In his British Academy lecture, “The Platonism of Aristotle”, Professor G.E.L. Owen provides an account of how Aristotle arrived at his theory of predication and the categories. He argues that both developed as a result of Aristotle’s criticism of Plato, in particular as a result of his reflection on the Third Man Argument (TMA). In this paper I present an alternative account of Aristotle’s response to the TMA. If this account is correct, it is unlikely that Aristotle’s theory of predication and the categories developed as a result of reflection on the TMA.

I. Strong and Weak Predicates and Predications

Owen suggests that Aristotle distinguished between two sorts of predications, strong and weak. (1) is a strong predication, (2) a weak predication:

(1) Socrates is a man.
(2) Socrates is white.

(1) is a strong predication because ‘man’ “is used in the same sense whether we use it to describe Socrates or to speak of the kind or species under which Socrates falls. For suppose we ask what man is: the answer to this general question (say, ‘a featherless biped’) will be equally applicable to the particular man Socrates” (135-6). (2) is a weak predication because “to say that Socrates is white is to say that he is coloured in a certain way; but if we go on to ask what white is, we shall have to say, not that white is coloured in a certain way, but that white is a certain colour” (136). Owen also characterizes the difference between (1) and (2) as that between essential and accidental predication; Socrates is essentially a man, accidentally white (137).

Owen sometimes says, not that (1) and (2) are strong and weak predications, but that ‘man’ and ‘white’ are strong and weak predicates.

This might only be to say that in (1) ‘man’ is predicated strongly, whereas in (2) ‘white’ is predicated weakly. But consider (3):

(3) Della Robbia white is white.

(3) is a strong predication no less than is (1); Della Robbia white is essentially white, just as Socrates is essentially a man. I am unsure whether
Owen will say that in (3) ‘white’ functions as a strong or as a weak predicate. He might say that it functions as a strong predicate, since (3) is a strong predication. In this case, the same predicates can be both weak and strong, depending on what sorts of predications they figure in; a predicate is strong, when used in a strong predication, and weak when used in a weak predication. Let us call this the relative conception of strong and weak predicates.

On the other hand, Owen might want to say that ‘man’ is always a strong predicate, ‘white’ always a weak predicate — irrespective of the fact that ‘white’, at least, can figure in both weak and strong predications. In this case, a predicate is weak or strong simpliciter: strong predicates are substance predicates, weak predicates are nonsubstance predicates. Let us call this the absolute conception of strong and weak predicates.

Since nonsubstances have essences, the relative and absolute conceptions of strong and weak predicates do not coincide. (I do not dispute that Aristotle makes both contrasts, nor does Owen seem to. The issue is only which contrast Owen intends, when he distinguishes between strong and weak predicates.) As we shall see, Owen’s account of Aristotle’s response to the TMA looks different, depending on whether we assume the relative or absolute reading.

Whichever reading we assume, however, it is clear that Owen believes that the contrast between strong and weak predicates is directly relevant to the TMA. In particular, he argues that Aristotle came to believe that strong and weak predicates function differently with respect to the TMA. In what follows, I shall dispute this claim, for both readings of the contrast between strong and weak predicates. Aristotle consistently offers a general response to the TMA, one meant to work in the same way for all predicates — for substance and nonsubstance, essential and accidental predicates alike. Neither his contrast between substances and nonsubstances, nor his contrast between essence and accidents, is directly relevant to the TMA.

II. Owen and the TMA

Owen argues that Aristotle’s distinction between strong and weak predicates arose from reflection on the TMA. The TMA purports to show that a theory of forms is vulnerable to a vicious infinite regress. Corresponding to a given predicate ‘F’, the Platonists want just one form, the F; the TMA purports to show that, if there is one form corresponding to ‘F’, there are an infinite number of them.

Accounts of the premises of the TMA vary. Following a suggestion of