

“Being is said in many ways”

1. Textual references:

<i>Metaph.</i>	Γ.2, 1003 ^b 5 *	Δ.7, 1017 ^a 22	Δ.11, 1019 ^a 5
	Δ.28, 1024 ^b 13	E.2, 1026 ^a 33	Z.1, 1028 ^a 10
	H.2, 1042 ^b 25	Θ.1, 1045 ^b 33	Θ.10, 1051 ^a 34
	K.3, 1060 ^b 32 *	K.8, 1064 ^b 15	
<i>Phys.</i>	185 ^a 21		
<i>De An.</i>	410 ^a 13		

* = “focal meaning” passages: ‘is’ is like ‘medical’ or ‘healthy’.

2. Does this mean that ‘exist’ has many senses? Cf. G.E.L. Owen, “Aristotle on the Snares of Ontology” in Bambrough, *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, p. 77:

It looks as though a new sense of the word will have to be conjured up for each sort of thing we want to talk about; but it is absurd to suggest that a word has not merely more than one sense but an unrestrictedly large number of senses [as Aristotle argues, 1006a34-b11]. Aristotle’s answer is the theory of categories. Ultimately, he holds, to be is always to be either a substance of a certain sort, or a quality of a certain sort, or a quantity of a certain sort — the list notoriously varies, but the nucleus remains stable and the number remains small. ... **it seems that the verb ‘to be’ in its existential role enjoys a number of irreducibly different senses. ...**

4. What are these alleged senses? Owen’s suggestion seems to be:

‘exists₁’ means ‘is a substance’
‘exists₂’ means ‘is a quality (of some substance)’
‘exists₃’ means ‘is a quantity (of some substance).’

Existence-Claim

Horses exist.
Pallor exists.
Hatred exists.

Analysis

Horses are substances.
Pallor is a quality.
Hatred is a relation.

This is implausible. Consider: “Everything that exists is either a substance or a quality or a quantity, etc.” What is the sense of ‘exists’ in this claim?

5. Counterpart paraphrases (explicit definitions):

Sentence

Tarzan swings.
Benny Goodman swings.

Paraphrase

Tarzan dangles from a rope.
B.G. plays syncopated rhythms.

6. Non-counterpart paraphrases (contextual definitions):

Sentence

Octogenarians exist.
Corruption in the police department exists.

Paraphrase

Some people live to be 80.
Some policemen take bribes.

7. Aristotle's analysis of existence claims about non-substances involve non-counterpart paraphrases; the definitions are contextual, not explicit.

Existence-Claim

Pallor exists.
Running exists.
There are qualities.
There are relations.
There are actions.

Analysis

Some substance is pale.
Some substances run.
Substances are qualified.
Substances are related.
Substances act.

8. Are there counterpart paraphrases in Aristotle? The best evidence for them seems to be H.2 (1042^b25). We'll look at three different translations of this passage:

So it is clear that 'is' is said in just as many ways. A threshold is because it is situated so, and [in this case] being signifies its being so situated" [Bostock]

Plainly, then, the word 'is' is used in a corresponding variety of ways. A threshold *is*, in that it is situated thus and so: 'to be' means its being so situated [Owen]

Clearly, then, 'is' is said in just as many ways. Something is a threshold, for instance, because it has this position, and its being a threshold signifies its having this position [Fine & Irwin]

For 1042^b25 to be a counterpart paraphrase, the first 'is' must be existential, and the subject of 'is situated' must be 'threshold'. I.e.,

'A threshold exists' is analyzed as 'it [sc., a threshold] is situated at the foot of a doorway'.

On Fine & Irwin's translation, the first 'is' is predicative, not existential:

x is a threshold iff x is situated at the foot of a doorway.

which is supported by 1043^a7-12:

"... if we have to define a threshold, we shall say that it is wood or stone in such a position..."

So we have a non-counterpart paraphrase: 'A threshold exists' can be paraphrased as 'There is a piece of wood or stone at the foot of a doorway'. The existence of a threshold is analyzed in terms of a predicational statement in which form is predicated of matter. The 'exists' in that statement is not given its own (counterpart) paraphrase.