**Aristotle and Ockham on Being**

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**Abstract**

Aristotle and William of Ockham both argue that existence or being is a predicate, though not a distinguishing predicate. I place Ockham’s argument in an Aristotelian context and discuss its merits. I then turn to empiricist criticisms of the view that we can coherently predicate being of things. I argue that while Ockham’s argument is cogent, his account of how we come to have the concept of being is inadequate. Ockham’s view needs to be supplemented with Kantian insights.

**Introduction**

Aristotle starts *Metaphysics Gamma* with the claim that “[T]here is a discipline (episteme) which studies being as being and what features hold of this through itself (kai ta touto hyparchonta kath’ auto)” (1003a 20-21, my translation). As I understand him, his key arguments in *Gamma*, chapter 5 and following, are responses to Protagoras’s relativism, which he takes to hold that all perceptions are true, and to Cratylus’s extreme Heracliteanism, which he takes to hold that everything is always changing in every respect. Aristotle argues that extreme Heracliteanism leads to Protagorean relativism and stresses the incoherence of both extreme Heracliteanism and Protagorean relativism. He concludes from a variety of arguments that some objects of perception are fairly persistent auta kath’ auta (these through themselves); that is, they are something in themselves independently of perceivers. He plausibly identifies being an auto kath’auto (this through itself) with having a mind independent essence, or being composed of things which have a mind independent essence. He argues in his scientific works that the essence of kinds of things is one of the key factors which explains the pattern in the way they change. For instance, human beings, like other animals, change from embryo to child to adult. The continuing presence of their essence explains their continuity despite many changes they undergo. In two earlier papers, I have given an exposition of Aristotle’s key arguments, so I will not spell them out here (Couvalis, 2011; 2015).

By contrast to Aristotle, Ockham seems to intend to criticise the view that the existence of something is independent of its essence. In spite of this, his arguments and his responses to potential critics are intended to bolster the Aristotelian position and illuminate it.

**Ockham’s Central Argument**

Ockham’s central argument for a predicate of being is stated very simply:

One can prove that there is one common concept predicable of everything in the following way: If there is no one such common then there are different concepts for different things. Let us suppose that there are two such concepts, A and B. Following out this supposition, I can show that some concept more general than A and B is predicable of an object C. Just as we can form the verbal proposition ‘C is B’, ‘C is A’, and ‘C is something’, we can form the three corresponding mental propositions. Two of these are dubious and one is certain; for someone can doubt which of the first two is true, while knowing that the third is true. If this is granted, I argue as follows: The two propositions all have the same subject; therefore, they have different predicates. Were it not so, one and the same proposition would be both certain and dubious; for in the present case the first two are dubious. But if they have different predicates, the predicate in ‘C is something’ is not the predicate in either ‘C is B’ or ‘C is A’. It is, we can conclude, a different predicate. But it is clear that the relevant predicate is neither less general nor convertible with either A or B. It must therefore be more general. But this is what we set out to prove-that some concept of the mind, different from those that are logically subordinated to it, is common to everything … Just as one word is capable of being truly predicated of everything, there is some concept of the mind that can be predicated of every object or of every pronoun referring to an object. (Ockham, 1974: 122-3).

Ockham spells out the same point less abstractly elsewhere when he says:

to the name ‘being’ there corresponds one common concept that is predicable of all things. I prove this as follows: Let A be ‘a human being’, let B be ‘an animal’, and let C be ‘Socrates’. Then I argue: Just as one can formulate the three spoken propositions ‘C is A’, ‘C is B’, and ‘C is a being’, so too can one formulate three similar mental propositions, two of which are doubted and the third of which is known. For it is possible that someone should be in doubt with respect to both ‘C is A’ and ‘C is B’ and yet know ‘C is a being and is something. This is manifestly obvious in the case of something approaching from a distance: When one sees it, he is often in doubt about whether it is a human being or an animal or a donkey, and yet he knows evidently that it is a being and is something. Given this, I then argue as follows: Two of these mental propositions are doubtful and the third is known. And the three propositions have exactly the same subject. Therefore, they have distinct predicates. For otherwise the same proposition would at one and the same time be doubtful and certain to the same person – which is impossible; therefore, these three propositions have three distinct predicates. Likewise, it is obvious that the predicate of the third proposition is neither less common than nor interchangeable with any of the other predicates; therefore, it is a predicate that is more common than any of them (Ockham, 1991b: 448-9).

We do not even have to refer to someone knowing that something is there to accept Ockham’s point. It is enough that someone can reasonably believe that something is there in a fog or in the distance while reasonably leaving open its particular species or genus. We can also expand on his example by considering examples in which it is rational to believe that something causes a phenomenon without yet having a justified belief about the nature of that thing. For instance, radio astronomers can be puzzled about a signal. Is it a distant pulsar? Pigeon poop on one of their devices? The transmission of a nearby radio station? An animal in the wiring? Black body radiation? And so on. Still, they can be pretty sure that something or things causes a signal – a being or beings.

**Empiricist Criticisms of a Science of Being**

Ockham’s argument for a property of being is powerful and simpler than anything we can find in Aristotle’s illuminating but convoluted arguments. Nevertheless, modern empiricist philosophers have been reluctant to accept that being or existence is a property of things, though it is unclear whether any of them have been aware of Ockham’s argument.

Hume puts the central empiricist criticism of a property of being very clearly when he argues that if we have an idea of existence as such or external existence as such (existence outside of our own minds), we must have an idea derived from some experienced impression. However, when we conceive of a thing and then conceive of it existing, there is no experienced difference at all. “The idea of existence, then, is the very same as the idea of what we conceive to be existent ... That idea, when conjoin’d with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it” (Hume, 2007: 48). In a letter in which Hume replies anonymously to the critics of his *Treatise of Human Nature* he adds:

[O]ur author indeed asserts… that we have no *abstract or general ideas*, properly so speaking; and that those ideas, which are called general, are nothing but particular ideas fixed to general terms. Thus, when I think of a horse in general, I must always conceive that horse as black or white, fat or lean, etc. and can form no notion of a horse that is not of some particular colour or size. In prosecution of the same topic the author hath said, that we have no general Idea of existence, distinct from every particular existence (Hume, 2007: 428).

Bertrand Russell was so impressed by Hume’s argument that we have no general idea of existence that he stated that “[S]o long as it was thought that “existence” ... could be significantly predicated of an actual given particular, it was impossible to answer Hume’s contention that existence adds nothing to the subject...” (Russell, 1913:138–139). Yet as we have seen, Aristotle and Ockham plausibly thought that we could significantly talk of the being of a given particular. We can, for instance, as Ockham would have said, reasonably claim “there is some being or beings in the external world causing this signal” when we do not know what is causing the signal. We can also note that the signal itself is not a hallucination. It is, using Aristotle’s jargon, an ‘auto kath’ auto’, a mind independent thing which has features independently of perceivers.

One thing that underlies Hume’s and Russell’s thinking is the view that if existence is a property, it must be a distinguishing property. They believe that this has the absurd consequence that an existing thing must appear different from a non-existent thing, even though there are no non-existent things. Russell explains the point through a joke:

... it is obvious that, if you think of the things there are in the world, they cannot be divided into two classes — namely those that exist and those that do not. Non-existence is, in fact, a very rare property. Everyone knows the story of the two German pessimistic philosophers of whom one exclaimed: ‘How much happier were it never to have been born’. To which the other replied with a sigh: ‘True! But how few are those who achieve this happy lot’” (Russell, 1956:137).

Hume and Russell’s point is well taken; however, their extreme empiricism leads them to neglect the possibility that being is a universal property of things, and not a distinguishing property.

As the second quote from Hume above indicates, he also thinks that our ideas of things must be precise in every way because we get them through specific impressions; though by attaching them to general terms, we enable them to stand for a number of things which differ in various ways. It is, of course, initially mysterious how we come to grasp the scope and meaning of general terms on such an account. Hume tries to deal with this problem by proposing that a general term is attached to a large number of resembling precise ideas derived from precise impressions. (Hume, 2007: 17-22)[[1]](#endnote-1). But, as Wittgenstein points out, everything resembles anything else in some respect, so neither the meaning nor the scope of a term can be established through images alone, no matter how many of them there are; further, we can use images in all sorts of ways to explain very different concepts (Wittgenstein, 1969: 2-3, 77ff.). While Hume is aware of the issue Wittgenstein raises, it seems he only proposes a selective attention to a feature of an impression to deal with it. As Wittgenstein shows, it is quite unclear how something like attention could distinguish between a command, a description, naming something, an explanation, or a metaphor (Wittgenstein, 1963: 2-18).

In a very influential account, Russell tried to explain how we could talk significantly about existence by saying that any properly understood statement “... exists” has the logical form “there is an x, such that x is a...”. He calls the logical form “x is a…” “a propositional function” when the “…” is filled in by some predicate. For instance, “x is a unicorn”. He says that “[E]xistence is essentially a property of a propositional function. It means that the propositional function is true in at least one instance. If you say ‘There are unicorns’, that will mean ‘There is an x, such that x is a unicorn’” (Russell, 1918:204). The statement “there is an x such that...” picks out the things in the world and attributes a predicate to at least one of them. If some of them really have the property attributed to them by the predicate, the statement will be true. If they do not, it will be false. So, on Russell’s account, existence is a property of propositional functions, not of things. This is how he thought we could solve Hume’s problem.

Unfortunately, however, Russell’s propositional function account does not solve the problem Aristotle was addressing, for it does not indicate what makes things things (what makes beings beings), which is what Aristotle wanted to know. On the contrary, it makes it entirely mysterious what makes something an inhabitant of the external world as opposed to the object of a hallucination. In some of his work, Russell tried to bite the bullet on this and to make the objects of hallucinations real. He thinks that phantoms and images are not fundamentally different from external objects except that “[I]f you shut your eyes and imagine a visual scene and you stretch out your hand to touch what is imaged, you won’t get a tactile sensation, or even necessarily a tactile image. You will not get the usual correlation of sight and touch... The general correlations of your images are quite different from what one chooses to call ‘real’ objects. But that is not to say that such images are unreal, it is only to say that they are not part of physics”. He goes on to give a similar account of Macbeth’s dagger: “Macbeth sees a dagger. If he tried to touch it, he would not get any tactile sensation, but that does not imply he was not *seeing* a dagger, it only implies that he was not *touching* it. It does not in any way imply that the visual impression was not there” (Russell, 1918:224).

Russell’s view of external existents is a form of neutral monism in which the view of one perceiver is supplemented by the views of others, and in which psychological phenomena are explained by different laws to physical phenomena. Nevertheless, the components of the psychological and the physical world are the same kind of thing — this is why neutral monism is a monism. On Russell’s account the components of the world are actual and possible sense-data.

Note, however, that the move to neutral monism is an ad hoc device to save Russell’s view of the meaning of “being” and “exists” by making it untestable. Why should we accept neutral monism? If the reason is merely that it saves Russell’s view, then no good reason has been given to accept it. In any case, as I have pointed out elsewhere, Russell’s neutral monism is an implausible view which is similar to Protagoras’s relativism and suffers from similar problems (Couvalis, 2015). I will not pursue the point further here.

Despite the points I have made, empiricists might nevertheless argue that there is a problem with the view that being is a universal property. The problem is how do we acquire the concept of being if we can’t perceive it as a property?

**Aristotle and Ockham on Concept Acquisition**

Aristotle’s account of concept acquisition in general is sketchy. He assumes that there is an innate capacity to extract universals from particulars. Modrak has pointed out that his sketchy account of epagoge (often misleadingly translated as induction) gives us some idea of what people do when they extract a universal from a particular (Modrak, 2001: 108-111). As she says, it is pretty clear that he thinks we start with some kind of nominal definition of a kind based on experience but work up to producing a real definition which has to be substituted for it. She compares Aristotle’s account to Hilary Kornblith’s recent argument that children have a tendency to classify things into natural kinds which reflect real features of the world. However, Kornblith thinks that children do this innately without being able to grasp the underlying essences of things, which are revealed only by experimental sciences such as mineralogy[[2]](#endnote-2). There seems to be nothing as sophisticated as this in Aristotle. Aristotle seems to altogether reject innate ideas. Further, he does use classification into natural kinds in his biological works, but shows little grasp of the difficulty involved in working out the real essences of kinds. This is not surprising. Kornblith starts by discussing Locke; but by Locke’s time modern chemistry was developing and the difficulties in discovering essences even with sophisticated experiments had become apparent.

According to Modrak, Aristotle thinks the capacity for noesis allows humans to use representations based on experience in a way which abstracts from their specific features. Indeed, this allows humans to grasp sharp geometrical representations from the rather wobbly material representations of edges we can produce by drawing in sand and the like (Modrak, 2001: 244-278). While Modrak’s account of Aristotle’s text is persuasive, it relies on the mysterious capacity of noesis. Aristotle never really tells us how noesis works. It is hard to see how we could have come up with a notion as abstract as being from Aristotle’s brief account of how we arrive at concepts of geometrical objects. After all, we can perhaps see how we can represent edges by drawing lines that are a little wobbly and deciding to ignore their wobbliness[[3]](#endnote-3). But how can we come up with a concept like being, which is so abstract that it does not include the features of any particular object, or of any particular kind of object?

Ockham offers a very brief empiricist account of how we can acquire the concept of being which seems superior to anything we can find in Aristotle. To understand his view, we need a very rough account of his distinction between intuitive and abstractive cognition. In this context, an intuitive cognition of something is the cognition by which an object is directly cognised to exist. Its contingent features are also intuitively cognised. Natural human cognition requires the presence of the object cognised. “When I intuitively cognize Socrates and the quality of whiteness that inheres in his skin, I evidently know that he exists and that he is white …”(Pelletier, 2013: 72-73). It is in abstractive cognition that we acquire the concept of being. What exactly is involved in abstractive cognition is debated by scholars. Nevertheless, Ockham says that “it sometimes happens, as is evident in the case of something that is approaching me from a distance, that the singular thing causes a sensation by virtue of which I am able to judge only that the thing seen is a being. It is obvious that in such a case the abstractive cognition which I have … is a cognition of being and not of anything more specific; and consequently, it is neither a specific concept nor a proper concept of a singular thing” (Ockham, 1991a: 65).

**Ockham on Essence and Existence**

Ockham explicitly argues that a thing is the same as its essence, and that the essence and existence of a thing are identical. In this respect his view is similar to that of Aristotle. We need to bear in mind, however, that Ockham is a nominalist about properties and essences. So, in his view, there is no universal kind essence shared by all items of a particular species. They merely have an exact resemblance in some respect. By contrast, on the usual interpretation, Aristotle holds that there are immanent universals shared by items of a particular species. I will not discuss Ockham’s argument against immanent universals here. Nevertheless, before I continue, note that Ockham has an easier time than Aristotle identifying being and essence. Aristotelians have trouble in explaining how distinct things of the same kind can be different if their existence and essence are the same[[4]](#endnote-4).

**Some Problems with Ockham’s Account**

Despite the fact that Ockham’s account is an advance on Aristotle, there are two inadequacies in it.

The first inadequacy is that while Ockham gives us good reasons to think that Hume is wrong in thinking that our conceptual grasp of things must involve precise images, it is hard to see how an empiricist could accept that we can have concepts that are completely indeterminate as to size, shape and so on. Ockham’s examples of seeing an object in the distance are certainly indeterminate in some respects; but even when we see such an object we know that it has some rough size, that it is moving towards us, and so on. The object is not wholly indeterminate. By contrast, when we talk of something as a being or a thing, that talk is wholly indeterminate as to the size and nature of the thing.

The second inadequacy is that Ockham has not explained how we come to have a conception of an external world. His direct realist account of perception simply assumes that we naturally form such a conception when we perceive an object in the external world. He does not indicate what kind of cognitive machinery enables us to have an intuitive cognition of an object. As we have seen, the empiricist Hume was deeply puzzled as to how we could come to have an experience of existence or of external existence.

One possibility is that the concept is innate. Kant, for instance, seems to have thought that Hume got himself into sceptical absurdities through refusing to accept that some of the fundamental organising concepts of our mind are innate. On Kant’s view, empiricists make the mistake of confusing the fact that all cognition begins with experience with the false claim that all of it arises from experience (Kant, 1996: 43-4).

Aristotle’s critique of Protagoras and Cratylus in *Metaphysics Gamma* suggests that, in part, he had something like a Kantian transcendental argument in mind for essence and being; after all, something’s being what it is in virtue of itself and not in virtue of a perceiver is, by definition, not a feature we could perceive. A transcendental argument relies on the claim that we lapse into incoherence when we deny a key assumption, and Aristotle argues that we collapse into incoherence when we follow through the views of Protagaros and Cratylus because we make everything pros ti – subjective or relative to a perceiver[[5]](#endnote-5). But Aristotle never seems to recognise that his line of argument might commit him to the view that the concept of being is something we have a priori.

In partial defence of Aristotle, though, it should be said that we can imagine various empirical tests for the claim that some supposedly perceived object is really there as opposed to being hallucinated[[6]](#endnote-6). It is hard to see how this would give us the idea of an itself in virtue of itself (auto kath’ auto) if we did not already have it, but it does show how we could put the concept to use through experiential tests.

**Conclusion**

Ockham offers a powerful argument for the claim that we have a separate concept of being which is not merely the concept defended by Russell. He also offers a plausible account of how we can acquire a non-specific concept of a thing, that is of a being. In that respect, it provides an adequate response to Hume. However, it is not an adequate account of how we can acquire the concept of something external to our mind (an auto kath’auto in Aristotle’s terms). Indeed, it is difficult to work out how any empiricist account could be adequate for acquiring such a concept. As I have said, empiricist accounts of concept acquisition cannot distinguish between experiencing the object of a persistent rich and detailed hallucination and experiencing a real thing. It is plausible that the concept is innate. Something’s being an itself in virtue of itself and not in virtue of a perceiver is not a feature we could perceive. But Aristotle doesn’t seem to recognise that this might commit him to the view that the concept of being is something we have a priori. However, discussing an alternative account in detail would have to be the subject of another paper.

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1. For a clear and sympathetic account of Hume’s view, see Schmidt, 2003: 32-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Kornblith presents a detailed account in Korblith, 1993. His account is backed up by psychological research presented in Gelman, 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For an argument that Kant can give a much more convincing account of how geometry works than abstractionist accounts because he uses the notion of the synthetic a priori, see Friedman, 1992: 55-95. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Loux argues that Aristotelians have an easy solution to this problem because multiplicity is built in to Aristotelian essences (Loux, 2002: 129-133). This seems to me to be mere linguistic trickery. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For an argument that the notion of an external world is built into the notion of subjective experience, see Kant’s Refutation of Idealism (Kant, 1996: 288-302). For a careful comparison between Kant’s and Aristotle’s strategies, see Politis 2004: 136ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Of course, I do not want to deny that if I hallucinate something, such as a cat, there will really be a representation in my head. I also do not want to deny that such a representation will have essential features that make it seem to me as if I am perceiving a cat outside of me. Nevertheless, the object of such a hallucination will not exist and will not have the essence of a cat. In Aristotle’s terms it will be pros ti, relative

to a perceiver. Further, the representation in my head will be produced by the functioning of my brain, not by a cat in in the world.

*Thanks to Paul Oppenheimer and to the members of the Adelaide logic group for helpful comments on a draft of this paper.* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)