Relational Attributes in Aristotle*

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Aristotle’s theory of relations involves serious difficulties of interpretation. By attempting to solve some of the problems posed by J.L. Ackrill in his famous commentary on the Categories (Ackrill, 1963), I hope to contribute to a better understanding of Aristotle’s statements on the nature and status of relational attributes. In general, my procedure has been to analyse the criteria by which entities are supposed to fall under the category of “the relative” (τὰ πρὸς τὰ). The following topics will be considered: i) Aristotle’s two definitions of relatives in Categories 7, ii) the pseudo-relational character of the parts of substances, and iii) the three-fold classification of relatives in Metaphysics Δ 15. A corollary of these discussions will be that relations may have played for Aristotle a far more conspicuous role in the definition of substances and attributes than has been hitherto acknowledged.

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The most extensive treatment of relational attributes by Aristotle is to be found in Categories 7 and Metaphysics Δ 15, and the present article is accordingly centered around these two texts. However, reference will occasionally be made to passages from the Topics, Sophistical Refutations and other works, whenever they might shed light on the problems discussed. Although I am aware that Aristotle’s philosophical system experienced important changes during its development and cannot always be treated as a whole, I have found no evidence that could point to a significant variation in his theory of relational attributes.

Aristotle avails himself, certainly, of different approaches when speak-

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ing of relations. In the *Topics*, for instance, he uses his conception of relational attributes, as well as that of other categories, to analyse the logical structure of what is said, and to distinguish it from the surface likeness of the words used for saying it. In the *Categories* a grammatical criterion, very similar to one previously used by Plato, is given for the identification of relational attributes, but it soon reveals itself as insufficient, and is apparently replaced by a more ontological approach. Finally, in *Metaphysics* Δ 15 Aristotle presents us with three different classes of relational entities and a fairly exact description of each of them (as well as with some derivative uses of the word "relative"), but makes no reference to the problems discussed in *Categories* 7. I hope to be able to show that all these approaches, far from contradicting one another, fit into a coherent whole.

It is well known that Aristotle does not have a noun for "relation". Since he lays emphasis on the "things related", and not on the relation itself, he uses the technical expression τὰ πρὸς τι, "things [said] in relation to [something else]", in order to address what we might call the "correlates" or "relata" of a relation (the Greek preposition πρὸς means "relative to", "in relation to"). But he addresses these relata in so far as they possess relational predicates. Instead of speaking of abstract relations like "slavery" or "equality", he mentions "the slave" and "the equal". As Ackrill observes (1963, 98), Aristotle does not, of course, mean that the slave Callias or the number 5 are each a relative (they are a substance and a quantity), but that they are relatives in so far as they are called "slave" and "equal". Now, I think everyone will agree that the expression "in so far as they are called" requires in this context, to say the least, an explanation.

For convenience and clarity of exposition, I will begin my discussion with *Categories* 7, and not with the *Topics*, which is probably an earlier work.  

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1 In this article I shall render the Greek τὰ πρὸς τι -- depending on the context -- by "relational attributes", "relational entities", or "relatives" (the standard rendering in commentaries). By "correlative" I mean the "converse" relational attribute which corresponds to a given relational attribute, e.g., the correlative of "parent" is "child" (for more details see note 12). Finally, by "correlates" or "relata" I refer to the underlying entities that stand to each other in a particular relation, e.g. "10" and "5" are correlates or relata in the relation of "being the double of" (or "being the half of").

2 One exception is Met. Δ 15, 1021b6-8, where Aristotle alludes to "abstract" relations (without calling them by this name) such as "equality" and "likeness". But this is clearly a derivative, secondary sense of the word "relative", as is shown by its peripheral mention near the accidental meanings of the term and its absence in other parts of the Aristotelian corpus.

3 For this claim I base myself on evidence drawn by Kahn (1978, 242 ff.) from the presentation of the doctrine of categories in the two mentioned works.