An Introduction to the First Five Chapters of Aristotle's Categories

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1. Introduction:

In an earlier paper I have argued that a satisfactory account of Aristotle's postulation of individuals, both substantial and non-substantial, in the Categories can be achieved by taking seriously his characterization of these individuals as things that are 'one in number' and by interpreting this characterization as 'a unit in a possible act of enumeration'. This approach to the Categories has important consequences for the interpretation of the remainder of the work. In this essay I wish to present an account of the first five chapters (bar chapter 4 which lays out the categories themselves) based on the former paper.

In particular, I wish to examine the four-fold division of 'the things that are' in chapter 2 and the two relations of 'being said of' and 'being in' (or, rather, 'existing in') that are used to construct this four-fold division, and the nature of 'primary substance' (or, rather, 'primary being') and the basis for its distinction from 'secondary substance' (or, rather, 'secondary being'). The account that will be developed here is substantially and importantly different from any other that I am aware of, and, even if it does not secure conviction, its publication will hopefully make the dogma that the Categories is a 'common-sensical' work less readily tenable and force a re-thinking of the usual account of the work.

I wish to suggest that 'the things that are' are 'things that exist and in existing are something', that the two relations ('being said of' and 'being in') are existential, that 'primary substance' – πρωτη οὐσία – is the existentially primary mode of existence of individuals and that their separation from 'secondary substances' is due partly to a hypothesis of count-nouns in language, partly to a recognition that, to the extent that counting forms a basis of the work, to that extent an ability to use language is presupposed in the classification of 'the things that are', and, finally, that Aristotle cannot simply view 'secondary substances' as items of language because he recognizes

1 "Individuals in Aristotle's Categories," Phronesis, 17 (1972) 107-123.
that we can have a man as a unit of enumeration without there being any one particular man that is that unit.

2. Homonymy, Paronymy and Synonymy:

As these notions are introduced in the first chapter of the work examples of synonyms would be all the individual men that there might be, of homonyms a man and a man in a picture, of paronyms all the brave. All these are, so to speak, of the same ontological type. However, certain writers have wanted to exempt paronymy from this type of interpretation. On their account paronyms are not, for example, all the brave, one to another, but a brave man and bravery. Thus, Hintikka writes:

"...paronymy appears as a notion incomparable with synonymy and homonymy: Things are defined to be synonyms and homonyms in so far as they share the same name, whereas two things are paronyms when they are called by different 'names' (terms) of which one is nevertheless derived (grammatically) from the other,"²

and, in more linguistic frame of mind, Owen claims that:

"...the definition of paronyms is merely grammatical. It shows...how adjectives can be manufactured from abstract nouns by modifying the word-ending."³

Now, though there is no need to read the characterization of paronymy as it is given in chapter 1 in this way, whereby the paronyms are the item called by an adjective which is an inflected form of a 'name' for a property and the property 'named', and hence as producing an asymmetry with the characterizations of homonymy and synonymy in the first chapter, these writers have a point. For, as 'paronymy' is actually employed in the work, the relata are indeed what they claim (v. 6 b 11-14, 10 a 27-b 11, 2 a 27-29; v. too Phys. 245 b 11-12). This 'twist', however, is not restricted to paronymy. As homonymy and synonymy are employed in the work the relata are not items of the same ontological status. Thus, examples of synonymy are a particular man and what he is, his eidos: