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Existential Propositions in Aristotle

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EXISTENTIAL PROPOSITIONS IN ARISTOTLE

As regards existential propositions, the following definition shall serve as the point of departure: existential propositions are propositions of which the predicate (together with the copula) is formed by the positive or negative form of verbs such as "to be", "to exist". For example, "Men exist", "Square circles do not exist." [1]

As regards both structure and interpretation of existential propositions, there are differences between authors. Some consider them to be single-membered propositions, without predicate, [2] others view them as subjectless propositions. [3] There are also some who regard them as two-membered propositions, assuming that words such as "is", "there is", "exists", can be viewed as predicates. [4]

The term "existential proposition" is not found in Aristotle. It first appears in Herbart as "Existentialsatz". Nor did Aristotle work out any theory of existential propositions. In his considerations regarding the possible mode of negating a given proposition he mentions propositions such as "*A* is," consisting of but two words, or members (later known as

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[1] Cf. S. Leśniewski, „Przyczynek do analizy zdań egzystencjalnych", *Przegląd Filozoficzny*, XIV (1911), p. 329; *Logicheskiye rozsuzhdeniya*, St. Petersburg, 1913, p. 57. Existential propositions in general, with particular reference to existential propositions in Aristotle, were studied by H. Cornelius, P. Tikhomirov, S. Leśniewski and, more recently, by G. Rabeau (*Le jugement d'existence*, Paris, 1936), and S. Mansion (*Le jugement d'existence chez Aristote*, Louvain–Paris, 1946).

[2] F. Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkte*, I. Leipzig, 1874, pp. 276, 283; criticized by Ch. Sigwart, *Logik*, I, Tübingen, 1904, p. 93 n.; interpretation of existential categoric propositions is also found in Leibniz—L., pl., G., VII, 211–217.

[3] J. F. Herbart, *Lehrbuch zur Einleitung in die Philosophie*, Königsberg, 1834, p. 84; see also M. W. Drobisch, *Neue Darstellung der Logik*, Hamburg–Leipzig [1836], 1887, pp. 61f; also F. Miklosich, *Subjektlose Sätze*, Wien 1883, p. 18.

[4] Foremost among these stands H. Cornelius, *Versuch einer Theorie der Existentialurteile*, München, 1894, pp. 31, 86; cf. also P. Tikhomirov, "Logicheskii kharakter eksistentsialnykh suzhdenii", *Voprosy Filosofii i Psikhologii*, XLII, 1898, pp. 115f. This view is also held by S. Leśniewski.

existential propositions), as distinct from propositions of the pattern "*A* is *B*," consisting of more than two members, and where the copula "is" comes in as a third something (*De interpr.* 19 b, 14–24). He compares propositions such as "Man walks" with two-membered propositions, pointing out the analogy with respect to negation, where the particle "no" has been put before the verb (*De interpr.* 20 a, 3–5). Elsewhere, he shows them to be reducible to three-membered propositions, since the proposition "Man walks" is equivalent to the proposition "Man is walking" (*De interpr.* 21 b, 5–10). Coming after Aristotle, Eudemus, an early Peripathetic, emphasized the difference between propositions of the "*A* is *B*" type and those of the "*A* is" type. He thought that in propositions of the "*A* is" type the meaning of the particle "is" differs from that which the particle "is" has in propositions of the "*A* is *B*" type. [5] According to Saccheri, the particle "is" can be used to convey either of two senses: *1*) the verbal, and *2*) the copulative.

1) The particle "is" is used in the verbal sense, whenever something is confirmed or negated unconditionally, that is to say, whenever the existence of the subject is affirmed or negated; as in the proposition: "Adam is a man," or rather, "Adam was a man," "Alexander's horse does not exist" (equivalent to: "Alexander's horse is not in existence"). Relevant to this example of Saccheri's is Aristotle's view recorded in *De interpr.* 21 a, 21–24, where the point is made that it is not lawful to predicate of a dead man that he is man; or of *AB* that it is *B*, since *A* entails something not compatible with *B*.

2) The particle "is" is used in the copulative sense, when something is affirmed or negated conditionally, that is to say, when the predicate predicates about the subject conditionally, on condition that the subject does not exist; as, for instance, in the proposition: "Peter is man." Here no more than a relation between the predicate (man) and the subject (Peter) is predicated, that is, the existence of Peter-man is asserted conditionally, not unconditionally. The proposition is equivalent to the proposition: "If Peter exists, man exists." [6]

Both Aristotle and Eudemus think that the particle "is" in existential propositions is used in the verbal sense. According to Aristotle, a positive proposition, if true, is one that either links up or juxtaposes something to something else (*Met.* 1027 b, 20–22; *Met.* 1051 b, 2–5), the copula or particle "is", whether obvious or implicit, indicating the juxta-

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[5] Cf. C. Prantl, *Geschichte der Logik im Abendlande*, I, Leipzig, 1927, p. 355.
[6] Cf. H. Saccherius, *Logica demonstrativa*, Augustae Ubiorum, 1735, pp. 15, 9: "Huic subiectum clarius intelliges, quid sit copula est sumi in vi verbi, quid sit sumi in vi copula. Sumitur in vi verbi quando propositio est absoluta, sive quando aliquid affirmatur aut negatur absolute, ut in dictis propositionibus, Petrus fuit homo. Econtra sumitur in vi copulae, quando aliquid affirmatur aut negatur conditionate; adeo ut affirmatur aut negatur praedicatam de subiecto sub conditione, quod existit subiectum."

position; thus, without the copula there would be no proposition (*De interpr.* 17 a, 11–12, also 19 b, 12–13); with reference to the particle (*prosthesis*) see *ibid.* 21 b. 26–28.

But what does this copula link up or juxtapose in propositions like "man is"?—Or, rather, what is "man" linked up to, or juxtaposed to, in that proposition? According to Aristotle, to affirm of somebody (for instance, of man) or something that he (or it) "is", amounts to saying that he (or it) is a substance, or its content, its accidents; or that which is predicated of the substance; or that which continues in a relation of whatever kind with regard to the substance (*Met.* 1033 b, 5–10; 1017 a, 7–22). [7]

The purport of these basic loci would seem to be that, for Aristotle, if something is said to be so and so, the assertion also implies the existence of the something.

Elsewhere, however (*De interpr.* 21 a, 24–28), Aristotle asserts that from the proposition "Homer is a poet" it does not follow that Homer is (exists); from the proposition that something is it is not permitted to infer that something does inform. This is the reason why from the proposition that the object represented is something it does not follow that the object is (i.e., exists). Similarly, if a non–existent something is made object of representation, it is not permissible to infer that it is something, that is, something that has existence (*De interpr.* 21 a, 32–33).

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[7] H. Maier, *Die Syllogistik des Aristoteles*, I, Tübingen, 1896, p. 116.