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Aristotle on the Truth of *Things*

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Aristotle has, on the whole, a comfortably modern theory of truth. For example, we read in *de Interpretatione* (17a2) and again in *de Anima* (430a27) that truth cannot belong to anything less than a statement—not to a single word or idea, not to just any string of words. Moreover, we read in Book VI of the *Metaphysics* (1027b26ff) that truth belongs to statements and beliefs, but not to the things that those statements and beliefs are about. We may at first be a bit alarmed to read that truth is, for Aristotle, a kind of being; but it really just comes to this, that the unqualified verb 'to be' in Greek can mean 'to be true'—; moreover, says Aristotle, it is a relatively minor meaning of the verb 'to be', a sideline (1027b30ff). All of this seems sensible and right.

This picture is troubled, though, by *Metaphysics* IX,10. This chapter clearly ascribes truth and falsity not just to thoughts and statements, but also to the things (*ta pragmata*) those thoughts and statements are about; it also ascribes truth to in-composites and to the things they designate. Moreover, it says that being in the sense of truth is the most important kind of being: being in the strictest sense: *to kyriôtata on*.¹ The mismatch with the other writings on truth is very striking.

Commentators have been much irked by this chapter. Ross, for example, says that Aristotle's linguistic carelessness has made his meaning more obscure than it really is (Ross, 1970, 278). He then performs sanitizing surgery: he simply brackets the claim that being in the sense of truth is the most important kind of being (*to kyriôtata on*) from his edition of the Greek text and drops it from his translation.² Giovanni Reale (1968, 92n2) followed Ross in his Italian version. Werner Jaeger in the critical apparatus to his edition of the text suggests solving the problem not by deletion but by addition (Jaeger, 1963, *ad loc.*). Some commentators perform on this chapter what I like to call the *exegetical glissando*, that is a careful study of a string of fussy little matters without even alluding to the major problem that the chapter presents. Pseudo-Alexander is the most striking example here (Alexander, 1891, *ad loc.*). Felix Grayeff concluded that this chapter is not the work of Aristotle himself, but of some other member of the Lyceum, less clear-headed than his master (Grayeff, 1974, 207n.). And Jaeger is so embarrassed by what seem like Platonizing parts of this chapter that he offers this diagnosis:

Aristotle went over his *Metaphysics* late in his life when he had drifted back towards a more Platonic position; he altered things here and there to make the *Metaphysics* exhibit 'a gradual ascent up the scale of being to immaterial essence, and to make the whole work single in its aim, though constructed of such disparate materials' (Jaeger, 1960, 205). IX,10 was added as part of this exercise. To be honest, I find this incredible.

Let us, then, consider this chapter. It presents, as I see it, three problems to the modern reader. The text ascribes truth and falsity not only to beliefs and statements but also to the things, the objects that these beliefs and statements designate. And this distinction is later cross-divided with that between composites and incomposites (whatever those are). Thus truth and falsity are ascribed to four sorts of entities: (a) composite designators, (b) composite designata, (c) incomposite designators, and (d) incomposite designata. Only the first of these cases seems to make any sense. But (b) what does it mean to say that designata of statements or beliefs are true or false? A true fact is a pleonasm; there is nothing for facts to be true *to*. Further (c) how can a single word or a single incomposite idea be said to be true? And finally, (d) how can the designatum of a single word or incomposite idea be said to be true? In this paper I shall consider only the first of these three problems, though what I propose here can function as a springboard for attempting the remaining two. What, then, does Aristotle mean by ascribing truth and falsity to composite *things*?

The examples that Aristotle gives of composites are white stick and incommensurable diagonal.³ And he writes that being and nonbeing in the sense of truth or falsity

...in the case of the *things* is a matter of being combined or separated, so that he who thinks the separated to be separated and the combined to be combined has the truth, while he whose thought is in a state contrary to that of the objects is in falsity (1051b2-5).

The second part of this passage gives a rough correspondence theory of the truth of beliefs, but the first part seems to say that the things themselves are true if their elements are combined, and false if their elements are separate. I have read in a 'respectively' here, but it would seem to be amply justified by a later passage in the chapter:

Being, in the sense of truth, and nonbeing, in the sense of falsity in the one case (sc. composites) come to this: if (the elements are) combined, it is true; if they are not combined, it is false (1051b33-35).

So, things are true, or *are* in the sense of truth, if their parts are combined; false if their elements are separated. What does this mean?

Apart from the various ways of writing off this chapter that I mentioned, there have, I think, been three honest attempts to understand it, or rather this part of it, fathered respectively by Aquinas, Brentano and Heidegger. I would like consider these before I go on to make a further proposal. I begin with Brentano.

(i) *Brentano's turning the tables*. Brentano's principal answer to the question what is meant by ascribing truth and falsity to things consists in changing the direction of the truth relation. Just as statements can be true or false to the things they are about, so things can be true or false to the statements that are made about them. He writes:

...how is it that a thing can be called true or false? Obviously only in so far as it forms the object of a true or a false judgment. Thus things are called true or false with respect to our judgment.... (Brentano, 1975, 21)

It is true, I think, that we do very occasionally speak of things being true to judgments, though usually only when the judgment antedates the thing, when the judgment is a forecast. 'His subsequent career was true to my prediction', we might say. Notice a peculiarity of this usage, though. When we say that a judgment is true, we don't have to go on and say *to what* it is true, to which fact or thing. But when, with Brentano, we say that a fact or thing is true, we have to specify to what judgment it is true. For any fact is true to one judgment and false to another—its contradictory—, whereas a judgment is true or false to only one fact. All this, however, is surely an obscure back street of metaphysics, resting on a rare and awkward *façon de parler*. It would be odd to make much of it, and quixotic to see in it the principal kind of being.

And in any case, it cannot possibly be what Aristotle has in mind. On Brentano's account truth and falsity in things is a relational property; it consists in a relation between a thing and a judgment. But it is clear that Aristotle's notion of truth in things is that it is a nonrelational property. A composite thing is true if its elements are combined and false if its elements are separated. So Brentano cannot be right.

(ii) *Aquinas' veritas ontological causalis*. Aquinas fathered a long tradition concerning the relation between beliefs and facts. This tradition distinguishes *veritas logica*, the familiar kind of truth that belongs to beliefs and statements, from *veritas ontologica*, which belongs to the states of affairs and things that beliefs and statements designate. More particularly, the truth of things is *veritas ontologica causalis*: states of affairs have ontological truth when they cause true beliefs about themselves in the mind (Aquinas, 1950, *ad loc.*). So we might say that ontological truth is called truth by a figure of speech—a form of metonymy—

in which the cause bears a predicate which properly applies to its effect: the cause is named by its effect. Properly, it is the belief, the effect, that is true; but by metonymy we call its cause, the fact or thing, true as well.

This is a clever idea, and maybe it was what Aristotle had in mind. But it encounters a major problem. Any given fact will be the cause of a corresponding truth: the fact that the cat is on the mat is the cause of the truth of "the cat is on the mat". But any such fact is also the cause of a corresponding falsehood: the fact that the cat is on the mat is the cause of the falsity of "the cat is not on the mat". So there is just as much reason to call any fact an ontological falsehood as there is to call it an ontological truth. The device errs by liberalism

(iii) *Heidegger's unconcealedness*. The text of IX,10 was of crucial importance to Heidegger in his influential analysis of the Greek concept of truth. He examined the etymology of *alêtheia*, and found it to be made up of the negative prefix *a-* and a word which comes from *lanthanô*, to escape notice. That which is true, then, is that which does not escape notice, that which is unconcealed, dis-covered (Heidegger, 1962, H225). It follows that the primary locus for truth is not beliefs and propositions, but things, not designators but designata. Hence the importance of IX,10 to his view.

Famously, though, Charles Kahn argued that though Heidegger was right about the root he was wrong about the voice. The *alêthês* is not unconcealed but unconcealing (Kahn, 1973, 363ff). The evidence is the meaning of *alêthês* in the Homeric texts where, presumably, the earlier and deeper semantic strata are more patent. In those texts Kahn finds that *alêthês* is never used of either beliefs or things, but only of persons, and it means 'undeceiving', 'sincere', 'truthful'. These studies were pursued and these conclusions broadly confirmed by J.-P. Levet (1976). So the primitive idea of unconcealedness, which Heidegger finds in the early use of *alêtheia* cannot be what Aristotle is thinking of in ascribing truth and falsity to things.

(iv) *A further proposal*. For composites, having their ontological elements combined, is at one point called by Aristotle truth (1051b2); later it is called being (1051b18); and later it is called being in the sense of truth (1051b33). And the property of having ontological elements separated is called falsity, nonbeing, and nonbeing in the sense of falsity. This should lead us to suspect that truth, for things, is pretty much what we would call existence.⁴ It has always seemed very puzzling that, with his frequent refrain about the many senses of being, Aristotle never seems to notice the one sense that we would think primordial — the existential sense. If this is right, if being in the sense of truth as it belongs to

designata is simply existence, then it is particularly appropriate that this should be called the principal sense of being.

We must ask, though, (a) what exactly these composites are, and (b) why it would make sense for Aristotle to use the language of truth to express existence.

(a) What exactly are the composites? A *prima facie* objection to my proposal to find a general theory of existence in this chapter is that the composites that Aristotle is discussing, at least if we are to be guided by his examples, are not things in the ordinary sense, but states of affairs: the stick's being white and the diagonal's being incommensurable. To answer this objection I have to argue that Aristotle has in mind much more than states of affairs when he speaks of composites.⁵

We can advance the search for the nature of composites by asking what Aristotle means by *incomposites*. We might have supposed that when he came to discuss incomposites in the second part of the chapter (starting at 1051b16) we would find that they were simply the elements of which our earlier composites were made: stick, white, diagonal, incommensurable. Unfortunately the text of this part is more than usually crabbed and telegraphic, and its meaning is not very clear. What is clear, however, is that he is talking about some fairly lofty sorts of things. These incomposites are all said to exist not potentially but in actuality (1051b28), no error is possible about them — only ignorance (1051b27) —, they appear to be called 'being itself' (1051b29). Surely Aristotle is not here talking about anything so humble as a stick!

An important clue to understanding what is going on here is Aristotle's mention of *incomposite substances* (*tas mê synthetas ousias* 1051b27). This implies that there are also composite substances. Of course this is not news: individuals are composites of matter and form; essences are composites of genus and differentia, etc. But it suggests that Aristotle is here considering what happens *when one reaches the limits of discomposition*.⁶ That is, Aristotle in his discussion of composites was giving us a general recipe for understanding the existence of anything which can be discomposed: existence consists in the combination of the ontological parts. (Recall the analysis of 'a threshold exists' as 'a stone is placed in such-and-such a way', and other such examples, in *Metaphysics* VIII, 2.) The section of the chapter dealing with incomposites, then, is dealing with absolute incomposites, things which cannot be discomposed. And composites are everything else, including ordinary things like sticks and diagonals; they exist by having their parts combined.⁷

(b) From truth to existence. But why should Aristotle have called existence *truth*? How are these notions allied for him? They are not so allied for us.

Let me first say what the answer is not. It is a commonplace that the unqualified verb 'to be' in Greek has a veridical use: *tauta esti*—these things are—is the constant refrain of Socrates' interlocutors. So the verb 'to be' can be used to ascribe truth in Greek. That fact will explain why the language of being can be used to predicate truth, but it doesn't explain why the language of truth can be used to predicate being, existence. Language about feet in the Bible, we are told, is often used euphemistically to designate genital organs, but we do not infer that if sexual organs were mentioned they would be a euphemism for feet. What makes it apt for Aristotle to see existence as a kind of truth?

The answer I want to defend is that what Aristotle means by the truth of things is what we might call their reality,⁸ and of course it is not so hard at first glance to understand how that should be regarded as meaning their existence.

First the positive evidence. *alêthês* in Greek can mean 'real'. Euripides, for example, in the *Orestes* (414) speaks of a 'real friend'.

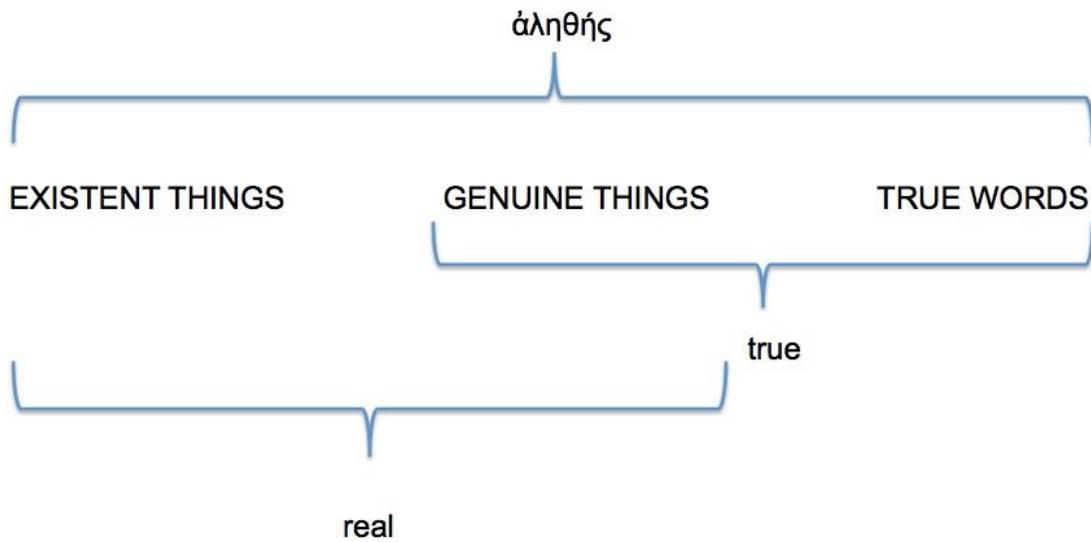
Against this proposal several objections will be urged. In the first place, the normal Greek word for 'real' or 'genuine' is *alêthinos*, not *alêthês*. Secondly, and more forcefully, a real friend, a true friend, is not exactly an existent friend, but one who is no sham: reality in its normal sense seems not at all the same as existence. An unreal friend, a fairweather friend, nonetheless exists.

Let us take these objections in turn. First, *alêthinos* and *alêthês*. If we may trust the dictionary, the only difference between these two is that *alêthinos* cannot be used of words, but *alêthês* can. Both can be used of people, meaning truthful, or of things, meaning real.

The second objection was that existence and reality are not the same thing. 'Real' is a word whose use is heavily dependent on the pragmatics of language: we only call a thing real to rule out the suggestion or suspicion that it is 'sham, half-baked, makeshift...' Austin has located the concept of reality firmly in the terrain of plastic flowers, toy buses, real eccentrics and genuine cowhide (Austin, 1970). Surely, however, this is too swift. One of the meanings of reality, though perhaps not the commonest, is existence. Is Santa Claus real?

Moreover, Aristotle was clearly aware that existence was only one, and a rather special, meaning of *alêthês*. Or at least he was aware that non-existence was only one meaning of *pseudês*. In $\Delta 29$, the chapter on falsity, *pseudos*, he says that *pseudos* can belong to *things* (*pragmata*) in two senses: meaning that the thing in question does not exist because its elements are separated (1034b22), or else that the thing, though it does exist, is such as not to seem like what it is. The latter is exactly the case of plastic flowers. So Aristotle recognizes, explicitly, two senses of 'real', one in which it means existent and amounts to having its elements combined, and the other in which it means genuine.⁹ And we have seen that, *pace* Austin, both of these senses occur also in English.

But what is the connection between *truth* and reality? *Aléthês* means 'true', but it also means 'real', and one sense of 'real' is 'existing'. All of this is obscured in English because, although 'true' can mean real in the sense of 'genuine' (True Cross, true megalomaniac etc.), it cannot ever mean real in the sense of 'existing'. The English words do not map onto the Greek, and that, I believe, is the simple source of the discomfort we feel in reading this chapter:



NOTES

¹ There has been debate about whether the adverb *kyriôtata* should be taken with *on* (Burnyeat et al., 1984, p. 256) or with *alêthes* (Crivelli, 2004, p. 236). The latter view would lessen the tension with VI, 4, but it seems to me grammatically impossible. See the discussion in Long, 2011, p. 172, n.45.

² Jonathan Barnes restored the phrase in his revision of the Oxford translation.

³ The text reads: *hôsper to leukon <to> xylon ê to asummetron tên diametron*. The *<to>* was supplied by Bywater, presumably to give parity of grammatical structure to the mention of the two examples. I am not sure that it is called for. Aristotle in this section makes much of the distinction between accidental predication — sometimes so and sometimes not so — and essential predication — always so and impossible to be otherwise. The examples are, I suppose, meant to pick up this distinction. The first *to* in each case is presumably the *to* of mention; the article *tên* with *diametron* may be there to show that it is diameters *in general* that are being talked about; i.e. it may be the universalizing definite article. This would underline the point that incommensurability is a property not just of this or that diagonal, but of all diagonals, of diagonals in general. If that is the force of the definite article, then we neither need nor want one in the case of a white stick. It is not the universal stick that is white.

⁴ This view was suggested by Halper, 1989, p. 219.

⁵ Crivelli (2004, p. 6) suggests that Aristotle's composites fall into two classes, states of affairs and material substances. He claims that all states of affairs, true and false, exist; truth is, for them, a further property. I have difficulty making sense of this.

⁶ In *de Anima* III, 6, which treats of the knowledge of simples, Aristotle distinguishes things which are potentially simple from things which are actually simple (430b6ff). Although his example there has to do with quantitative simplicity, the point is the same: some things which are actually compound can be treated as simples; others are simple in themselves.

⁷ What kind of existence is in play? Kahn's subtle work on the verb 'be' in Greek has isolated three different uses of the verb which might be called existential (as well as a number of others which might be confused with existential uses: veridical,

locative, etc). These existential uses are (1) the existential copula: 'There is a certain Socrates, a wise man, a student of things aloft ... who makes the weaker argument the stronger'; (2) the existential sentence operator: 'There is someone (no one) who does such-and-such'; (3) the existential predicate: 'There are no gods'. Kahn sees (3) as growing out of (2), which in turn grows out of (1). The existential verb 'to be' stems thus from the copula (Kahn, 1986, 9-12).

In claiming that Aristotle in IX,10 of the *Metaphysics* is flagging an existential sense or use of the verb 'to be', I have in mind the last and strongest case: a flat claim that so-and-so is part of the furniture of the world—a claim that something or other is indeed there to be met with.

⁸ Kahn suggests that truth and reality are the direction in which to look for the emergence of the concept of existence in Greek philosophy. See Kahn, 1976.

⁹ Absent from IX,10 is any notion of truth (reality) as genuineness.

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