

# Topics

By Aristotle

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Book I

## Chapter 5

We must now say what are ‘definition’, ‘property’, ‘genus’, and ‘accident’. A ‘definition’ is a phrase signifying a thing’s essence. It is rendered in the form either of a phrase in lieu of a term, or of a phrase in lieu of another phrase; for it is sometimes possible to define the meaning of a phrase as well. People whose rendering consists of a term only, try it as they may, clearly do not render the definition of the thing in question, because a definition is always a phrase of a certain kind. One may, however, use the word ‘definitory’ also of such a remark as ‘The “becoming” is “beautiful”’, and likewise also of the question, ‘Are sensation and knowledge the same or different?’, for argument about definitions is mostly concerned with questions of sameness and difference. In a word we may call ‘definitory’ everything that falls under the same branch of inquiry as definitions; and that all the above-mentioned examples are of this character is clear on the face of them. For if we are able to argue that two things are the same or are different, we shall be well supplied by the same turn of argument with lines of attack upon their definitions as well: for when we have shown that they are not the same we shall have demolished the definition. Observe, please, that the converse of this last statement does not hold: for to show that they are the same is not enough to establish a definition. To show, however, that they are not the same is enough of itself to overthrow it.

A ‘property’ is a predicate which does not indicate the essence of a thing, but yet belongs to that thing alone, and is predicated convertibly of it. Thus it is a property of man to-be-capable of learning grammar: for if A be a man, then he is capable of learning grammar, and if he be capable of learning grammar, he is a man. For no one calls anything a ‘property’ which may possibly belong to something else, e.g. ‘sleep’ in the case of man, even though at a certain time it may happen to belong to him alone. That is to say, if any such thing were actually to be called a property, it will be called not a ‘property’ absolutely, but a ‘temporary’ or a ‘relative’ property: for ‘being

on the right hand side' is a temporary property, while 'two-footed' is in point of fact ascribed as a property in certain relations; e.g. it is a property of man relatively to a horse and a dog. That nothing which may belong to anything else than A is a convertible predicate of A is clear: for it does not necessarily follow that if something is asleep it is a man.

A 'genus' is what is predicated in the category of essence of a number of things exhibiting differences in kind. We should treat as predicates in the category of essence all such things as it would be appropriate to mention in reply to the question, 'What is the object before you?'; as, for example, in the case of man, if asked that question, it is appropriate to say 'He is an animal'. The question, 'Is one thing in the same genus as another or in a different one?' is also a 'generic' question; for a question of that kind as well falls under the same branch of inquiry as the genus: for having argued that 'animal' is the genus of man, and likewise also of ox, we shall have argued that they are in the same genus; whereas if we show that it is the genus of the one but not of the other, we shall have argued that these things are not in the same genus.

An 'accident' is (i) something which, though it is none of the foregoing—i.e. neither a definition nor a property nor a genus yet belongs to the thing: (something which may possibly either belong or not belong to any one and the self-same thing, as (e.g.) the 'sitting posture' may belong or not belong to some self-same thing. Likewise also 'whiteness', for there is nothing to prevent the same thing being at one time white, and at another not white. Of the definitions of accident the second is the better: for if he adopts the first, any one is bound, if he is to understand it, to know already what 'definition' and 'genus' and 'property' are, whereas the second is sufficient of itself to tell us the essential meaning of the term in question. To Accident are to be attached also all comparisons of things together, when expressed in language that is drawn in any kind of way from what happens (accidit) to be true of them; such as, for example, the question, 'Is the honourable or the expedient preferable?' and 'Is the life of virtue or the life of self-indulgence the pleasanter?', and any other problem which may happen to be phrased in terms like these. For in all such cases the question is 'to which of the two does the predicate in question happen (accidit) to belong more closely?' It is clear on the face of it that there is nothing to prevent an accident from becoming a temporary or relative property. Thus the sitting posture is an accident, but will be a temporary property, whenever a man is the only person sitting, while if he be not the only one sitting, it is still a property relatively to those who are not sitting. So then, there is nothing to prevent an

accident from becoming both a relative and a temporary property; but a property absolutely it will never be.

## Part 6

We must not fail to observe that all remarks made in criticism of a 'property' and 'genus' and 'accident' will be applicable to 'definitions' as well. For when we have shown that the attribute in question fails to belong only to the term defined, as we do also in the case of a property, or that the genus rendered in the definition is not the true genus, or that any of the things mentioned in the phrase used does not belong, as would be remarked also in the case of an accident, we shall have demolished the definition; so that, to use the phrase previously employed,' all the points we have enumerated might in a certain sense be called 'definitory'. But we must not on this account expect to find a single line of inquiry which will apply universally to them all: for this is not an easy thing to find, and, even were one found, it would be very obscure indeed, and of little service for the treatise before us. Rather, a special plan of inquiry must be laid down for each of the classes we have distinguished, and then, starting from the rules that are appropriate in each case, it will probably be easier to make our way right through the task before us. So then, as was said before,' we must outline a division of our subject, and other questions we must relegate each to the particular branch to which it most naturally belongs, speaking of them as 'definitory' and 'generic' questions. The questions I mean have practically been already assigned to their several branches.