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Predicating the Good

L. A. KOSMAN

Although the general intent of Aristotle's argument in *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 6, 1096a23-27 is clear, the exact nature of the claim on which the argument rests is not obvious. Aristotle writes:

ἔτι δ' ἐπεὶ ἀγαθὸν ἰσαχῶς λέγεται τῷ ὄντι (καὶ γὰρ ἐν τῷ τί λέγεται, ὅλον ὁ θεὸς καὶ ὁ νοῦς, καὶ ἐν τῷ ποιῶ αἱ ἀρεταί, καὶ ἐν τῷ ποσῷ τὸ μέτριον, καὶ ἐν τῷ πρὸς τι τὸ χρήσιμον, καὶ ἐν χρόνῳ καιρὸς, καὶ ἐν τόπῳ δίαίτα καὶ ἕτερα τοιαῦτα) . . .

What does Aristotle mean by the claim that good is said in as many senses as being, and how are we to understand the explanatory clause which follows? The usual reading of this passage takes Aristotle to be making one of two claims, depending upon whether the categories are viewed as classifying types of entity or types of predicate: (a) items in all categories have good predicated of them, or (b) good can be predicated in all the categories of predication. In either case, what follow are understood as *subjects* of exemplary predications. Thus "ὅλον ὁ θεὸς καὶ ὁ νοῦς" is elliptical for "ὅλον ὁ θεὸς καὶ ὁ νοῦς ἀγαθὸς ἐστίν," in which good is (a) predicated of a substance, God and intelligence, or (b) predicated in the first category of some entity, namely God and intelligence. (I am throughout understanding "God and intelligence" as a hendiadys). Similarly, "αἱ ἀρεταί" is elliptical for "αἱ ἀρεταὶ ἀγαθαὶ εἰσίν," in which good is (a) predicated of a quality, or (b) predicated in the category of quality of some entity, and so on.

It is such a reading which is found in most translations of the passage in question. I quote here only two:

Further, since 'good' has as many senses as 'being' (for it is predicated both in the category of substance, as of God and of reason, and in quality, i.e. of the virtues, and in quantity, i.e. of that which is moderate, and in relation, i.e. of the useful, and in time, i.e. of the right opportunity, and in place, i.e. of the right locality and the like), . . .¹

¹ Translation by W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon, (New York, 1941).

Secondly, the term “good” has as many meanings as the word “is”: it is used to describe substances, e.g., divinity and intelligence are good; qualities, e.g. the virtues are good; quantities, e.g., the proper amount is good; relatedness, e.g., the useful is good; time, e.g., the right moment is good; place, e.g., a place to live is good; and so forth.²

But is this the correct reading of Aristotle’s argument? Suppose we understand Aristotle to be claiming (a) that good can be predicated of entities in any category. Why then the peculiar choice of examples in the first category? We also say that men, cabbages, and elephants are good; why couldn’t these serve as well as examples of substances of which good is predicated? And why should Aristotle have given examples here, while in the other categories mentioned, he presents what clearly must be taken as explications: “good is predicated of qualities, *namely* the virtues”.

If, on the other hand, we take Aristotle to be arguing (b) that good can be predicated in any category, greater difficulties ensue. “ἐν τῷ τί [ἐστι] λέγεσθαι” is Aristotle’s normal expression for predication in the first category, where that means predication of an element in a thing’s τί ἐστι or οὐσία. It would follow, then, that “ὁ θεὸς καὶ ὁ νοῦς ἀγαθὸς ἐστίν” is an essential predication – that good is the τί ἐστι or οὐσία of God and intelligence.

Were this so, Aristotle’s choice of God and intelligence would become explicable. But it is impossible, just for the reasons set forth in this passage, that good should be the τί ἐστι or οὐσία of anything. One important and central consequence of the categorical diversity of being is that there is no entity whose essence it is to be: “τὸ δ’ εἶναι οὐκ οὐσία οὐδενί· οὐ γὰρ γένος τὸ εἶν.” (*Posterior Analytics* II, 6, 92b13) Similarly, because good is not a genus, as the discussion in question is meant to show, it is impossible that it should be the τί ἐστι or οὐσία of anything. Even if we were to allow the possibility that good *might* constitute the essence or part of the essence of an entity, we should still have difficulty with the passage. For if anything looks like a case of essential predication, “virtue is good” does, or “the right amount is good”. But in that case, the point is lost, for then these are not predications in other categories at all, but ἐν τῷ τί.

The implausibility of either reading is made clearer by attention to the language of the passage. For if Aristotle is presenting what are

² Translation by Martin Ostwald, *Nicomachean Ethics*, (New York, 1962).

the *subjects* of predications in the various categories, we should expect to find a different construction. Aristotle's meta-descriptions of predication usually take the form: predicate in the nominative followed by "λέγεσθαι" or "κατηγορεῖσθαι" followed by "κατά" followed by subject in the genitive. We should therefore expect to find not "οἶον ὁ θεὸς καὶ ὁ νοῦς . . . αἱ ἀρεταὶ . . . τὸ μέτριον etc.," but "οἶον κατὰ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ νοῦ . . . κατὰ τῶν ἀρετῶν . . . κατὰ τοῦ μετρίου etc." It is such a construction which we find, for example, at *Posterior Analytics* I, 22, 83a28: "οἶον κατὰ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τὸ λευκόν [λέγεται]," and at *Categories* 2, 1a21: "οἶον ἄνθρωπος καθ' ὑποκειμένου μὲν λέγεται τοῦ τινὸς ἀνθρώπου."

What the language of the passage appears instead to suggest is that God and intelligence, the virtues, etc., are meant not to be subjects, but rather to be *predicates*. But how are we to understand this? It will help to pay closer attention to the claim that good is said "ἰσαχῶς τῷ ὄντι," for the passage will become clearer if we see predication of the good in strict analogy with predication of being.

The doctrine of the categories is just the claim that τὸ ὄν πολλαχῶς λέγεται. In making this claim, Aristotle is not primarily claiming that being is predicated of many kinds of things, but that many kinds of being are predicated of entities, or that being is predicated in many senses, just as many as there are categories. "καθ' αὐτὰ δὲ εἶναι λέγεται ὅσαπερ σημαίνει τὰ σχήματα τῆς κατηγορίας· ὅσαχῶς γὰρ λέγεται, τοσαυταχῶς τὸ εἶναι σημαίνει, ἐπεὶ οὖν τῶν κατηγορουμένων τὰ μὲν τί ἐστὶ σημαίνει, τὰ δὲ ποιόν, . . ." (*Metaphysics* Δ, 7, 1017a22). When I say that Socrates is a man, this is to predicate of him a certain kind or sense of being, being what he is. When I say that he is cultured, this is to predicate of him another kind or sense of being, being a certain quality, and similarly, when I say that he is five feet tall, or in the Lyceum, or has his shoes off, etc.

"Socrates has his shoes off" is an interesting case, for it is not immediately obvious that this is an instance of predicating *being*. It is clear, however, that we could rephrase this as "Socrates is barefoot," so that the respect in which we have a predication of being becomes apparent. Aristotle makes just this point following the passage I have quoted: "οὐθὲν γὰρ διαφέρει τὸ ἄνθρωπος ὑγιαίνων ἐστὶν ἢ τὸ ἄνθρωπος ὑγιαίνει, οὐδὲ τὸ ἄνθρωπος βαδίζων ἐστὶν ἢ τέμνων τοῦ ἀνθρώπου βαδίζει ἢ τέμνει, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων." (*Metaphysics* Δ, 7, 1017a27) What this shows is that it is possible in Greek as in English to predicate being without explicitly using the verb "εἶναι" or "to be." Thus to say "Socrates is a man" is to predicate being in the category of τί ἐστὶ, to

say "Socrates is cultured" is to predicate being in the category of ποιόν, and to say "Socrates walks" is equally to predicate being (in the category of ποιεῖν) even though no explicit use is made of the verb "to be."

It is equally possible to predicate good of items without any explicit use of the locution "is good." And this fact lies behind Aristotle's point in the *Ethics*. To say of something that it is virtuous or is a virtue is a way of predicating good, relative to the category of quality. Similarly, to say that something is at the right time, or is in the right amount, or is in its proper place, is to say it is good relative, respectively, to time, quantity, and place.

We may now understand the nature of Aristotle's argument in the *Ethics*. He begins by claiming that good, like being, is predicated in many categories, that is, that there are many ways of being good. He then gives examples of *predicates* which are (disguised) means of predicating good in each of the categories. To say of God and intelligence that it *is* God and intelligence is to predicate ἐν τῷ τί, for in doing so we state *what* something is. At the same time, however, it is to predicate good of God and intelligence. For God is the best kind of substance one can be, and thus in stating *what* God is, one is also predicating good of him. It is not, however, that good is *what* God is; *what* he is is God, but that's a good thing to be. Similarly, when we say that Socrates is courageous, we predicate ἐν τῷ ποιῶ, but we also predicate good of him. For being courageous or being virtuous in general is a good way to be; courage and virtue in general, that is, are good qualities. The same analysis applies in each of the other categories. The instances that Aristotle gives, then, are not the subjects of exemplary predicative statements, but rather the predicates of such statements. They make clear that the multivocity of "good" is exhibited not only in the fact that many sorts of things may be said to be good, but more in the fact that predicates of radically different type are in fact disguised means of predicating the good in radically different senses.

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