Notes on the Copula

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In an Aristotelian sentence, a predicate is attached to a subject by a copula. The copula appears to be a verb. Some philosophers have recognized a multitude of copulative verbs; but traditionally there is only one – in English, the verb 'be'. If the copulative 'be' is a verb, then (according to Aristotle) it has a primary signification and it also 'co-signifies' a time. Primarily, the copula signifies a 'combination', namely the combination of predicate and subject, and the nature of the combination has sometimes been elucidated in terms of identity. The 'co-signification' runs into difficulties when it comes to the standard rules of conversion in Aristotelian syllogistic. Some ancient commentators suggested that, in its copulative use, the verb 'be' functions as a connector. That is plausible – and it suggests the conclusion that the copula lacks signification and is logically redundant.

1. Introduction

A proposition may feature in an Aristotelian syllogism inasmuch as it has a certain form or structure–inasmuch as it attaches a predicate to a subject in a certain quantity (universally or particularly), a certain quality (affirmatively or negatively) and a certain modality (assertorically, apodictically, or problematically). You might picture that structure like this:

$$M \ Q^L \ Q^T \ S \ A \ P.$$

A structure of that sort might for convenience be called a syllogistic structure; and you might use the expression 'syllogistic proposition' as shorthand for 'proposition which possesses a syllogistic structure'. Most