Aristotle on the Existential Import of Singular Sentences

MICHAEL V. WEDIN

Aristotle is sometimes held to the thesis [T1] that singular affirmative sentences imply the existence of a bearer for the grammatical subject of the sentence. Thus the truth of “Socrates is sick” requires that something exist which is identical with Socrates. Attribution of T1 to Aristotle can be justified by appeal to Categories 13 b 27-33 which seems to contain a straightforward statement of the thesis. Unfortunately, T1’s status becomes problematic in light of On Interpretation 21 a 24-28, for here Aristotle seems to deny T1 explicitly. This, at least, is the consensus among his commentators. We are thus faced with a serious inconsistency in Aristotle’s account of singular sentences, an inconsistency most interpreters are content merely to mention, if they notice it at all. The first part of this paper advances some suggestions for reconciling the troublesome passages. In the second part I draw out certain related features of Aristotle’s theory of singular sentences.

I

Suppose we begin with Categories 13 b 27-33, the passage which commits Aristotle to T1.3

... 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 “he is sick” is false but “he is not sick” true.

Although we cannot read Aristotle as here providing a completely adequate analysis of singular sentences, what he says will surely be part of such an analysis. His interest is mainly in the relation between the truth value of singular sentences and the existence of non-grammatical subjects. It is clear that for Aristotle the relation is not presupposition, for his sample sentences are granted truth value even if their grammatical subjects lack bearers. Rather, Aristotle appears to construe the relation in terms of the now familiar principle

1. Fa ⊑ (∃ x) (x = a),

for the final sentence of the passage asserts, in effect, that “Fa” is false should a not exist. And this, of course, is equivalent to (1). Hence, should
Socrates not exist, all affirmative sentences about him are unambiguously false and all such negative sentences unambiguously true. Intuitively, the idea is just that if Socrates does not exist, then a fortiori he cannot have properties. Thus sentences attributing such to him must be false.4

Should the subject exist, on the other hand, we are told that one of “Fa” and “¬Fa” will be true. We are not, however, told which — so Aristotle recognizes (correctly) that a’s existence is sufficient neither for the truth of “Fa” nor for the truth of “¬Fa.” In particular, he must have in mind

2. ¬Fa = ¬(∃x)(x = a) ∨ (∃x)(x = a & ¬Fx)

as the truth conditions for negative singular sentences and

3. Fa = (∃x)(x = a & Fx)

as the truth conditions for affirmative singular sentences. For (2) and (3) make quite perspicuous the compatibility of a’s existence with the truth of either “Fa” or “¬Fa.”

The *Categories* passage is impressive evidence. It states T1 clearly and concisely with no hint of restriction as to its range. The sole qualification we seem obliged to honor is that T1 govern sentences with present tense verbs. Otherwise it might encourage counting “Socrates was a philosopher” false on the grounds that Socrates no longer exists. Even this qualification, which is not really relevant to our interest in T1, would be otiose were all sentences construed as eternal. But Aristotle’s remarks elsewhere in the *Categories* rule this out.5 So Aristotle looks quite comfortable with T1 as stipulated. It is thus doubly surprising to find in *On Interpretation* signs of his rejecting the thesis.

The relevant lines occur in a passage whose general interest and importance for our problem are sufficient to merit its full citation.

(a) It is true to speak of the particular also unqualifiedly [κατὰ τὸν πυρὸν καὶ ἀπλ도록], for example calling some particular man a man or some particular white man white.

(b) But not always, however. Whenever in what is added some opposite is contained from which a contradiction follows, it is not true but false, for example calling a dead man a man. But whenever no such opposite is contained, it is true. (c) Or rather whenever it is contained, it is always not true; while whenever it is not contained, it is not always true. (d) As for instance, Homer is something [ἐστίν πε], say a poet. Does he therefore exist [ἄν ποὺ τεῦχει ἐστίν]? No, for the “is” [τὸ ἔστιν] is not predicated of Homer derivatively [κατὰ συμβεβηκός]; for it is because he is a poet, not in its own right [ἄλλο τά διὰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ], that the “is” [τὸ ἔστιν] is predicated of Homer. (e) Therefore, (e.1) where what is predicated both contains no contrariety if definitions are put instead of names and is predicated per se [κατὰ ἐκ τοῦ] and (e.2) [where what is predicated] is not predicated derivatively [μὴ κατὰ συμβεβηκός], in these cases it will be true to speak of the particular thing also unqualifiedly. (f) It is not true to say that what is not [τὸ μὴ ὅ], because it is thought about, is something that is [ἐστίν πε]; for what is thought about it is not that it is, but that it is not [δὲ γὰρ αὐτοῦ ὅ ὅ ἔστιν ὅτι ἔστιν, ἄλλοτε ὅ ὅ ἔστιν].6