he is a cobbler simpliciter. This last point will be particularly important for our understanding of the Homer passage.

In the third section Aristotle offers two criteria to explain what he said in the first section. First of all, accidental attributes of something are not sufficient to constitute a metaphysical unity, nor are subalternate properties. For example, “white” and “sitting” are accidental properties of a man, so they cannot constitute some metaphysical unity that can be predicated of a man with a single assertion; and “being a man” is subalternate to “being footed” and “being an animal”, so there is no metaphysical unity “being a footed man” or “being an animal man” that can be opposed to “being a non-footed man” or “being a non-animal man”.
The structure of the fourth section, which contains our Homer example, is rather complex. Aristotle begins by noting that it is always true to call a particular man a man, and a particular white man white. But "when in what is added some opposite is contained from which a contradiction follows" (21a21-22) such assertions will always be false. (It is important to note that Aristotle says "follows", ἐπεταί; this word indicates that the problem is one of inference.) For example, it is false to call a dead man a man because the concept of "man" contains the concept of "being a living thing" while the concept of "dead man" (if τεθνεώτα άνθρωπος, per impossibile, could count as a concept) contains the concept of "not being a living thing". The assertion "the dead man is a man" allows us to infer, by replacing names with definitions, that "the non-living thing is a living thing", which is absurd. Now, the verb "to be" presents us with a special case, because it can be either existential or copulative. Aristotle claims that in a sentence like "Homer is a poet" the verb "to be" is playing a copulative role and is not predicating existence of Homer. For this reason we may not infer "Homer exists" from "Homer is a poet", because the word "is" in "Homer is a poet" serves a function analogous to the "is" in "Homer is running", and we may not take apart a predicate like "is running" or "is a poet" and assert separately its constituent parts of a subject any more than we can assert "Brussels sprouts are good" on the grounds that "Brussels sprouts are good for you". This is a point about the structure and semantic content of the predicate and would be true regardless of the existence of the subject of the predication.9

We can contrast this final section of our chapter of De interpretatione with the tenth chapter of the Categories by putting the matter this way. The Categories passage has to do with an entailment relation that holds of certain kinds of assertions, while the De interpretatione passage rejects a putative rule of inference for use with predicates containing the verb "to be" (and by extension makes a claim about the semantics of predicates generally). In the Categories Aristotle is implicitly saying that any sentence of the form "a is F" entails the sentence "a exists"; in the De interpretatione passage, on the other hand, Aristotle is concerned to show that there is no valid inferential move from a predicate "is F" to an existential predicate "is" within the context of the semantic content of the predicate alone. In other words, "being F" differs in an essential way from "being simpliciter": it is the difference between the copulative and existential uses of the verb είναι, and Aristotle quite rightly notes that we cannot extract "existence" as a predicate from another predicate whose linguistic expression contains only the word "is" as a syntactical connector linking a subject to a semantic predicate.10 To allow such a move would be to allow a move from Fa to Ga, where F and G represent different predicates; without some sort of axiom or theorem to allow such a move there is no compelling reason to accept such an inference, and not only are there no compelling reasons to warrant such an axiom or theorem, Aristotle seems to be at pains to explain where there should be no such axiom or theorem.

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9 If I understand him correctly, my interpretation is not inconsistent with that of Michael Wedin, "Aristotle on the Existential Import of Singular Sentences", Phronesis 24 (1979) 179-196, but his view is a syntactical one, whereas my view is that the semantic structure of the predicate is fundamental in blocking the inference. According to what Wedin calls the "non-decomposition" principle, the "is" of "Homer is a poet" is predicated accidentally (κατά συμβεβηκός) of Homer and such predications may not be "detached" to form new predications saka veraute (pp. 186-187).

So far nothing in my analysis would warrant drawing the conclusion that Aristotle has contradicted himself. The received view goes too far in trying to tie the example from the De interpretatio to the lesson of the Categories: the existence of Homer is not what is at issue. It is true enough that the sentence “Homer is a poet” entails “Homer exists”, but when Aristotle says that we may not infer “Homer exists” from “Homer is a poet” he is not saying that “Homer is a poet” does not entail “Homer exists”, he is saying that we may not decompose a complex predicate into its constituent parts if it contains a copulative “to be”, and in particular we may not convert a copulative “to be” into an existential “to be”. If Aristotle had chosen a different example, one that did not involve the verb “to be”, the putative contradiction might never have been an issue, but it is precisely because of the dual nature of the verb “to be” that it seems a particularly natural example.

This fallacious conversion between the copulative and the existential uses of the verb “to be” was a greater risk in the dialectical practices of Aristotle’s day than in our own, because Greek had only the one verb for both meanings. In English we never say “Mary exists running”, and everyone knows that “Mary is running” is not semantically equivalent to “Mary exists running”. We might think that “Mary is running” entails “Mary exists” or we might not—but either way we know that you can’t replace, salva veritate (or even salva mente), the “is” of “is running” with the definition of “exists”, and this is precisely Aristotle’s point in our passage from the De interpretatio.

Aristotle notes that the “is” in “Homer is a poet” is only predicated of Homer by virtue of its being a part of the predicate “is a poet”; the “is” is not a genuine instance of predication, but an accidental sort (κατά συμβεβηκός 21a26-27), by which he presumably means to say that the “is” in “Homer is a poet” is not, all by itself, actually predicking anything of Homer, but only insofar as it is connected to “poet”, thus completing the sense of the predicate. In other words, Aristotle here draws a distinction between something that is a predicate in the primary sense of that word, and something that is not a predicate in the primary sense, but rather is a predicate only in an accidental sense.11 This brings me to one final point about Jacobs’ reading of our passages.

Jacobs rejects the idea that Aristotle here has in mind the difference between predicates that are predications essentially and predicates that are predications only accidentally; he claims that what Aristotle has in mind is instead the difference between predications of accidental and predications of essential properties. Being a poet, on Jacobs’ reading, is an accidental property that Homer has, while existing is an essential property. It seems to me that there are two problems with this view. First, it is not clear that Aristotle would have regarded existence as a property of any sort, let alone of an essential sort. Usually one thinks of predicates such as “man” or “animal” when one thinks of the essential properties of a subject like Homer. An essential property is what makes a thing what it is, but existence is common to everything and does not count as a principle of differentiation.12 “Homer is a man” or “Homer is a rational biped” predicate essential properties of Homer, but “Homer exists” does not assert a property that can be used to tell us what it is to be Homer.

Second, Jacobs appears to be insisting that, because Aristotle speaks of accidental and essential predicates at 21a7-17, he must still be speaking about them in 21a18-33, but this is not at all clear.13 For one thing, Aristotle is not primarily concerned with accidental and essential predicates

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11 Here I part company with Wedin (182), who reads κατά συμβεβηκός in a slightly different way: the “is” in “Homer is a poet” attributes accidental being to Homer, as opposed to καθ’ αὐτό being (Metaphysics Δ 7). I agree with Wedin (186), contra Jacobs (see below), that Aristotle is not concerned here with sentences that express κατά συμβεβηκός predications.

12 Cf. Posterior Analytics 2.7 92b13: “existence is not the essence of anything”.

13 In an appendix (p. 295), Jacobs makes the rather bold claim that “Aristotle never uses the expressions καθ’ αὑτό/κατά συμβεβηκός ὁ δὲ (and its cognates) to denote anything other than the difference between using “is” (and its cognates) to assert what is essential and what is accidental” (emphasis in the original). This seems to
even in 21a7-17. It is true that he is talking about predicates that are accidental in some way, but his point is that when they are combined in certain ways they are not predicates simpliciter, because they no longer assert one thing of one thing.

An examination of Posterior Analytics 1.22 83a15-17 supports reading the distinction being drawn here in the way I am suggesting. Aristotle says that predicating, say, “white” of “log” is predication simpliciter, but predicating “white”, say, of “the musical” is either not predication at all (μηδαμώς κατηγορείν), or else predication only accidentally and not simpliciter (κατηγορείν μὲν μὴ ἄπλως, κατὰ συμβεβηκός δὲ κατηγορείν). At the beginning of the passage in which he discusses the Homer sentences, Aristotle notes that his topic is predication simpliciter with respect to individuals (ὁληθὲς δ’ ἐστὶν εἰπεῖν κατὰ τοῦ πινός καὶ ἄπλως, 21a18-19); and this after discussing predications involving complex predicates that are κατὰ συμβεβηκός. The similarity of language and subject matter seems sufficient to warrant concluding that Aristotle does, in fact, have in mind here the distinction between predications simpliciter and predications in a derivative sense, rather than the distinction between predications of accidental and essential properties.

To sum up, then: although Jacobs fails to rescue Aristotle from the putative contradiction of which he is accused by the received view, he can be saved nevertheless. He accepts existential import for singular subjects and disallows conversion of a copulative “to be” into an existential “to be” on the grounds that there is no intersubstitutivity of definition for the two uses of the verb εἶναι, and this result can be generalized to any similarly complex predicate.

2. General Terms

So far we have considered only those sentences whose subjects are singular terms: I turn now to a consideration of Aristotle’s treatment of non-referring general terms. We know from the Prior Analytics that, according to the Laws of Subalternation, universal statements have existential import (AaB entails AiB, AeB entails AoB), but he was aware that general terms could be non-denoting. His favorite example of a non-denoting general term was τραγέλαφος, a combination of the Greek words τράγος, he-goat, and ἔλαφος, deer, the compound usually being rendered into English as “goat-stag”.14 This particular general term presents a slightly different problem than does “Socrates” or “Homer”, since Aristotle believed that both Socrates and Homer had existed at some time even if they did not exist in his own time;15 but there had never been any goat-stags nor would there ever be. So no statement asserting properties of goat-stags can be true according to the criteria of Categories 10. If no true assertions can be made about goat-stags, what can we possibly know about them? Does the word “goat-stag” have any meaning at all? At De interpretatione 1 16a16-18 Aristotle says:

καὶ γὰρ ὁ τραγέλαφος σημαίνει τι, οὔπω δὲ ἄληθὲς ἢ ψεῦδος, ἐὰν τὸ εἶναι ἢ μὴ εἶναι προστεθῇ ἢ ἄπλως ἢ κατὰ χρόνον.

For even “goat-stag” signifies something, but not yet something either true or false, unless “is” or “is not” be added, either simpliciter or with respect to time.

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14 Aristotle did not coin the term: it is found in Aristophanes (Wasps 937) and Plato (Republic 488a).
15 See Physics 221b31-32.
The word σημαίνειν sometimes been offered as the Greek equivalent of the English “to mean”, but there are good reasons for being wary about accepting such an equivalence. The literal meaning of the word is well established: it means “to show by means of a sign, to indicate, to point out”. It is related to the noun σημεῖον, a “sign” or “token”. Smoke, according to Aristotle, is a σημεῖον of fire; other writers speak of similar relations: a trumpet-blast is the σημεῖον of the beginning of battle, a signet-ring is a σημεῖον of an oath, and tracks in the snow are σημεῖα of an animal’s proximity. If this is supposed to be Aristotle’s word for “meaning” then his notion of meaning is very different from ours, for though smoke “means” fire, smoke does not, by itself, have meaning in our sense. And Aristotle himself is careful to restrict what he has to say about language to spoken sounds that are significant by convention: he does not suggest that smoke is a medium of communication that exists between a fire and a human observer. So this passage from the De interpretatione cannot be safely interpreted to be claiming that a word like “goat-stag” has “meaning” even though there are no goat-stags. So what is this passage claiming?

If we are to take the σημαίνει of 16a17 quite literally, then the passage is claiming that the word “goat-stag” indicates something by means of its status as a signifier. Aristotle is vague about what is signified: “goat-stag” σημαίνει τι, it “signifies something”, but he does not say what. We know that it cannot signify a real, particular goat-stag, the way “Socrates” or “Homer” signify real, particular men—i.e., “goat-stag” is not the name of an individual or a rigid designator. What, exactly, does it signify? Perhaps it is meant to be like the word “man” or “horse”, a name of a class. For Aristotle, a class name signifies an essence: what it is to be a member of the class. So the term “goat-stag”, if it were going to signify a class at all, ought to signify what it would be for something to be a member of the class of goat-stags: it ought to signify τὸ τὸ τραγέλαφο το εἶναι.

How do we know what it is to be a goat-stag? According to Aristotle, a definition can tell us what it is to be something. But definitions have a kind of existential import of their own: according to the Posterior Analytics (2.7) to know what something is, to know its scientific definition, presupposes the knowledge that it is. So we cannot come to know what it is to be a goat-stag by means of any process of scientific definition; indeed, there can be no scientific definitions of goat-stags if there are no goat-stags. Indeed, Aristotle here reiterates his claim about goat-stags from De interpretatione 1 (Posterior Analytics 2.7 92b5-8):

τὸ γὰρ μὴ ὃν εἶπεις ὁδέος δι' τι ἔστιν, ἀλλὰ τι μὲν σημαίνει ὁ λόγος ἢ τὸ ὀνόμα, ὅταν εἶπο τραγέλαφος, τί δ' ἔστι τραγέλαφος ἀδύνατον εἶδεναι.

Of that which does not exist, no one knows what it is. 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.

But we are still left wondering what it is, exactly, that the name “goat-stag” or its account (λόγος) could possibly signify, at least in Aristotle’s view. This is a question that falls outside of the scope of this paper, so I will conclude with some remarks of a very general kind that I think will put this problem into the context of inference and semantics that I stressed in the first part of the paper.

If we allow a term such as “goat-stag” to stand for a concept then we do not need to insist that the concept have a scientific definition associated with it—an informal or ostensive definition will suffice to give sense to the word λόγος in the Posterior Analytics passage above. An informal definition of “goat-stag” might include imaginings, standardized within the culture by means of

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conventionalization, of what the offspring of a goat and a stag might look like. This sort of λόγος will not tell you what it is to be a goat-stag, because “goat-stag” is not the name of a genuine, scientific class and, hence, there is no such thing as what it is to be a goat-stag. However, it will enable you to understand sentences in which the word “goat-stag” is used if you are a member of the same culture as the person with whom you are speaking. In this case, as the saying goes, meaning is use.

The language in *De interpretatione* is reminiscent of Plato’s language of “interweaving” in *Sophist* 262ff.; indeed, the same metaphor is used (συμπλοκή). Part of the project of *De interpretatione* seems to be to give an Aristotelian account of how it is that subject terms combine with predicate terms to give rise to assertions about relations between metaphysical subjects and predicates, and on this score it seems that Aristotle is in agreement with Plato: false assertions are not meaningless because they can be understood in terms of the signification of their components. To assert that “Theaetetus flies” is false because, on Plato’s account, the entity picked out by the word “Theaetetus” cannot “interweave” with the Form denoted by the word “flies”, but (contra the Eleatics) the assertion is not meaningless because we understand what the two words refer to. Presumably a similar judgment could be made if Theaetetus did not exist: the assertion must be false (because there is nothing for the Form of flying to interweave with), but if the word “Theaetetus” has some use that has been agreed upon in the language community (it refers to a man who, when alive, was named “Theaetetus”), then the assertion is a meaningful one nonetheless. On this account assertions about goat-stags will have meaning because we understand the use of the terms involved, but in attempting to “combine” the pseudo-concept of a goat-stag with the concept of some genuine predicate (i.e., when we add “is” or “is not”), the assertion is rendered false, since there are no goat-stags for the predicates to combine with.

So even though Aristotle is not explicit about the existential import of sentences containing non-referring general terms, what he says about definition and essence makes it clear that his thinking about such terms was consistent with what he said explicitly about non-referring singular terms in the *Categories*: any statement asserting properties of such terms will be false, suggesting that sentences containing assertions about general terms also carry existential import.

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17 For an extended discussion of this aspect of the *De interpretatione*, see Whitaker, *Aristotle’s De interpretatione*, pp. 35-61.