

ARISTOTLE AND A MODERN NOTION OF PREDICATION

KWAME GYEKYE

It is by now an accepted view that the traditional doctrine of predication allows terms representing both individuals and universals (concepts, abstract entities) to occupy the position of subject in a predicate statement, whereas modern logic allows only singular terms, for example, proper names, which stand for individuals, to be subjects. Thus, in the notation ' Fx ' in modern logic, ' F ' (the predicate) stands for a property (or concept) and ' x ' (the subject) for an individual. In this way, traditional logic would regard as proper predication both of the following statements:

- (i) Socrates is pious,
- (ii) Piety is a virtue,

whereas modern predicate logic would disallow (ii). My aim in this brief paper is to show that, with regard to this aspect of predication—the aspect dealing with the proper subject of predication—Aristotle's theory must be dissociated from the traditional doctrine. For Aristotle means his primary substance, which is an individual, to be the paradigm case of the subject of a statement, as I will try to elucidate in this paper, and that even if what I am claiming as the position of Aristotle is not given explicit expression in his known works, it is certainly implicit in his logic and ontology.

According to Aristotle's doctrine of categories, which doctrine was meant to demolish Plato's theory of the self-existing Forms, an universal term, like piety, does not exist independently but inheres in a primary substance (i.e., an individual) and is ontologically dependent upon it; such a term is thus, in a Fregean-Russellian language, an incomplete symbol. In that doctrine, the term 'pious' (or 'piety'), being an attribute (or a property), must logically be an attribute of something—an individual: so that, if you say 'piety is a virtue', it is presupposed that there is *something* which is pious (and which virtuous). In the *Posterior Analytics* 73^{b7} Aristotle says: "I also describe as (existing) per se whatever is not asserted of something else as subject. I mean, for example, that 'the walking' is *something else* (*heteron ti: aliquid aliud*) which walks, and similarly

'the white'.' In the *Metaphysics* 1028^{a20-29}, he says: "And so one might even raise the question whether the words 'to walk', 'to be healthy', 'to sit' imply that each of these things is existent, and similarly in any other case of this sort; for none of them is either self-subsistent or capable of being separated from substance (*ousia*), but rather, if anything, it is that which walks or sits or is healthy that is an existent thing. Now these are seen to be more real because there is something definite which underlies (*hypokeimenon*) them (i.e., the substance or individual), which is implied in such a predicate; for we never use the word 'good' or 'sitting' without implying this (scil. individual)". (Ross's translation) (*Ousia*, here, as in the *Categories*, is used synonymously with *hypokeimenon*: substratum, subject, which is both a metaphysical principle indicating the subject of inherence of a property, and a logical principle indicating the subject of predication.) What Aristotle means to say surely is this, that in such statements as "sitting is pleasant", "goodness pays", the terms occupying the position of the subject cannot properly function as logical or real subjects, for these terms, qua universal terms, imply substrates. In other words, the real subject of a proposition must always be a substrate, that is, an individual, a complete symbol.

Within the framework of Aristotle's logic and ontology, then, we can symbolically translate the statement "Piety is a virtue" (symbolically: 'VP') as $(\exists x) (Px . Vx)$. That is, for Aristotle, genuine predications are those with individuals as subjects; statements with universal terms or concepts as subjects which also do occur in our speech acts—such statements may provisionally be allowed in virtue of their translatability or reducibility into those with individuals as subjects. So, when Strawson says: "Thus, in the statement, 'Generosity is a more amiable virtue than prudence'; may we not want to say that generosity and prudence appear as subjects. . . ? Yet the expressions, 'generosity' and 'prudence', do not possess the kind of *completeness* which our mediating criterion requires of subject-expressions,"¹ he is on a ground not unfamiliar to, not absent from, Aristotle's system. Strawson's examples of 'generosity' and 'prudence' are, of course, analogous to Aristotle's 'healthy', 'white', and 'sitting', i.e., in their nature: the examples of both indicate universal—or concept—introducing expressions that belong to Aristotle's 'accidental' or dependent categories and are, as such, incomplete.

If the interpretation I am putting on Aristotle's system is correct, that is, if the notation 'VP' is in actual fact to be read as $(\exists x) (Px . Vx)$, then Frege's view that ". . . the behaviour of the concept is essentially predicative, even where something is being asserted about it",² may be said not to be dissimilar to Aristotle's. (In Frege the concept is the reference of a

1. P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (A Doubleday Anchor Books ed., 1963), p. 193. My italics.

2. *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, ed. by P. Geach and Max Black, Basil Blackwell, Oxford (1960), p. 50.

predicate.³) Frege's point is that even if a concept-introducing word is in the subject position, it is nevertheless to be considered as a predicate. If the move from 'VP' to $(\exists x) (Px \cdot Vx)$ is correct—and I think it is correct in Aristotle's system—it is found that the grammatical subject-term 'P' in 'VP' is (or becomes) actually a predicate-term in $(\exists x) (Px \cdot Vx)$; thus 'P' in 'VP' is not the real subject. Not dissimilar to Aristotle's position, as I have been trying to elucidate it in this paper, is also Geach's view that "though a predicable may occur in a proposition *otherwise* than as a predicate attached to a subject, it does not then lose its predicative, incomplete character".⁴ Thus, in the notation 'VP' the subject-term 'P', which is a concept-introducing word, is still a predicate by virtue of its incomplete character: this fact, or this point, is what I am claiming to be implicit or visible within the structure of Aristotle's logic and ontology.

It is, of course, possible to analyse the statement 'Piety is a virtue' by the universal quantifier rather than by the existential quantifier: $(x) (Px \supset Vx)$. This mode of interpreting the statement would, of course, not commit the analyst to the actual existence of anything. But Aristotle would use the existential quantifier since he is already committed to the actual existence of the primary substance, without which nothing else is. But, it should be noted, whichever quantifier is preferred, the fact still remains that some individual object, potential or actual, is presupposed as the possessor, or subject of inherence, of the property 'piety'.

Now, it is true that Aristotle does in the *Categories* consider species and genera (i.e., universals) as substances, albeit secondary substances, and it seems that they also can, qua substances, be subjects of predication. Yet, for Aristotle, the individual is more fundamental, more basic; and species and genera, being complex notions, are reducible to it. In *Categories* 2^{a34-b6} Aristotle explains that if primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for both the species and the genera as well as the other nine 'accidental' categories to exist. For this reason, the individual is "that which is called a substance most strictly, primarily, and most of all" (*Categories* 2^{a11}; see also 2^{b15-18}). Thus, even in the *Categories*, the individual, not the universal, is that which really qualifies as substance. No wonder, then, that in the *Metaphysics* (e.g., 1038^{b35-36}, 1042^{a22}) Aristotle denies the attribution of substance to universals. We might say, however, that by his doctrine of the secondary substances in the *Categories*, Aristotle is merely giving due recognition to the fact that we do have universal—or concept-introducing terms (and, in this case, universals, i.e., species and genera, which are essential to, or conceptually bound up with, the metaphysical make-up of the individual) standing in the position of subjects in our normal linguistic activities. But by emphasizing the primacy and the irreducibility of the primary substance, i.e., the individual, vis-à-vis the

3. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

4. P. T. Geach, *Reference and Generality*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (1962), p. 32. My italic.

derivativeness and the complex character of concepts, whether essential or inessential (accidental) to the metaphysical make-up of an individual, Aristotle means to show surely that the complex universal depends upon or derives from the incomplex individual. Thus "Man (species) is mortal" for him means that there exist Plato, Socrates, Parmenides, etc., each one of whom is a man and is mortal.

It may be concluded from all this, that within the framework of Aristotle's logic and ontology the ultimate subject of predication is the individual. For Aristotle, every predicate, irrespective of its position in the proposition, implies a substrate (*ousia: hypokeimenon: subjectum*) which is an individual.

To summarise: As regards predication,

- in (i) modern logic the notation is ' Fx ';
- in (ii) traditional logic the notations are, (a) ' Fx ' and (b) ' FX ' (where X , like F , stands for a universal);
- in (iii) Aristotelian logic the alleged notations are: (a) ' Fx ' and (b) ' FX ' (where X , like F , stands for a universal).

But if my interpretation of Aristotle is acceptable, then in the case of Aristotle, ' FX ' reduces, or is translatable, into ' Fx ' (where ' x ' stands for an individual object, not an individual property), as in the modern theory of predication. If my interpretation of Aristotle's notion of the subject of predication were acceptable, it would mean (i) that with regard to the notion of predication Aristotle's is dissociable from the traditional, and (ii) that the modern logical notation of ' Fx ' has a precursor in Aristotle.

*University of Ghana
Legon, Ghana*