Aristotle on Predication

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In dealing with the Greek Philosophers we tend to take the notion of predication for granted: we tend to assume that we have the right to use the term 'predicate' without question, in discussing the theories put forward by e.g. Plato and Aristotle. An example of this tendency is the common assertion that Plato held that the Forms were self-predicable. While this assertion may be in some sense true, it does assume that the notion of predication may be taken for granted. This assumption is, perhaps, partly due to a further assumption that the notion of predication is a logical or even grammatical notion, and that Plato and Aristotle must therefore have seen its importance and employed it accordingly. I wish to question that assumption in Aristotle's case. I have already questioned it in connection with Plato,1 saying that Plato was continually trying to account for what we should call predication in terms of notions akin to that of identity. It is tempting to assume that because Aristotle had the term 'predicate' at his disposal, he must have known all about the notion. It is moreover, a feasible suggestion that in Aristotle 'κατηγορείν' is a technical term the origins of which are obvious. The use of the phrase 'κατηγορείν τι κατά τινας' stems from legal contexts; it thus comes to mean 'to maintain or assert something of something' and it perhaps retains something of an accusatorial aura. But while the use of the phrase implies that Aristotle knew in some sense something about what it is to assert something of another thing, it does not imply that he could ipso facto provide the correct theory about it. What is true is that the trend of Aristotle's metaphysical thought led him towards a view of predication which involved treating it as something much more than a mere grammatical notion.

My fundamental reasons for doubting whether Plato and Aristotle really understood predication is that they were, as Speusippus was not, realists, in the sense that they embraced a realist theory of meaning. They believed, that is, that the meanings of words are real entities existing independently of the mind. In Plato's case this is obvious enough from the very fact of the Theory of Forms, and from the fact that Plato frequently speaks of the problem of predication as that of how one thing

can have many names. Thus words were thought of as names and were considered to get their meaning accordingly. In Aristotle’s case it is evident from such considerations as his theory of equivocation (which is a theory about the entities picked out by expressions), and from more explicit remarks about meaning which he makes in the *De Interpretatione* and elsewhere. For a philosopher who adopts such a theory of meaning the natural course is to adopt also an ‘identity theory of predication’; for, on this view, when we say that X is φ we express some sort of relationship between two entities, and since the relationship is expressed by the word ‘is’ the natural interpretation of it is in terms of identity. Antisthenes embraced this conclusion in the most forthright manner, and the consequence was inevitably a drastic restriction in the number of genuine predications allowable. Indeed, only tautologous statements of identity were allowed. Plato tried to extend the list and to show that statements of identity are but special cases of predicative statements; but the justification of this procedure involved the theory of the blending of Forms, and he seems to have convinced no one that Forms were capable of being blended in this way. Speusippus in consequence gave up the Forms and with them, apparently, the realist theory of meaning. Aristotle retained the theory of meaning but did not want the Forms. How was this possible, and what theory of predication resulted? How, in other words, could a theory of predication be built upon the view that all words are names, without supposing the existence of entities other than ordinary, generally recognized things? Aristotle’s problem is Plato’s problem of how one thing can have many names — minus the impetus towards the Forms.

It is best to approach this problem from the most grammatical of Aristotle’s considerations of it — the *De Interpretatione*. It is clear from the first two sections of that work that every expression is considered by Aristotle to signify some thing (σημαίνει τι), although verbs, as opposed to nouns, signify in addition (προσημαίνει) time. They achieve this by being symbols (σύμβολα) of τά ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ. What nouns signify is clear enough, but what of verbs? They, it is said, signify what is spoken of another thing — τά καθ’ ἐπερου λέγομενα. This is not in itself very illuminating; but Aristotle goes on to say that a ‘logos’ comes about from such expressions, i.e. from nouns and verbs, by synthesis, and a presupposition of the application of such a notion is that the entities joined must have some independent status.1 But clearly not every combination

1 *cf. Met E.,* 1027b 17ff. for a similar reference to the notion that assertion consists of a synthesis.