

24.200: Ancient Philosophy  
November 1, 2004

### Aristotle's Categories

Aristotle's Categories is naturally viewed as part of his logical writings. In it he distinguishes various kinds of claims we make, and various relations we assert in making those claims. This leads him to a list of broad classification of things; it is plausible to take this set of categories to be the broadest classification of all the things that there are in terms of their highest genera. I.e., Aristotle is proposing that ultimately there are 10 fundamentally different kinds of things. This is his list, with some examples:

**substance:** Socrates, Plato, horse, human being, animal

**quality:** pale, square, grammatical

**quantity:** 6 ft. tall, 12 inches long

**relation:** half, larger

**where:** in the marketplace

**when:** tomorrow, in October

**position:** is lying, is sitting

**having:** has shoes on

**doing:** cutting, hitting

**being affected:** being cut, being hit

Overlaying this classification of things, there is a further fourfold distinction which relies on a distinction between two kinds of predication:

*being said of* and *being present in*.

Animal is "said of" Socrates (think of this in terms of essential predication: Socrates could not cease to be an animal and continue to exist); Pale is "present in" Socrates (think of this in terms of accidental predication: Socrates could cease to be pale and continue to exist). This is the fourfold classification which further divides the items in the 10 categories:

- a) what is both *said of* and *present in* things (non-substance species and genera)
- b) what is *said of* but not *present in* things (species and genera of substance)
- c) what is *present in* but not *said of* things (non-substance individuals)
- d) what is neither *present in* nor *said of* things. (individual substances)

In addition to classifying the things that exist, Aristotle is concerned to ask whether there are some sorts of things which should have a privileged status in our theorizing. Are there some sorts of things which are more significant than others, e.g., some sorts of things which are ontologically or epistemologically basic? We can rephrase this question more simply by dividing it into two issues:

- a) Are there some sorts of things on which the existence of everything else depends, i.e., things such that if they failed to exist, nothing else would exist?
- b) Are there some sorts of things which are required for systematic understanding of the world,

i.e., things such that if they failed to exist we couldn't have such knowledge?