ARISTOTLE
NOTES ON DE INTERPRETATIONE (Ch. 9)
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Introduction

The following are detailed notes of Aristotle’s De Interpretatione, which were part of a Summer Project Grant, approved by the Maricopa County Community College District. I would like to thank them for allowing me to spend time and effort on this research.

Please be aware that in what follows, these are actual sentences of Aristotle’s text in some cases, but this is not the whole text. More importantly, I have deleted many unnecessary words, phrases, sentences, and/or examples (when 3 would suffice), and added underlining, italicizing, and so on, to make the text easier to understand. I have also added any notes or objections I may have thought along the way, which are underlined and highlighted in blue. I have also moved his examples nearer to when he describes a principle (sometimes he says, e.g., “X is Y and not-Y” and then gives an example of not-Y for several sentences, until finally getting to an example of Y; I moved the example to make it more easily accessible).

In addition, these notes are in no way to be thought of as being a substitute for reading all of the De Interpretatione for oneself; these notes are merely what I thought was most important, and put into a form that I could more easily understand.

Lastly, despite all these disclaimers, I do sincerely hope that these notes are of some value to the reader.

De Interpretatione, Ch. 9

9 The Sea Battle Argument (18a-19b). It is necessary for the affirmation or the negation of something that is or has been to be true or false. But with particulars that are going to be it is different.

If every affirmation or negation is true or false, it is necessary for everything either to be the case or not to be the case. If one person says that X will be and another denies X, it is necessary that one of them is saying what is true (if every affirmation is true or false); both will not be true simultaneously. If it is true to say that it is white or is not white, it is necessary for it to be white or not white; and if it is white or is not white, then it was true to say or deny this. If it is not the case it is false, if it is false it is not the case. So it is necessary for the affirmation or the negation to be true. It follows that nothing either is or is happening, or will be or will not be, by chance or as chance has it, but everything of necessity and not as chance has it (since either he who says or he who denies is saying what is true). Otherwise it might equally well happen or not happen, since what is as chance has it is no more thus than not thus, nor will it be.

If it is white now it was true to say earlier that it would be white; so it was always true to say of anything that has happened that it would be so. But if it was always true to say that it was so, or would be so, it could not not be so, or not be going to be so. If something cannot not happen, it is impossible for it not to happen, and it is necessary for it to happen. So everything that will be happens necessarily. So nothing will come about by chance (or not of necessity).

Nor can we say that neither is true – that it neither will be nor will not be so: First, though the affirmation is false the negation is not true, and though the negation is false the affirmation (on this view) is not true. And if it is true to say that something is white and large, both white and large have to hold true of it, and if they will hold true of it tomorrow, they will have to hold tomorrow; and if it neither will be nor will not be the case tomorrow, then there is no “by chance”. Take a sea-battle: it would have neither to happen nor not to happen.

These and others absurdities follow if it is necessary for every affirmation and negation either about universals spoken of universally or about particulars, that one of the opposites be true and the other false, and that nothing of what happens is as chance has it, but everything is and happens of necessity. There would be no need to deliberate or to take trouble (thinking that if we do this, this will happen, but if we do not, it will not). Say someone said ten thousand years ago that X would be the case, and another denied X at that time; so
whichever of the two was true to say then, will be the case of necessity. It doesn’t make any difference if anyone made the contradictory statements or not. This is how the actual things are (or will be) even if someone did not affirm it and another deny it. It is not because of the affirming or denying that it will be or will not be the case, nor is it a question of ten thousand years ago rather than any other time. So if in the whole of time the state of things was such that one or the other was true, it was necessary for this to happen, and for the state of things always to be such that everything that happens happens of necessity. What anyone has truly said would be the case cannot not happen; and of what happens it was always true to say that it would be the case.

What if this is impossible? We see that what will be has an origin both in deliberation and in action, and generally that there is the possibility of being and of not being in things that are not always actual; both possibilities (being and not being) are open, and so, both coming to be and not coming to be are open. Many things are like this: e.g., it is possible for this cloak to be cut up, and equally that it will not be cut up but will wear out first. The same goes with all other events that are spoken of in terms of this kind of possibility. So not everything is or happens of necessity: some things happen as chance has it, and of the affirmation and the negation neither is true rather than the other; with other things it is one rather than the other and as a rule, but still it is possible for the other to happen instead.

What is, necessarily is, when it is; and what is not, necessarily is not, when it is not. But not everything that is, necessarily is; and not everything that is not, necessarily is not. To say that everything that is, is of necessity, when it is, is not the same as saying unconditionally that it is of necessity. Similarly with what is not. The same account holds for contradictories: everything necessarily is or is not, and will be or will not be; but one cannot divide and say that one or the other is necessary. E.g., it is necessary for there to be or not to be a sea-battle tomorrow; but it is not necessary for a sea-battle to take place tomorrow, nor for one not to take place – though it is necessary for one to take place or not to take place. Since statements are true according to how the actual things are, wherever these allow of contraries as chance has it (i.e. with things that are not always so or are not always not so), the same necessarily holds for the contradictories also. With these it is necessary for one or the other of the contradictories to be true or false – not this one or that one, but as chance has it; or for one to be true rather than the other, yet not already true or false.

Therefore, it is not necessary that of every affirmation and opposite negation one should be true and the other false. What holds for things that are does not hold for things that are not but may possibly be or not be; with these it is as we have said.