

# Aristotle on Essence, Essential, Accident and Accidental

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## A. Accident

1. We call an accident (συμβεβηκός) that which attaches to something and can be truly asserted, but neither of necessity nor usually.’ (Met.<sup>1</sup>, Δ, 1025a14-16)
2. Whenever an accident attaches to a subject, it attaches to it not because it is that subject (μη διότι τοδὶ ἦν). (Met., Δ, 1025a21-24)
3. ‘There is no definite cause for an accident, but a chance cause, i.e. an indefinite one.’ (Met., Δ, 1025a24-25)
4. ‘The accident has happened or exists, -not in virtue of itself, however, but of something else. (Met., Δ, 1025a28-29)
5. ‘What attaches to each thing in virtue of itself but is not in its substance is an accident.’ (Met., Δ, 1025a30-32)
6. ‘An accident is something which, though it is ... neither a definition nor a property nor a genus, yet belongs to the thing.’ (To., I, 5, 102b4-)
7. An accident is ‘something which may either belong or not belong to any one and the self-same thing, as (e.g.) being seated may belong or not belong to some self-same thing.’ (To., I, 5, 102b4-)
8. ‘There is nothing to prevent an accident from becoming a temporary or relative property ... [and] there is nothing to prevent an accident from becoming both a

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in this paper:

Cat.	<i>Categories</i>
Met.	<i>Metaphysics</i>
OI.	<i>On Interpretation</i>
PsA.	<i>Posterior Analytics</i>
To.	<i>Topics</i>

relative and a temporary property; but a property absolutely it will never be.’ Aristotle’s example is ‘being seated.’ That it is a temporary property is evident. It is also a relative property to those who are not seating when he is the only person sitting. Therefore, it is a temporary and also a relative property.

9. ‘In the case of accidents and in no other it is possible for something to be true in a certain respect and not universally’ and ‘there is nothing to prevent an attribute belonging in part’ so that it is open to dispute accidents e.g. being white or just about a man because he might be white or just in part only. Thus, ‘conversion is not a necessary process in the case of accidents.’ (To., B, 1, 109a9-)

### ***B. Essential versus accidental***

Aristotle distinguishes between two senses of being (τὸ ὄν): accidental sense (κατὰ συμβεβηκός) and essential sense (καθ’ αὐτό). The accidental sense happens when something is said to be another thing while there is in fact a third thing which is both of them. Thus, being the first thing is not by itself the second thing.

- a) Aristotle speaks of three ways in which one thing is said in an accidental sense to be another. (Met., Δ, 1017a8-22)
  - i) When both the subject and the predicate are accidents of a third thing and it is in fact the third thing which ‘is’ by its own. Thus, when it is said e.g. that ‘The just is musical’ it is said accidentally because it is in fact a third thing, Socrates for example, which is just and musical. (Met., Δ, 1017a13-19)
  - ii) When that to which the attribute belongs is. The example of this must be ‘the man is musical’ because it is in fact the man which is.
  - iii) When the subject which has as an attribute that of which it is itself predicated, itself is. The example of this must be Aristotle’s third example: ‘The musical is man.’
- b) Aristotle rejects the essential sense to categories: ‘Those things are said in their own right to be that are indicated by the figures of predication; for the senses of ‘being’

are just as many as these figures.’ (Met., Δ, 1017a22-24) Aristotle does not give us any example of the essential sense.

Daniel W. Graham<sup>2</sup> suggests that while essential predication is of the logical form of ‘S is P,’ the logical form of the accidental predication is ‘S has P.’ Although he concedes that the is/has contrast is not Aristotle’s, for which he thinks Aristotle prefers ‘said of’/‘in’ terminology, he points to the discussion of ‘have’ in Cat. 15 as an evidence of its potential value for an analysis of predication.<sup>3</sup>

Kirwan analyses the distinction of essential and accidental predicate as such: while essential predicates ‘are identical with the subjects of which they are predicated; other predications are true in virtue of the fact that two distinct items, e.g. a substance and a quality, ‘coincide.’<sup>4</sup>

Herman Weidemann<sup>5</sup> believes ‘what divides a predicative statement which predicates essentially from a predicative statement which predicates accidentally is the fact that the former does- whereas the latter does not- answer the question what its subject cannot fail to be without ceasing to exist, as the somewhat its subject goes on existing, no matter what happens to be true of it during its existence, or, what kind of things its subject must be in order to be identifiable as one and the same object as long as it exists.’

### ***C. Essential***

1. Either the formula or the name of the subject of an essential attribute is involved in it. For example, animal is involved in female but not in white. (Met., Z, 1030b23-26)

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<sup>2</sup> Graham, Daniel W., *Aristotle’s Two Systems*, 1987, Oxford University Press, pp. 40-41

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* n. 36

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from: Weidemann, Herman, *In Defence of Aristotle’s Theory of Predication*, *Phronesis*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1980, p. 76

<sup>5</sup> Weidemann, Herman, *In Defence of Aristotle’s Theory of Predication*, *Phronesis*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1980, p. 80

2. Essential attributes, combined together, form a unity. Thus, e.g. animal and biped form a unity because they are both essential of man. (OI., II, 11, 21a14-16)
3. Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of essential attributes (PsA., A, 4, 73a34-b3; 22, 84a12-17):
  - a) Those attributes that belong to their subject as elements in its essential nature as e.g. line belongs to triangle or point to line. Here the very being of triangle is composed of line or that of line is composed of points: line is contained in the formula of triangle and point in that of line.
  - b) Those attributes whose subjects are contained in their own defining formula as e.g. straight is an essential attribute of line because line is part of the defining formula of straight or odd belongs to number because number is part of the defining formula of odd.

Every attribute that is related in neither of these two ways to its subject, it is not an essential but an accidental attribute. (PsA., A, 4, 73b3-5)

4. That attribute which is not predicated of a subject other than itself is an essential attribute. A substance cannot be predicated of anything but itself and is, thus, essential. (PsA., A, 4, 73b5-10)
5. A thing consequently co-stated with anything is essential. For example, if a beast dies when its throat is being cut, its death is also essentially connected with the cutting because the cutting was the cause of death, not death a coincidence of cutting. (PsA., A, 4, 73b10-15)
6. Essential attributes in both of this sense, either in the sense that their subjects are contained in them or in the sense that they are contained in their subjects, are necessary as well as consequently co-stated with their subjects. The reason is that it is impossible for them to inhere in their subjects either simply or in the qualified sense (that one or other of a pair of opposites must inhere in the subject as e.g. one of straight or curve must be necessarily predicable of a line or one of odd or even of number). (PsA., A, 4, 73b16-21; 6, 74b5-12; B, 96b1-5)

7. Only those attributes that are within a genus are essential and possessed by their respective subjects as such and, thus, are necessary. Thereupon, both the conclusion and the premises of demonstrations which produce scientific knowledge are essential. (PsA., A, 6, 75a28-31) Therefore, ‘the extreme and the middle terms must be drawn from the same genus; otherwise, as predicated, they will not be essential and will thus be accidents.’ (PsA., A, 6, 75b10-12) Also, the theorems of a science can be demonstrated by means of another science only when they are related as subordinate to superior. (PsA., A, 6, 75b13-)
8. Our knowledge of the connexion of an attribute with a subject is essential only when ‘we know that connexion through the middle term in virtue of which it inheres (καθ’ ὃ ὑπάρχει), and as an inference from basic premises essential and ‘appropriate’ to the subject.’ The essential belonging of the middle to the minor has a necessary connexion with its belonging to the same genus of the major and minor: ‘If that middle term also belongs essentially to the minor, the middle must belong to the same genus as the major and minor terms (ἀνάγκη τὸ μέσον ἐν τῇ αὐτῇ συγγενεῖα εἶναι). (PsA., A, 9, 76a4-9)
9. In an essential predication, the predicate is signified of a subject identical with itself or with a species of itself. Since only predicates which signify substance signify that the subject is identical with the predicate or with a species of the predicate, predicates signifying substance are essentially predicated and any other predicate is accidental or coincidental. Thus, while animal is essentially predicated of man because man is identical with a species of animal, white is accidentally predicated of man because man is neither identical with white nor a species of it. (PsA., A, 22, 83a24-32) Weidemann<sup>6</sup> discusses the confusion between essential predications and statements of identity. He warns that the expression ‘(to be) just what a man is’ (analogous to the Greek phrase ‘(εἶναι) ὅπερ ἄνθρωπον) ought not to be confused

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<sup>6</sup> Weidemann, Herman, In Defence of Aristotle’s Theory of Predication, *Phronesis*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1980, pp. 79-80

with the expression ‘just what it is for a man to be,’ which renders the phrase τὸ ὄπερ ἀνθρώπου εἶναι’ (1007a22, 23, 27-28); a confusion Kirwan discusses.

10. ‘Demonstration proves the inherence of essential attributes in things.’ (PsA., A, 22, 84a11-12)
11. ‘Nothing which does not happen to belong to the genus is essentially the genus; e.g. a white man is not essentially a color.’ Thus, while justice falls within the genus, a just man does not. (To., Γ, 1, ^116a24-)
12. There is no syllogism of essence (*ti esti*). Nevertheless, we come to know *ti esti* through a demonstration. (93b15-20; cf. 93b25-28)<sup>7</sup>

#### **D. Accidental**

1. An accidental attribute cannot be predicated of a subject universally. Thus, we cannot say ‘Every man is musical.’ The reason is that ‘universal attributes belong to things in virtue of their nature.’ Therefore, accidental predicates are predicated only of the individuals. (Met., Δ, 1017b33-1018a2)
2. An accidental is a mere name. (Met., E, 1026b13-)
3. An accidental is obviously akin to non-being. (Met., E, 1026b21)
4. ‘That which is neither always nor for the most part we call accidental.’ (Met., E, 1026b27-33)
5. The matter (ὄλη) is the cause of the accidental because it is matter which is capable of being otherwise than as it for the most part is. (Met., E, 1027a13-16) In fact, there is cause or principle of the incidental of the same kind as there are of the essential because if there were, everything would be of necessity. (Met., K, 1065a6-8) The causes of accidental are unordered and indefinite. (Met., K, 1065a25-26)
6. Since all science is either of that which is always or of that which is for the most part, there is no science of the accidental. (Met., E, 1027a19-24; K, 1064b30-

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Devereux (B220, 152 fn. 45) refers to 94a1-2, 7-9, 11-16 where Aristotle seems to speak as if there is a demonstration of the *ti esti* where ‘there is a *ti esti* which can figure as the conclusion of a demonstration.’

1065a6) Therefore, since an accident may also not inhere and, thus, it is impossible to prove its inherence as a necessary conclusion, there is no demonstrative knowledge of accidents. (PsA., A, 6, 75a18-23)

7. The accidental is not necessary but indeterminate. (Met., K, 1065a24-26)
8. The co-positing of a subject and a predicate which are accidental either to the same subject or to one another, whiteness and being musical for instance, does not form a unity. (OI, II, 11, 21a7-14)
9. Negative predicates, i.e. predicates including a 'not,' are accidental predicates. Thus, if good be an essential predicate of a subject, 'not bad' cannot be essential but is accidental. (OI., II, 14, 23b15-20)
10. Every attribute which does not belong to its subject in either of two senses of essential attribute (cf. PsA., A, 4, 73a34-b3), namely, belonging to their subjects as an element of its formula or their subjects belonging to them as an element of them, is an accidental attribute. (PsA., A, 4, 73b3-5)
11. Those attributes that are predicated of a subject other than themselves are accidental attributes. Thus, everything except substance is an accidental in this sense. (PsA., A, 4, 73b5-10)
12. A thing not consequentially connected with anything is accidental. For example, in 'while he was walking it lightened,' the lightning was not due to his walking but was a coincidence. (PsA., A, 4, 73b10-15)
13. Those attributes that are not within a genus are accidental attributes. (PsA., A, 6, 75a28-31) Therefore, the extreme and middle terms that are not drawn from the same genus are accidents. (PsA., A, 6, 75b10-12) Moreover, to apply an attribute to subjects in different genera afford knowledge of the attribute, only as inhering accidentally, not as belonging to its subject as such.' (PsA., A, 9, 75b38-76a3)