

MARCO ZINGANO

ARISTOTLE AND THE REHABILITATION OF HOMONYMY

Abstract

This text is an authorial presentation of Marco Zingano's *Aristotle and the Rehabilitation of Homonymy: A Metaphysical Journey Through Words and Things* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2025), prepared at the request of *Aristotelica*. It aims to introduce the scope, structure, and main lines of argument of the book, in order to situate it within current research on Aristotle's metaphysics and related areas. The book offers a systematic investigation of Aristotle's notion of homonymy, arguing that it plays a central and constructive role in his metaphysics, ethics, and natural philosophy. For Aristotle, homonymy does not merely signal conceptual confusion or linguistic ambiguity; quite the opposite, Aristotle develops a sophisticated account of homonymous notions to address a fundamental philosophical difficulty: the absence of generic unity in the most basic domains of scientific inquiry. The study argues that Aristotle's response to this problem consists in a progressive 'rehabilitation' of homonymy, under the pattern of what the book calls attenuated homonymy: a form of homonymy mitigated by definitional overlap, which allows for conceptual unity without recourse to the genus-species model. Contrary to a widespread position on this issue, which ultimately rests on Alexander's interpretation of focal meaning as the only intermediary between pure homonymy and total synonymy, the book's central claim is that Aristotle employs a plurality of non-generic unifying devices, each suited to a different philosophical context. These include hierarchical forms of unity (such as focal meaning, serial order, and subordination), but also non-hierarchical forms (analogy and resemblance). Overall, the book contends that attenuated homonymy is not only compatible with scientific discourse but is, in certain domains, indispensable to it, at least as Aristotle conceives of it.

Keywords

Aristotle, Homonymies, Attenuated Homonymy, Substance, Book Presentation

Author

Marco Zingano

Universidade de São Paulo

mzingano@usp.br

ORCID: 0000-0003-1579-4301

My book *Aristotle and the Rehabilitation of Homonymy: A Metaphysical Journey Through Words and Things* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2025, 552 pp. ISBN: 9789004712188) investigates Aristotle's notion of homonymy in several parts of his work, particularly in his metaphysics and ethics. I describe it as a metaphysical journey through words and things, and I mean what I say. As Plato's pupil, Aristotle firmly believes that the principles of things conform to universality and generic unity. However, he holds that the fundamental concepts of our scientific knowledge lack corresponding categories to which we can apply universal concepts. Being is not a genus, good is not a genus, and nor is change. Metaphysics, ethics, and physics they lack generic unity, making it challenging to ground scientific investigations in these areas. Aristotle's metaphysical journey can be likened to starting behind the eight ball: any science requires generic unities at its foundation, but first philosophy, second philosophy, and ethics lack such foundations. This book describes how Aristotle brilliantly evades this problem as only he could.

Aristotle speaks of homonymous things, not words. Aristotle's contemporary philosopher Speusippus discussed the notion of homonymous words and categorised all words into groups. While Aristotle mentions that in regular Greek words – not things – are synonymous or homonymous, not things, Aristotle's *philosophical* analysis focuses on homonymous things, not homonymous words. He identifies natural complexities that cannot be conceptually apprehended without concepts whose homonymy stems not from word misuse but from the very nature of things. This, however, marks the end of his journey; at its outset, Speusippus appears to be correct, and Aristotle wrong: words are homonymous, not things. But then Aristotle explores the multiple meanings of several philosophically important notions, the most outstanding of which are 'being' and 'good'. He shows that these notions do not happen to have several meanings like chance homonymous words do. Quite the opposite: their meanings are intertwined in such a way that they overlap without ever fully coinciding. This book examines Aristotle's various approaches to achieving conceptual unity among several notions that lack generic unity. These notions are such that Aristotle cannot unify their senses using the universality pattern or the genus-species structure. Therefore, if he wants to bring some sort of unity to the various senses of

these notions (as he does), then he has to devise new ways to do this. One of the main arguments of this book is that Aristotle utilises a significant variety of unifying devices, which are distinct from one another in important ways. Another main contention is that Aristotle not only believes that there is room for such notions in a well-constructed language but, more importantly, that some of them are necessary for any successful scientific discourse about the world.

The main division falls between homonymies, in which there is nothing in common, and those in which there is something in common. There is only one kind of homonymy with nothing in common, viz. chance homonymy. There are several kinds that have something in common. They are further divided as follows:

- (i) with nothing in common (*κατὰ κοινὸν μηδέν*):
 - (a) chance homonyms (*ἀπὸ τύχης ὁμώνυμα*)
- (ii) with something in common (*κατὰ τι κοινόν*):
 - (a) hierarchical kinds:
 - (α) focal meaning (*πρὸς ἓν*)
 - (β) ordered series (*τῶ ἐφεξῆς*)
 - (γ) subordination (*γένος – εἶδος*)
 - (b) non-hierarchical kinds:
 - (α) by analogy (*κατ' ἀναλογίαν*)
 - (β) by resemblance (*καθ' ὁμοιότητα*)
 - (c) parts and wholes:
 - (α) large and strict modalities
 - (β) compositional kinds
 - (d) unnamed kinds
- (iii) unrecognised cases.

I call all kinds of homonymy that have some definitional trait in common *attenuated homonymy*. These enlarge the field of homonymy, operating alongside chance homonymy, the homonymy that is traditionally detected as such and has no philosophical use. Attenuated homonymy is homonymy that is mitigated through the overlapping definitions of different natures with the same name. These overlaps tame the harshness of chance homon-

ymy, while – as the label ‘attenuated homonymy’ indicates – being discovered through investigations against the background of the usually unfruitful chance homonymy.

The main sections of this book examine attenuated homonymy and are as follows.

(a) Hierarchical Homonymies: three different kinds of non-generic unity establish the mode of signification in tandem with a hierarchy among the united items. Understanding that the items are united by one of these kinds is tantamount to grasping the type of hierarchy in which they stand. The first kind concerns focal meaning, which Aristotle notoriously applies to the categories as the supreme genera of being in such a way that substance is the primary being, and the other categories refer to it as their central case. A second kind is serial ordering. Any ordered series features a hierarchy, this time in the form of lining up the items in a sequence following a primary one, established through succession: the posterior item succeeds the anterior one and cannot exist if the anterior does not exist, but the anterior can exist without the existence of the posterior. Aristotle endeavours to show that it holds for the different sorts of soul. The third kind of hierarchical homonymy I examine is more elusive, and Aristotle himself remarks that it often passes unnoticed. This type of homonymy occurs when the same name is applied to both the genus and one of its species, such as (general) justice and (particular) justice. I refer to this phenomenon as homonymy by subordination. These non-generic unities are all hierarchical modes of signification, but their hierarchies differ in the way they are structured.

(b) Non-hierarchical Homonymies: there are two kinds of non-generic, non-hierarchical unity. The first is analogy, applied to good (*Eth. Nic.* I 6 esp.). Analogy establishes a conceptual unity by virtue of proportion, according to the mathematical formula $a : b = c : d$. Mathematical proportion does not establish a hierarchy between the related items. This detail is far from innocuous; it is crucial to interpreting Aristotelian ethics, because it entails that, if Aristotle wants to establish a hierarchy among the ultimate ends – as he clearly does – then he must develop an independent argument on which to ground the hierarchy he seeks. The second non-hierarchical, non-generic unity is resemblance. Resemblance often appears too weak to establish any

genuine unity among similar items; however, in some cases, the strength of resemblance can provide a legitimate basis for unity, as Aristotle argues. This is notably the case for friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (VIII 2-6 esp.).

(c) Unnamed Homonymies. In this section, I analyse a case of attenuated homonymy that has been acknowledged as such. However, there is no official or final solution in Aristotle's philosophy. This case is extraordinary because it concerns the core of natural philosophy, specifically the concept of change (κίνησις), which is central to Aristotelian second philosophy. There are four kinds of change: coming to be and passing away (in the category of substance); alteration (quality); increase and decrease (quantity); and locomotion of what can be carried along (where). Change would be lost in chance homonymy unless a non-generic pattern can be found to ground their specific unity. The identity of the device that can afford physics a non-generic unity remains mysterious, as Aristotle nowhere explicitly names or explains it. Greek commentators were worried by this, and Alexander produced a solution that hints at an Aristotelian ancestry.

(d) Unrecognised Homonymies. This section examines homonymies that Aristotle does not recognise as such. They represent two distinct types. First, there are homonymous notions that are not recognised, although they are homonymous, such as πάθος. Aristotle seems to show no recognition that *affection* and *emotion* are different meanings of πάθος. These senses have opposite directions of fit, and their meanings may not overlap. When Aristotle explores the various senses of πάθος in *Metaphysics* Δ (21.1022b15-21), he discusses only the different senses of affection and does not delve into the meaning of πάθος as an emotion. Second, there are cases that appear homonymous, but in fact are not, and Aristotle is not misled by their appearance. However, Greek commentators fear that homonymy looms under the guise of chance homonymy. The first case is not recognised, while the second is not homonymous.

(e) This study culminates in the final chapter, examining the complex question of the meanings of οὐσία in Aristotle's philosophy – the cherry on top of the cake, so to speak. Substance (in actuality) refers either to the composite of form and matter, i.e., the individual thing that exists in the sensible world, or to form, that which is the cause of the composite being what it is.

Substance also has a third sense as matter, in the sense of the proximate matter of sensible things, to the extent that matter is substance in potentiality. Thus, οὐσία in general is said in three ways, and, regarding actuality, there are two senses: the ultimate substratum (the individual things that are the substrata of attributes), and the form, on account of which the individual thing is what it is. These three senses are clearly interconnected, but how to unify them in a clear and uncontroversial manner? In our schema, substance is a case of compositional homonymy: form is substance in actuality, which combines with the proximate matter (substance in potentiality) to compose an individual thing, which is also substance in actuality, such as Socrates with his snub nose and fair complexion, while matter is substance only in potentiality. There is also the challenge of connecting sensible and non-sensible substances within a unified domain of substantiality. Aristotle's stance on this matter is unclear and has sparked longstanding controversy. One of the claims in this book is that only a comprehensive survey of how attenuated homonymy works in Aristotle will enable us to gain a better understanding of these and related issues.