

Aristotle on Truth

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1) *Truth and falsity belong only to thought, primarily, and speech, secondarily*

Thought is the primary realm in which truth and falsity may occur and speech the secondary realm of this occurrence while the realm of external being has no truth and falsity in itself. The first and last points are directly asserted by Aristotle in one text: ‘Falsity and truth are not in things-it is not as if the good were true, and the bad were in itself false- but in thought.’ (Met.,¹ E, 1027b25-27; cf. Met., K, 1065a22-23) The second point is also somehow implied: ‘As there are in the mind thoughts which do not involve truth and falsity, and those which must be either true or false, so it is in speech.’ (OI, I, 1, 16a9-11)

2) *Truth and falsity belong only to co-positings and positing aways and not to incomposites*

Truth and falsity do not belong to the realm of external being but only to the realms of thought and language. However, they do not belong to all the elements in these realms. Neither do they belong to incomposite elements in thought (‘With regard to simple things and essences, falsity and truth do not exist even in thought.’ (Met., E, 1027b26-28; So., Γ, 6, 430a26-b4)), nor to such elements in language.² Consequently, all incomposites are incapable of being true or false. (cf. Met., Θ, 1051b17-22 and b26-27) Where we have no

¹ Abbreviations used in this paper:

Cat.	<i>Categories</i>
Met.	<i>Metaphysics</i>
OI.	<i>On Interpretation</i>
PrA.	<i>Prior Analytics</i>
So.	<i>On the Soul</i>

² ‘Of things said without co-positing none is either true or false.’ (Cat., 4, 2a8-10)

co-positing or positing away, of the kind made by copula or verb, we cannot have truth and falsity though we can have significance: ““Man” and “white”, as isolated terms, are not yet either true or false. In proof of this, consider the word “good-stag.” It has significance, but there is no truth or falsity about it, unless “is” or “is not” is added, either in present or in some other tense.’ (OI., I, 1, 16a14-18) Therefore, any other kind of co-positing cannot be the subject of truth and falsity. One good example of co-positings not made by copula or verbs are simple negations: ‘He that uses the expression ‘not-man,’ if nothing more be added, is not nearer but farther from making a true or a false statement than he who uses the expression “man.”’ (OI., I, 10, 20a34-36)

It is indeed a co-positing or a positing away that is the subject of truth and falsity: ‘For it is co-positing (σύνθεσιν) and positing away (διαίρεσιν) that truth and falsity is about.’ (OI., I, 1, 16a12-13) Co-positing is so vital for truth-falsity that ‘of the things that are never said based on co-positing, nothing is true or false.’ (Cat., 10, 13b9-11) This co-positing can be both in thought (‘where the alternative of true or false applies, there we always find a sort of combining of objects of thought in a quasi-unity ... For falsehood always involves a combining’ (So., Γ, 6, 430a26-b2) and ‘truth or false is a co-positing of concepts of thought’ (So., Γ, 6, 430a11-12) and in language³ because they are produced in thought: ‘There is not only the true or false assertion that Cleon is white but also the true or false assertion that he was or will be white. In each and every case that which unifies is thought.’ (So., Γ, 6, 430b4-6)

3) *Correspondence to external world*

Although truth and falsity belong to thought and language and not to external world, their basis is in the external world. It is, in fact, the correspondence of thought and language to

³ ‘For truth has the affirmation in the case of what is compounded and the negation in the case of what is divided, while falsity has contradictory of this apartment.’ (Met., E, 1027b20-23) Nonetheless, it must be thought that its co-positing and positing away is primary (Note: Aristotle does not call any of the realms primary in any respect.

external world that makes what is true, true and what is false, false: ‘To say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that is not, is true.’ (Met., Γ, 1011b26-27; cf. Met., Θ, 1051b2-5) When the two realms are correspondent, we can transfer from one to the other: ‘If it is true to say that a thing is white, it must necessarily be white; if the reverse proposition be true, it will of necessity not be white. Again, if it is white, the proposition stating that it is white was true; if it is not white, the proposition to the opposite effect was true. And if it is not white, the man who states that it is making a false statement, it follows that it is not white.’ (OI., I, 9, 18a39-b3) This possible mutual transformation does not, however, imply that each realm is the basis of the other. In fact, it is only the external world that is the basis of truth and falsity in thought or language and not vice versa: ‘it is not because we think that you are white, that you are white, but because you are white we who say this have the truth.’ (Met., Θ, 1051b6-9; Cat., 5, 4b8-10) Aristotle even calls the external world the ‘cause’ of truth in the realm of language while the converse causation is not approved: ‘Whereas the true statement is in no way the cause of the actual thing’s existence, the actual thing does seem in some way the cause of the statement’s being true: it is because the actual thing exists or does not that the statement is called true or false.’ (Cat., 12, 14b18-22) This one-sided relation Aristotle calls ‘reciprocation as to implication of existence’: ‘For there being a man reciprocates as to implication of existence with the true statement about it: if there is a man, the statement whereby we say that there is a man is true, and reciprocally- since if the statement whereby we say that there is a man is true, there is a man. And whereas the true statement is in no way the cause of the actual thing’s existence, the actual thing does seem in some way the cause of the statement’s being true: it is because the actual thing exists or does not that the statement is called true or false,’ (Cat., 12, 14b14-22)

Aristotle attaches falsity to not-being: ‘We call things false in this way, then, either because they themselves do not exist, or because the appearance which results from them is that of something that does not exist.’ (Met., Δ, 1024b24-26) Or: ‘A false formula is the formula of non-existent objects, in so far as it is false.’ (Met., Δ, 1024b26-27) This correspondence

to ‘non-being’ is, however, more a miscorrespondence: ‘Hence every formula is false when applied to something other than that of which it is true, e.g. the formula of a circle is false when applied to a triangle.’ (Met., Δ, 1024b27-28)

4) *A sense of being*

Aristotle believes that the strictest sense of ‘being’ (τὸ ὄν) and ‘not-being’ (τὸ μὴ ὄν) is truth and falsity. (Met., Θ, 1051a34-b2) In this sense, being means truth and not being falsity and this happens in two forms: co-positing (or positing away) and existence (or non-existence). In the first form, we have truth if the subject and attribute are really combined. (Met., Θ, 1051b33-) The same can be said about false when ‘it is not put together or cannot be put together.’ (Met., Δ, 1024b17-19) In the second form, we have truth when we think objects that exist and falsity when we think non-existents. (Met., Θ, 1052a1-3; Δ, 1024b17-18)

5) *Necessarily: either true or false*

There are two states that must either be true or false and, thus, there is no possibility for a third state for them. The first case is ‘what is or has taken place’: every proposition about these, whether positive or negative, must necessarily be either true or false.⁴ (OI., I, 9, 18a28-38) The second case is when we have a pair of contradictories: ‘In the case of a pair of contradictories, either when the subject is universal and the propositions are of a universal character, or when it is individual ... one of the two must be true and the other false; whereas when the subject is universal, but the propositions are not of a universal character, there is no such necessity.’ (OI., I, 9, 18a29-32; cf. 7, 17b29-33) About every affirmation or denial it can be said that ‘it is necessary that affirmations or denials must be

⁴ Aristotle points out that this is not the case about the future tense. (OI., I, 9, 18a33-) Nonetheless, even in such cases, ‘one of the two propositions must be true and the other false, but we cannot say determinately that this or that is false, but must leave the alternative undecided.’ (OI., I, 9, 19a36-b2)

either true or false.’ (OI., I, 9, 18b4-5; 10, 20a34-35; Cat., 4, 2a7-10) It is indeed distinctive of contradictories that ‘always one or the other of them is true or false.’ (Cat., 10, 13b33-35)

6) *Degrees of falsity*

Aristotle believes that not all things that are false are so in the same way but there is a falsier and a less false (Met., Γ) In the same way, ‘the judgement which denies the true judgment is more really false than that which positively asserts the presence of the contrary quality.’ (OI., II, 14, 23b20-21; cf. b21-23) Aristotle also speaks of ‘wholly false’ (ὅλην ψευδῆ): ‘I mean by “wholly false” the contrary of the truth, e.g. if what belongs to none is assumed to belong to all, or if what belongs to all is assumed to belong to none.’ (PrA., B, 2, 54a4-6)

7) *Self-agreement of truth*

In *Prior Analytics* (A, 32, 47a8-9) Aristotle says: ‘Everything that is true must in every respect agree with itself.’

8) *Other points about truth*

- a) Aristotle believes that Heraclitus’ theory that ‘all things are and are not’ make everything true while Anaxagoras’ theory that ‘there is an intermediate between the terms of a contradiction’ makes everything false. (Met., Γ, 1012a24-27)
- b) ‘Regarding things that cannot be otherwise, opinions are not at the same time true and at another false, but the same opinions are always true or always false.’ (Met., Θ, 1051b15-17)
- c) ‘It is not possible to be in error regarding the question what a thing is, save in an accidental sense.’ (Met., Θ, 1051b22-26)