Chapter 1
Per se Being and Potential/Actual Being

Aristotle divides being into four types: *per se* being, accidental being, being as truth, and potential/actual being. Of these, *per se* being and potential/actual being are the central focus of his metaphysics, as we explained in the introduction. In this beginning chapter, I seek to interpret why the distinction between *per se* being and potential/actual being is significant. I start by explaining what *per se* being is, and proceed to discuss what potential/actual being is and how it is distinct from *per se* being. Toward the end of this chapter, I show that both *per se* being and potential/actual being are included in the focal structure of being which is the substantial subject of the science of being as being.

I. *PER SE* BEING

In his lexicon on being in *Meta.* v.7 Aristotle's account of *per se* being is as follows:

> Those things are said in their own right [or *per se*] to be that are indicated by the figures of predication;[1] for the senses of 'being' are just as many as these figures. Since some predicates indicate what the subject is, others its quality, others quantity, others relation, others activity or passivity, others its place, others its time, 'being' has a meaning answering to each of these. (1017a22-27)

This passage (for convenience of reference, let us call it the "*per se* being passage") is supposed to explain what it is for something to be a *per se* being. Aristotle tells us that those things are *per se* which are "indicated (or

[1] *Kath hauta de einai legetai hosaper sēmainei ta schēmata tēs katēgorias.* The subject of *sēmainei* is ambiguous in Greek, and so the sentence can also be translated as: "All things which signify the figures of predication are said to be in their own right [or *per se*]" (C. Kirwan, 1993, 40). The term *sēmainein* (to signify) is related to *sēmeia* (sign or symbol), although it is the etymological origin of our modern word 'semantics'. For Aristotle, in addition to names, verbs, phrases and sentences are also signifiers (*Poetics*, 1456b38ff). To say that they signify means that they are the signs or symbols of the thing, through the affections of the soul (cf. *DI.* 1.16a3-8, 14, 24b1-2). Since *per se* beings are the things rather than the signs of the things, it might be difficult to say that they signify.

signified) by the figures of predication". He further claims that among predicates (*katēgoroumena*, literally, "things that are predicated") some signify what a thing is, some a quantity, and so on. There are as many *per se* beings as there are predicates. It entails that substance, quality, quantity, relation, activity, passivity, place, time, etc. are *per se* beings. Apparently, *per se* being is related to both "figure of predication" and "predicate".[2] This implies that there must be a sort of correspondence between "figure of predication" and "predicate". The passage, however, does not say how they are related. Yet, clearly, to understand the nature of *per se* being, we have to understand this relation.

The list of *per se* beings, presented in this passage, turns out to be the familiar list of categories. The word 'categories' is derived from the Greek word *katēgoria*, the verb of which is *katēgorein* ("to accuse"). In the "*per se* being passage", what is translated as "figures of predication" is *ta schēmata tēs katēgorias*, and what is translated as "predicates" is *katēgoroumena*. Thus, to say that there are as many *per se* being as there are "figures of predication" or "predicates" amounts to saying that there are as many *per se* beings as there are "figures of categories" or "categories". This is why the list of *per se* beings, i.e., substance, quality, quantity, etc., is precisely the familiar list of categories. The divisions of *per se* beings map the divisions of the categories. For this reason, *per se* beings can also be called "categorial beings". In fact, even Aristotle himself names substance, quantity, quality, etc., "categories of being" (*hai katēgoriai tou ontos*, *Meta.* ix.1, 1045b28).

Since the "*per se* being passage" reports that there are as many kinds of *per se* being as there are categories, an interpretation of *per se* being turns out to be an interpretation of Aristotle's categories. Some confusion might occur at this juncture. When Aristotle provides the list of substance, quantity, quality, etc., it is often not clear whether he is talking about these items on the list as linguistic items or as extra-linguistic beings. Commentators have good reasons to complain against Aristotle in this regard.[3] However, it is not the

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[2] Probably for this reason, T. H. Irwin and G. Fine translate *per se* beings directly as "predicative beings" (1995, 270).

[3] E.g. J. Ackrill remarks of Aristotle, "It is careless of him to speak as if it were substances (and not names of substances) that signify." (1963, 88) The same confusion also occurs in Aristotle's dictum that "being is said in many ways". As D. Bostock points out that when Aristotle says this, "he is utterly careless of our distinction between *using* a word in the normal way, to speak of whatever that word stands for, and *mentioning* the word itself." (1994, 45)

Aristotle's ambiguity over the distinction between non-linguistic objects and linguistic expressions has caused much controversy regarding what a category is in Aristotle. Should categories be understood as linguistic terms, or as extralogical entities, or things meant, or ultimate predicates? For a helpful historical survey of the debate on the nature of Aristotle's categories, see T. H. Irwin, 1988, 498-499. For a helpful discussion of the nature of a category in metaphysics in general, see J. J. E. Gracia, 1999, especially ch.6. I would like to point out that the fact that potentiality and actuality are not on the list of *per se* beings or categories should rule out the view that categories in Aristotle are concepts.

case that Aristotle is not aware of the distinction between beings and linguistic expressions. Instead he simply does not bother to attend to this distinction. In *Cat.* 1a16 he claims that he is dealing with "things that are said" (*ta legomena*, i.e. expressions), and in *Cat.* 1b25ff he calls substance, quantity, quality, etc., "things [i.e. expressions] said without any combination". But in *Cat.* 1a20 they are said to be "of things there are" (*tōn ontōn*). What is going on here seems to be that for Aristotle there is a sort of corresponding structure between the language we use to express the world and the beings in the world, so that in treating one of them he is treating the other as well. Language is used by Aristotle as a mirror of the structure of reality and thus as an instrument for metaphysics.

For our purpose, however, there is a more pertinent difficulty. In the "*per se* being passage", the categories of substance, quantity, quality, etc. are said to be predicates, yet *katēgoria* is also the word for "predication". Is category, then, predication or predicate? There has been a long-standing debate concerning this issue. The traditional view is that an Aristotelian category is a predicate. On the contrary, M. Frede argues that in its technical sense *katēgoria* means "predication" or "kind of predication", and only in a derivative usage does it mean "predicate".[4]

However, in the "*per se* being passage", *per se* beings are said to be signified by both predication and predicate. This suggests that there must be a sort of internal relation between predication and predicate. But this relation will not be grasped if *katēgoria* can only be "predication" or can only be "predicate". Indeed, it must be through an explanation of this intrinsic relation that we can understand what Aristotle means by *katēgoria*. We need to know what the "figures of predication" are in *Meta.* v.7's "*per se* being passage", and how they are internally related to predicates. But where do we turn for enlightenment?

In the "*per se* being passage", the list of categories or *per se* beings contains 8 members: what a thing is, quality, quantity, relation, activity, passivity, place, and time. In the Aristotelian corpus, the longest list provided contains ten members, and there are two places and only two places that the ten-member list is presented: *Cat.* 4, and *Top.* i.9.[5] Although the *Categories*, given the title itself, is more tempting for one to turn to regarding the nature

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[4] M. Frede remarks: "I am inclined to think that the translation 'predicate', at least in the Aristotelian sense of 'predicate', would never have been suggested as a possibility if it had not been needed to make the text fit certain preconceptions as to what Aristotelian categories are. In any case, the following seems to me to strongly favour the translation 'predication'. The term '*katēgoria*' is used at least six times in the *Topics* outside our chapter [i.e. *Topics*, i.9] (107a3; 109b5; 141a4; 152a38; 178a5; 181b27). In each case it can be taken to mean 'predication', i.e. in no case do we have to take it in the sense of 'predicate', but in at least three cases it definitely has to be taken in the sense of 'predication' (109b5; 141a4; 181b27)." (Frede, 1981/1987, 33)

[5] In other places, the number is usually reduced, or the list is open-ended in the form of "so on", or "the rest". Cf., e.g. *Meta.* v.7, 1017a24-7, vii. 1, 1028a11-13.

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