

DISCUSSION ARTICLE IV:

Note on Translating an Aristotelian Dative and τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι

By Robert Zaslavsky

The difficulty of finding adequate English equivalents for certain key Aristotelian terms is a recurring theme in commentaries on Aristotle. Indeed Owens' chapter on "The English translation of Aristotelian terms" and his later discussion of the meaning of τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι form an English summa of the controversies which Aristotle's ways of speaking about being have aroused.¹ Despite this, I should like to offer a fresh solution to the problem of rendering two key Aristotelian uses of the articular infinitive τὸ εἶναι with an embedded modifier, the one τί ἦν, and the other the dative noun and/or adjective, two usages which are clearly meant to be parallel.² Let us take, for example, *De anima* B.1.412b10-15 (emphasis mine):

καθόλου μὲν οὖν εἴρηται τί ἐστὶν ἡ ψυχὴ· οὐσία γὰρ ἡ κατὰ τὸν
λογον. τοῦτο δὲ τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι τῷ τοιῶδι σώματι, καθάπερ εἶ τι
τῶν ὀργάνων φυσικὸν ἦν σῶμα οἷον πέλεκυς· ἦν μὲν γὰρ ἂν τὸ
πελέκει εἶναι ἡ οὐσία αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ τοῦτο· χωρισθείσης δὲ
ταύτης οὐκ ἂν ἔτι πέλεκυς ἦν, ἀλλ' ἡ ὁμωνύμως, νῦν δ' ἔστι
πέλεκυς.³

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The emphasized phrases have been variously translated:⁴

<u>τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι</u>	<u>τὸ πελέκει εἶναι</u>
(1) the what-IS-Being	the being of [= proper to] an axe
(2) the essential whatness	its essential whatness
(3) essence	that which makes it an axe
(4) la quiddité	la quiddité de la hache

None of these really does the job (and the same could be said of the translations of Tredennik et al, cited by Owens, pp. 181ff., n. 83). And even though Smith (2) and Tricot (4) recognize the parallelism of the phrases, they fail properly to exploit it, in the one by blurring the parallelism into an identity, and in the other by silently importing the τί ἦν

¹ Joseph Owens, *The doctrine of being in the Aristotelian metaphysics; a study in the Greek background of mediaeval thought* (Toronto, 1963), pp. 137-154, 180-188. This work will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text as Owens.

² Cf. Owens' reference to "the construction of εἶναι with the Dative . . . and the corresponding expression τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι (p. 137, n. 2). Also cf. LSJ εἰμί F end: "in the Aristotelian formula τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι . . . τί ἦν . . . takes the place of the dat. In such phrases as τὸ ἀγαθῶ εἶναι, τὸ μεγέθει εἶναι. . ."

³ The text used here is the Oxford Classical Text (OCT), ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford, 1959). All references to Aristotle are to the OCT, except where specified otherwise by name of editor and date.

⁴ The translations here are: (1) From Owens p. 184 and p. 181, n. 83a; (2) Aristotle, *De anima*, tr. J. A. Smith, in Aristoteles, *The basic works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, 1941); (3) Aristoteles, *On the soul . . .*, tr. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, 1957, Loeb Classical Library); (4) Aristoteles, *De l'Âme* [par] Aristote, tr. J. Tricot (Paris, 1969).

from the first phrase into the second. And in most cases the τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι is the determinant for translating the τὸ πελέκει εἶναι, except for Hett (3) who loses the verbal connection altogether.

What, then, is the solution? I would suggest that the solution lies in abiding by the parallelism and treating the embedded dative and the τί ἦν as mutually determinative.

Let us begin with the dative.⁵ The dative used here might seem to be (see Owens, p. 137, n.2; p. 181, n. 83a) the dative of the [258] possessor,⁶ but it cannot be. Rather it is—and here is the uniquely Aristotelian twist—the locative dative of time (cf. Smyth 1530-1543, esp. 1529). For as the context in the *De anima* indicates (especially χωρισθείσης . . . ταύτης), the τὸ πελέκει εἶναι refers to a temporal-like, if not a temporal, process. In other words, the instrument composed of wood and metal, shaped into handle and head, and put together for use, is not strictly, but only homonymously, an axe unless it is at work as an axe, and when it is at work as an axe, when it is ἐνεργοῦν (cf. 412b27-413a1 to 412a25-26), its οὐσία is present and manifest. And to capture this in English, one should translate τὸ πελέκει εἶναι by “its being *when* it is an axe.” The dative, then, functions primarily as the locative dative. To demonstrate this, let me cite the phrase which Owens cites (Owens, p. 181, n. 83a) to demonstrate that it is the possessive dative: τί ἦν αὐτῷ τὸ αἷματι εἶναι (*De animalium partibus* B.3.649b22). According to Owens,

Τί (Bekker text) is an indefinite pronoun, and is the subject of ἦν. Αὐτῷ is evidently the ordinary Dative of the Possessor, and refers back to the ‘blood’ mentioned in the preceding line (b21). Τὸ . . . εἶναι is a predicative infinitive. Αἷματι might appear at first sight to be a dative by assimilation to αὐτῷ, having originally been a predicative accusative. But the article preceding renders this explanation unlikely The second dative, accordingly, should be an original dative This makes it a possessive dative The first possessive dative αὐτῷ is the ordinary possessive dative after the copulative ἦν.

Owens’ analysis here is not as compelling as it might seem, for two reasons. First, and less important, it seems pointless to argue against assimilation, since Aristotle’s own frequent usage of τὸ εἶναι with an embedded dative makes arguing that an accusative αἷμα has been assimilated into a dative αἷματι unnecessary from the start. Second, and

⁵ The use of τὸ εἶναι with an embedded dative is found throughout Aristotle. In the *De anima* alone, it appears at B.1.412b13, 2.413b29-30, 4.416b12, 7.419a9-10, 12.424a26-27, Γ4.429b10-11, 12, 17, 20. But see also *Metaphysica* (Ross, 1924), Γ4.1006a33-34, b13-14, 24-25, 1007a1-2, 22-29; Z.4.1029b14-15, 17-19, 21-22, 28, 32, 1030a2, 6.1031a20-21, 23-24, 27-28, 31-b1, 5, 7-9, 11-13, 30, 1032a2, 5-6, 8, 11, 8.1033b11, 10.1036a1-2, 18, 11.1037b2, 15.1039b25, 16.1040b19; H.3.1043b2-3; I.1.1052b3, 5, 11-12, 16-18, 1053b4, 8.1058a17; K.10.1066b11, 13. And further see *Physica* A.2.185b21-22, 25, 32-33, 3.186a29, 7.190a16-17, 191a2-3, B.3.195a35, Γ.1.201a31-32, 5.204a23; *De animalium partibus* (Langkavel, Teubner, 1868) B.3.649b22; *Analytica priora* B.21.67b12-15; *Analytica posteriora* A.5.74a33-34, B.4.91b4-5, 6.92a20-21; *Categoriae* I.1a5, 7.7a36-37, b5, 8, 10.13a20; *Ethica Nichomachea* Γ.5.1113b13-14; *De generatione et corruptione* (Joachim, 1922/1970) A.10.328b2; *De caelo* A.9.278b5-6; *Topica* B.1.109a14-15.

⁶ Cf. Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek grammar*. Rev. Gordon M. Messing (Cambridge, 1956), 1476. This work will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text as Smyth.

more decisive, it is by no means necessary to construe αὐτῷ with ἦν, but rather one could construe it as the possessive dative for the τὸ . . . εἶναι, and in doing so one would see that the αἷματι need not function as an unnecessarily duplicated dative of the possessor, but rather that it functions as a lo-[259]cative dative of time to supplement the αὐτῷ as dative of the possessor. Hence one should translate the phrase by “its (αὐτῷ) being (τὸ . . . εἶναι) when-it-is-blood (αἷματι).” So, there are solid reasons for taking the embedded dative as a locative of time.⁷

Of course, in pre-Aristotelian Greek, the locative dative of time (cf. Smyth 1447, 1539 ff.) consists of a word which ordinarily expresses or implies time, such as time unit words (e.g., ἡμέρα ἕκτη) or words designating temporally localizable events (e.g., the name of a regularly recurring festival), but as readers of Aristotle realize, “Aristotle himself was forced to use unusual Greek to convey his thought” (Owens, p. 154). And although the standard grammars cite only pre-Aristotelian usage, there are, as readers of Greek realize, more things in the Greek language than are dreamt of in standard grammars. In short, neither pre-Aristotelian Greek usage nor standard grammars can be the sole arbiters of unique Aristotelian usage, but rather in reading Aristotle, one must always keep in view the injunction that *Aristoteles ex Aristotele illustretur ac intellegatur*.⁸ And since “the same necessity that compelled Aristotle to employ bizarre Greek phrases demands a like sacrifice of customary style in a modern language” (Owens, p. 12),⁹ when one translates Aristotle into English, one must exploit and extend the resources of English in a way which matches Aristotle’s own exploitation and extension of Greek.¹⁰

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Therefore, let us begin again, this time with the embedded τί ἦν, especially the imperfect indicative ἦν. Why does Aristotle use the imperfect? Or, to put it more generally, for what did the Greeks use the imperfect? They used it to designate a past activity which occupies a length of time, in contradistinction to the aorist, which is not so used (cf. Smyth 1923, 1889-1890, 1909). According to Smyth,

The imperfect may be represented by a line, along which an action progresses; the aorist denotes a point on the line The imperfect of ‘continuance’ or ‘duration’ implies nothing as to the absolute length of the action (Smyth 1908, 1908a)

⁷ For a parallel passage, see *De anima* B.7.419a9-10; τοῦτο . . . ἦν αὐτῷ τὸ χρώματι εἶναι (this would be its being when it is surface-hue). One should also consider Aristotle’s analogous use of δύναμις in the dative, e.g., *De anima* B.1.412b27 (τὸ δυνάμει ὄν) et passim.

⁸ Cf. Aristoteles, *Aristotelis de anima libri tres*, ed. Friedrich Adolph Trendelenberg, 2d ed. (Berlin, 1877), pp. xx, 103. Also cf. Owens, pp. 73, 78, 83.

⁹ Also consider Owens’ remark that “a rather cryptic and disconcerting manner of using philosophical expressions is met in the Stagirite” (p. 137). Also see Owens pp. 136 ff., on “Aristotle’s procedure with equivocal.”

¹⁰ Consider the following statements of the problem: “If one is to keep from going astray, the signs in English must point in the same direction as they did in the original Greek” (Owens p. 145). “[One must] determine the best English equivalent, an equivalent in which none of the components of the difficult phrase will lose its original import yet which will be compact enough” (Owens p. 181; cf. pp. 185, 147). “There [260] seems to be no way of expressing this notion by any *simple* English verbal form” (Owens p. 184; emphasis mine). “The use of . . . customary philosophical terminology . . . is excluded by the requirement of keeping as close as possible to Aristotle’s own phrasing, often cast in unusual Greek technical expressions” (Owens p. 13).

In addition, the imperfect may denote a present possibility (Smyth 1774-1777) and repeated or customary action (Smyth 1893).¹¹ Hence, the imperfect is suggestive of duration, repetition, and present possibility (cf. Owens pp. 183-184). And in order to put all this into English, one would have to translate the τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι by "being when it is what it was."¹² And this rendering preserves the parallel with the embedded dative without blurring the distinction between them.

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Finally, then, let me offer a barbarically literal translation of the passage from the *De anima* with which we started:

Therefore, what soul as a whole is has been spoken; for it is beingness in accordance with a logos. And this is the this here suchlike's body's¹³ *being when it is what it was*, e.g., if any of the instruments, such as an axe, were a natural body, its beingness would be its *being when it is an axe*, and this is its soul; and if this were separated from it, it would no longer be an axe, except homonymously, but now¹⁴ it is an axe.

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¹¹ Cf. Owens pp. 183ff., n. 85, for a fair and comprehensive survey of the history of the controversy over the meaning of the imperfect here.

¹² D. W. Hamlyn has also reached somewhat similar conclusions with respect to rendering the force of the imperfect in τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι. Cf. *Aristotle's De anima, Books II and III (with certain passages from Book I)*, tr. with introduction and notes by D. W. Hamlyn (Oxford, 1968), note ad 412b10, pp. 85-86: "Aristotle uses for essence his characteristic phrase τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι . . . (How the phrase is to be construed literally is a matter for argument. It is often held that it should be construed as 'the what it was to be . . .,' taking the εἶναι as dependent on the τί ἦν. I have, however, taken the view that the definite article and the εἶναι belong together as in Aristotle's characteristic use with a dative [cf. the example that immediately follows here— τὸ πέλκει εἶναι (what it is for it to be an axe = essence of an axe)].) Given this, the question τί ἦν; [the imperfect tense stressing perhaps the continuity of the thing] is now introduced in the place of the noun in the dative, so producing the formula 'what it is for it to be what it was.'" Hamlyn, however, does not address himself to the question of specifying what kind of dative Aristotle employs.

¹³ Here τῷ τοιοῦδι σώματι is indeed the dative of the possessor.

¹⁴ I.e., when it is at work being an axe, when it is what it was for it to be when it is an axe.