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De semantiek van Aristoteles: waarheid en betekenis in het tijdperk van het darwinisme

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Citation

Vroonhoven, T. T. H. van. (2018, February 14). *De semantiek van Aristoteles: waarheid en betekenis in het tijdperk van het darwinisme*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/61146>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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<http://hdl.handle.net/1887/61146>

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Issue Date: 2018-02-14

SUMMARY

Aristotelian semantics – truth and meaning in the Darwinian era

The leading argument of this doctoral thesis is that Aristotle's text *De Interpretatione* is of *methodical* relevance for present-day philosophical thinking. In the era of science and technology, the status of philosophy has become problematic. The philosophical questions of old have been either debunked as grammatical misconceptions or reformulated and incorporated into modern scientific enquiry. *There is no need for philosophy*. In addition, the problematic status of philosophy is further exacerbated by the positivist distinction between semantics and empiricism. Philosophy deals either with concepts or with empirical facts. However, whereas the former are merely a matter of pragmatic decision, the latter belong to the domain of scientific testing. Faced with this dilemma, there is no place for philosophy; the only tenable claim to truth is that of science.

Given this situation, the aim of this doctoral thesis is twofold. It purports to show that the problematic status of philosophy can be traced back to Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*. In addition, it shows that this text also contains clues to truth of a more fundamental nature that is not restricted to propositional correctness, thereby opening up the possibility of a transformed way of philosophical thinking.

The first chapter discusses the key elements of what can be called *Aristotelian semantics*: a set of presuppositions concerning the nature of signs and language that originate in Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*. Among these presuppositions are the notion of meaning as mental representation, the distinction between meaning and propositional truth, the conventional character of linguistic meaning, the notion of truth as agreement of things and thinking and the notion of autonomous propositional speech. It is shown that the positivist distinction between semantics and empiricism that renders philosophy obsolete is actually a variant of these Aristotelian presuppositions. By contrast, the philosophy of Aristotle is not of a propositional character. It is concerned with naming that discloses the changeless elements that cause things to be. In this way, Aristotle provides contemporary thinking with the important clue that philosophy might be possible as *name giving*. However, both Aristotelian semantics and Aristotle's philosophy as naming are based on a specific foundation: the presupposition of being as unchanging identity.

Although still dominant in various guises in both everyday and scientific thought, Aristotelian semantics have been radically dismantled and subverted by the philosophy and science of the modern era. The second chapter traces this subversion. It points out that its various manifestations stem from a fundamental semantic shift in what constitutes identity. This is the emergence of a new mode of being, characterizing beings in so far as they exist as a series of iterations. The shift to this *serial identity* becomes manifest in the philosophy of Leibniz. The chapter follows the parallel disruptions of Aristotelian semantics in Wittgenstein's pragmatism, the philosophy of Derrida and particularly in contemporary Darwinism as the ramifications of this semantic shift. Similarly, the shift to a serial identity implies that a philosophy in the vein of Aristotle, as the naming of changeless elements, is no longer possible.

The third chapter answers the question why Heidegger turns to Aristotle. Heidegger recognizes *De Interpretatione* as the origin of the leading metaphysical theories on meaning, but also acknowledges their upheaval in pragmatism. However, Heidegger further points out that individuals are always situated within a space of meanings that gives rise to the mutual accessibility of things and thinking. It is only from this preliminary situatedness that the nature of signs can be conceived. Heidegger

indicates that the fundamental feat of a sign is the *disclosure* of things. Signs open up a space of meanings out of which things manifest themselves. This gives rise to a return from the traditional notion of truth to the more encompassing understanding of truth as un-coveredness (*a-lêtheia*). Truth cannot be equated with propositional correctness since disclosure through propositional speech is only a mode of the disclosure that appertains to *all* signs. This disclosure is always exposed to the possibility of distortion, giving rise to a revealing that is simultaneously concealing. This revealing is not bound to the human use of signs, since it is in itself a derivative of the revealing and concealing that characterizes the emergence of things within a surrounding world of meaning. Although most of Heidegger's interpretations of *De Interpretatione* are problematic, the chapter concludes with the observation that Aristotle's text does indeed provide clues to an understanding of *alêtheia* as the fundamental unity of revealing and concealing.

Following Heidegger's pointer to truth as uncoveredness, the fourth chapter again raises the question what characterizes philosophical speaking. It shows how Heidegger's seemingly mystical remarks on the nature of language can be understood concretely in the light of the aforementioned serial identity. In particular, Heidegger's insistence on the irreconcilable discrepancy between language and human language use runs remarkably parallel to the understanding of the nature of language in the recent complexity sciences. In these sciences, the distinction between language as an emergent macrostructure and the restricted linguistic behavior of individuals is emphasized. However, Heidegger points out that the restricting and orienting character of language cannot manifest itself as long as it is discussed propositionally. Instead, it can be experienced in the search for the right *name*. Despite the superficial appearance of propositional structure, Heidegger's thinking is concerned with the searching for names in which the restricting and orienting character of language manifests itself. In the search for a philosophical name, this restricting itself is brought to the fore *as that which oriented the search*. This final chapter tracks several of Heidegger's pointers to the possibility of philosophy as name giving. It then turns out that Aristotle's manner of speaking in *De Interpretatione* can be conceived as an example of philosophical name giving.

This thesis concludes that philosophy cannot consist in uncovering propositional truths. Instead, it indicates the possibility of an alienating experience, namely that the seemingly self-evident accessibility of nature through scientific enquiry is mediated and surrounded by a language that both guides human thinking and is at the same time indifferent to human behavior. The temporary abiding in and, possibly, naming of this alienation *is* philosophy.