

## Notes and Discussions

### DIFFERENT KINDS OF EQUIVOCATION IN ARISTOTLE

In an interesting essay, "Aristotle on the Snares of Ontology" (in R. Bambrough, *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965], pp. 69-95) Professor G. E. L. Owen has returned to some of the same problems he dealt with earlier in a different context in his famous essay on "Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle."<sup>1</sup> As before, the different terms Aristotle used to make distinctions between the different senses in which words and phrases may be used in more than one way play an important role in spelling out Aristotle's meaning. The general comments on this topic which Owen makes would deserve a long discussion. Here I shall comment on a couple of points only.<sup>2</sup>

On page 72, Owen says that in the *Topics* Aristotle "makes it clear that to say that a word (as contrasted with a complex phrase or sentence) has many uses is to say that it is used *homonymously*." This statement has a solid basis in the distinctions Aristotle makes in *De Soph. El.* 7, 169a22 ff., for the equivocity of a single term is there identified with homonymy and distinguished from the equivocity of a phrase, called by Aristotle *amphiboly*. There is little in *De Soph. El.* or in the *Topics* to contradict this. However, Owen's claim seems to fly in the face of what we find in the *Metaphysics* and in the *Analytics*. There we seem to have a variety of perfectly obvious instances in which a term has according to Aristotle many uses (is *pollakhos legetai* or *dikhos legetai*) and yet is said by Aristotle not to be homonymous. Some of these passages were discussed by Professor Owen himself in his earlier paper under the heading of *focal meaning* (*pros hen* equivocation). Some of them are commented on in my paper "Aristotle and the Ambiguity of Ambiguity" (*Inquiry* 2 [1959]: 137-151). I am genuinely at a loss to see how these passages could be reconciled with Owen's claim. He now discusses only one of them, viz. *Metaphysics* IV, 2, 1003a34, saying that a multiplicity of uses is here not called homonymy "for political reasons." The politics in question presumably dealt with the idea of a universal science whose denial was likely to touch a sensitive nerve in the Platonists. There are passages in Aristotle, however, in which these "political" reasons could scarcely have been operative, e.g., *Met.* IX, 1, 1046a4-7: "We have pointed out elsewhere that 'potency' and the word 'can' have several senses [*legetai pollakhos*]. Of these we may neglect those which are so called by homonymy." Here Aristotle is discussing some of the most characteristic notions

<sup>1</sup> In I. Düring and G. E. L. Owen, eds., *Aristotle and Plato in Mid-fourth Century* (Gothenburg, 1960), pp. 163-190.

<sup>2</sup> I have briefly dealt with some other issues in my review article, "New Essays on Old Philosophers," *Inquiry* 10 (1967): 138-147.

of his own—notions which others had little reason to be sensitive about. Moreover, in addition to the passages in which homonymy is explicitly said to be a narrower notion than a multiplicity of uses (*pollakhos legetai*), there is a host of passages in which the phrase *pollakhos legetai* (or *dikhos legetai*) is used in a context which has so little to do with equivocation that it seems extremely unlikely that Aristotle should have wanted to assimilate them to cases of homonymy.

Prompted by evidence of this kind, I argued in the earlier paper that in his mature works Aristotle normally distinguishes between cases of *pollakhos legetai* and those of *homonymy*. The former phrase can occasionally serve to indicate almost any distinction between the different parts of the field of a term, while homonymy for the mature Aristotle means a genuine logical difference between the different uses. How wide Aristotle's use of *dikhos legetai* was is perhaps shown by the fact that it is once used (in *An. Pr.* I, 17, 37a16 ff.) to indicate that certain syllogistic premises were really conjunctions of two different statements. Notice that Owen's claim implies that the distinction between synonymy and homonymy was for Aristotle something like a genuine dichotomy, at least in the case of terms as contrasted with phrases. This marks a considerable change of position, for in his earlier paper Owen had spoken of focal meaning as a *tertium quid* between homonymy and synonymy. Owen now calls such improvements as focal meaning "sophisticated variants on the idea of homonymy."

What in any case forces us to acknowledge some clear distinction in Aristotle between *pollakhos legetai* and homonymy are those contexts in which Aristotle says or implies of one and the same word that it has *both* kinds of multiplicity of uses. I have argued that this is the case with Aristotle's remarks on the meaning of possibility (see "Aristotle's Different Possibilities," *Inquiry* 3 [1960]: 17-28). This is also what Aristotle says of potentiality in the passage I quoted above from *Met.* IX, 1. It is very easy indeed to see that the different senses of possibility constitute a case in which the distinction comes in handy. Sometimes what is necessary is called possible, sometimes it is not: these are logically different uses of "possible," and the difference between them is an instance of homonymy. However, in one of these two "homonymous" senses of possibility the field of application of the term falls into (at least) two different parts, namely, into what is necessary and what is possible either way (i.e., is neither necessary nor impossible). This is a clear-cut case of non-homonymous discrepancy between different uses. I have produced some evidence that seems to show this is exactly how Aristotle views the situation in the *Prior Analytics* and in *De Interpretatione*. This evidence has not been challenged, and in any case an alternative account of the relevant passages should be given in order to deny this.

What, then, is there to be said for the other side? How are we to understand the relation of Aristotle's statements in *De Soph. El.* to his practice in the *Metaphysics* and elsewhere? Really instructive evidence is hard to come by. I should not trust either of the two *Ethics* to give us Aristotle's fully considered, explicit position (cf. Owen, "Aristotle on the Snares of Ontology," p. 73, note 1), especially as what he says in them can be readily reconciled with my position (cf. "Aristotle and the Ambiguity of Ambiguity," p. 139). In my old paper, I surmised

that part of the reasons why Aristotle does not pay much attention in the *Topics* to the distinction between *pollakhos legetai* equivocations and homonymy is the practical purpose of the work as a handbook for argumentation. Although this view seems to me to have much to recommend itself, Owen may very well be right in saying that it has been exaggerated. It is true that Aristotle sometimes contrasts homonymy and synonymy, but these passages as listed, e.g., by Bonitz, do not contain any explicit statements that the contrast involved is exhaustive.

More light is perhaps shed on the matter by one of the passages to which Owen refers. In *Topics* II, 3, 110b16 ff. Aristotle mentions in so many words an equivocation which is a case of *pollakhos legetai* but not of homonymy. Owen explains this apparent counter-example to his claim by saying that Aristotle is here dealing with the equivocation of a phrase and not of a single word. This is likely to be correct, although Owen does not discuss in detail what really makes this case different from homonymy. (One may, e.g., ask whether the real reason for the difference is perhaps the fact that the expression in question is propositional rather than predicative, which makes it impossible to speak here of homonymous, i.e., equally-named, objects, rather than the mere difference between simple and complex expressions.) However, this passage is in several respects extremely interesting. One striking thing about it is its similarity with the famous passage in *Met.* IV, 1 in which Aristotle argues that "to be" is "said in many ways" and yet is not homonymous and that everything that is can therefore be subjected to one science:

#### *Topics*

Take, for instance, the statement "the science of many things is one."

Here the things in question may be the ends or the means to an end: e.g., medicine is the science of producing health and of diet.

#### *Metaphysics*

Not only in the case of things which have one common notion does the investigation belong to one science, but also in the case in which they are related to one common notion.

. . . there is one science which deals with all healthy things, [and] the same applies in other cases also. [For] everything which is healthy is related to health, one thing in the sense that it preserves health, another in the sense that it produces it, another in the sense that it is a symptom of health, another because it is capable of it.

No matter what we can say of Aristotle's terminology, it is obvious that what he is doing in *Met.* IV, 1 is to give a positive answer to a special case of the question he is discussing in *Top.* II, 3 as an example of a non-homonymous phrase which is *pollakhos legetai*. Moreover, in the part of the *Topics* passage which was quoted above Aristotle also gives in one of the senses of the question a positive

answer to it. One should not overlook, of course, that in *Met.* IV, 1 and in *Top.* II, 3 Aristotle is dealing with the equivocation of entirely different expressions. In the former, the possible ambiguity of the question whether the different “beings” are subject to the same science is not raised, and in the latter the multiplicity of uses of “being” is not considered. Nevertheless Aristotle’s awareness of the widely different kinds of ways in which the science of different things can be one, which he exhibits in *Top.* II, 3, may very well be indicative of the line of thought which later led him to the idea of a non-homonymous focal meaning of “being” put forward in *Met.* IV, 1. In fact, the examples used in the two passages are similar: “medical” occurs as an example of focal meaning in *Met.* IV, 1; “medicine” is used as an example in *Top.* II, 3. At least *sub specie aeternitas* we can thus almost say that all Aristotle had to do in order to move from the view taken in the *Topics* passage to the view he takes in *Met.* IV, 1 is to appeal to a special case of “the science of many things,” viz. to the science of the many different things that can be said to be—the same stratagem he applies in the *Topics* to the question at large.

From this point of view, Aristotle’s later device was not so much a “sophisticated variant on the idea of homonymy” as a sophisticated variant on the idea of *amphiboly* or the equivocality of a complex phrase. In fact, it seems to me that the questions which Owen’s article provokes concerning the relation of *amphiboly* to non-homonymous multiplicity of uses (of single words) in Aristotle are very important, and maybe occasion some additions to the remarks I made in the earlier paper on ambiguity in Aristotle.

It is obvious that in a certain sense the idea of focal meaning presupposed the assimilation of the equivocality of single words to those of longer phrases. As the possibility of a non-homonymous multiplicity of uses is explained by Aristotle, it turns on “adding to and subtracting qualifications” (*Met.* VII, 4, 1030a32-33). Now one cannot subtract qualifications from a single word nor add to it and still keep it single. What Aristotle presumably has in mind is therefore the definition or explanatory formula that can be used to express the meaning of a term. It is true, admittedly, that there are things one can do to a single word along these lines: one can add different suffixes and prefixes to it in accordance to grammatical rules. This is in fact precisely what goes into Aristotle’s notion of paronymy (*Cat.* 1, 1a12-15). The notion does not carry anyone very far, however, and hence the consideration of the explanatory *logoi* is necessary for Aristotle’s idea of “adding to and taking away” to be workable. It is probably no accident that several examples of the “unused” materials for the idea of focal meaning which Owen finds in the *Topics* have to do with the different grammatical forms of one and the same word, just as in the case of paronymy.

Thus the development of the idea of a focal meaning is apt to lead to an emphasis on longer explanatory formulas and their variants in connection with discussions of equivocality. Such non-homonymous multiplicities of uses as focal meaning are probably as much and more heirs to the idea of *amphiboly* as modifications of the idea of homonymy (or of the idea of paronymy). The device of focal meaning owes its genesis as much to the breakdown of the homonymy-*amphiboly* distinction as to the breakdown of the synonymy-homonymy dichotomy.

Owen's own remarks and notes contain in fact evidence to show how easy it was for Aristotle to go from a word to its definition (or explanatory formula) and back: "it makes no difference which one says" (p. 73; cf. note 2). Further evidence is also forthcoming. For instance, from *Pr. An.* I, 35 it appears that what the syllogistic variables stand for in Aristotle is not always a single word, but might be a longer *logos*. This seems to be viewed by Aristotle as an unimportant accident of language.

There does not seem to be much of a difference between what one can say of a single word and what one can say of a complex phrase in the parts of the *Topics* we have been considering, either. In 110b16 ff. Aristotle does not say or in any other way emphasize that he is dealing with the equivocity of a phrase as contrasted with that of a single word: he simply mentions a case of non-homonymous multiplicity of uses as an illustration of the *topoi* he is there discussing. In *Top.* I, 15, 107b6 ff. a *logos* is said to be homonymous, not amphibolous, as we might expect. Owen suggests that this is due to the fact that the ambiguity in question turns on that of the single word *symmetros*. There is not much evidence one way or the other, but even if Owen is right, the passage nevertheless illustrates the fact that the difference between homonymy and amphiboly was not very great for Aristotle.

The insignificance of the difference is also indicated by the fact that the word "amphiboly" is often used by Aristotle for purposes other than the marking of the equivocity of a phrase. For instance, in *Poetics* 25, 1461a26 amphiboly is attributed to a single word. The relative insignificance of the ideas of amphiboly and paronymy in Aristotle's mature writings perhaps also becomes natural in this way.

Thus Owen's remarks seem to me to add up to a point different from what he himself primarily emphasizes. What they bring out, it seems to me, is the role of the concept of amphiboly in the formation of Aristotle's idea of a non-homonymous multiplicity of uses.

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#### A NOTE ON GLADSTONE AND BERKELEY

In 1871, Professor A. C. Fraser presented to W. E. Gladstone his just published edition of the works of Berkeley. These volumes along with others from Gladstone's collection are in the library Gladstone founded, St. Deiniol's, Hawarden, Flintshire. Gladstone's notations, marginal comments and underlinings are readily detected and are of some interest.

Among philosophical works we note that many of John Stuart Mill's books, labelled "From the author" contain frequent marginalia and question marks as well as citations to specific pages on the fly leaf. *The Subjection of Women* (1869), is full of markings, including one adjacent to Mill's comment on the effectiveness of