Aristotle’s Theory of Assertions: A Reply to William Jacobs

PETER SIMPSON

In a recent article in Phronesis (XXIV, 1979, 282-300) William Jacobs attributes to Aristotle a theory of assertions, according to which if the subject of a sentence fails to refer to an actual entity it cannot qualify as an assertion. This attribution is made again in an article in Philosophical Studies (37, 1980, 419-428), where Jacobs expands the theory to indicate that the same holds of the predicate as well, and that if, in the case of either term, no actual thing is denoted, there is no assertion. This position of his is based on Aristotle’s statement that an assertion “affirms or denies something of something” (τι κατὰ / ἄνω πνῶς; De Interpretatione 17a20-22, 25-26), and on the further premise that for Aristotle ‘thing’ (τι) can only signify an actual entity, not a word or a concept, or a possible or fictional entity. So, for instance, the sentences ‘All dogs are mammals’ and ‘Some men are not white animals’ cannot qualify as assertions unless there actually exist mammals and dogs, white animals and men. About this theory and its attribution to Aristotle I would like to make a number of points.

1. When applied to Aristotle the theory is absurd and clearly so, for since assertions are defined by Aristotle as sentences that are true or false (ib. 17a2-3), it will follow that any sentence with a term or terms not referring to an actual thing will be neither, including these: ‘Centaurs are mythical creatures’ and ‘No dog is a centaur’. The same will be so with such negations of existence as ‘There is no king of France’ and ‘There are no centaurs’ (or, to put them into subject/predicate form, ‘No one is king of France’ and ‘Nothing is a centaur’). All these sentences state something true and it would be absurd to deny the fact, yet this is just what the theory compels us to do. And this is a good reason for not attributing it to Aristotle.

2. The identification of τι with ‘actual thing’ (leaving aside, for the moment, Jacobs arguments for it) is sufficiently refuted by a catalogue of some of the many kinds of assertions we find in Aristotle’s writings. Not only does he make them (that is, say something true or false) about actual things but also about words and concepts (as in the logical works and the Metaphysics), about imaginary or opinable objects (as when he says centaurs and not-being are not), about universal natures (as when he talks of the ‘what it is to be’ of something) and even about assertions themselves (for to say that assertions affirm or deny something of something is to make an assertion about assertions). None of these can sensibly be called actual entities. In fact Aristotle makes assertions, like any thinking man, of as many kinds of object as can be thought, and this can only mean, if we are to take his statement about assertions seriously, that far from ‘thing’ (τι) being confined to ‘actual entity’, it is, for Aristotle, as unlimited as thought itself.

3. Jacobs’ principal argument in support of his contention about the meaning of τι is drawn from De Interpretatione 21a32-33, where Aristotle says: “because not-be-
ing is an object of opinion, it is not true to say that it is something (δυνατόν), for the opinion of it is not that it is but that it is not". Jacobs takes this as showing that Aristotle denied that something opinable or imaginary was a thing, but apart from this showing directly the opposite (for to say of not-being that it is not, as one does if one has an opinion to this effect, is to make an assertion about it, and so to indicate it is a 'thing', at any rate according to Aristotle's understanding of assertions), Jacobs has misunderstood the force of the remark. Aristotle is not saying that not-being is not in any way at all (on the contrary it is as something opinable), but that it is not in an unqualified sense. This is confirmed by Sophistical Refutations 167a1-2 where he says that the argument 'not-being is opinable, therefore not-being is' is an example of the fallacy of concluding something simply from a premise that is true only in a certain respect, and hence where he evidently is admitting that in a certain respect, at least, not-being is indeed something.

Jacobs also argues that since for Aristotle, unlike Plato, the being of a universal is dependent upon its being instantiated, where universals occur in assertions actual individuals must still be denoted. But neither is this so, for when universal natures are talked of in science reference to any actual particulars is excluded since these are only accidentally involved (science, according to Posterior Analytics 75b21-5, is of the eternal and incorruptible and only accidentally of the corruptible, and it is the actually existing particular, as Metaphysics 1039b20-1040a2 makes clear, which is the corruptible), and science does not consider what is merely accidental to it (so Metaphysics 1026b2-11, 1027a19-20). Universal natures are indeed, for Aristotle, dependent on particular instantiations for actually existing in the world, but not, as the above makes plain, for being thought about and appearing in assertions.

4. The significance of the statement "assertions affirm or deny something of something" is, it seems to me, partly grasped by Jacobs where he says that when Aristotle speaks of predication his attention is on 'things' not on words or concepts, and that thus he views predication 'ontologically' as a relationship between extralinguistic, not linguistic, entities. Jacobs, however, is too quick to conclude from this that assertions must therefore be about actual things. It is not necessary, indeed, as I have argued, it is false, to interpret Aristotle in this way. In view of the fact that Aristotle does make assertions about words and concepts, besides a good deal else, the point of his 'ontological' understanding of predication cannot be that words or concepts, or anything that is not an actual thing, are not capable of being spoken of in assertions. Rather it must be that what is spoken of in them and joined together in the predication, is not the words used in the verbal expression of the assertion or the concepts used in thinking it, but the object or objects so expressed and so conceived (whether this object be itself a word or a concept, or not). In this way predication is of something extralinguistic and 'ontological', for it is always of the objects or 'things' signified, not of the verbal signs doing the signifying (this is, I think, the force of τι in Aristotle's statement), even if, as does happen, this object is not an actual entity but a possible or fictional one, or even a word or a concept.

Taken in this way, Aristotle's statement about assertions has an acceptable sense, and saves us from the absurdities and difficulties that Jacobs' interpretation throws us into.

5. The theory of assertions Jacobs attributes to Aristotle is introduced in the