

Charles on Aristotle on Essence

Philipp Blum

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First part of [Charles \(2000\)](#): knowledge of (the signification of) kind terms does not require knowledge about any kind members (or whether there are any):

The key to Charles’s analysis is Aristotle’s three stage inquiry into what something is. The first stage is achieved when one knows an account (logos) of what a name or name-like expression signifies (93b3–32). This stage allows for knowledge of what a name signifies without any knowledge of the existence or essence of the kind. When one knows that what is signified by a name or name-like expression exists, the second stage is reached (93b32). The final stage is realised when one knows the essence of the object/kind signified by a name or name-like expression (93b32–33). ([Degnan, 2004](#), 35)

The set-up is given by two quotations (cf. [Charles, 2010a](#), 286):

In all these cases, it is clear that what it is and why it is are the same. What is an eclipse? Privation of the light from the moon by the screening of the earth? Why is there an eclipse? Or why is the moon eclipsed? Because the light leaves it when the earth screens it. What is harmony? An arithmetical ratio of high and low. Why does the high harmonise with the low? Because there is an arithmetical ratio between them. (Post. An. B.2, 90a14ff.)

‘Why does it thunder?’ Because the fire is extinguished in the clouds. But ‘What is thunder?’ Noise of fire being quenched in the clouds. Hence the same account is used in different ways: in one way as a continuous demonstration, in the other a definition. (Post. An. B.10, 94a4ff.)

Charles’ analysis is:

From a demonstration which explains why noise of a certain type (viz. thunder) occurs,

- Noise belongs to all fire-quenchings.
- Fire-quenching belongs to the clouds.

Hence, noise belongs to the clouds. (93b9–12)

one can read off the answer to question [“what is thunder?”]: thunder is the type of noise in the clouds that is caused by fire being quenched. On occasion, Aristotle explicitly identifies the cause (e.g. fire being quenched in the clouds), marked out by the middle term, with the essence (90a1, 90a15, 93b8). In this, he identifies the cause with what makes the phenomenon the one it is (its basic essence). ([Charles, 2010a](#), 288)

An Post 93a29–32 describes a case where we attain that-knowledge at the same time as why-knowledge: starting with a preliminary, but accidental, account of what an eclipse is (“a type of noise in the clouds”, 93a22–3), we find an account of why the eclipse occurs by determining its cause, the screening of the moon from the sun’s light by the interposition of the earth between the two, which is

the relevant middle term and thus “we know at the same time that the moon is eclipsed and why it is eclipsed” (93a35-6, cf. Charles (2000, 37)). This is contrasted with the case where we have only that-knowledge, due to our middle term not specifying the cause, but the effect of the eclipse: “the inability of the moon – if full and if nothing is in between [the moon and the earth] – to cast shadows” (93a36-b1, cf. Charles (2000, 54)).

Not just explanation, but definition and essence retrace causality:

The order of definitional priority is metaphysically dependent on the order of causation. Fire being quenched is definitionally prior to noise in the clouds because it is causally prior. It is the efficient cause. *The what it is to be something* (as captured in the definition) and the basic relevant cause are one and the same [...]. The dependence of our practice of definition on that of explanation depends on the identity of basic essence and basic cause. (Charles, 2010a, 290)

Similarly Menn: “Ousia is a cause” means: “the answer to a ‘what is it?’ question is also an answer to a ‘why’ question”.

A dioti/why-question is always: ‘why does *B* belong to *A*?’ So the question, e.g., ‘why does *x* exist?’ needs to be rewritten: instead of asking ‘what is a man?’, we ask ‘why is this animal a man’ or ‘why are these bones and this flesh a man’; ‘what is thunder’ becomes ‘why is there noise in the clouds’. We need a middle term, that connects ‘noise’ with ‘clouds’. First, we verify that there are eclipses, then we find a middle term between moon and darkness – we find relative position; thus explaining why there are eclipses, we also explain what it is for an eclipse.

Explanation-why is not an explanation ‘through’ the why, but of the why: it increases our confidence not in the fact to be explained (for we may well know it already), nor in the explanans (for that may also be known), but in the claim that the explanans *does* explain the explanandum; its purpose is “to exhibit the defence of our claim to having discovered the explanation of this truth [“Being eclipsed is true of the moon”] and, thereby, the definition of the essence of the thing [the lunar eclipse] referred to in it” (Politis, 2005, 252).

I do find it difficult, however, to see how such explanations can do this, if the corroboration of explanatory power means justification of a particular causal claim (‘causal’ here in our sense):

In Aristotle’s favoured examples (of thunder and eclipse) the efficient cause explains the occurrence of a given type of noise in the clouds (or deprivation of light: 93a30–b10). Further, in both cases, the type of noise (or light deprivation) in question is made the type it is by being caused in this way. In the case of thunder, its distinctive causal ancestry determines the specific type of noise that occurs and marks it off from other types of noise (see, for example, 94a5). In both, efficient causal ancestry makes what happens the type of thing it is: it fixes its identity.

In Aristotle’s account, one finds the best causal explanation of thunder when one finds that cause which fixes the feature which determines the identity of the phenomenon. Similarly, a successful search for the definition of thunder requires one to find the efficient cause of its occurrence. So understood, both definitional and explanatory projects are guided by, and directed towards, the idea of essence (or nature), understood as that which makes the kind the one it is and explains why it has the qualities it does. Indeed, these projects are two sides of the same coin, variants of one basic method differing only in ‘presentation’ (see, for example, 94a1–3). (Charles, 2010c, 11)

Whatever else it means “knowing the essence of” is strong enough to licence intersubstitutability in epistemic contexts:

[Aristotle] should also accept:

- *S* knows that *Fa*

- a is the same in essence as b
- S knows that Fb .

For, if a and b are the same in essence, they will share all the same properties. (Charles, 2000, 97)

'Knowing the essence' is then further glossed as 'knowing what would be required for the thing to exist':

In Aristotle's terms, one might possess an account of what ' K ' signifies without knowing that the kind exists, if one does not know that the signification of the name is in fact determined by that kind. In such a case one will not know that there exists one unified phenomenon that brought about these thoughts, still less be able to distinguish that phenomenon from all others. While the content of the relevant thought will be determined by the kind that is signified, the thinker need not know which kind that is (in the way required to distinguish that kind from all others, either real or imaginary). Rather, in having a thought about eclipses, she may think of them as possessing certain features which would locate them, if they exist, in an ordered world: e.g. being a certain unified property of the moon. But, in knowing this, she need not know everything about what makes the thought the thought it is. In particular, she need not know that the thought in question is (constitutively) brought about by an existing kind in the world. Indeed, she may not know whether or not this case is like that of 'goatstag'. In brief, she need not know that the kind in question exists. (Charles, 2000, 102)

On the question what essence is, however, Charles does not say much:

Definitions, if successful, give us knowledge of what the kind in question is (see B.3, 90b16; *Topics* Z.4, 141a27ff.). The feature marked out in a definition determines what the thing in question is. [fn.] It is the feature cited in answer to the 'What is F?' question which makes the kind the one it is. I shall describe the feature needed for this role (in the *Analytics*) as the one which fixes the identity of the kind. (Charles, 2010c, 293)

In the footnote, Charles writes:

Aristotle uses the phrase 'just what the thing is' (*hoper ti estin*) in describing the basic essence (*to ti ên einai*): see *Metaphysics* 1030a3. More fully, the basic essence is just the sort of thing the thing in question is. Indeed, it is what makes the particular in question a particular of the kind it is. (There are interesting issues at stake here which require further study.) (Charles, 2010c, 293, fn. 8)

Whatever else it does, essence explains existence:

The (basic) essence, in Aristotle's account, simultaneously defines what it is to be house and explains why the house is as it is: why it possesses those properties it must have to be a house. (Charles, 2010c, 296)

References

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