QUINE ON ARISTOTLE ON IDENTITY

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Quine has often expressed his impatience with the fact that "Identity evidently invites confusion between sign and object."[1] He finds the confusion in the works of a great many philosophers. What is most interesting, however, is that he excludes Aristotle from his disapprobation. "On the other hand Aristotle had the matter straight: things are identical (ταὐτα) when 'whatever is predicated of the one should be predicated of the other'. "[2] I believe a closer inspection of Aristotle's views would lead Quine to abandon this small truce with the Philosopher —unfortunately for Quine.

Philosophers have confused sign and object by taking identities, such as "Tully is Cicero", as relating the names (signs) 'Tully' and 'Cicero' rather than the objects Tully and Cicero. But identities purportedly express a relation between objects —not signs of objects. Aristotle was cautious about this distinction. Signs are "things that are said".[3] Objects are "things there are".[4] Moreover, as Quine recognizes, Aristotle is talking in chapter seven of *Topics* about the identity of objects. What Quine misses, or perhaps chooses to ignore, is (i) the fact that Aristotle nowhere takes identity to be a relation at all, and (ii) the fact that, for Aristotle, singulars can be predicated.

This is how Quine interprets his quotation from *Topics:* objects (individuals) are identical when any (general) term

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[1] W. V. Quine, *Word and Object*, Cambridge. Mass., The M.I.T. Press, 1960, p. 117.

[2] *Word and Object*, p. 116n. The quotation is from *Topics*, II, 1, 152a34ff.

[3] *Categories*, 1a16.

[4] *Categories*, 1a20.

predicated of one is predicated of the other. If Aristotle intended this then he would have been an important precursor of Quine's views. Now for Quine objects are always individuals —what were primary substances for Aristotle. When we assert anything we predicate a general term of an object to which we make reference by use of a singular term. Singular terms are never predicated; and general terms are never referential.[5] One might be tempted to say that Quine's "pegasizing procedure" allows him to predicate some singulars (*viz.* proper names). But this is not so. The procedure simply creates a new general term which happens to hold uniquely of the named individual. As Geach has said, "Only a name can be a logical subject; and a name cannot retain the role of a name if it becomes a logical predicate."[6] This view then, that subject (referring expressions) and predicates are (syntactically) radically asymmetric, is held now by most logicians. But it was not Aristotle's view.

First of all, Aristotle was more familiar with (and thus less fearful of) Platonism. For him not all objects (things there are) are individuals. Universals, such as secondary substances and qualities are nonindividuals. Primary substances and instantiations of qualities are individuals. Unlike Plato however he takes primary substances as ontologically prior to all other objects. This ontological priority notwithstanding, there is no Quine-like restriction of singular terms to subject (referential) position and general terms to predicate position. Any term, singular or general, can be used either referentially or predicationally.[7] In fact it is this ability of terms to appear in both subjects and predicates which makes syllogistic possible.[8] Quine has missed this view of Aristotle's, especially with respect to the predication of singulars, by ignoring the

    [5] For a more detailed discussion see G. Englebretsen, "Aristotle and Quine on the 'Basic Combination'," *The New Scholasticism*, 56 (1982).

    [6] P.T. Geach, *Logic Matters*, Oxford, 1972, p. 48.

    [7] See the argument for this in G. Englebretsen, "Singular Terms and the Syllogistic," *The New Scholasticism*, 54 (1980).

    [8] See G. Englebretsen, "A Journey to Eden: Geach on Aristotle," *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 14 (1981); and "Aristotle on the Subject of Predication," *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 19 (1978).

second half of the sentence he quotes from *Topics*. The entire passage reads (Prichard-Cambridge translation):

> ... for any accident belonging to the one must belong also to the other, and if the one belongs to anything as an accident, so must the other also. If in any of these respects there is a discrepancy, clearly they are not the same.

Examples of singular predications are 'That man is Plato', 'Tully is Cicero', and 'A log is this white thing'.

Now. of course, this view that singular terms can be predicated demands that the copula in such sentences be the copula of predication. Thus, while Quine, along with the great majority of contemporary logicians, must enforce ambiguity on the copula (*viz.* the so-called 'is' of predication/the so-called 'is' of identity), Aristotle could keep the copula univocal —it is simply and always the mark of predication.[9] Logicians like Quine, by not permitting singular predications, must account for the appearance of a singular term in what looks like a predicative position by denying that the position is predicative. For Quine, singulars always refer, are never predicated, and thus only fit referential positions. Consider the frame 'Tully is. . .'. Aristotle takes the copula as always predicational so that whatever term fills the blank, singular or general, is a predicate term —syntax determines role. Quine takes the sense of the copula to depend upon whether the blank is filled by a singular or a general term. Since singulars are, for him, always referential, when the blank is filled by a singular the copula cannot be predicational —role determines syntax.

The contrast between the Aristotelian and Quinian views about singular predication (and so many other logical matters

9 See F. Sommers, "Do We Need Identity?," *Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (1969); M. Lockwood, "On Predicating Proper Names," *Philosophical Review*, 84 (1975); G. Englebretsen, "A Note on Predication," *Dialogue*, 19 (1980); G. Englebretsen, "Do We Need Relative Identity?," *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 23 (1982); and G. Englebretsen, "A Note on Identity, Reference and Logical Form," *Crítica*, 8 (1981).

as well) is great. Quine's Fregean insistence on a second sense
of the copula for identity sentences requires him to introduce
a degree of complexity into his logic of terms (the first
order predicate calculus) to accommodate identities (the
first order predicate calculus with identity). Aristotle's
benign failure to ambiguate the copula allowed him to treat
identities as simple predications and in no way syntactically
special. Thus, there is no "syllogistic with identity". Diffe-
rences such as this reflect a much deeper difference between
Quinians and Aristotelians. Aristotle, like any grammarian,
indeed any ordinary speaker, is led by the formal similarities
between 'Tully is wise' and 'Tully is Cicero' to take both to
be simple predications. Quine, on the other hand, like his
predecessors Frege and Russell, has a general contempt for
natural language as a rational medium. The appearance of
formal similarity is swept away by a theory which determines
the role any term can play in a sentence on the basis of its
denotation. 'Tully is wise' and 'Tully is Cicero' are taken to
have very different logical forms because 'wise' and 'Cicero'
have very different kinds of denotation —and so much the
worse for any language which fails to show this.[10]