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A pursuit of ontological truth in Aristotle's philosophy

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Introduction

The relevance of truth as a topic is evident from the huge quantity of discussions and theories of truth. The notion of truth has been widely investigated - along with all varieties of issues pertaining to it.¹ We encounter different discussions on truth, often referencing metaphysics, logic, and numerous other areas of philosophy - some of which are among the most difficult and persistent issues currently discussed. My project falls within these discussions—and more specifically the discussion about how one can understand or define the concept of truth within the framework of Aristotle's philosophy.

Truth is a difficult subject. At the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle tries to encourage his students about the task at hand with the following observation:

T1: The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, no one fails entirely, but everyone says something true about the nature of things, and while individually they contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed. [...] Perhaps, as difficulties are of two kinds, the cause of the present difficulty is not in the facts but in us. For as the eyes of bats are to the blaze of day, so is the reason in our soul to the things which are by nature most evident of all. (*Met. a. 1*, 993a27-993b5; 993b9-993b11)

Here, Aristotle opens with general comments on the study of truth to which every scholar contributes - even though no one can adequately attain the truth. Truth, he argues, is like the proverbial door which no one can miss - and so in a sense, the job at hand should be relatively easy. Aristotle has also commented on the course one should take for such an investigation:

T2: The natural way of doing this is to start from the things which are more knowable and clear to us and proceed towards those which are clearer and more knowable by nature; for the same things are not knowable relatively to us and knowable without qualification. So we must follow this method and advance from what is more obscure by nature, but clearer to us, towards what is more clear and more knowable by nature. (*Phys. I.1*, 184a17-184a21)

Given Aristotle's suggestions, I shall begin the project of seeking ontological truth in Aristotle's work with a theory that is most familiar to me - that is, the correspondence theory of truth.² In order to go about this task, I will begin by stating my theoretical background, and then roughly picture a structure of my arguments.

¹ For instance, Wolenski, 2004. This research investigates the concept of truth in ancient philosophy from the pre-Socratics until Aristotle.

² The opposition here is not between two kinds of being—for example, the eternal and temporal—but between two ways in which beings show themselves. (Brogan, 2005, 71.)

1. Why seek ontological truth in Aristotle?

In various discussions about truth, there is a tendency for scholars to work with a singular question: “what is truth?”. There are certainly numerous ways to answer this question. For example, some might argue that truth is a relation between assertions and reality.³ Or that truth is an immanent property that makes things be true.⁴ Broadly speaking, we may distinguish between two kinds of truth theory, logical ones and metaphysical ones (Lynch 2009).⁵ Logical theories seek to construct formal systems that are consistent, while also containing a predicate which has most of the properties which we ordinarily take the English predicate ‘is true’ to have, such as Tarski’s and Kripke’s theories of truth. By contrast, metaphysical theories seek to give a non-formal account of the nature of truth, that is, what truth consists in and what it means to say that something is true, such as correspondence, coherence, deflationary, and pragmatist theories of truth.

In this project, I would like to explore the possibility of a particular metaphysical theory of truth in Aristotle’s work. Following the implications of metaphysical theories of truth, I would like to view the concept of “truth in things” and “truth as being in the strictest sense” provided by Aristotle as clues to an ontological reading of truth to be found in Aristotle’s works. This ontological reading of truth is about more than just playing the role of truth-maker in the context of a classical correspondence theory of truth.⁶ Nevertheless, Aristotle’s view of truth has been traditionally classified as a correspondence theory of truth.⁷ My ontological reading of truth in Aristotle will reveal what is the concrete content of “truth in things” that has been observed to play the role of truth-maker in the framework of the correspondence theory of truth. In light of this it bears reminding that the scope of the question of the ontological reading of truth is restricted to various modes of being, especially to so-called “being in the strictest sense”, which plays a fundamental role in understanding the real world surrounding us. Ultimately, this ontological interpretation of truth provides the foundation for truth in statements as truth-values which has been widely accepted by scholars holding the correspondence theory of truth.

Therefore, the aim of this project is to deepen our understanding of the concept of truth by extending the scope of truth from truth in statements to the domain of being—all within the light of Aristotle’s work. This means that we need to rethink all relevant topics in terms of ontological truth. And so, based on this interpretation of truth as being in the strictest sense, we shall be able to establish some applications of ontological truth in Aristotle’s works.

3 For instance, the classical correspondence theory of truth.

4 This situation can be proven by *the Oxford Handbook of Truth*. It argues that “Truth is a property, that has been of great interest to philosophy and beyond for about as long as we have a history for philosophy. It is a topic of active research in many branches of philosophy, notably metaphysics and logic. That property is the topic of this Handbook. Essays in this volume will explore the basic nature of the property of truth, i.e. its underlying metaphysical and logical properties. Others explore its role in such areas as ethics and science and mathematics, and so on. They do so from a number of perspectives, both historical and systematic. They use various techniques and approaches, from metaphysics, ethics, philosophy of science, logic, and many others.”

5 Lynch, 2009, 3-5.

6 For instance, David Armstrong’s theory of truth — which will be discussed in chapter One.

7 This view will be discussed in chapter One.

2. The structure of the investigation

I will first begin my investigation from a familiar theory of truth - that is, the classical correspondence theory of truth in which truth has been defined as correspondence relation between truth-bearers and truth-makers. How to specify those basic elements in the formulation of the correspondence theory of truth is open to interpretation. Nevertheless, based on the theoretical fact that the correspondence theory of truth has generally been turned into the traditional account of truth in Aristotle, Aristotle's investigations of truth will be my main research object. Specifically, I will focus on two levels of truth found in Aristotle, which are: 1) truth in assertions reported by *Metaphysics* Γ.7, Δ.7 and *Metaphysics* E.4; and 2) ontological truth stated in *Metaphysics* Θ.10. Most scholars read in Γ.7 a vintage exposition of the correspondence theory of truth, a theory which, they claim, Aristotle normally espouses. While in Θ.10, when Aristotle argues 'being in the strictest sense' to be truth, Aristotle underlines a new way to discuss truth that is related to being, rather than truth as truth-values of assertions. This will make up the primary content for chapter One.

How Aristotle regards 'truth as being in the strictest sense' in relation to the truth-makers in the traditional interpretation of truth in Aristotle will be further explored in chapter Two. There I shall discuss the relation between words, thoughts, and things in terms of combinations and separations in reality, resulting in the conclusion that things are prior to thoughts or words. Based on such a conclusion, I would like to suggest that there is a hierarchy of truth in Aristotle, viz. that truth in things is prior to truth in thoughts, which is prior to truth expressed in statements. In this hierarchy, the ontological reading of truth is prior to the traditional interpretation of truth. This will be the topic of chapter Three.

As we can see, in contrast to the traditional interpretation of the view of truth gleaned from *Metaphysics* Γ.7, Δ.7, and E.4, the ontological reading of the view of truth in *Metaphysics* Θ.10 provides us with a new perspective to interpret the concept of truth in Aristotle's philosophical works. Apparently, this new expression of truth as being in the strictest sense cannot only explain why the traditional view of truth in E.4 is correct, but can also be observed in various indications and applications of "truth as being in the strictest sense" in other domains of Aristotle's work. Except for the concepts of combination and separation, Aristotle does not directly provide us with specifics for the concept of being in the strictest sense as truth. However, we can explore the nature of being in the strictest sense through certain clues and various exemplifications of truth as being in the strictest sense. Following the structure offered by Aristotle in Θ.10, and with the help of the investigation of truth as being in the strictest sense in chapter Two, what is fundamental in being in reference to categories, as well as potentiality and actuality will be considered as clues to understand the nature of ontological truth that is being in the strictest sense.

The purpose of chapter Four is to survey certain clues in the ontological reading of truth that is being in the strictest sense. Some clues can be gleaned from how Aristotle discusses the concept of being in the framework of Θ.10, including being referring to categories and being referring to potentiality and actuality. What is more, a hierarchy of beings can be observed. The simple things in Θ.10 in terms of the categories will be identified as the primary

substance in *Categories*. Typically for categories, which are said without combination, these are prior to and more basic than assertions consisting of combinations of categories. Among the categories that have been divided into ten kinds, substance is the fundamental one. On the one hand, primary substances make definitions and assertions with truth-values possible. On the other hand, primary substances have ontological priority over other single categories. For a primary substance can exist separately in its own right, and the existence of items in other categories is determined by their ontological dependence on the primary substances.

At the same time, a further clue to the ontological reading of truth can be observed in the discussion of what is fundamental in being with reference to potentiality and actuality. In the first place, Aristotle has applied the concepts of potentiality and actuality to the analysis of motions. Moreover, Aristotle argues that the concepts of potentiality and actuality can be further used to describe various modes of being, instead of just being concerned with motions. In the framework of actuality and potentiality as ways of being, eternal beings and perishable things come into our sight in which eternal beings are always in actuality and enjoy ontological priority. Therefore, understanding what is always actuality is fundamental in our investigation of being with reference to potentiality and actuality. This priority of actuality as a mode of being shall be read as a clue to the ontological reading of truth in Aristotle. In this way we have revealed a hierarchy of being in Aristotle.

Chapter Five aims to show how the ontological reading of truth makes statements true by investigating the relation between essences and demonstrations in *Posterior Analytics*. The structure of a demonstration reveals that every part of a demonstration has an internal relation with essences as the necessary starting point of a demonstration. The first premise as the starting point of a demonstration must always be necessarily true at all times. Moreover, the necessity that characterizes the immediate definition promises the necessity of the conclusion of a demonstration. According to Aristotle's view, demonstrations produce knowledge that must be true, and this knowledge has been considered as the highest mode of actuality of human beings. Except for demonstrative knowledge, knowledge of indemonstrables such as axioms should also be investigated. Given the fact that indemonstrable knowledge is also attributed to truth in statements, the principle of non-contradiction shall be taken as an example of axioms to show its role in the work of how ontological truth makes statements true.

In chapter Six, as we look into the theory of affirmation and negation in *On interpretation* and *Topics*, where Aristotle focuses on truth in assertions as truth-bearers. Aristotle introduces the notion of the principle of non-contradiction as an *archê* of all axioms performing in knowledge. In this case, I am going to investigate what we can learn from the way the principle of non-contradiction operates under the hierarchy of truth established in chapter Three and within the hierarchy of being investigated in chapter Four. I aim at explaining the principle of non-contradiction as an ontological principle in terms of categories without contraries and actualization of modes of being that is always true without falsity, rather than merely taking the principle of non-contradiction as a logical principle focusing on assertions. Considering the hierarchy of truth in chapter Three, the ontological reading of the

principle of non-contradiction is prior to and should be responsible for the logical reading of the principle of non-contradiction. From my perspective, it is easier to understand why Aristotle takes the principle of non-contradiction as ‘a principle in things as the truth’⁸ that is prior to and in a sense beyond the scope of human knowledge,

Finally, in my conclusion, I posit that the search for ontological truth is both a valid and valuable pursuit for human beings. By nature, we seek ontological truth. Many of us even find joy in this pursuit. Yet, at the same time, certain limitations of our nature make it so that as humans, we may continually search for ontological truth, but can in all likelihood never completely achieve it nor hold onto it.

⁸ *Met.* K.5, 1062a19-1062b11.