

BEING AND ESSENCE IN CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS OF ARISTOTLE*

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1. BEING AND EXISTENCE IN CONTEMPORARY “ANALYTICAL ONTOLOGY”

In the proceedings of the Conference on “Analytical Ontology”, held at University of Innsbruck in September 1997, Peter van Inwagen¹ published an interesting paper, where, from a point of view which he defines “broadly Quinean”, he argued in favour of the following four theses: (1) Being is not an activity; (2) Being is the same as existence; (3) Being is univocal; (4) The single sense of being or existence is adequately captured by the existential quantifier of formal logic. The first thesis is clearly an anticipation of the third. It is supported by affirming that the differences of being, alleged by philosophers who conceive it as an activity (*e.g.* Sartre and the existential phenomenological tradition), are only differences in nature, which do not concern being, once admitted the distinction between a thing’s being and its nature. The second thesis is defended by referring to Quine, and states that there is no difference between what is expressed by ‘there is’ and ‘exists’. The third thesis is defended by means of the observation that existence is closely tied to number, because “to say that unicorns do not exist is to say something very much like saying that the number of unicorns is 0”, while “to say that horses exist is to say that the number of horses is 1 or more”. On the basis of this observation van Inwagen [1998] can conclude that “the univocacy of number and the intimate

connection between number and existence should convince us that there is at least very good reason to think that existence is univocal". The fourth thesis is the most developed, by means of arguments drawn from formal logic, about which I am not able to judge. But they – this is at least my impression – only explain and justify in a more sophisticated way the main argument brought in defence of the third thesis.

What impressed me on reading this paper, as an old frequenter of Aristotle's philosophy, was the third thesis, which van Inwagen formulates in opposition to a modern philosopher who never concealed his Aristotelian inspiration, namely, Gilbert Ryle. This philosopher, in a famous page of *The Concept of Mind*, affirmed:

It is perfectly proper to say, in one logical tone of voice, that there exist minds and to say, in another logical tone of voice, that there exist bodies. But these expressions do not indicate two different species of existence [...] They indicate two different senses of 'exist', somewhat as 'rising' has different senses in 'the tide is rising', 'hopes are rising' and 'the average age of death is rising'. A man would be thought to make a poor joke who said that three things are now rising, namely the tide, hopes and the average age of death. It would be just as good or bad a joke to say that there exist prime numbers and Wednesdays and public opinion and navies; or that there exist both minds and bodies. (Ryle [1949], p.23)

According to van Inwagen, "Ryle has made no case for the thesis that existence is equivocal". And he adds – but it is not clear whether referring to Ryle or in general – "I know no argument for this thesis that is even faintly plausible". This enables him to say: "We must therefore conclude that existence is univocal".

In fact, Ryle was not the only philosopher who admitted different senses of being. Before him John L. Austin, the first who introduced Aristotle in the analytical Oxford philosophy, in his famous article entitled "The Meaning of a Word" (1940) claimed that "'exist' is used paronymously", *i.e.* with a "primary nuclear sense" and other senses dependent on it, just as 'healthy' in Aristotle (Austin [1970], p.71). In *Sense and Sensibilia* he wrote:

'real' (the translation of the Greek, '*on*', *i.e.* 'being') is *not* a normal word at all, but is highly exceptional; exceptional in this respect that, unlike

‘yellow’ or ‘horse’ or ‘walk’, it does not have one single specifiable, always-the-same *meaning*. (Even Aristotle saw through this idea). *Nor* does it have a large number of different meanings – it is not *ambiguous*, even ‘systematically’. (Austin [1962], p.64, italics in the text)

As everybody knows, the doctrine that being, and perhaps also existence, is at least not univocal, if not equivocal, is distinctive of Aristotle. He refers to it several times.² Admittedly, Aristotle never brings any argument in defence of this doctrine. By so doing, he gives the impression of considering this doctrine perfectly evident, though he was clearly persuaded that he was the first philosopher who discovered this truth. He blames in fact not only Parmenides, Zeno and Melissus, *i.e.* the Eleatics, for having conceived being as univocal, but also Democritus, and even Plato.³ In the whole *Corpus Aristotelicum* there is – as far as I know – only one passage where Aristotle makes an attempt to prove that being is not univocal, at *Metaphysics* B 3, 998^b22-27. This is an astonishing situation, but just for this reason the passage is worthy of some attention, greater than that which is usually reserved to it even by Aristotle’s interpreters.

Even van Inwagen’s commentator Gary Rosenkrantz fails to mention this passage. On the one hand, he admits that, because of the intimate connection between the ‘is’ of existence and the ‘is’ of predication, or the ‘is’ of existence and the ‘is’ of identity, “until van Inwagen provides some reason to think that predication and identity are univocal, his argument against the equivocacy of ‘exist’ is not clearly valid” (Rosenkrantz [1998]). On the other hand, he argues, this time against Ryle, that there are species (not *genera* or different modes) of existence, because the system of the ontological categories “has entity (or entityhood) as its *summum genus*”. But this is exactly what Aristotle denies in the quoted passage. Before analysing this passage, however, let us say something about the relation between being and existence in Aristotle.

2. BEING AND EXISTENCE IN ARISTOTLE

In his article “On Aristotle’s Notion of Existence”, Jaakko Hintikka claimed not only that Aristotle did not admit “the Frege-Russell thesis

about the ambiguity of verbs for being like the Greek *einai*”, according to which these verbs express either identity, or predication, or existence, or finally subsumption, but also that Aristotle consciously considered this thesis, and rejected it (Hintikka [1999], p.782). This would be documented in *Metaph.* Γ 2, 1003^b22-30, where Aristotle says that “*to be* and *to be one* are the same [...] since ‘one man’ and ‘man’ as well as ‘existent man’ and ‘man’ are the same thing, in that the reduplication in the statement ‘he is a man and an existent man’ yields no fresh meaning”. Aristotle was operating with an unitarian concept of being, says Hintikka, because “in the fullest sense, *einai* had to comprise all of the first three Frege-Russell senses of being, that is predication, existence, and identity”.

This does not mean, Hintikka argues, that Aristotle did not introduce distinctions between different uses, and even different senses, of being other than the Frege-Russell ones. “The most prominent of them are the distinction between being in different categories as well as the contrast between potential being and actual being”. In this way Hintikka shows that it is impossible to isolate, in Aristotle, the existential from the predicative sense of being, and that, since the latter sense is multiple, inasmuch as there are many kinds of predicates, *i.e.* the “categories”, the existential sense is also multiple.

The same result had been reached five years before by Lesley Brown. By focusing on the use of the verb ‘to be’ in Greek philosophy, she had concluded that, while distinguishing ‘to be something’, *i.e.* the predicative use of being, from ‘to be *haplos*’, *i.e.* its existential use, Aristotle thinks that they are closely connected. So, when he claims that ‘is’ is said in many ways, it is impossible to decide whether he is analysing existential or predicative uses. Lesley Brown says

Aristotle insists on the inter-relations of the question ‘Is *X*?’ and ‘What is *X*?’. [...] The distinctions he does consider philosophically important – chiefly that between essential and accidental being, and the different ways in which, as he puts it, ‘being is said’ which correspond to the different categories – cut across the syntactic distinction between complete and incomplete, and do not correspond to the semantic distinction between ‘exists’ and the copula. (Brown [1994], pp.233-236).

The connection between the existential and the predicative sense of being, which is not a confusion, is at the basis also of a famous paper by G.E.L. Owen, published for the first time in 1965. According to Owen, when Aristotle says that “being is said in many ways” (*pol-lachos legetai to on*), for ‘being’ he means ‘existence’ or, to mark the role of ‘on’ as a grammatical predicate, ‘existent’ (Owen [1965]). “At various places – Owen observes – Aristotle says things which show how the verb ‘to be’ in its existential role or roles can have many senses”. He says in *De anima* II, 415^b13, that “for living things, to be is to be alive”, so that, when we say that a man ‘is’, we mean that he ‘is living’, because, if he is dead, we cannot say that he ‘is’. Aristotle generalizes the point when he speaks of the ‘being’ of a thing (its *ousia* or *einai*) as what is explained by its definition, that is, by the account of the sort of thing it is. This means that the word ‘is’ is used in a variety of ways corresponding to the conditions of the being of a thing, as its material, its position, its time, *etc.* For instance, as Aristotle himself observes in *Metaph.* H 2, 1042^b15-1043^a7), a threshold *is*, in that it is situated thus and so: for it ‘to be’ means its being so situated; and ‘the ice *is*’ means that it is solidified in such and such way.

On the basis of Aristotle’s theory of categories, Owen continues, to be is always to be either a substance of a certain sort, or a quality of a certain sort, or a quantity of a certain sort. The categories are the most general headings under which other classifications are grouped. No category is a species of another, and no category is a species of *being* and *what there is*, for there is no such *genus* as *being* (cf. the passage in *Metaph.* B). So the verb ‘to be’ in its existential role enjoys a number of irreducibly different senses.

But Owen admits that in Aristotle there is also another sense of existence. In the *Analytica Posteriora* he distinguishes the question *ei estin* (“whether *A* exists”) from the question *ti estin* (“what *A* is”) (89^b34-90^a1). In this case Aristotle does not say that ‘exists’ has a different sense for different kinds of subjects. Instead he says that we can only be said to know of *A*’s existence to the extent that we know what it is to be *A* (93^a21-33). According to Owen, this is the use of the verb ‘to be’ most commonly called ‘existential’ at present. It is the use which is rendered by the French ‘*il y a*’ or by the German ‘*es gibt*’, and it is represented in predicate logic by the existential quantifier.



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