

# The Concept of Like in Aristotle

Mohammad Bagher Ghomi

[mbqomi@gmail.com](mailto:mbqomi@gmail.com)

Like (ὁμοιος) has the following functions in Aristotle's philosophy:

1. We know from Aristotle that some thinkers believed that 'like is known by like.' (ἡ δέ γνῶσις τοῦ ὁμοίου τῷ ὁμοίῳ). (Met.<sup>1</sup>, B, 1000b5-6 and So., A, 5, 410a27-29 about Empedocles; So., A, 2, 404b16-18 about Plato; So., A, 2, 405b12-16 and b26-28 about those who define the soul by its power of knowing) This, however, is a problematic theory in Aristotle's point of view. One major problem is that it is in contradiction with saying that like is not capable of being affected by like (though there are some who believe in this: So., B, 5, 416b35-36) simply because knowing and thinking are ways of being affected on their own views. (So., A, 5, 410a23-26) Another reason being that this theory entails that error must be a 'contact with the unlike' because it is the opposite of the knowing of like by like. (So., Γ, 3, 427a26-b5) Aristotle also mentions that some thinkers believe that like is fed by like, though there are some others who believe in its converse. (So., B, 4, 416a29-32) He also mentions a theory he assigns to 'Antisthenes and other such uneducated people' based on which it is not possible to say what a thing is (τί μὲν ἐστὶ) and its definition but it is possible to say what a thing is like' (ὅτι δ' οἷον καττίτερος). (Met., H, 1043b23-28)
2. Aristotle posits likeness as distinguished from sameness: things are the same whose substance is one but those are like whose quality is one.' (Met., Δ, 1021a11-12) Quality is the only basis of similarity and dissimilarity: 'It is only based on one of

---

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

Cat.	<i>Categories</i>
Met.	<i>Metaphysics</i>
So.	<i>On the Soul</i>
To.	<i>Topics</i>

the qualities that things are called similar and dissimilar (ὅμοια δὲ καὶ ἀνόμοια κατὰ μόνας τὰς ποιότητας λέγεται). A thing is not similar to another in virtue of anything but that in virtue of which it is qualified.' (ὅμοιον γὰρ ἕτερον ἐτέρῳ οὐκ ἔστι κατ' ἄλλο οὐδὲν ἢ καθ' ὃ ποιόν ἐστίν) (Cat., 8, 11a15-18) Also, things that are not without difference in their compound substances and thus are not absolutely the same but are the same in their form, are called alike. (Met., I, 1054b3-7)

3. **Family resemblance.** Aristotle says that some kinds of sameness that are not one due to the sameness of species ought still to be ranked in the same class because they seem to be one family based on a certain likeness and resemblance. (To., I, 7, ^103a10-25)
4. Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of likeness:
  - a) Likeness between things belonging to different genera with such a formula: as one is to one thing, so is another to something else (e.g. knowledge to object of knowledge and perception to object of perception). (To., I, 17, 108a7-10)
  - b) Likeness between things belonging to the same genus: they are alike in so far as they have any identical attribute. (To., I, 17, ^108a14-17)
5. The contrary of likeness and unlikeness seems to be at least an alternative for primary difference and contrariness. Aristotle asserts that all contraries refer to the primary differences and contraries: 'Since everything that is may become referring to some one common nature, each of the contraries also may become referring to primary differences and contraries of being, whether the first differences of being are plurality any unity or likeness and unlikeness, or some other differences.' (Met., K, 1061a10-15; cf Met., K, 1061b11-15; Met., Γ, 1005a6-8)