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MACDONALD ON ARISTOTLE ON THE GOOD

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1. Introduction

There is a passage in the Nicomachean Ethics (NE) that holds out the promise of giving us a profound insight into Aristotle’s view of the good. The problem is that the passage, A.6: 1096a23-29, has proved remarkably resistant to satisfactory interpretation, defying the efforts of scholars over the last eight decades. It argues, contra Plato, that the good cannot be one thing and, according to Irwin’s translation,1 reads as follows:

Further, good is spoken of in as many ways as being is spoken of. For it is spoken of in [the category of] what-it-is, as god and mind; in quality, as the virtues; in quantity, as the measured amount; in relative, as the useful; in time, as the opportune moment; in place, as the [right] situation; and so on. Hence it is clear that the good cannot be some common [nature of good things] that is universal and single; for if it were, it would be spoken of in only one of the categories, not in them all.

Just what is Aristotle saying here? The main problem seems to lie in understanding what the relationship is between the good, or “good,” and the examples given: Just how are they related such that “good” turns out to be spoken of in as many ways as “being”—or, as some would put it, to have as many senses as “being”? Are they things of which “good” is predicated? Or is each itself a good which is predicated of something else? Or are they neither subjects nor predicates of sentences in which “good” occurs? If not, what is the connection between “good” and the examples?

1985.
2. Interpretations of *Nicomachean Ethics* A.6:1096a23-29 before Macdonald’s

Each of these interpretations, and more, have been offered in the literature. Ross,² for example, thought that “good” was predicated of the examples, giving us “God is good,” “the virtues are good,” and so on.³ This is very appealing and the “most obvious”⁴ way to take them, especially on Ross’s translation, but the problem with it is that it does not seem to make “good” multivocal. What is there to prevent “good” from having the same sense, even though it is predicated of items from different categories? As Irwin remarks,⁵ “we might as well say that “amusing” or “strange” is multivocal because both substances and qualities can be amusing or strange.”⁶

Hardie,⁷ using an interpretation put forward earlier by Joachim,⁸ offered an interpretation that seemed to overcome this problem. He argued that “god is good,” “the useful is good” and so on, “are not simply propositions in which good is a predicate asserted of various subjects; they are definitions. The predicate expresses the essence, or part of the essence, of the subject; and it is, therefore, inevitably in the same category as the subject.”⁹ “The argument [now] looks very much better,” Ackrill points out. “We now have something approaching an identity-statement; and in such a statement the predicate-item cannot fail to be in the same category as the subject-item.”¹⁰ One assumption underlying this interpretation, however, is that “the terms in Aristotle’s examples [—and, by implication, any other terms he might have chosen—] stand for genuine species and . . . not merely portmanteau words;” and this, as Ackrill suggests, would be difficult to show.¹¹

Since taking “good” to be predicated of the examples does not seem to help much, perhaps we should take the examples to be, not subjects, but predicates—that is, things themselves predicated of other things. This is the approach taken by Kosman.¹² “[W]hen we say that Socrates is courageous, we . . . predicate good of him. For being courageous or being virtuous in general is a good way to be; courage and virtue in general, that is, are good qualities. The same analysis applies in each of the other categories.” “The instances that Aristotle gives, then, are not the subjects of exemplary predicative statements, but

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²See his translation of the argument in 1915 (quoted above).
³Also Urson (see 1988, 23) and Santas (see 1989, 150)—even Irwin, in his own way (see 1981, 539)—subscribe to this interpretation.
⁴Ackrill 1977, 17.
⁵1981, 539.
⁶Although there is a real problem here, I believe that for Aristotle any term predicated cross-categorically does indeed have different senses; I also believe that the way in which such a term would have different senses turns out not to help this interpretation, and I argue for this point in “Goods and Predication in Aristotle.”
⁸See 1962, commentary on 1096a23ff.
⁹Hardie 1980, 57.
¹⁰1977, 18.
¹¹1977, 19.
¹²See Kosman 1968, 171-74.
rather the predicates of such statements. They make clear that the multivocity of “good” is exhibited not only in the fact that many sorts of things may be said to be good, but more in the fact that predicates of radically different type are in fact disguised means of predicating the good in radically different senses.” This makes admirable sense of the passage and puts Aristotle’s examples squarely into the several categories. Is it, however, what Aristotle has in mind? Not according to Ackrill: “[I]t does not seem easy to derive this point from Aristotle’s text in the way Kosman suggests. It would be surprising if Aristotle were illustrating the diversity of senses of ‘good’ by allusion to examples that do not contain the word; this is not how he or anyone else normally proceeds when exhibiting any kind of ambiguity in a term. The context does not warn us that the rather sophisticated notion of a disguised predication of good is in play.”

Ackrill himself proposes that the examples should be taken neither as subjects nor as predicates but instead as indicating the criteria on the basis of which things are called good, and as occurring in sentences of the following form: “_____ is good because it is god,” “_____ is good because it is courageous (for example),” and “_____ is good because it is useful,” and so on. He elaborates:

There is to be no implication that the subject-terms are in different categories. The point is that the ground for predicating “good” in the different cases is radically different. If I say that Callias is good and am asked “how do you mean, ‘good’?” or “why do you call him good?,” I answer “he is brave and honest.” But other things may be commended as good for other reasons and indeed other sorts of reason—because they are of the right size or useful for some purpose. The criteria for commending different things as good are diverse and fall into different categories; and this is enough to show that “good” does not stand for some single common quality.

This approach seems to combine the virtues of the past two: “good” is predicated of things, which is natural, yet the examples Aristotle gives are also much like Kosman’s disguised predications of it, and they therefore distribute themselves nicely among the several categories. However, it is questionable whether taking the examples to be the criteria on the basis of which “good” is applied will yield the desired result. As Rawls and others have pointed out, the criteria on the basis of which “good” is applied may differ while its meaning remains the same, and the same applies to terms other than “good.” MacDonald has a very good example to illustrate this:

“Hot,” for instance, might well have a single sense or meaning despite the fact that I appeal to radically diverse criteria in explaining my predicating “hot” of various items. I might explain my calling the vapor hot by pointing out that it is steam (a substance); I might explain my calling the molten iron hot by pointing out that it is red (a quality); I might explain my calling the liquid hot by pointing out that it is boiling (an action); and so on. Thus, if Aristotle’s point in the examples is that

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131968, 174.
141977, 20.
16See Ackrill 1977, 21.
17See 1971, 405.
18For example, Hare: see 1952, 108.
different criteria, which fall into different categories, may be cited to justify predicking “good” of different things, then the examples he gives do nothing to support... the claim that “good” has may senses.\(^1\)

Since Ackrill’s 1972 article there have been two serious attempts at sorting out this passage. One is by Woods,\(^2\) who in effect denies that any satisfactory interpretation can be given of this or the corresponding passage in the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*). The other is by MacDonald.\(^3\)

3. MacDonald’s interpretation

MacDonald, who uses Irwin’s translation of the *NE* passage, concludes as follows: When [Aristotle] says in *EN* i.6 that good is spoken of in each of the categories, he means that goodness consists in various real properties, and the examples he lists in i.6—some of which are substances, some of which are qualities, etc.—are some of those real properties... Since god and mind are substances, the virtues qualities, measured amounts quantities, etc.—it follows, given Aristotle’s view of the categories, that the good is not some common nature.\(^22\)

I believe that this statement—and Irwin’s acknowledged influence in bringing it about\(^23\)—constitutes a very valuable contribution toward the explication of this passage and, more generally, toward understanding Aristotle’s theory of the good. The statement is, I believe, somewhat imprecise,\(^24\) but that is not a major flaw. The problem with MacDonald’s interpretation lies not so much with the conclusion he arrives at but rather with the specific interpretation of the *NE* passage on the basis of which he arrives at it.

“My strategy,” MacDonald asserts, is “to explain the puzzling passage from i.6 in light of the less opaque discussion in i.7.”\(^25\) This is the idea that lies at the heart of his interpretation. In the i.7 passage, Aristotle argues as follows:

But let us return once again to the good we are looking for, and consider just what it could be, since it is apparently one thing in one action or craft, and another thing in another; for it is one thing in medicine, another in generalship, and so on for the rest.

What, then is the good in each of these cases? Surely it is that for the sake of which the other things are done; and in medicine this is health, in generalship

\(^{1}\)1989, 158-59.
\(^{2}\)1992 (first edition, 1982), 65-69. Although Woods’s primary concern is with the corresponding passage in the *Eudemian Ethics*, both, as he seems to agree (see 66), present essentially the same argument. I have argued against this interpretation elsewhere, at length (in “Goods and Predication in Aristotle”).
\(^{3}\)1989. I offer a somewhat fuller discussion of these interpretations—as well as my own, positive account of *NE* 1096a23-29—in “Aristotle on the Irreducible Senses of the Good.”
\(^{22}\)1989, 172. All references to MacDonald’s work are to this article.
\(^{23}\)See 160m30.
\(^{24}\)Since Aristotle, as I shall argue, is not saying that goodness consists in various “real properties” (that is, universals) but, more generally, in various realities or existents.
\(^{25}\)162.
victory, ... in another case something else, but in every action and decision it is the end, since it is for the sake of the end that everyone does the other things.

According to MacDonald:

In the above passage, [Aristotle] says that the good is different in different cases: health is the good in medicine ..., victory in generalship ..., etc. The expression “the good in A is x” seems to be [his] preferred way of saying that action or activity A aims at some end (good) x. He uses the same expression in . . . Topics [107a5-7] . . . .

The passage from EN i.6 in which the argument from homonymy occurs is strikingly similar. Aristotle says that good is spoken of in the category of what-it-is . . . , in quality . . . , etc. Of course, this passage uses “spoken of in . . .” where the other two passages omit “spoken of,” but this difference appears to be unimportant . . . . Thus, for Aristotle, the expressions “the good in A is x” and “good is spoken of in A, where it is x” seem to be interchangeable.

The similarity in the mode of expression in these passages suggests that Aristotle is making the same point in each of them. The claim in EN i.7 is that there is an end or good corresponding to activities such as medicine and generalship, and these goods are, respectively, health and victory. By analogy, then, Aristotle’s claim in EN i.6 appears to be that there is an end or good corresponding to each of the categories, and these goods are god and mind corresponding to substance, the virtues corresponding to quality, and so on.

At this point MacDonald runs into a problem. How can there be a good or end for all substances, for all qualities, and for all the other nonsubstances? As he himself says, “whereas the claim in EN i.7 is clear and plausible, its analogue in EN i.6, at least at first blush, seems bizarre and perhaps unintelligible.” In order to show that the analogue “is intelligible and perhaps even plausible,” he says that he needs to define more precisely what Aristotle means by the expression “the good in (or for an) A is x.” In this expression, A ranges not only over human actions and activities, as it does in the A.7 passage, but also over things having a function, and “‘x’ stands for the real nature or property in which goodness consists relative to A, i.e., ‘x’ specifies the nature which ‘good’ signifies in the case of A(s). Thus, the expression ‘the good in (or for an) A is x’ is equivalent to ‘as far as A(s) is (are) concerned, goodness consists in x.’” He therefore goes on to restate his interpretation of A.6 in terms of A.7 accordingly:

On my interpretation, when Aristotle says that the good in medicine is health, he is saying that as far as medicine is concerned goodness consists in health.

Analogously, then, in the EN i.6 passage he is saying that as far as substance is

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261097a15-22. Irwin’s translation.
27To be more precise, it of course is not these expressions that occur in the passages but, if anything, substitution instances of them.
28I have omitted only the Greek for the two italicized phrases.
29This is MacDonald’s ellipsis.
30163-64.
31164.
32164.
33For his attempt to do this, see 164-68 and 160-61.
34168.
concerned goodness consists in (being) god and mind, as far as qualities are concerned it consists in the virtues, and so on.\textsuperscript{35}

This statement requires some explanation, as MacDonald recognizes, and he attempts first to explain, by reference to the function of substances, what it means to say that "as far as substance is concerned goodness consists in (being) god and mind." Socrates, according to MacDonald, has a certain function not only \textit{qua} carpenter or harpist or human being but also \textit{qua} substance; any substance \textit{qua} substance does, at least in a sense.\textsuperscript{36} That function is to exist independently. "Existing independently can be construed as performing a function, analogous to the way in which building and playing the harp are functions."\textsuperscript{37} Moreover, since the good for any thing having a function is performing that function well,\textsuperscript{38} it is clear what the good for substances \textit{qua} substances is: "On analogy with the carpenter and the harpist, the good for substances (\textit{qua} substances) will be to exist independently well, i.e., to exist as independently as possible. The good harpist is the one who plays well or most completely; the good substance will be the one the existence of which is most independent or complete."\textsuperscript{39} Although "substances exist independently in virtue of the fact that they can exist independently of nonsubstance particulars... while nonsubstance particulars cannot exist independently of substances," in this sense no substance, including god and mind, exists more independently than any other. "But Aristotle also recognizes at least one other sort of independent existence. In his discussion... of the first mover Aristotle claims that there is a substance which exists independently of sensible things... Clearly, not all substances exemplify this sort of independent existence; god and mind, and perhaps only god and mind, do." Thus, "god and mind exist more independently than other substances in virtue of being independent in more respects; they are most truly independent and complete. If god and mind are the most compete substances, then they will be the end or good for substance."\textsuperscript{40} This, then, is what it means to say that "as far as substance is concerned goodness consists in (being) god and mind."

"[Q]ualities, quantities, places, and times," however, "are not entities which can be said to have functions as substances can..."\textsuperscript{41} and the good for them therefore cannot be explained in terms of performing a function well or completely. To put it in other words, the good for these categories cannot be their paradigm instances, if paradigms instances in a category are those members of it that perform their function well or completely, because "there do not seem to be paradigm instances of qualities, quantities, places, and times in the way there are paradigm substances. One time is just as much a time as any other, and the same seems to hold for qualities, quantities and so on."\textsuperscript{42} Nevertheless, there is "an extended sense [in which] we can say that there are paradigm instances of qualities, quantities, etc.," and that is insofar as they are "relative to..."\textsuperscript{43}
actions, activities, and things which do have functions." For example, although "the good quantities [are] the measured (or appropriate) amounts . . .," [w]hich quantity constitutes the appropriate amount . . . will depend on whether we are talking about meals or missiles and, if meals, whether meals for a heavyweight wrestler or a ballerina. In all cases of meals the good quantity will be the appropriate amount relative to the person whose meal it is." Similarly for the other nonsubstance categories. "The paradigm qualities for a thing which has a function are those which enable that thing to perform its function well—the virtues (relative to that function); . . . the paradigm place for an action, an activity, or a thing having a function is the right situation (relative to the circumstances or function). Thus, it is actions, activities, and things with functions which have ends or goods, and qualities, quantities, relations, times and places are good relative to the goods of actions, activities, and things with functions."

This, as I understand it, is MacDonald’s case. It consists of four main claims:

I. “The good in A is x” and “good is spoken of in A, where it is x” are interchangeable. This claim allows him to interpret the A.6 passage in terms of A.7 and to argue that there is an end for substances qua substances, for qualities qua qualities, and so on. This is the key step in his argument.

II. In the expression “the good in (or for an) A is x,” the A’s are human actions and activities and things having a function, and the x’s are real natures or properties.

III. The end or good for substances qua substances is to exist as independently as possible and, since god and mind are the substances that exist as independently and completely as possible, god and mind are the ends or goods for substances qua substances.

IV. There is “an extended sense” in which there are paradigm instances of nonsubstances, such that the virtues, the measured amount and the other examples given by Aristotle are goods.

These four claims, in turn, allow him to conclude that in the A.6 passage Aristotle is saying that goods are, or goodness consists in, various “real natures” or “properties”—namely, the paradigm instances given as examples in the passage—and that, since these fall into all the categories, the good cannot be one thing.

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43 171.
44 171.
45 171-72.
4. Are “the good in A is x” and “the good is spoken of in A, where it is x” interchangeable?

At a literal and superficial level it is clearly false that “the good in A is x” (in A.7) and “good” is spoken of in A, where it is x” (in A.6) are interchangeable, since the A.6 statement says the good in A is spoken of in A in addition to saying that it is x. However, if we ignore this difference—and MacDonald, perhaps too readily, dismisses this difference as “unimportant”—and if the A.7 and A.6 passages really are “strikingly similar,” then it would seem reasonable to suppose that the expressions are interchangeable. Are they, then, so very similar?

A closer reading does not seem to support the view that they are. Although they have points in common, the main one being that goods are many, overall they are very different—indeed almost opposed to each other.

I translate the A.7 passage as follows:

Again let us return to the good we are seeking: What can it be? For it appears to be one thing in one action or art and another in another: it is one thing in the art of medicine and another in the art of generalship, and likewise in the rest. What, then, is the good of each? Is it not that for the sake of which the other things are done? In the art of medicine this is health, in the art of generalship victory, in the art of architecture a building, and in other spheres something else; that is, in every action and course of action it is the end, for all do whatever else they do for the sake of this.

Aristotle’s point here is integrative: although in different actions (πράξεις) and courses of action (προαιρέσεις) the goods are specifically different, what they have in common is that in every case the specific good is the end, that for the sake of which the other things are done.

The movement of thought in the entire paragraph from which this passage is taken is integrative. It is a movement toward identifying the good for man, the good toward which all our actions ought to be directed. In the passage just quoted, Aristotle has set himself up for answering that question, at least at a certain level. Having just claimed that for all actions the good is the end, he goes on to finish the paragraph by concluding:

Therefore, if there is an end for absolutely all our actions, this would be the good achievable by action, and if [there are] more than one, these would be.

Of course, he spends most of the rest of A.7 arguing to the conclusion that there is indeed an end or good for all our actions, for all distinctively human actions: “activity of soul

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46 See 163-64.
47 οὐ χαρίν.
48 Προορέσει. Where προξίς and προορέσις are opposed, προορέσις may mean “course of action.” In the old Oxford edition, Ross has “pursuit,” which seems accurate and perhaps more elegant. In the revised Oxford edition, Urmson-Barnes have “choice,” and Irwin has “decision.”
49 τὸ τέλος.
50 22-24.
[performed] in accordance with human excellence,” and he devotes most of the rest of the NE to elaborating upon and explaining what this is supposed to mean.

The point of the A.6 passage is of course more difficult to make out. Understanding the passage is complicated by Aristotle’s use of λέγεσθαι, especially its occurrence right after he has claimed that good “is spoken of” in as many ways as being is. How is one to understand its meaning here? Taking the phrase in which it occurs to mean “it is spoken of in [the category of] what-it-is, as God and mind . . . ,” as MacDonald does (following Irwin), does not seem very helpful: Just what does this mean?; taking it to mean “it is said . . . in the category of substance, as god and reason,” as Ackrill does, is much the same and seems equally puzzling; taking it to mean “it is predicated . . . in the category of substance, as of God and reason,” as Ross does in the old Oxford edition, is inaccurate; and taking it to mean “things are called good . . . in the category of substance, as God and reason,” as Urmson-Barnes do in the recently revised Oxford edition, seems ill supported by the Greek.

Perhaps “means,” one of the standard meanings of the verb in its active voice, is a better translation of λέγεσθαι here, as well as at its two other occurrences in our paragraph. If so, then “X λέγεται δι’ χώσ/τριχώσ/ . . . ” (a very common construction) is literally translated as “X is meant in two ways/three ways/ . . . ”—and more naturally expressed as “X means two things/three things/ . . . ,” the word “thing” here being taken in a very broad sense. In this construction λέγεται is modified by an adverb of manner, but it often has this sense even when it is not. Moreover, I think that “means” here carries the sense of “signifies”—that is, that λέγεται here has the same meaning as σημαίνει often has. This is not at all unusual in Aristotle, with many passages illustrating this use of λέγεται and σημαίνει. Indeed, many of the passages which illustrate this use exhibit the following pattern: “ ‘X’ means many things [λέγεται πολλαχώς], for it signifies [σημαίνει] a or b or c . . . ,” indicating that a term may mean several things because it signifies several. The passage in the Eudemian Ethics (EE) which makes essentially the same argument as the one in the NE we are considering is a case in point, and, although

511098a16-17.  
52See 1977, 17.  
53See 1915.  
54See Barnes 1984.  
55I offer a fuller discussion of these alternative translations in “Aristotle on the Irreducible Senses of the Good.”  
56I offer a fuller defense of this translation in “Aristotle on the Irreducible Senses of the Good.”  
58See, for example: Metaphysics Δ: 1:1012b34, 3:1013b26, 4:1014b26, 5:1015a20, 6:1015b16, 7:1017a7, and 8:1017a10. Indeed, Aristotle often uses λέγεσθαι with and without an adverb or adverbial phrase indiscriminately, with the same meaning; see, for example, Metaphysics Δ.2:1013b24 and 29, 4:1014b16 and 18, and 8:1017a14-15 and 17.  
59I am therefore offering what MacDonald would call a “multiple-natures interpretation” of our passage, or at least something close to it (see 160-62).  
60This is illustrated in some of the chapters from Metaphysics Δ; see, for example: 7:1017a7-8 and 22-24.  
61Although it also says more.  
62That passage, A.8:1217b25-35, reads:
the NE passage does not use λέγετα in the first clause and σημαίνει in the second, instead using λέγετα in both, this seems merely to confirm that λέγετα should be translated by “means” there and that it means “signifies.”63

I therefore propose to translate the A.6 passage as follows:

Further, since “good” means as many things as “being” [ἐπει τό ὅγιον ισόχως λέγεται τῷ δόντι]—for it means [things] in the “what” [ἐν τῷ τί λέγεται] (for example,64 god—that is,65 mind) and in quality (the virtues) and in quantity (the moderate-[amount]) and in the relative (the useful) and in time ([the] opportune-time) and in place ([lan] abode) and other things such as these—it is clear that it cannot be a certain common universal—that is, one thing; for [then] it would not

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“Good” means many things, indeed as many as [πολλαχώς λέγετα καὶ ισόχως] “being.” For “being” . . . signifies [σημαίνει] sometimes what-it-is, sometimes quality, sometimes quantity, sometimes time, and, in addition to these, sometimes [things] in the [category of] being-acted-upon, sometimes [things] in the [category of] action, and the good is in each of these categories: in substance, mind—that is, God; in quality, the just; in quantity, the moderate-amount; in time, the opportune-time; and teaching and being-taught in the sphere of action. Therefore, just as being is not some one thing with regard to the things mentioned, so neither is good, nor is there one science either of being or of the good.

63 A distinction may be drawn between the signification and the meaning of a term, where the signification of a term is the existent referred to by it and its meaning is an “affection of the soul” similar to the existent referred to (See De Interpretatione 1: 16a3-8) or a concept or some other mental content or its use or the criteria of its application or that, among other things, which is entered in a dictionary and competent speakers of that language understand by it—or some other thing different from the existent referred to. As I understand them, Irwin (see 1982, especially 242-43, 246-48 and 264-66; and 1981, especially 539-40 and 543) and MacDonald (see 153-62), following him, would draw some such distinction and say that, since for Aristotle the signification of a term is some real nature, essence or property and the meaning of a term is not, the meaning and signification of a term cannot be the same thing for Aristotle. Presumably, then, they would not agree that λέγετα should be translated by “means” and that it carries the sense of “signifies” (σημαίνει). (Although they would not agree with this, the result is that the goods referred to in the NE passage, and elsewhere, become realities, and this outcome, I believe, would appeal to both.)

Let me say at once that with this translation of λέγετα I do not deny that meaning and signification may be different in Aristotle. “Genus” (γένος), for example, signifies different things for him when used to refer to genera in the different categories, yet it is not implausible to suppose that it has one and the same sense when it is; conversely, “one” (δι) and “being” (δι) signify the same things, the constituents of the categories, yet it would be incautious to assume that they have the same meaning for Aristotle. I only maintain that meaning and signification—and “means” and “signifies”—sometimes, even often, come to the same thing for him.

I devote some more attention to Irwin’s views elsewhere (in “Aristotle on the Irreducible Senses of the Good”).

64 “For example” seems a more likely rendering of ὅτι than “I mean” or “that is.” “Good,” for Aristotle, signifies many more things than the ones mentioned here—as indicated, for example, by Topics A.15: 107a3-12 (which I quote and discuss a bit below) and Rhetoric A.6: 1362b10-29 (which I quote and discuss in “Aristotle on the Irreducible Senses of the Good”).

65 An epexegetic καί seems preferable here. If καί had a conjunctive sense, what would this νοῦς, which would be other than god, be? Human νοῦς in general? Any and every particular person’s νοῦς? None of these seem to be particularly persuasive examples of substances that are goods. Menn (1992) also takes καί to be epexegetic (see his illuminating discussion at 551-53); and so do Broadie (1991, 54n21) and Urmson (1988, 121).
mean [things] in all the categories [οὗ γάρ ἡν ἐλέγετ' ἐν πάσαις τοῖς κατηγορίαις] but in one only.

Although much in this passage calls for explication, its essential point is clear: the good is not one thing but many, since "good" means things in all the categories—or, as Aristotle might have said, since goods are found in all the categories. This is not very similar to the A.7 passage. The point here is not at all integrative, but rather the opposite: it is to show that goods are many and irreducibly diverse, not to point out what is common to diverse goods. There seems little warrant, then, for claiming that these two passages are "strikingly similar." 66

If this account of A.7 and A.6 is correct, then, not only is it not true that they are "strikingly similar," it is not the case that "the good in A is x" is present in both of them. It is present in A.7, of course, but not in A.6. Whereas the A.7 expression states what the good is and the A.6 expression says what it means ("'good' means things in A: for example, x"), the implicit expression in A.6 corresponding to the one in A.7 is: "there are goods in A: for example, x." These expressions are not interchangeable, not just because the x given is the good in A in the one and merely one example of a good in A in the other, but for other, more radical reasons. In "the good in A is x," A ranges over actions and courses of action, and the variables for x, although specific things different from one another (such as health and victory), are always ends and are identified as such. This is not the case for "there are goods in A: for example, x." Here the A's are categories, the x's are goods in those categories, and, contrary to what MacDonald would have us believe, there is no indication that the x's are also ends. Although they may also be ends for Aristotle, because they are goods and goods are sometimes things sought, there is no mention of this in the passage—as is not surprising, since to mention that any of the goods have something in common would not only be irrelevant to the point being made but would undermine it. In any case, there is no indication that the x's are the ends of the A's given, as is the case for the A.7 expression. 67

66 This discussion has of course assumed that "'good' is spoken of in A, where it is x" is in fact the expression that we find in the A.6 passage on Irwin's translation. That, however, is not actually true. On his translation the expression would be "'good' is spoken of in A as x," and this, whatever its precise meaning, is quite different from what MacDonald claims it to be, since it does not also say that the good in A is x, only that it is spoken of as x. The difference between the A.7 and A.6 expressions therefore would be even greater than MacDonald's choice of words would have us believe.

67 Similar remarks can be made for the corresponding expression in the Topics passage (A.15: 107a3-12) which MacDonald uses to support his claim that the A.7 and A.6 expressions are interchangeable. I translate this passage, where Aristotle is trying to help us spot ambiguity, as follows:

Look also at the kinds of categories signified by the name and see whether they are the same in all cases; for if they are not the same, it is clear that the thing said is homonymous. For example, the good in the case of food is that which is productive of pleasure; in the case of medicine, that which is productive of health; in the case of [the] soul, being of a certain quality—for example, [being] of sound mind or [being] manly or [being] just; and similarly in the case of man. Here and there [it is] a time; for example, the opportune time is a good, for the opportune time is called [a] good. Often it is a quantity; for example, in the case of the moderate amount, for also the moderate amount is called [a] good. The good, then, is homonymous.

The corresponding expression here is "the good in the case of A is x," verbally almost the same as the one in A.7. Here, again, the A's are not simply actions and courses of action but examples from several categories: food, medicine (or the art of medicine), the soul, and man. (The A's are not specified for the opportune time and the moderate amount.) The x's are varied. Some are ends: health, the good in the
5. The domains of A and x in “the good in A is x”

MacDonald’s second claim concerns the substitution instances of A and x in “the good in (or for an) A is x”: A ranges over human actions and activities and things having a function, x over real natures or properties—where “real natures” or “real properties” seem to mean universals (τὰ καθόλου), and where universals subsume essences (τὰ τίνα θεωρεῖν)⁶⁸. Since this claim is made on the assumption that “the good in A is x” occurs in both the A.7 and A.6 passages and are interchangeable,⁶⁹ this is to claim that A and x range over the domains indicated in both passages.⁷⁰

We have already seen that this is not an accurate specification of the domain for A, the domains differing in the two passages. In the A.7 passage, the concrete instances of the expression mention only actions and activities (or “courses of action”), not things having a function. MacDonald admits this⁷¹ but goes on to point out that “Aristotle in fact believes that more than just human actions [and activities] have ends or goods”⁷²—human beings and other things do, too. That is indeed true, but what is to the point here is that none of the substitution instances of A in the A.7 passage are things having a function. In the A.6 passage, on the other hand, A ranges over the categories, and, since

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⁶⁸ See 160-61, and 168: “The property of being good is no single real property, no single Aristotelian universal.”

⁶⁹ And in the Topics passage, as well.

⁷⁰ The purpose served by claiming that A also ranges over things having a function seems to be to link the meanings of “the good in A is x” as it occurs in A.7 and A.6. If we assume that “the good in A is x” occurs in both A.7 and A.6 and if it is true that A ranges also over things having a function, then some degree of overlap in meaning would be effectuated between the occurrences of the expression in A.7 (which talks about human actions and activities but not about things having a function) and A.6 (which talks not about human actions and activities as such but, among other things, about substances, which, MacDonald will argue, are things having a function). However, we may observe that if MacDonald’s first and central claim were in fact true, he would not need to argue that A ranges over things having a function as well as over human actions and activities. If “the good in A is x” and “good” is spoken of in A, where it is x” really were interchangeable, then the substitution instances of A in “the good in A is x” would be identical in both occurrences of the expression, in A.7 and A.6, and, since A.6 is to be read in terms of A.7, they would all be instances of the sort that have ends—namely, the corresponding substitution instances of x. This, presumably, is the position MacDonald desires.

⁷¹ See 164.

⁷² 164.
the categories for Aristotle include everything that exists, it necessarily ranges over human actions and activities and things having a function (although none of its substitution instances are specified as such); but it of course ranges over many other things as well. It is therefore inaccurate to specify the domain of A as human actions and activities and things having a function. 73

Although MacDonald does not explicitly argue for the claim that x ranges over real natures or properties, he does offer an implicit argument, and his discussion of homonymy in Aristotle74 plays a large role in this. For Aristotle, to paraphrase MacDonald, F is homonymous, if and only if there are at least two things, x and y, that are F and the account of x’s Fness and y’s Fness are different—that is, a different real nature or property is signified by the two accounts (P1); good is homonymous (P2); therefore, “there are at least two good things, x and y, such that the account of x’s goodness and the account of y’s goodness are different; that is, a different real nature or property is signified by the two accounts”75 (C1). What is stressed in this argument is that the two goods are different real natures or properties, but it is of course also true that both are real natures or properties of one sort or another (anything homonymous would have to be). However, MacDonald, presumably on grounds of the argument just stated, assumes that all goods are real natures or properties76 (C2). If so, then, since the x’s in “the good in A is x” are identified as goods (P3), he can arrive at his final conclusion that the x’s in “the good in A is x” are real natures or properties (C3).

I believe that the first argument here is sound: good is homonymous for Aristotle, the account of homonymy given is accurate, and the conclusion follows. However, it clearly does not follow that all goods are real natures or properties (C2). It is not true, either. Although Aristotle’s conclusion in the Topics passage considered is that good is homonymous (P2), that is not precisely what he says in A.6. In A.6 he says that “good” means, or signifies, things in all the categories, and this is a claim broader than the claim that good is homonymous. It allows for the accounts of “good” to signify real natures or properties and thus for good to be homonymous, but it also allows for them to signify particular substances as well as particular qualities and other particular nonsubstances.77 Aristotle himself says that “good” signifies Odysseus, Helen, Paris and Achilles,78 and he would no doubt have agreed that it also signifies the particular herbs and actions that are productive of health, to mention no others. It also signifies god, as we know, and god, because he is not a universal,79 is not a property or a real nature. The more accurate way to label Aristotle’s goods, I would argue, is to call them existents (οντα), which is what

73 It is also inaccurate to specify it in this way for the Topics passage, as I have argued above.
74 See 160-61.
75 161.
76 This is implicit in his discussion of the “multiple-natures interpretation of homonymy” on 160-62, for example.
77 By “F signifies x,” I mean, not “F is truly predicated of x,” but that “F” signifies x in much the same way that “Socrates” signifies Socrates or “white [color]” signifies white [color], a universal that may be truly predicated of him and other things.
79 Not being “said of” (λέγεται κατ' οντι, κατηγορεῖ κατ' οντι) or “in” (ύπάρχει, ἐν) other things in the relevant sense.
the constituents of the categories are. If this is correct, then MacDonald’s third argument, although valid, does not persuade us of its conclusion. It need not be true that the x’s in “the good in A is x” are real natures or properties: they might not be, since not all goods are real natures or properties. I conclude, therefore, that MacDonald’s claim that x ranges over real natures and properties is inaccurate, and that the larger suggestion that for Aristotle all goods are real natures or properties is false.

6. The end or good for substances qua substances

If MacDonald’s claim that A.6 may be read in terms of A.7 is not well founded, then his claim that substances qua substances have a function does not seem well founded either, whether that function is to exist independently or anything else. It is because A.6 may be read in terms of A.7 that substances qua substances have ends, and it is because they have ends that they have functions—that is the most natural way to explain their having ends, on the assumption that they do. If, then, A.6 may not be read in terms of A.7, this entire edifice seems to collapse. Even if it is true that the A’s in “the good in A is x” as it occurs in A.6 include things having a function, because they include substances, that still would not mean that substances qua substances have a function (or that qualities qua qualities have a function, and so on), only that those substances having a function have a function. Moreover, even if we were to grant that for Aristotle substances qua substances have a function, there seems little reason to believe that this function would be to exist independently. MacDonald offers no direct textual evidence to support his claim that Aristotle held this view—and that is hardly surprising, for the view is absurd on the face of it. For a substance to exist independently of nonsubstances and sensible substances is merely for its existence not to be dependent on them, for their nonexistence not to result in or involve its nonexistence; it is merely for it to stand in a certain relationship to them, and a negative one at that, and for it to stand in that relationship is not for it to do anything—it is not for it perform any activity or action, and so it is not for it to possess any ἔργον at all.

Of course, MacDonald recognizes that existing independently is not really the function of substances. According to him, it is “analogous” to a function and therefore can be “construed as” such and is so “in a sense.” However, it is difficult to see how he has much of a case here, unless existing independently really is performing a function. A.6, according to him, should be interpreted along the lines of A.7. If so, then in A.6 Aristotle is saying that the good for, or in the case of, substances is god and mind, where god and mind are the ends for substances. The idea that substances qua substances have a function, and specifically the function of existing independently, is then introduced to account for how substances qua substances can have ends and for why specifically god and mind are their ends. For MacDonald to say, then, that existing independently is not really the function of substances qua substances but merely something analogous to it is for him to destroy his case. It is for him to say that this is not, in fact, the function of

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80 I have argued for this point at some length in 1988.
substances *qua* substances; it is to imply—since this is supposed to be *the* function of substances *qua* substances—that they have no function at all; and it is to say that god and mind are not, in fact, their ends. Therefore, for MacDonald to say that substances *qua* substances have a function only “in a sense”\(^81\) is for him to admit, in effect, that his model for explaining the A.6 passage fails when applied to substances.

There is, in fact, nothing in the A.6 passage about substances striving for the independent existence of god or mind, about god or mind being their end or completeness. God and mind are given no pre-eminent status there—quite the contrary, they are merely examples of goods in the category of substance (as are the virtues in the category of quality, and so on for the other categories); nor is that surprising, for the conclusion Aristotle is driving at there does not require any pre-eminent status for any of them—he merely needs any old example or two for each category.

### 7. The paradigm instances of nonsubstances

If MacDonald’s model for explaining the A.6 passage fails for substances, it seems to fail even more for nonsubstances. In order for his model to work for, or fit, qualities, quantities, and the remaining nonsubstances (now the A’s in “the good in A is x”), the A’s must, for every nonsubstance category, be either human actions or activities or things having a function, and that is not the case for every nonsubstance category. Precisely speaking it is not the case for any of the nonsubstance categories, since no nonsubstance category is accurately identified either as human action or as human activity or as thing having a function. Also, for every nonsubstance category, the x’s in every case must be the ends, or paradigm instances, of their respective A’s, and that is not the case either: the virtues, for example, are not the ends of qualities *qua* qualities or their paradigm instances.

MacDonald of course recognizes this.\(^82\) Only in an “extended sense”\(^83\) is it true that there are ends for or paradigm instances of them—that is his third claim. This, however, is also for him to admit, in effect, that his model for explaining A.6 fails to apply: for every nonsubstance category there must really be ends, or paradigm instances, in order for his model to work, and MacDonald admits that there are not.

The basis for his claim that in an extended sense there are paradigm instances of nonsubstances admittedly is sound enough. His basis is that, since “actions, activities, and things having a function . . . have ends or goods,” we can say, and Aristotle would have agreed, that “qualities, quantities, relations, times and places are good relative to the goods of actions, activities, and things with functions.”\(^84\) The question, however, is whether this is the reason why Aristotle considered the nonsubstances given in the A.6

\(^81\) We may also ask whether existing independently is even analogous to performing a function. They are not analogous by example, as the role of the heart may be analogous to the role of a mechanical pump; nor are they analogous relations, as mathematical proportions may be. Just how are they supposed to be analogous?\(^85\)

\(^82\) See 171.

\(^83\) 171.

\(^84\) 172.
passage to be goods, and it does not seem that it can be. After having argued in our passage that the good cannot be one thing because goods fall into all the categories, he goes on, a little later in the same chapter, to speculate about how these disparate goods might be connected or united: “But what, then, does it [i.e., the good] mean? It certainly is not like the things bearing the same name by chance. But then do absolutely all goods belong to one class at least by being [derived] from one thing or [by being] relative to one thing? Or [do all goods belong to one class] rather by analogy (for as sight is in the body, so reason is in the soul, and so on in other cases)?” It is evident from this passage that the goods about whose connection to one another he is speculating are already considered by him to be goods, and that he expects his reader to consider them to be so, even before he has arrived at a satisfactory answer to how they might be connected. It therefore will not do to say that some of these, the nonsubstances given, are goods for Aristotle by virtue of that connection or relation; they were goods to begin with, or at least Aristotle considered them to be so, and only later began to wonder about their connection or unity.

8. Conclusion

It must be said, then, that MacDonald’s attempt at explicating the A.6 passage is not successful. Although his main conclusion—that Aristotle’s examples in the A.6 passage are goods, and that these goods are “real natures” or “properties”—happens to be largely true, the interpretation of the A.6 passage he offers in support of this conclusion will not stand up to scrutiny. There is no warrant for interpreting the A.6 passage in terms of the A.7 discussion, and even if there were, such that we should have to accept his model for interpreting the A.6 passage, that model fails on its own terms.

85 “At least,” since there is no common thing uniting them. 86 1096b26-29.
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