

Qualities in Aristotle's *Categories*

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It is commonly taken for granted that Aristotle's main concern in *Categories* is to propose a classification in which each thing occupies one, and only one, place in a hierarchy consisting of genera that are divisible into species. Any passage in this work that seems to contradict this assumption is considered perplexing or even taken as evidence of 'a weakness in the foundations of Aristotle's theory of categories'.¹ So strong is this belief that the authenticity of 11a20–38, which comes at the end of the discussion of qualities in chapter 8, has been doubted.² The purpose of this contribution is to show that there is indeed a weakness, not, however, in Aristotle's theory but in the commonly held assumptions about it. A full investigation of all problems involved and of previous research requires much more space than is available on this occasion. Thus, my main focus will be on chapter 8, and I will refer to the translation and commentary by J. L. Ackrill, a work that has been, and still is, hugely influential on determining how *Categories* is understood.³

This is how chapter 8 begins:⁴ 'I speak of that in accordance with which men⁵ are spoken of as some sort of men (ποιοί τινες λέγονται) as a quality' (8b25–6). In other words, the qualities to be discussed are those of particular men (τινες), that is to say, some accidental qualities as opposed to substantial (or essential) ones. The latter are qualities in accordance with which all members of a class belonging to a certain genus differ from all members of another class (or of other classes) of the same genus. At *Categories* 1b18–19 Aristotle gives examples of classes of the genus *animal*: *animal with legs*, *winged animal*, etc. The species *man* can be spoken of as some sort of animal, not as some sort of man; some man (i.e. a particular man) can be spoken of as some sort of man (hence also as some sort of animal). In the first case we produce a definition involving a substantial quality, in the second case we make a predication involving an accidental quality.

This is Ackrill's translation of *Categories* 8b25–6: 'By a *quality* I mean that in virtue of which things are said to be qualified somehow'. The differences between this translation and the one proposed above are considerable and

1 This is the verdict of Ackrill 1963, 109.

2 One important instance is in Frede 1987, 13.

3 Günther Patzig's appreciation has in all likelihood contributed to the influence: 'Als eine Erklärung des Textes, die auch Sachfragen erörtert, hat Ackrill's knappes Buch einen neuen Standard für die Interpretation antiker philosophischer Text gesetzt.' Patzig 1996, 105.

4 All translations are my own unless attributed to someone else.

5 I consistently use the word 'man' in the sense of human being.

important. First of all, Ackrill takes this sentence as a *definition* of a quality, but if it were a definition intended to cover all types of qualities, *ποιοί τινες* (some sort of men) would represent an unacceptable restriction; this is presumably the reason for Ackrill's 'things', as if the original had *ποιά τινα* (some sort of things). Secondly, 'are said to be' is a possible translation of *λέγονται*, but there are other possibilities; as I will suggest below, 'are spoken of as' conveys a sense of duration attached to the predication of 'some sort of thing' (*ποιόν*), as opposed to the predications of 'doing' (*ποιεῖν*) and 'being affected' (*πάσχειν*).

The chapter on quality in *Categories* should be read against the passage that deals with the proprium of substances at 4a10–b19. A substance is something that is capable of admitting (*δεκτικόν*) contraries like sickness and health, whiteness and blackness, while remaining one and the same thing. Substances alternate between, for instance, being sick and in good health, hot and cold. A change of this kind is an alternation (*μεταβολή*), and it occurs when a substance has undergone an affection (*πάθος*). To admit contraries (e.g. to be able to become cold after having become hot) is to change (*κινεῖσθαι*). A *μεταβολή* is not just any kind of change,⁶ but a change that comes about when one and the same substance alternates between contraries.

From the very beginning of the discussion of qualities, Aristotle is concerned with alternations. If A and B are things between which substances alternate, the alternation is not always symmetrical so that it is equally quick from A to B as from B to A. The first example is an alternation between a disposition and a possession, e.g. a disposition for knowledge and a possession of knowledge. A man who is disposed for knowledge is inferior at first but changes quickly to less inferior and by degrees to excellent, and once he has reached the point of excellence, he is no longer merely disposed for knowledge but in possession of it. When men are closer to a possession, they are better disposed; when they have a longer way to go, they are less disposed (9a7–8). Once knowledge has become a possession, the man possessing it usually remains excellent, 'unless there is a grand-scale alternation (*μεγάλη μεταβολή*) through a disease or something else of that nature' (8b31–2).

When the pendulum swings quickly in both directions, both A and B are dispositions:

Things are spoken of as dispositions if they are easily changed (*εὐκίνητα*) and alternate quickly (*ταχὺ μεταβάλλοντα*), as, for example, heat and refrigeration, and sickness and health and any other things like that. For *man* is disposed in some way in accordance with them, but a man who comes into existence alternates quickly from hot to cold and from being in good health to being sick. (8b35–9a1)

⁶ Ackrill's 1963 translation is confusing since 'change' is used for both *μεταβάλλειν* and *κινεῖσθαι*.

One very important feature of this statement is the contrast between ὁ ἄνθρωπος (the species *man*⁷) and γινόμενος, that is to say, any man who comes into existence (and eventually dies). This is not brought out in Ackrill's translation: 'It is what are easily changed and quickly changing that we call conditions, e.g. hotness and chill and sickness and health and the like. For a man is in a certain condition in virtue of these but he changes quickly from hot to cold and from being healthy to being sick.' The translation blurs the crucial distinction between how the species *man* and a particular man are spoken of. The species *man* is only disposed for things, it never possesses them. The implication of Aristotle's text is that different species are disposed for different alternations: the species *stone* (like *man*) is disposed for heat and refrigeration, the species *man* (unlike *stone*) for sickness and health.

Why does Aristotle say that possessions are also dispositions, whereas dispositions are not necessarily possessions (9a10–13)? Not, as Ackrill suggests, because he would consider possessions a sub-class of dispositions.⁸ The reason is rather that something like knowledge, which exists in the soul of someone (1b1–2), is a disposition when that someone is only disposed for it but both a disposition and a possession when he possesses it. Why both a disposition and a possession? I can think of at least two reasons. (1) When a man has reached the point of possessing some knowledge, he does not cease to be disposed for it. If he ceased to be disposed for whatever knowledge he possesses, any knowledge that he had once possessed but later forgotten would be irretrievably lost because he would no longer be disposed for it, i.e. capable of acquiring (admitting) it again. (2) If the species *man* is disposed for certain qualities, the members of the species cannot cease to be disposed for those same qualities.

In men, some things are both dispositions and possessions (as, for instance, knowledge), while other things are merely dispositions. Among the latter are heat and refrigeration: no man who becomes cold remains cold for the rest of his life, and a man who becomes hot does not stay hot forever.

To say that someone is better disposed or less well disposed is not to compare one man to another; it is to pass a judgement on, for example, how close a man's disposition for knowledge is to the possession of that same thing. By contrast, the second kind of quality accounts for differences between

7 This is how ὁ ἄνθρωπος is used here as elsewhere in *Categories*.

8 Ackrill 1963 uses the terms 'state' and 'condition' for ἔξις and διάθεσις. He thinks that there is a difference between ἔξις ('state') as opposed to διάθεσις, and ἔξις ('possession') as opposed to στέρησις ('privation'). I think that it can be argued that ἔξις is the same in both cases, a possession, but viewed from different perspectives, either in relation to a disposition or in relation to a privation. I intend to produce arguments for this position elsewhere.

men: some men are born with an ability to do something (*ποιεῖν*) and to avoid being affected by something (*πάσχειν*) with greater facility than others. Since the species *man* is disposed in some way in accordance with health and sickness, any man is always somewhere on a scale between these two contraries. But this does not account for individual variations, for whereas most men are disposed in fairly similar ways, some men are born healthy and others are born sickly. This ability/inability is not something that the species *man* possesses but something that some men (*τινες*) – i.e. men who are born and pass away – possess.

Thus, one and the same thing, knowledge, can be counted both as a disposition and as a possession. It is simply not possible to draw up two lists, one for dispositions and the other for possessions and decide – using duration and changeability as criteria – which quality goes where (see Ackrill’s efforts in 104–05). What *is* possible is to draw up two lists: one for dispositions for X, Y, Z, etc., the other for possessions of X, Y, Z, etc., but there would be no point in making such a list other than to determine which things can be both dispositions and possessions and which things can only be dispositions in a certain kind of substance. As for the ability that some are born with, Ackrill translates ‘natural capacity’, and as a result of this choice he finds fault with Aristotle: ‘it is surprising that Aristotle treats this as a distinct type of quality while saying nothing about capacities in general. One may have or lack an aptitude for trigonometry; but to say that someone is capable of learning trigonometry is not to ascribe or deny an aptitude to him’ (105). This is unfair: the first type of quality, disposition, *is* a capacity in general, and the second type, ability, is an aptitude.

The predications of *ποιεῖν* and *πάσχειν* are central to the discussion of the second kind of quality but even more so to the discussion of the third kind, affective quality (*ποιότης παθητική*), which is treated together with affections (*παθή*), which are not qualities at all. In a comment on this passage Ackrill complains (107): ‘How can Aristotle include hotness and coldness in this group of qualities (9a30) when he has already classified them as conditions (8b36–9)?’⁹ The complaint is unjustified. First of all, Aristotle speaks of *κατάψυξις*, ‘refrigeration’, at 8b36, i.e. something that conveys the idea of alternation in one and the same substance that can be hot at one time and cold at another, but of *ψυχρότης*, ‘coldness’, at 9a31, i.e. a permanent quality in some things (Aristotle gives no example, but one could think of snow and ice). But more importantly, men become cold because they are disposed for getting chilled, so in the case of men refrigeration is a disposition. But things like ice

9 As mentioned above, ‘condition’ is Ackrill’s 1963 translation of *διάθεσις*.

and snow are not disposed for getting cold; they have admitted coldness once and for all. They are, in Aristotle's terminology, δεδεγμένα (9a32, 36, 9b4), not things that are capable of admitting an alternation, δεκτικά. Aristotle's example of the former is honey, which has admitted sweetness once and for all. Ackrill translates τὰ δεδεγμένα 'things that possess them', an expression which blurs the distinction between, on the one hand, τὰ δεδεγμένα and τὰ δεκτικά, and on the other, things that are disposed for something and things that possess it. Only things that are δεκτικά are disposed for something. As we saw above, the species *man* is merely disposed for knowledge; in the chapter on relatives, the species *man* is spoken of as capable of admitting knowledge (ἐπιστήμης δεκτικός 7a37). Now we have an answer to Ackrill's frustrated question that was quoted at the beginning of this paragraph: in men coldness is a disposition (condition in Ackrill's terminology), and when it occurs it is an affection that causes a change, an alternation; in things that have admitted coldness once and for all (like snow), coldness is a quality.

By now it should be clear why 'are spoken of as' is preferable to 'are said to be' as a translation of λέγεται at the beginning of the chapter on qualities. We speak of honey as something sweet¹⁰ and of ice as something cold, but we do not speak of a man who is scantily dressed on a cold day as someone cold, for we cannot divide men into cold men, hot men, and men who are lukewarm. We can say about the scantily dressed man that he is cold, but then we are not thinking of a quality of his but of an affection he is undergoing.

Men blush when they are affected by shame. The reason why this can happen at all is that the species *man* is disposed for different skin colours. But how about the second kind of quality, the inborn disability in some men not to be easily affected? Is there a Greek expression that indicates that someone is born with a disability not to be affected easily by shame or fear? I believe that there is. At 9b31–2 Aristotle has introduced what seems to be two new words in Greek (to judge from *LSJ*): ἐρυθρίας and ὀχρίας. They appear to function like some other Greek words ending in *-ias*, e.g. *emias* = one who is inclined to vomit, ὄξυθυμίας = one who is quick to anger. They should probably be translated 'one who is inclined/quick to blush' and 'one who is inclined/quick to become pale'. Arguably Aristotle wants to demonstrate here that men who are spoken of as inclined/quick to blush, or as inclined/quick to become pale, are spoken of in this way in accordance with a disability not to be affected by anything, that is to say, in accordance with a quality. Thus, 9b28–33 should be translated as:

¹⁰ Cf. how we speak of sweets and sweeteners.

Things that come about from things that are easily dissolved and quickly removed are spoken of as affections. For men are not spoken of as some sort of men in accordance with them. For one who blushes when he is ashamed is not spoken of as someone who is inclined/quick to blush, and one who becomes pale when he is afraid is not spoken of as someone who is inclined/quick to become pale, but rather as having been affected somehow.

LSJ translates ‘of ruddy complexion’ with a reference to 9b31, and ‘one of a pale complexion’, with a reference to 9b32; accordingly Ackrill translates ‘ruddy’ and ‘pallid’, probably from a conviction (erroneous to my mind) that Aristotle is here contrasting temporary blushes with permanent complexions, when he is in fact contrasting affections (not qualities) with a disability not to be affected (the second type of quality).

We have repeatedly seen that the notion of classification, with each thing in its own place and in one place only, is undermined by the text. We have seen that knowledge can be a disposition or a possession, and in either case a quality. But we also know from the chapter on relatives that Aristotle counts knowledge, disposition, and possession (among other things of the same kind) as relatives (6b2–3). At 11a20–38 he demonstrates that species of knowledge (such as knowledge of grammar or music) are always qualities, for we are spoken of as knowledgeable in grammar or in music in accordance with them, that is to say, because we are disposed for them or possess them. When knowledge is predicated, as when we say ‘knowledge of grammar is knowledge’, it is spoken of in reference to something placed below (a ὑποκείμενον).¹¹ By contrast, when the genus *knowledge* is not predicated in reference to something placed below, but is what we would call a ‘grammatical subject’, it is a relative, for knowledge is knowledge of something capable of being known. Co-relatives (knowledge and something capable of being known) are placed opposite one another; they are ἀντικείμενα, and this is surely one reason why Aristotle, having reached this point in the *Categories*, sets out to discuss different kinds of ἀντικείμενα, relatives being one kind (11b17–14a25). We may now turn to Ackrill’s objection which was mentioned at the beginning of this paper:

The claim that a genus that is a relative may have species that are not relatives seems to conflict with Aristotle’s whole idea of a genus-species classification and categorial ladders. ... Thus there is a nasty dilemma, and its existence points to a weakness in the foundations of Aristotle’s theory of categories. (108–09)

¹¹ Cf. 1b1–3.

The answer to this objection is simply this: When knowledge is spoken of (predicated) in reference to a species placed below it, it is a quality; when it is spoken of (predicated) as something in relation to something else which is placed opposite it, it is a relative (πρός τι). This is how the categorial ladder is to be understood. When the first step (knowledge of grammar) is a quality, the next step (knowledge) is also a quality, and so is the following step (disposition or possession), until we reach the top of the ladder, quality. But no such ladder is involved in relatives. They exist side by side and are simultaneous. Thus, there is no reason to suspect the authenticity of 11a20–38.

References

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