

ARISTOTLE ON ONTOLOGICAL PRIORITY

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SUMMARY: 1. *Introduction*. 2. *Priority in Separation*. 3. *Aristotle's Critique of the Academy*. 4. *Priority in Perfection*. 5. *Ontological Priority in Physics VIII*. 6. *Ross' Proposal*. 7. *Conclusion*.

1. INTRODUCTION¹

THERE are several passages in the *Metaphysics* where Aristotle explains ontological priority in terms of ontological dependence, but there are others where he seems to adopt a teleological conception of ontological priority. It is sometimes maintained that the latter priority too must be construed in terms of the former, or that the priorities in question are not both endorsed (or simultaneously endorsed) by Aristotle. The goal of this paper is to show otherwise; I argue that what is at issue are two distinct priorities that Aristotle simultaneously endorses.

I begin by examining two formulations of ontological priority that I call priority in separation and priority in perfection. The former priority is bound up with Aristotle's account of separation; a thing is separate (in being) from another insofar as it can be without the other, whereas a thing is prior in separation to another insofar as it can be without the other but not conversely. Because ontological priority is nonreciprocal separation, a correct interpretation of Aristotle's account of separation is important not only in its own right but is also critical for a proper understanding of the asymmetric ontological dependence that prevails between a substance and its attributes. The precise interpretation of ontological dependence has been a subject of controversy among commentators, and my position will be that the inseparability of matter and the convertibility of being and unity provide reasons to interpret ontological dependence in terms of unity.

When Aristotle talks about ontological priority he often means priority in separation, yet there are several passages where Aristotle explains ontological priority in an entirely different way. In these passages, Aristotle's concern is

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not ontological dependence (no matter how one interprets ontological dependence), but rather the extent to which a thing has attained its *telos*. Aristotle provides several examples to clarify this (teleological) conception of priority: the house is prior to its matter, the man is prior to the boy, and bodies are prior to lines and planes. Aristotle's point is that in each of these cases, what is actual is prior to what is potential in the sense that the former is the perfection and completion of the latter.

Charlotte Witt and Stephen Makin argue that priority in perfection must itself be construed in terms of ontological dependence, whereas Ian Mueller argues that what is at issue here are two distinct conceptions of ontological priority. Mueller maintains more precisely that despite several passages in the *Metaphysics* where Aristotle talks about priority in separation, this is a conception of ontological priority that he ascribes to Plato and not a conception of ontological priority he endorses himself. Neither of these approaches is satisfactory; at *Physics* VIII.7, 260b17ff. Aristotle himself distinguishes between (and simultaneously endorses) the priorities in question. If this is right, however, we face the difficulty of having to explain why Aristotle would use the same terms (e.g. *proteron tē ousia*) to refer to two different concepts. I discuss Ross' proposal (that the two senses of ontological priority under discussion correspond to the two senses of substance) as one possible interpretation of the text that forces us to deny neither that priority in separation and priority in perfection are distinct nor that they are simultaneously endorsed by Aristotle.

2. PRIORITY IN SEPARATION

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle offers several passages where ontological priority is defined in the following terms: x is ontologically prior to y if and only if x can be without y , while y cannot be without x . In v.11, for example, Aristotle tells us that the things prior in nature and substance are 'those which can be without (*endechetai einai aneu*) other things, while others cannot be without them' (1019a3-4).² In XIII.2 he adds, 'The things prior in substance are those which continue to be when separated (*chōrizomena*) from other things' (1077b2-3). In another passage he refers to the priority in question as 'priority in being' (VII.15, 1040a21). In these and similar passages, what is at issue is a kind of priority that Aristotle explains in terms of ontological dependence and that he alternatively calls priority in substance, priority in nature, or priority in being.³ I will call the priority under discussion 'priority in separation'.

² In the present section translations are my own; elsewhere I follow J. Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1984, sometimes with slight modifications.

³ The phrases that modify *proteron* are (i) *tē ousia*, (ii) *kat' ousian*, (iii) *tē phusei*, (iv) *kata phusin*, and (v) *tō einai*.

Thus, x is prior in separation to y insofar as x can be without y but not vice versa.

Throughout the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle appeals to the concept of ontological dependence to analyse the relationship between substances and attributes. In his discussion of the many senses of priority, he writes:

Some things are called prior and posterior in this sense, but others in nature and substance, namely, those which can be without other things, while others cannot be without them; this distinction was also used by Plato. If we consider the many senses of being, first of all the subject is prior, so that substance is prior. (v.11, 1019a1-6)

Aristotle states here that substance is prior to the other categories of being, and because a thing is ontologically prior to another insofar as the first can be without the second but not conversely, it follows that there is an asymmetric ontological dependence between substances and attributes. Substance is prior, Aristotle elsewhere explains, because ‘none of the other categories is separate, but only substance’ (vii.1, 1028a33-4). In the *Physics*, he adds that ‘none of the others is separate apart from substance, for everything else is predicated of substance as subject’ (I.2, 185a31-2). Even on the face of it, it is clear that the concepts of separation and ontological priority are closely related.

Separation is a difficult concept that at first seems to create more problems than it solves, but it is not possible to gain a better understanding of Aristotle’s account of priority without gaining a better understanding of his account of separation. Aristotle never defines separation, and attempts to determine the meaning of the term from the context confront several complications. First, there are various kinds of separation: Aristotle talks about things that are separate in time, separate in place, separate in account, and about a kind of separation that he does not name but that we may call separation in being. In addition to the many kinds of separation, Aristotle sometimes talks about separation and sometimes about separation *from* something. For example, in one passage he argues that the composite natural substance is separate simply (*chōriston haplōs*),⁴ but in another he tells us that it is not separate from matter.⁵ Yet, even the notion of separation from matter is ambiguous: it is possible to *define* the objects of mathematics separately from matter (unlike the snub, the concave can be defined without reference to matter), but ontologically speaking, mathematical objects are not separate. Therefore, unlike the matter-form composite, mathematical objects can be defined separately from matter, but only the former is separate in being.

To impose order on this chaos, we must begin by noting that a kind of pri-

⁴ ‘The matter-form composite [...] is separate simply’ (*Metaph.* viii.1, 1042a29-31).

⁵ Without Schwegler’s emendation the text reads: ‘For natural science deals with things that are not separate [from matter]’ (*Metaph.* vi.1, 1026a13-4).

ority corresponds to each of the kinds of separation named above. For example, Aristotle discusses separation in time, in place, in account, and in being; likewise, he speaks of priority in time, in place, in account, and in being. The question thus arises: how are the concepts of separation and priority related to each other? Aristotle explains separation in account (*logos*) as conceptual independence.⁶ He maintains that a thing is *prior* in account to another, on the other hand, insofar as the former is conceptually independent of the latter *but not conversely*. In VII.10, for example, Aristotle states that the right angle is prior in account to the acute angle because the account of the former does not include that of the latter, whereas the account of the latter includes that of the former (1035b6-7). The difference between separation in account and priority in account is clear: priority is *nonreciprocal* separation. What about the relationship between separation in being and priority in being? According to Gail Fine, and I concur, this is an analogous case; priority in being is nonreciprocal separation in being: ‘A is naturally [i.e. ontologically] prior to B just in case A is separate from B, but not conversely’.⁷ In other words, a thing is separate from another just in case it can be without the other, whereas a thing is ontologically prior to another just in case it can be without the other but not conversely.⁸ Let us first try to understand Aristotle’s account of separation to get a better sense of the kind of ontological dependence that prevails between a substance and its attributes.

In a seminal paper Fine offers an interpretation of separation as the capacity for independent existence.⁹ Phil Corkum calls this ‘the standard

⁶ More precisely, he argues at *Metaph.* VII.5, 1030b23-5 that what is not conceptually independent is not separate in account. See also M. Peramatzis, *Priority in Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, Oxford University Press, New York 2011, p. 25.

⁷ G. FINE, *Separation: Reply to Morrison*, «Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy», 3 (1985), pp. 159-166, 159.

⁸ Cf. E. KATZ, *Ontological Separation in Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, «Phronesis», 62 (2017), pp. 26-68, who rejects this (standard) interpretation, arguing instead that ontological separation and ontological priority are mutually entailing.

⁹ G. FINE, *Separation*, «Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy», 2 (1984), pp. 31-88. Alternatively, D. MORRISON (*Separation in Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, «Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy», 3 (1985), pp. 125-158) argues that two things are separate if and only if they are outside the ontological boundaries of each other, whereas L. SPELLMAN (*Substance and Separation in Aristotle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995) argues that separation in being is the ontological correlate of separation in definition. Cf. P. CORKUM, *Aristotle on Ontological Dependence*, «Phronesis», 53 (2008), pp. 65-92; P. CORKUM, *Substance and Independence in Aristotle*, in B. SCHNIEDER, M. HOELTJE, and A. STEINBERG (eds.), *Varieties of Dependence: Ontological Dependence, Grounding, Supervenience, Response-Dependence*, Philosophia Verlag, München 2013, pp. 36-67; and K. KOSLICKI, *Varieties of Ontological Dependence*, in F. CORREIA & B. SCHNIEDER (eds.), *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, pp. 186-213.

interpretation',¹⁰ and Donald Morrison states that Fine's account of separation is 'the most popular of all in the literature'.¹¹ Separation is, indeed, a kind of independence, but there are several issues with interpreting separation as the capacity for independent *existence*.¹² To begin, it is not clear whether existence emerges as a distinct concept in Aristotelian philosophy; Charles Kahn, for example, argues otherwise.¹³ Charlotte Witt claims in this vein that 'without establishing that Aristotle drew a distinction between being as existence and being as essence in his metaphysics [...] the best that can be concluded is that ontological priority in Aristotle is a mélange of existential and essential dependency relations'.¹⁴ In a word, it is misguided to interpret separation in terms of existence without determining, first of all, whether and to what extent we can ascribe the concept to Aristotle.

Second, and more importantly, Fine's interpretation is not in line with some of Aristotle's examples. One of the points Aristotle makes in the *Metaphysics* is that matter is not separate (VII.3, 1029a26-8). The inseparability of matter does not receive the attention it deserves in the literature on separation and ontological priority. What one must realize here is that if separation is to be interpreted as having a capacity for independent existence, Aristotle's claim that matter is not separate is another way of saying that matter cannot exist on its own. However, it makes little sense to argue that matter cannot exist on its own or that it does not exist before it takes on the form. Surely, bronze can and does exist even before it has been sculpted into a statue.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Aristotle states clearly that matter is not a 'this' and separate (*tode ti kai chōriston*). What Aristotle means by this will be discussed presently, but let us first go through some of the problems faced by the existential interpretation of ontological dependence.

In his definition of ontological priority, Aristotle uses the phrase *endechetai einai aneu*, which the Oxford translation renders as 'can exist without'.¹⁶ One

¹⁰ P. CORKUM, *Aristotle on Ontological Dependence*, cit., p. 66.

¹¹ D. MORRISON, *Separation in Aristotle's Metaphysics*, cit. p. 131.

¹² See E. KATZ, *Ontological Separation in Aristotle's Metaphysics*, cit., pp. 31-40, for a recent overview of the literature on whether separation in being needs to be interpreted in terms of existence.

¹³ See C. H. KAHN, *Why Existence does not Emerge as a Distinct Concept in Greek Philosophy*, «Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie», 58 (1976), pp. 323-334.

¹⁴ C. WITT, Review of *Priority in Aristotle's Metaphysics*, «Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews» (2012). See also M. PERAMATZIS, *Aristotle's Notion of Priority in Nature and Substance*, «Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy», 35 (2008), pp. 187-247, 196-200.

¹⁵ Aristotle has different conceptions of matter, one of which is what Aristotle calls 'proximate matter', which in turn he distinguishes from 'primary matter'. It is the former that I have in mind when talking about bronze as the matter of the statue.

¹⁶ I agree with commentators who point out the problems with the existential interpretation of ontological dependence, even when I don't necessarily endorse their alternative

problem with this translation is that it is not possible to make sense of the ontological priority of substances over attributes in terms of existence. First of all, it is not true that substances can exist without any attributes whatsoever. For example, sublunary substances are sensible bodies, but (to take a single example) each body must have a size; a body can be large or small, but it is not possible for it to have no size whatsoever. In that case, there is no real difference in the way that substances and attributes depend on one another. That is, not only is it true that a size cannot exist without a body, it is equally true that a body cannot exist without a size. It is not fair to ascribe to Aristotle the position that Fine ascribes to him,¹⁷ a position that compels us to concede that Aristotle has overlooked such an obvious fact.

Those who endorse the existential interpretation of separation (and therefore the existential interpretation of ontological priority) might reply that Aristotle's point is not that a substance can exist without any attributes but that it can exist without any of the attributes that it happens to have at a particular time. In other words, even though a sensible substance cannot exist without having a size, it can surely exist without the size that it now has. Presumably, then, this is the sense in which Aristotle believes a substance to be separate from its attributes. However, this interpretation also runs into difficulties.¹⁸ Not only is it true, for instance, that the thing that now happens to be white will continue to exist even if it takes on some other colour, it seems equally true that white can exist without its current substance as long as something else is white. Once again, there seems to be no difference in the way that substances and attributes depend on one another.

The cause of these difficulties is the existential interpretation of ontological dependence. Insofar as we interpret separation in being as separation in existence and ontological priority as nonreciprocal separation, we must concede that there is hardly any difference in the way that substances and attributes depend on one another. An alternative construal of separation (and therefore of ontological priority) is suggested by the passages where Aristotle explains *why* matter cannot be substance in the truest sense. In one of these passages, Aristotle says that even though there is a line of reasoning according to which matter seems most of all to be substance, this is impos-

construal. For example, Peramatzis (*Priority in Aristotle's Metaphysics*, cit.) rightly argues against the existential interpretation, pointing out its many flaws. His own account of ontological priority is similar to Spellman's account of separation – i.e. in the same way that Spellman (*Substance and Separation in Aristotle*, cit.) claims that separation in being is the ontological correlate of separation in definition, Peramatzis claims that priority in being is the ontological correlate of priority in definition.

¹⁷ G. FINE, *Separation*, cit., p. 36, note 19.

¹⁸ These have been discussed by FINE, *Separation*, cit., p. 36, note 20; and CORKUM, *Aristotle on Ontological Dependence*, cit., p. 73.

sible (*adunaton de*) because separation and thisness seem to belong especially to substance (*kai gar to choriston kai to tode ti hyparchein dokei malista tē ousia*). Commenting on the passage (and translating *tode ti* as individual), Ross writes: ‘Matter lacks two of the characteristic marks of substance. It is not capable of separate existence, and it is not individual’.¹⁹ Aquinas, on the other hand, interprets the passage as follows: ‘Now these two characteristics – being separable and being a particular thing – do not fit matter; for matter cannot exist by itself without a form by means of which it is an actual being, since of itself it is only potential’ (*In VII Metaphysicorum*, lect. 2, n. 1292). Now, it is one thing to say that matter does not have being, i.e. in the way in which the Greeks understand ‘being’, but a very different thing to say that matter cannot ‘exist’ on its own (*per se existere*) – a *prima facie* curious remark for a philosopher operating in a medieval context according to which matter is created (bestowed existence) by God. But is it really existence that matter lacks? Peramatzis writes that ‘bricks [...] do exist *before* the completed house exists’.²⁰ Peramatzis is right, for how could one impose form on matter that does not already exist?

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle maintains not only that substances alone are separate but also that substances are separate in the ‘way’ (*tropos*) that particular things are separate.²¹ To be a particular, according to Aristotle, is to be one in number (III.4, 999b33-4), which in turn provides an important clue as to what Aristotle means when he says that matter is not separate. Matter is not separate not because it cannot exist on its own, as Fine’s interpretation of separation would have us believe, but because matter is not one (before it takes on the form). We cannot talk about *this* bronze unless we are referring to this bronze *thing*, but in the latter case the unity is bestowed not by the bronze itself but by the substantial form. Similarly, the elements (i.e. the simple bodies) are not separate not because they cannot exist on their own but because they are like a heap before they become a unity. As Aristotle puts it, ‘Neither earth, nor fire, nor air is a unity; they are like a heap until some one thing is concocted and generated out of them’ (*Metaph.* VII.16, 1040b8-10).

The interpretation of separation in terms of unity has already been advanced by Morrison, who describes separation as a kind of numeric distinctness.²² Likewise, Edward Halper argues that ‘what Aristotle refers to as *separate* in one text he will, with apparently the same character in mind, elsewhere

¹⁹ W. D. Ross, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols., The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1924, vol. 2, p. 165.

²⁰ M. PERAMATZIS, *Aristotle’s Notion of Priority in Nature and Substance*, cit., p. 197.

²¹ ‘Unless one supposes substances to be separate in the way that particular things are said to be separate, one will abolish the kind of substance we want to maintain’ (*Metaph.* XIII.10, 1086b16-9).

²² D. MORRISON, *Separation in Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, cit., pp. 138-141.

term *one*' and that 'Aristotle often seems to think of separation [...] as a kind of unity'.²³ Even though the interpretation of separation in terms of unity has received some attention in the literature, the interpretation of *ontological priority* in terms of unity has never been advanced, as far as I know. But if separation is to be interpreted in terms of unity, and if ontological priority is nonreciprocal separation, we are compelled to interpret ontological priority in the following terms: *x* is ontologically prior to *y* just in case *x* can be one without *y* being one, but not vice versa. What exactly this would entail for Aristotelian ontology is beyond the scope of this paper, but for the time being I would like to present yet another reason why ontological priority must be interpreted in terms of unity.

There are a number of passages, mainly in the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle argues for what is sometimes called the convertibility of being and unity.²⁴ These passages show that being and unity are one of the many pairs of concepts that according to Aristotle have the same extension even though they don't necessarily have the same intension.²⁵ The convertibility of being and unity can be summarized as the idea that whatever 'is' is also 'one' and vice versa. If we can substitute the two terms *salva veritate*, however, this has an important implication for the concept of ontological priority, for as we have already seen, Aristotle states that ontologically prior things are 'those which can *be* without other things, while others cannot *be* without them' (1019a3-4). Substituting unity for being, we can read Aristotle as saying that ontologically prior things are 'those which can be *one* without other things, while others cannot be *one* without them'.

Returning now to the question of how we should interpret the ontological priority of substances over their attributes, the inseparability of matter and the convertibility of being and unity provide reasons to interpret the ontological dependence that prevails between substances and their attributes in the following terms: substances enjoy numerical unity independently of their attributes but not conversely, i.e. substances are the only beings whose unity is not parasitic on the unity of something else. In a word, there are a number of reasons to call into question the interpretation of ontological dependence in terms of existence and to maintain, instead, that what is at issue as far as separation and ontological priority are concerned is not existence but unity.

²³ E. HALPER, *One and Many in Aristotle's Metaphysics: The Central Books*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus 1989, p. 38.

²⁴ *Topics* IV.1, 121b7-8; *Metaph.* IV.2, 1003b22-4; X.2, 1054a13; XI.3, 1061a18.

²⁵ Cf. E. HALPER, *Aristotle on the Convertibility of One and Being*, «The New Scholasticism», 59 (1985), pp. 213-227, and S. MAKIN, *Aristotle on Unity and Being*, «Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society», 34 (1988), pp. 77-103.

3. ARISTOTLE'S CRITIQUE OF THE ACADEMY²⁶

The goal of this paper is to show that in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle distinguishes between two conceptions of ontological priority that he simultaneously endorses. Here I cannot broach the question of developmentalism in Aristotle's thought in any detail, yet I would like briefly to address the question of whether Aristotle presents ontological priority differently in the *Categories* and the *Metaphysics*. I will try to examine the problem with minimal commitments; my analysis will be confined to showing (i) that there is a line of reasoning the ontological implications of which Aristotle rejects in the *Metaphysics* and (ii) that what Aristotle rejects in the *Metaphysics* he presents in the *Categories* without critique.

Mention has already been made of Mueller, according to whom Aristotle rejects the conception of ontological priority that he inherits from his teacher. He writes, 'The more important point is that the reasoning invokes a sense of substantial priority – which we might call Aristotelian – inconsistent with [...] Platonic substantial priority'.²⁷ A bit later he adds, 'In any case it is clear that in *M 2* Aristotle rejects the argument [...] by rejecting the criterion for substantial priority which it employs and substituting a contrary one'.²⁸ I will argue (in Section 4) that there is an extent to which Mueller misconstrues Aristotle's position, but I agree with Mueller that in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle takes pains to reject the Platonic conception of ontological priority. If what is rejected in the *Metaphysics* is endorsed in the *Categories*, however, this would entail (although Mueller does not point this out explicitly) that in attacking the Platonic conception of ontological priority Aristotle is also attacking the views he once held.

Now, both in his earlier and later works, there are passages where Aristotle says that we consider a thing prior to another in the sense that it is predicable in cases where the other is not. Animal is prior to fish, for example, in the

²⁶ Because this section of the paper is written with the sole intention of providing an accurate portrayal of Aristotle's views on priority, I don't broach the question of whether Aristotle misrepresents the views held by Plato and his followers (especially those by Speusippus and Xenocrates). As is well known, it has been maintained that Aristotle misunderstands these philosophers, most notably in H. F. CHERNISS, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore 1944. See also J. ANNAS, *Aristotle's Metaphysics, Books M and N*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1976; H. F. CHERNISS, *The Riddle of the Early Academy*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1945; J. N. FINDLAY, *Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines*, Humanities Press, New York 1974; and H. J. Krämer, *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles*, Carl Winter, Heidelberg 1959.

²⁷ I. MUELLER, *Aporia 12 (and 12 bis)*, in M. CRUBELLIER and A. LAKS (eds.), *Aristotle's Metaphysics Beta*, Oxford University Press, New York 2009, pp. 189-209, 203.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 204.

sense that if something is a fish, it is thereby an animal; however, if something is an animal, it is not necessarily a fish (*Cat.* 13, 15a4-7). Because the priority in question is referred to as *proteron phusei*, many commentators consider priority in predication to be another formulation of what I have been calling priority in separation.²⁹ John Cleary states that ‘the [two] criteria are not identical though they yield very similar results’.³⁰ Thus, the question may be raised as to whether Aristotle uses the phrase *proteron phusei* similarly in the *Categories* and the *Metaphysics*.

In *Metaphysics* v.11, Aristotle ascribes to Plato the idea that a thing is ontologically prior to another insofar as it can be without the other but not conversely (1019a1-4). If ontological priority is asymmetric separation, however, it is telling that Aristotle criticizes the Academy philosophers for believing universals (the Ideas) to be separate.³¹ Aristotle tells us in XII.1, 1069a26-8 that these philosophers are mistaken in believing that universals are substances because they approach the matter from a logical perspective (*dia to logikōs zētein*).³² Aristotle writes, ‘For the Idea is, as its supporters say, particular and separate’ (VII.15, 1040a8-9). Later, he adds, ‘For they make the Ideas both (i) universal and (ii) separate and particular’ (XIII.9, 1086a32-4). These passages show us once again that the concepts of separation and unity are closely associated and that they are presented as criteria for substantiality. Yet they also show that, according to Aristotle, Plato and/or some of his followers were confused as to whether the Ideas are separate: if they are particular, they are separate; if they are universal, they are not separate. But they cannot both be

²⁹ See, for example, Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, R. SPIAZZI (ed.), Marietti, Turin 1950, J. P. Rowan (tr.), Dumb Ox Books, Notre Dame 1995, *In* v, lect. 13, n. 950; W. D. ROSS, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, cit., vol. 1, p. 317; and P. CORKUM, *Aristotle on Ontological Dependence*, cit., p. 75.

³⁰ J. J. CLEARY, *Aristotle on the Many Senses of Priority*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, Illinois 1988, p. 111, note 49.

³¹ Throughout the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle explains and attacks several views held in the Academy. We can ascertain that several passages are directly aimed at specific philosophers, but for the most part Aristotle’s target is less clear. J. Annas writes that ‘when Aristotle discusses various ideas in *M–N* he seldom mentions names’ (*Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, cit., p. 41), and that ‘the only theories we can identify with any confidence are those of Plato’s two successors’ (*ibidem*, p. 73). The philosophers Annas is referring to are Speusippus and Xenocrates, both of whom are generally believed to be among Aristotle’s main targets, especially in the last two books of the *Metaphysics*. In the passages I shall focus on, Aristotle talks about a number of unnamed philosophers, yet there is insufficient textual evidence to tell which members of the Academy are being alluded to. For further discussion of these topics, see Cherniss, *Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato and the Academy*, cit.

³² In the *Categories* universals are classified as ‘secondary’ substances, but they are substances nonetheless.

universal and separate, that is, as long as one understands separation in the way that Aristotle understands it.³³

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argues that if we take the line of reasoning followed by these philosophers to its logical conclusions, we must grant that being and unity are ontologically prior to everything else because if they are destroyed everything else is destroyed; in other words, there is nothing more predicable than being and unity because everything 'is' and is 'one'. As Aristotle puts it:

[B]ut it might be thought that the science we seek should treat rather of universals; for every formula and every science is of universals and not of particulars, so that as far as this goes it would deal with the highest classes. These would be being and unity; for these might most of all be supposed to contain all things that are, and to be most like principles because they are first by nature (*proteron tē phusei*); for if they perish all other things are destroyed with them; for all things 'are' and are 'one'. (*Metaph.* XI.1, 1059b24-31)

These lines contain an *argumentum ad absurdum*, for Aristotle elsewhere writes, 'Evidently neither unity nor being can be the substance of things [...] since in general nothing that is common is substance' (VII.16, 1040b18-23). Because universals are not substances (this conclusion is reached as a result of the many arguments Aristotle presents in *Metaphysics* VII.13-16), and because the principles of being that first philosophy seeks *are* substances, the line of reasoning according to which universals such as being and unity are ontologically prior to everything else must itself be rejected.

What remains to be discussed is whether the Aristotle of the *Categories* endorses a Platonic conception of ontological priority. To ask this somewhat differently: would the Aristotle of the *Categories* reject the line of reasoning according to which being and unity are prior to everything else? Granting the authenticity of the *Categories* in general and the *Post-Predicamenta* in particular, one cannot but acknowledge that what the later Aristotle would identify as a logical priority is identified in *Cat.* 12 and 13 as natural priority.³⁴ Here, asymmetric predicability turns out indeed to determine whether something is naturally prior to another.³⁵ On the other hand, this is the same line of reasoning the conclusion of which is that there is nothing more predicable than being and unity. In the *Metaphysics*, being and unity are logically but not onto-

³³ See M. TWEEDALE, *Aristotle's Universals*, «Australasian Journal of Philosophy», 65 (1987), pp. 412-423.

³⁴ The notion of causality helps decide cases that cannot be decided otherwise (*Cat.* 12, 14b11-13), but the true yardstick for establishing priority is ontological dependency relations.

³⁵ As has been mentioned in the previous note, Aristotle even proposes a tiebreaker criterion for predicates that reciprocate, saying that we must *then* consider whether one is the cause of the other (*ibidem*).

logically prior to everything else, in which case the Aristotle of the *Categories* seems to employ the phrase *proteron phusei* differently from the Aristotle of the *Metaphysics*. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss whether Aristotle had an early period where he interpreted ontological priority in Platonic terms, but it can be argued minimally that there is sufficient evidence to call into question accounts of Aristotle's notion of ontological priority that conflate what Aristotle says in the *Categories* and in the *Metaphysics*.

To sum up the last two sections of the paper, the inseparability of matter and the convertibility of being and unity provide reasons to interpret ontological priority in terms of unity. Once again, Aristotle states that we can substitute the terms 'being' and 'unity' *salva veritate*, in which case when Aristotle claims that ontologically prior things are 'those which can *be* without other things, while others cannot *be* without them', he is inevitably also saying that ontologically prior things are 'those which can be *one* without other things, while others cannot be *one* without them'. Throughout the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle also attacks the Platonic conception of priority, saying that the Academy philosophers make the Ideas both universal and separate, where in fact these can never go together. However, the Aristotle of the *Categories* presents the Platonic conception of priority without critique, thus giving us reason to consider the possibility that Aristotle's meaning of *proteron phusei* in the *Categories* may differ from that of the *Metaphysics*.

4. PRIORITY IN PERFECTION

In the passages examined so far, ontological priority has been explained as ontological dependence, notwithstanding the fact that the latter has been given different interpretations. Thus far, I argued (i) that the inseparability of matter and the convertibility of being and unity provide reasons to interpret ontological dependence in terms unity and (ii) that we should consider the possibility that in attacking the Academic conception of ontological dependence, the later Aristotle may also be attacking the views that he once held. What I would like to show now, however, is that there are various passages in the *Metaphysics* and elsewhere that explain ontological priority not in terms of ontological dependence (no matter how we interpret ontological dependence) but in an entirely different way. In these passages, Aristotle argues (or sometimes implicitly assumes) that a thing is ontologically prior to another not because the former is prior to the latter in respect of separation but because the former is the perfection and completion of the latter. We can adopt the terminology introduced by Aquinas, who calls this type of priority 'priority in perfection'.³⁶

³⁶ Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, cit., *In IX*, lect. 8, n. 1856.

Priority in perfection has not been given sufficient attention in the literature, and this is partly because commentators have not sufficiently disentangled priority in perfection from priority in separation. In what follows, therefore, my goal is to disentangle the two priorities; I will be arguing that priority in perfection (teleological priority) is different from priority in separation (asymmetric ontological dependence), even though both priorities are commonly referred to by the same phrases (*proteron tē ousia*, *proteron tē phusei*, and so on) throughout the *Metaphysics*.

What exactly is priority in perfection? In the *Generation of Animals* Aristotle writes, “The word “prior” is used in more senses than one, for there is a difference between (i) the end or final cause and (ii) that which exists for the sake of it; the latter is prior in the order of development, the former is prior in substance’ (II.6, 742a19-22). Here, Aristotle explains ‘priority in substance’ (*proteron tē ousia*) not in terms of ontological dependence, as we have now come to expect, but rather by appealing to teleology. Take another example. Matter can be understood as suitability for some form, i.e. a suitability that is yet to be realized. Matter is incomplete in the sense that it lacks something, the possession of which would bring it to its end state (*telos*) and thereby make it a complete (*enteles*) thing. It is the incompleteness of matter, therefore, that Aristotle has in mind when he states that a house is ontologically prior to the bricks and stones from which it is built. As he puts it:

Now the order of development and the order of substance are always the inverse of each other. For that which is posterior in the order of development is antecedent in the order of nature, and that is genetically last which in nature is first. That this is so is manifest by induction; for a house does not exist for the sake of bricks and stones, but these materials for the sake of the house. (*PA* II.1, 646a24-8)

The priority discussed here is priority in perfection: Aristotle is not saying that the house is ontologically prior (*proteron tēn phusin*) to the bricks and stones because the house can be without the bricks and stones but not conversely; his point is that the bricks and stones are posterior because the form of the house is present in them only potentially and not actually. In this and similar passages, whether or not something has the form actually turns out to be the criterion for ontological priority: a thing is ‘prior in form and in substance’ (*tō eidei kai tē ousia*) to another, Aristotle writes, insofar as ‘the one already has its form, and the other has not’ (*Metaph.* IX.8, 1050a5-7).

Aristotle’s works provide several other examples to clarify the priority in question. Aristotle’s point above was that matter is incomplete because it has the form only potentially. We can also imagine cases where the suitability of matter is partially realized. A half-built house, for example, is neither a *terminus a quo* nor a *terminus ad quem*, and the same can be said of Aristotle’s example of the man and the boy (1050a5); the boy has the form of the human being

only in part, which makes him less complete than the man, who has the form in full. This entails that the man is ontologically prior to the boy because what is fully actual is ontologically prior to what is actual only in part.

In *Metaphysics* XIII.2, Aristotle gives another example of priority in perfection, this time from the category of quantity. He says, namely, that in the realm of mathematics too ‘the incomplete spatial magnitude is in the order of generation prior, but in the order of substance posterior’ (1077a18-20). A few lines later, he adds that spatial magnitudes that are ‘*more complete and more whole*’ are ontologically prior to those that are less complete (1077a28). Once again, the context here is a discussion of whether Plato and his followers are right in saying that planes are ontologically prior to bodies and lines to planes, and Aristotle’s point is that they are wrong, that in fact lines are ontologically posterior to planes and planes to bodies. As he puts it:

For the dimension first generated is length, then comes breadth, lastly depth, and the process is complete. If, then, that which is posterior in the order of generation is prior in the order of substance, body will be prior to the plane and the line. (1077a24-8)

Lines, planes, and bodies are magnitudes distinguished by the number of dimensions they are extended in. Lines are extended in one dimension, planes in two, and bodies in three. Aristotle argues that if the Academy philosophers are correct to say that bodies are generated from planes and planes from lines, it would follow that what is last generated are bodies, which in turn would entail that whatever comes earlier is incomplete. In the *De caelo* he writes, ‘[B]ody alone among magnitudes can be complete. For it alone is determined by [all] three dimensions’ (I.1, 268a22-4). Similarly, in the *Metaphysics* he says, ‘Body is a sort of substance; for it already has in a sense completeness’ (XIII.2, 1077a31-2).³⁷ It is the completeness of bodies, in other words, that allows us to conclude that they are ontologically prior to that from which they are generated.

The teleological and therefore ontological priority of bodies to lines and planes is discussed in the context of a confrontation with a number of unnamed Academy philosophers. According to the mathematical ontology Aristotle himself endorses in *Metaphysics* XIII-XIV, lines, planes, and geometrical bodies are treated as abstractions, i.e. subtractions (*aphaireseis*), from substances. His argument above, however, is that even if these philosophers were right in saying that bodies are ‘generated’ from planes and planes from lines, they would thereby have to concede that bodies alone are complete. Because a thing is ontologically prior to another if the former is the perfection and completion of the latter, bodies must be conceived as prior to lines and planes even on Platonic assumptions.

³⁷ See also P. STUDEMANN, *The Body Problem in Aristotle*, «Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science», 35 (2002), pp. 211-234.

As has been discussed before, Mueller comments on this passage by claiming that this ‘reasoning invokes a sense of substantial priority – which we might call Aristotelian – inconsistent with [...] Platonic substantial priority’ and that Aristotle rejects Plato’s argument ‘by rejecting the criterion for substantial priority which it employs and substituting a contrary one’.³⁸ In the next section I will show that, *pace* Mueller, we have textual evidence of Aristotle endorsing both conceptions of ontological priority. But there is another reason why Mueller’s proposal is misguided; it is not the case that lines and planes are prior in separation to bodies, while the latter are prior in perfection to the former. We must rather distinguish between sensible bodies and geometrical bodies, the former of which belongs to the category of substance, while the latter belongs to the category of quantity. Substances are by definition prior in separation to attributes such as quantity, quality, and so on. What Mueller’s analysis obscures is that bodies are *not* generated from lines and planes; lines and planes are generated from sensible bodies by subtraction (abstraction). Geometrical bodies most closely resemble substances in that they are the first abstraction from sensible bodies. Aristotle concludes:

It has, then, been sufficiently pointed out that the objects of mathematics are not substances in a higher sense than [sensible] bodies are, and that they are not prior to sensibles in being, but only in formula (*tō logō monon*), and that they cannot in any way exist separately. (*Metaph.* XIII.2, 1077b12-14)

According to Mueller, we should treat *Metaphysics* XIII.2 as containing Aristotle’s rejection of the Platonic notion of ontological dependence and his attempt to replace it with his own notion of teleological priority, yet Aristotle’s endorsement of teleological priority need not entail a rejection of the ontological significance of dependency relations. What Aristotle rejects is not ontological dependence but what he believes to be a misinterpretation of the concept. As we have seen, Aristotle frequently uses the notion of ontological dependence to explain the ontological priority that prevails between a substance and its attributes. The unnamed Academy philosophers draw the wrong conclusion from the concept of ontological dependence because they (and perhaps also the earlier Aristotle) do not sufficiently distinguish between logical and ontological priority.

In sum, Aristotle provides several examples showing that what is more complete is ontologically prior to what is less complete: the house is prior to bricks and stones, the man is prior to the boy, and bodies are prior to lines and planes. Commentators often treat Aristotle’s discussion of the priority of actuality over potentiality in *Metaphysics* IX.8 as an anomaly, i.e. as the one place where he does not explain ontological priority in terms of ontologi-

³⁸ I. MUELLER, *Aporia 12*, cit., pp. 203-204.

cal dependence. However, this is not the case: phrases such as *proteron tē ou-sia* and *proteron tē phusei* are commonly used to mean teleological priority. In other words, Aristotle uses these phrases *both* to mean priority in separation and priority in perfection. The main goal of this paper is to show that these two priorities are distinct. This I tried to do by examining the passages where priority in separation is conceptually different from priority in separation. In the next section, I will show, moreover, that Aristotle *explicitly* distinguishes between these two formulations of priority. This leaves open the question whether the priorities under discussion are the only two conceptions of ontological priority and the question whether the two conceptions of priority yield identical results, after all. These are topics for future research, but such questions cannot be intelligently formulated unless one first acknowledges that the priorities at issue are conceptually distinguishable and that Aristotle himself distinguishes between them.

A distinction between the two formulations of ontological priority is made in several medieval commentaries on Aristotle. Mention has already been made of Aquinas who calls teleological priority ‘priority in perfection’³⁹ and thereby distinguishes it from what I have been calling priority in separation. Duns Scotus, too, interprets Aristotle in similar terms, distinguishing between two priorities that he calls priority in respect of eminence⁴⁰ and priority in respect of dependence.⁴¹ In contemporary literature, however, teleological priority has not received the attention it deserves. We need to try to understand about teleological priority without trying to incorporate it into priority with respect to ontological dependence, and we need to understand furthermore that Aristotle’s discussion of the priority of actuality over potentiality in *Metaphysics* IX.8 is not an anomaly. One could argue *then* that the priorities yield identical results, or even that the distinction between the priorities can be traced back to something more basic, but none of this would obliterate the distinction, which as we shall see is a distinction Aristotle himself makes in the *Physics*.

5. ONTOLOGICAL PRIORITY IN *PHYSICS* VIII

Mention has been made of commentators who maintain that teleological priority (priority in perfection) itself needs to be understood in terms of ontological dependence,⁴² and of others according to whom the priorities in ques-

³⁹ Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, cit., In IX, lect. 8, n. 1856.

⁴⁰ J.D. SCOTUS, *The De primo principio of John Duns Scotus: A Revised Text and a Translation*, E. Roche (ed. & tr.), The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure 1949, 1.7.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 1.8.

⁴² C. WITT, *The Priority of Actuality in Aristotle*, in T. SCALTSAS, D. CHARLES, and M. L. GILL (eds.), *Unity, Identity, and Explanation in Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, Oxford University

tion, while distinct, are not both endorsed (or simultaneously endorsed) by Aristotle.⁴³ Neither of these approaches is satisfactory. In previous sections of this paper, I tried to disentangle the two conceptions of priority from each other and show that they are distinct. Furthermore, in the *Physics* Aristotle himself distinguishes between the two priorities, specifically in a passage where he tries to prove that locomotion is prior to other types of motion in both ways. This gives us reason to reject any interpretation that conflates the two senses of ontological priority as well as any interpretation according to which Aristotle endorses only one of these priorities. If so, however, we are left with the difficulty of having to explain why Aristotle uses the same terms to refer to both priorities. Ross seems to be the only commentator to have made an attempt to address the difficulty, and his solution is that there are two senses of ontological priority because there are two senses of substance. First, I will show that in *Physics* VIII Aristotle distinguishes between the two conceptions of ontological priority, and then in the next section I will briefly mention Ross' proposal.

Let us first take the idea that by ontological priority Aristotle only means priority in perfection. Again, Mueller ascribes priority in separation to Plato and teleological priority to Aristotle. His point is that Aristotle rejects the former, that is, the conception of priority he inherits from his teacher, and replaces it with the latter (i.e. teleological priority). On the other end of the spectrum are Witt and Makin, both of whom maintain that ontological priority must always be understood as ontological dependence. They do not deny the passages where Aristotle explains ontological priority by appealing to teleology, but they argue that these passages, too, can be construed in terms of ontological dependence. Witt claims, for example, that it is with respect to ontological dependence that the adult human being is prior to the child. Conceding the *prima facie* implausibility of her position, Witt writes that 'it is at first sight implausible to interpret' certain passages as referring to ontological dependence and acknowledges that these passages explain priority not in terms of ontological dependence 'but rather in terms of a teleological relation' between the things in question.⁴⁴ She argues nevertheless that 'if an entity, state, capacity, or what have you is directed towards an end, then the existence of that entity or what have you is dependent upon the existence of the

Press, New York 1994, pp. 215-228; S. MAKIN, *What Does Aristotle Mean by Priority in Substance?*, «Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy», 23 (2003), pp. 209-238. See also S. MAKIN, *Aristotle: Metaphysics Book Θ*, Oxford University Press, New York 2006, pp. 192-196, and M. PERAMATZIS, *Priority in Aristotle's Metaphysics*, cit., p. 278ff.

⁴³ I. MUELLER, *Aporia 12*, cit.

⁴⁴ C. Witt, *The Priority of Actuality in Aristotle*, cit., p. 218.

end'.⁴⁵ Witt concludes, therefore, that despite appearances to the contrary, the priority of actuality over potentiality in IX.8, 1050a4ff. is simply priority in separation.

Both approaches are problematic, and for the same reason. What escapes notice is that Aristotle himself distinguishes between the two conceptions of priority.⁴⁶ In the *Physics* he writes, 'A thing is said to be prior to others if it can be without the others but not vice versa, and there is also priority in time and priority in substance' (VIII.7, 260b17-9).⁴⁷ When it comes to naming the different senses of priority, Aristotle is hardly consistent in his terminology, but his meaning is clear. The context here is a discussion of the ways in which locomotion is prior to other motions, and Aristotle's point is that when we are trying to determine which motion is prior, we must consider the different ways in which a thing is said to be prior to another. In the passage under discussion, Aristotle mentions three senses of priority: (i) priority in separation, (ii) priority in time, and (iii) priority in substance. He explains the last priority as follows:

In general, that which is becoming appears as something imperfect (*ateles*) and proceeding to a principle; and so what is posterior in the order of becoming is prior in the order of nature. Now all things that go through the process of becoming acquire locomotion last. [...] Therefore, if the degree in which things possess locomotion corresponds to the degree in which they have realized their natural development, then this motion must be prior to all others in respect of substance. (*Phys.* VIII.7, 261a13-20)

The terminology Aristotle adopts here is unmistakable; what he calls 'priority in nature' (*proteron tē phusei*) or 'priority in substance' (*proteron kat' ousian*) is none other than teleological priority. It is clear from this passage that Aristotle himself distinguishes between teleological priority and priority in separation; his point is that locomotion is prior to other motions on both counts: the latter kinds of motion are posterior both in the sense that they are incomplete (*ateles*) and in the sense that they depend on locomotion. Therefore, Aristotle simultaneously endorses both conceptions of priority, a corollary of which is that it is misguided to try to reduce one priority to the other, or to say that Aristotle accepts one but rejects the other.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 223.

⁴⁶ C. Y. PANAYIDES, *Aristotle on the Priority of Actuality in Substance*, «Ancient Philosophy», 19 (1999), pp. 327-344, makes a similar point. ⁴⁷ Translation mine.

⁴⁸ It has been pointed out to me by Errol Katayama that even if Aristotle endorses both conceptions of priority, this need not entail that Aristotle simultaneously considers both of them to be *ontological* priority. One could entertain the possibility, for example, that Aristotle changed his mind on which of these priorities counts as ontological priority. But this seems to me hardly possible because even in the same text (e.g. in *Metaph.* XIII.2), the

6. ROSS' PROPOSAL

Where does this leave us? If the two priorities are distinct, we must still ask why Aristotle uses the same terms to refer to both. So far as I can tell, Ross is the only commentator to have made an attempt to address the difficulty,⁴⁹ and he provides a simple yet elegant solution.⁵⁰ Ross argues that there are two senses of priority in substance because there are two senses of substance. It is important to discuss Ross' proposal, even though it faces problems of its own, because he offers an interpretation of the text that forces us to deny neither that priority in separation and priority in perfection are distinct nor that Aristotle simultaneously endorses both conceptions of priority. In his commentary on the *Metaphysics*, Ross writes the following:

An ambiguity is to be noticed in the meaning of τῆ οὐσίᾳ πρότερον. [...] The two senses of κατ' οὐσίαν (or φύσει) πρότερον answer to two of the meanings of οὐσία, which are so often distinguished by Aristotle. The first sense answers to that sense of οὐσία in which it means form, or to the τόδε τι considered as a fully formed or developed thing; the second to that in which it means τὸ ὑποκείμενον or the τόδε τι considered as something capable of separate existence.⁵¹

According to Ross, the priorities in question can be traced back to the two senses of substance. He identifies the two senses of substance as (i) the form and (ii) the ultimate subject (*to hypokeimenon eschaton*). By the latter, he argues, Aristotle 'means not prime matter but the individual which comprises both matter and form'.⁵² In other words, the two senses of substance are (i) the form taken by itself and (ii) the matter–form composite. Furthermore, these two senses correspond to the two senses of 'this' (*tode ti*) because this term also means either the form alone or the form taken with matter – in other words, 'the τόδε τι considered as a fully formed or developed thing' or 'the τόδε τι considered as something capable of separate existence'. The significance of these distinctions is that there is a kind of priority that Ross associates with the form, which is *ipso facto* the end of the thing,⁵³ and a kind of priority that he associates with the composite, which alone is separate.

phrase *proteron tē ousia* is used both to mean priority in separation (1077b2) and priority in perfection (1077a19).

⁴⁹ C. Y. Panayides, *Aristotle on the Priority of Actuality in Substance*, cit., agrees that there are two priorities at issue, but he does not pursue the problem. See also M. CAMERON, *Is Ground Said-in-Many-Ways?*, «Studia Philosophica Estonica», 7 (2014), pp. 29-55.

⁵⁰ It should be borne in mind that the few lines Ross devotes to the problem are only made *en passant*.

⁵¹ W. D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, cit., vol. 2, p. 414.

⁵² *Ibidem*, vol. 1, p. 310.

⁵³ It is worth noting that Ross' proposal is in line with *Metaph.* IX.8, 1050a5, where Aristotle refers to teleological priority as priority 'in form' (*tō eidei*).

Ross' interpretation is promising, for he not only maintains that the priorities under discussion are distinct but also tries to show *why* they are distinct, but it does face several difficulties. First, it should give us pause that Aristotle does not always refer to the priority in question as priority in substance. Instead, he equally often calls it priority in nature and sometimes even calls it priority in being. This does not show that Ross is wrong, but it takes away from the original appeal of the idea that there are two senses of priority in substance because there are two senses of substance. Second, Ross' proposal suffers from the lack of textual support; there is no passage in Aristotle's work that associates the two senses of ontological priority with the two senses of substance. Finally, and most importantly, Ross faces the difficulty of having to explain the omission of teleological priority in *Metaphysics* v.11, i.e. the difficulty to having to explain why there is no mention of teleological priority throughout Aristotle's lengthy treatment of the many senses of priority in v.11 – not even in the passage concerning priority in substance. After all, if teleological priority is indeed one of the two senses of priority in substance, it is difficult to account for why there is no mention of the former when Aristotle is providing an exposition of the latter.

Once again, if one distinguishes between priority in separation and priority in perfection, one faces the question of why Aristotle uses the same terms to refer to both. Ross provides a possible answer, but even if he is right, his interpretation must be worked out more precisely to determine how and why the two priorities 'correspond' to the two senses of substance. Ross' proposal provides a vantage point from which to approach Aristotle's account of ontological priority without conflating what are in fact two distinct conceptions of priority, and it is a challenge for future research to either address the difficulties and ambiguities inherent in Ross' interpretation or come up with an alternative solution to the problem.

7. CONCLUSION

The main goal of this paper has been to show that Aristotle simultaneously endorses two conceptions of ontological priority: priority in separation and priority in perfection. Concerning the former, I claimed that the inseparability of matter and the convertibility of being and unity provide grounds for interpreting separation (and therefore ontological dependence) in terms of unity. I argued next that we have sufficient reason to consider the possibility that Aristotle's meaning of *proteron phusei* in the *Categories* may differ from that of the *Metaphysics*. All of this, however, was meant to set the stage for the discussion of passages that explain ontological priority not in terms of ontological dependence (no matter how we interpret ontological dependence) but in an entirely different way, i.e. passages where Aristotle's concern is not

ontological dependence but rather the extent to which a thing has attained its *telos*. The many examples Aristotle gives in this context show that Aristotle's discussion of the priority of actuality over potentiality in *Metaphysics* IX.8 is not an anomaly, that phrases such as *proteron tē ousia* and *proteron tē phusei* are commonly used to mean teleological priority. What we may conclude from this is that there are at least two distinct conceptions of ontological priority in the works of Aristotle, which is a conclusion further reinforced by the passage at *Physics* VIII.7, 260b17ff. where Aristotle explicitly distinguishes between priority in separation and priority in perfection, in an attempt to prove that locomotion is prior to other types of motion in both ways. It is important, therefore, that Ross provides an interpretation of the text that forces us to deny neither that priority in separation and priority in perfection are distinct nor that they are simultaneously endorsed by Aristotle, so future research needs to either address the difficulties and ambiguities inherent in Ross' analysis or come up with an alternative solution to the problem by proposing another way in which the distinction between the two priorities can be traced back to something more basic.

ABSTRACT · There are several passages in the *Metaphysics* where Aristotle explains ontological priority in terms of ontological dependence, but there are others where he seems to adopt a teleological conception of ontological priority. It is sometimes maintained that the latter priority too must be construed in terms of the former, or that the priorities in question are not both endorsed (or simultaneously endorsed) by Aristotle. The goal of this paper is to show otherwise; I argue that what is at issue are two distinct priorities that Aristotle simultaneously endorses.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle, Ontological Priority, Ontological Dependence, Separation, Substance.