Aristotle's Definitions of Relatives in Cat. 7*

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1. Chapter 7 of Aristotle's Categories is dedicated to a study of relatives, which are called "πρός τι". At the very beginning a characterization, or definition, of them is given, which runs as follows:

(A) We call relatives all such things as are said to be just what they are, of or than other things, or in some other way in relation to something else (Cat. 7, 6a36-37; Ackrill's translation).

This definition is followed by some examples. Aristotle says:

(B) For example, larger (τὸ μεῖζὸν) is said to be what it is (τοῦθ' ὑπὲρ ἕστιν) than something); similarly with all other such cases (Cat. 7, 6a37-b2; Ackrill's translation). Similarly with all other such cases (Cat. 7, 6a37-b2; Ackrill's translation slightly modified).

The important point for the interpretation of these passages is to establish what τὸ μεῖζὸν and τὸ διπλάςιον refer to, since what we have to count as relatives depends on this question. An obvious answer to it is to take τὸ μεῖζὸν and τὸ διπλάςιον as meaning "what is larger" and "what is double", as Ackrill in his translation suggests. Then the sense of the first example given in (B) would be that an object a which is larger than an object b is called what it is, i.e. larger, with reference to b. Consequently, a has to be called a relative according to the definition proposed by (A) and,

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1 Simplicius (In Cat. 159, 9-11) points out that it is impossible to give a proper definition of relatives, since they are summa genera and a definiens must contain the genus of its definiendum. But Aristotle calls the characterization of relatives that he gives in text (A) a ὁρισμὸς at Cat. 7, 8a29 and 33.
in general, a relative is whatever stands in a relation to something. However reasonable this view may be, it entails a consequence that is paradoxical if it is considered in the light of Aristotle's ontology and of the meaning that he assigns to the categories. Everything stands in an identity relation to itself and, according to the interpretation of (A) we are discussing, it has to be called a relative. The category of relatives would have then the same extension as the class of existing things. In order to avoid this difficulty one would have to deny that identity is a relation, saying for instance that a relation holds only if two different terms are related, and not if two occurrences of the same term are in question. But this is not a very happy move. However, there is an even worse consequence. Consider the proposition:

\[*\]
as taller than b

and take "a" to stand for an individual substance, e.g. "Aldous". According to the hypothesis one should say that Aldous is a relative, being taller than someone. But Aristotle denies explicitly that an individual substance can be put among the relatives (Cat. 7, 8a16-18), since Aldous is not what he is, i.e. Aldous, of or than something else. One might try to escape this objection by saying that Aldous is not a relative if he is considered qua Aldous, but he is a relative if he is considered qua taller. In general, if "F" stands for a predicate such as "taller", "larger", "double", "son", "slave" and so on, and a is F, one could say that a is a relative qua F. According to this view things which are called relatives are individual things considered under a given description.

I do not think that this interpretation captures the real sense of Aristotle's words, if we give the qua-expression its natural meaning. In my view "a qua F is G" means simply that a is G because it is F, i.e. that "a is G" can be inferred from "a is F". Then if it is true to say that Aldous qua taller is a relative, it follows that Aldous is a relative — against Aristotle's explicit denial. Of course, one might try to give a different meaning to the qua-expression. Whatever its sense may be, it should be such that "a qua F is G" does not imply "a is G", and I find it difficult to believe that any such sense can be given.

Perhaps another road should be looked for. In order to illustrate it, it is useful to distinguish two senses of the word "relative". On the one hand, we can say that a is a relative because a is related to something. In this sense Aldous, being taller than someone, can be called a relative. On the other

\footnote{This is also the way in which the qua-expression is interpreted by Lear, pp. 168-174.}