

1 Introduction

1.1 What Is Ontological Priority?

Over the last three decades, investigations into ontological dependence and priority have become a major concern in contemporary metaphysics. Many see Aristotle as the originator of these discussions and, as a consequence, there is considerable interest in his own account of ontological dependence. For instance, Fabrice Correia writes:

The use of notions of dependence goes back as far as Aristotle's fourfold classification of beings, where the distinction between (primary and secondary) substances and non-substances is indeed characterized by means of a concept of ontological (in)dependence (Correia, 2008: 1013).¹

This recent interest in Aristotle is best seen as part of a general renaissance of Aristotelian metaphysics. Since the 1990s, Aristotelian metaphysics – including core Aristotelian ideas such as essentialism and hylomorphism – have become popular again.²

In light of the renewed interest in Aristotelian metaphysics, it will be worthwhile – both historically and systematically – to return to Aristotle himself and to see how he himself conceived of ontological priority (what he calls ‘priority in substance’ (*proteron kat' ousian*) or ‘priority in nature’ (*proteron tēi phusei*)),³ which is to be understood as a form of asymmetric ontological dependence. In this Element, I intend to show that my analysis is of value not only as a historical reconstruction of Aristotle but also to philosophers who are currently working on these issues, given that Aristotle provides keen insights into and discussions of ontological dependence.

In order to understand what ontological dependence is and where it applies, it is helpful to consider the ways in which metaphysicians conceive the structure of reality. Some metaphysicians take reality to have a *flat structure*: everything has the same ontological status (= all entities are equally fundamental) and belongs to the same category (= class of being). Others claim that everything has the same ontological status but that there are different categories (e.g. objects, properties, events, etc.). We might call this take on reality a *sorted structure*. Others still claim that the things that exist can have a different

¹ Cf. Fine (1995: 270).

² Kit Fine's work has contributed most to this revival of Aristotelian metaphysics. See Fine, 1994a; 1994b; 1995; 2001. Strawson's *Individuals* (1959) can be seen as the first break from the then widely popular Quinean metaphysics.

³ In the following, I will use the terms ‘ontological priority’, ‘priority in nature’, and ‘priority in substance’ interchangeably.

ontological status in addition to belonging to different categories (= *ordered structure*).⁴

According to Aristotelian metaphysics, reality is an ordered structure. It is the task of the metaphysician to study both what exists and what is fundamental.⁵ For metaphysicians who take the world to have an ordered structure, understanding dependencies is a central task.

An entity can depend upon another entity in various ways. One of the central forms of dependence is *ontological dependence*. To appreciate this form of dependence, consider the following examples: smiles ontologically depend upon mouths, events ontologically depend upon their participants, non-empty sets upon their members, tropes upon their bearers, wholes upon their parts, organisms upon their biological origins, boundaries upon the corresponding extended objects, and holes upon their hosts.⁶ This notion is closely connected to other core notions in philosophical discourse such as fundamentality, substancehood, and grounding. Questions of ontological dependence are central to all areas of philosophy: in the philosophy of mind, researchers investigate how the mind ontologically depends upon the brain. In meta-ethics, one argues about the nature of the ontological dependence between evaluative and descriptive properties. In the philosophy of religion, one investigates how the world ontologically depends upon a divine being.

There are different ways to cash out ontological dependence. Some accounts focus on *existence* and say that a being depends ontologically upon another being if its *existence* depends upon the *existence* of the latter. Other accounts focus on *identity* and say that a being ontologically depends upon another being if its *identity* depends upon this other being. Whereas philosophers of the first group bring in modal notions, such as necessity and possibility, to characterise ontological dependence, philosophers of the latter group introduce the notion of *essence* (Fine, 1995: 269–70; Correia, 2008: 1014).

It is important to distinguish between causal and ontological dependence. For instance, an event (such as the breaking of a window) can causally depend upon another event (Paul's throwing a ball). But one can also ask what the breaking of the window consists in (the destruction of some molecular structures) and what needs to be there for it to take place (for instance, a window). Or one can distinguish the cause of Judy's happiness (her mother giving her a compliment)

⁴ For this overview, see Schaffer (2009: 347–256).

⁵ It is precisely this Aristotelian approach to metaphysics that has become popular again. See Schaffer (2009: 347) on this renaissance.

⁶ The list can be extended. See Koslicki (2013: 1), Koslicki (2012: 188–9), and Correia (2008: 1013).

from the question of what Judy's happiness consists in (perhaps some neurons firing) and from what is required for the existence of Judy's happiness (for instance, Judy). The key point is that there can be an existential dependence relation or identity dependence between two things without there also being a causal relation, and vice versa.

In contrast with many flat-ontologists of his time (such as many Presocratics) and in agreement with Plato, Aristotle thinks that reality has an ordered structure. Consequently, when doing metaphysics, Aristotle is interested in what exists, in how to classify entities, and in the dependencies among the different categories. He is interested in the question of what things exist and he criticises his predecessors' and contemporaries' theories of what exists. (Famously, he argues with the Platonists over the question of whether Forms exist.) But Aristotle goes beyond giving a mere list of existents. He also believes that they belong to different ontological kinds and aims to produce a systematic classification of these. For instance, in the *Categories* Aristotle introduces a fourfold division of ontological classes: (1) primary substances (property-bearing individuals; e.g. Socrates); (2) secondary substances (e.g. the universal human being); (3) accidental particulars (e.g. the individual red); (4) accidental universals (e.g. the universal red). Then, in the *Metaphysics*, he further pursues this systematisation and introduces various classifications within the realm of substances by distinguishing, for instance, between perishable and non-perishable substances.

Finally, Aristotle is interested not only in classifying entities but also in determining ontological dependencies among these entities. In some cases, the dependencies are symmetrical. He calls such a symmetrical dependence 'simultaneity in nature'. In other cases, the dependencies are asymmetrical. He calls such an asymmetrical dependence 'priority in nature'. Importantly, he identifies this final task – namely to establish dependencies and to identify the fundamental items of reality – as the core subject of metaphysics. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle explicitly says that he is seeking the most fundamental beings in this hierarchy, the first principles (*archai*; *Metaph.* IV 1, 1003a22–1003a32; XII 1, 1069a29ff). He does not make any such programmatic statements in the *Categories*, but his investigation into the nature of substancehood and priority in the *Categories* suggests that he might have been guided by similar interests in the nature of fundamental beings. Understanding his account of ontological dependencies elucidates his view on the hierarchy of reality. For this reason, an analysis of the notions of priority and simultaneity in nature is crucial for understanding Aristotle's metaphysical system in both the *Categories* and the *Metaphysics*.

The main objective of this Element is to reconstruct Aristotle's view on the nature of ontological priority in the *Categories*.⁷ I integrate Aristotle's discussions of simultaneity in nature into an analysis of ontological priority in order to arrive at a more precise account of priority in nature.⁸ I intend to show that the discussions of ontological priority and ontological simultaneity illuminate one another.

Aristotle discusses priority and simultaneity in nature in three passages in the *Categories*, in chapters 7, 12, and 13. In view of the importance of the discussions of priority and simultaneity in nature⁹ for understanding Aristotle's views on the structure of reality both in the *Categories* and in the *Metaphysics*, it is striking that a discussion of the central passages, especially of *Categories* 7, has not yet been offered – Ackrill, for instance, dedicates just one page to the interpretation of all the relevant passages (*Cat.* 7, 12, and 13) taken together. Other interpreters have mainly focused on Aristotle's discussions of the primacy of primary substances in *Categories* 5, 2b1–6c.¹⁰ This Element offers the first systematic analysis of Aristotle's account of ontological dependence in these passages and shows that a thorough investigation of these passages not only leads to a better understanding of Aristotle's ontology in the *Categories* but also provides a better understanding of his metaphysical investigations in the *Metaphysics*.¹¹

An analysis of priority and simultaneity in nature yields important insights into his views about the structure of reality in the *Categories*. But it is also of particular interest for understanding the relationship between the *Categories* and the *Metaphysics*, because Aristotle discusses priority in both works. For instance, the account of ontological priority that he provides in the *Categories* is in many respects more elaborate and explicit than his discussions of this topic in the *Metaphysics*. As such, it can help us to illuminate Aristotle's often cryptic remarks about ontological priority in the *Metaphysics*. For in the *Metaphysics*

⁷ For the sake of clarity, it is important to mention that Aristotle distinguishes and discusses various senses of priority: priority in time, priority in definition, priority in knowledge, etc. This study only concentrates on what he calls 'priority in nature', 'priority in substance', and 'priority in substance and nature'.

⁸ Only John Cleary (1988: 25–32) offers a brief discussion of simultaneity in nature and its relation to priority in nature.

⁹ In my view, Aristotle takes up the notion 'priority in nature' from the Platonists and later renames it 'priority in substance'. See section 1.4.

¹⁰ Only Paula Gottlieb (1993) dedicates a more detailed investigation to a part of *Categories* 7, investigating in detail Aristotle's account of perception and its relationship to his theory of relatives.

¹¹ I will only discuss passages in which he explicitly speaks about ontological priority. I will not deal with passages in which he discusses separation (*chōrismos*) or the explanatory priority of substantial forms.

he is more interested in putting his accounts of ontological priority to use than in discussing them as he does in the *Categories*.

I will use modern notions and logical formulations wherever I find that they are suitable to clarify Aristotle's thought. I will connect Aristotle to recent debates where I find this connection helpful for better understanding both Aristotle and the present-day debates. In contrast to some Neo-Aristotelian studies on ontological priority, I do not argue that Aristotle has a compelling, univocal account of ontological priority (Peramatzis (2011)). This study is much more critical in this regard. I will show that Aristotle has many interesting and profound ideas about ontological priority and that this concept plays a crucial role in his metaphysical system, but the study will also demonstrate that his discussion is in some respects (at least from our present-day point of view) problematic and underdeveloped. Indeed, as it turns out, he does not even develop one unified account of ontological priority, but rather a set of different, non-reducible criteria whose exact relation remains unsatisfactorily unclear.

1.2 Aristotle's Account of Ontological Priority

At present, there is a dispute in the literature on Aristotle's account of ontological priority, in particular whether he conceives of it as asymmetric *existential* dependence or as asymmetric *essential* dependence.¹² Traditionally, Aristotle's account of ontological priority has been read existentially. On this reading, put forward by Ackrill and widely accepted (Ackrill, 1963: 83; Moravcsik, 1967: 95; Loux, 1991: 16; Fine, 1995: 270), Aristotle claims that A is prior in nature to B iff necessarily, A's existence implies B's existence, but not necessarily, B's existence implies A's existence.¹³

Taking the existential construal of ontological priority to be Aristotle's considered view, many philosophers follow Aristotle and defend accounts of ontological dependence and priority in terms of existence, often tying together an understanding of ontological dependence with the notion of substancehood. For instance, Descartes writes: 'by *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its *existence*' (Descartes, 1985: 210, as cited in Fine, 1995). Or Husserl: '*A content of the species A is founded upon a content of the species B* if an A can by its essence (i.e. legally, in virtue of its specific nature) not exist unless a B also exists.'¹⁴ In addition, philosophers who are working on this issue today

¹² This dispute echoes a debate in present metaphysics.

¹³ I use capitals in my reconstructions. These can stand for objects, properties, states of affairs, propositions, etc.

¹⁴ Husserl (Logical Investigation III, §21, p. 475). As cited in Fine (1995).

defend existential construals of ontological priority (often by adding further qualifications: by distinguishing, for instance, rigid dependence from generic dependence or by bringing in temporal operators).¹⁵

However, understanding ontological priority and dependence in terms of existence is problematic.¹⁶ (1) On the modal-existential account, it is not possible to establish an ontological priority between an object and the singleton set of this object. For the existence of Socrates necessarily implies the existence of the singleton {Socrates}, and the existence of the singleton {Socrates} necessarily implies the existence of Socrates. Yet we naturally suppose that there is such an ontological priority, namely that the singleton set ontologically depends upon its member, but not the other way round (Fine, 1995: 271).

(2) On the modal-existential account, everything depends upon necessary existents. As Kit Fine puts it: ‘A different kind of difficulty arises from the case in which the “dependee” y is a necessary existent. Consider Socrates and the number 2, for example. Given that 2 necessarily exists, it is necessarily the case that 2 exists if Socrates does. But we do not want to say, on that account, that Socrates depends upon 2, that what he is depends upon what the number 2 is; and similarly for almost any other necessary existent in place of the number 2’ (Fine, 1995: 271).

(3) In addition, the modal-existential approach cannot account for ontological priorities among necessarily existing items. This is problematic, since we suppose that there are such ontological priorities.

In view of the criticisms against the modal-existential account of ontological dependence, philosophers have suggested that it might be better to conceive of ontological priority in terms of *identity* or *essence*. For instance, Fine suggests that we replace the traditional modal-existential account and capture priority in terms of real definitions and essences. Using this approach, A is ontologically prior to B iff B mentions A in its definition but A does not mention B in its definition.¹⁷

In light of the criticisms levelled against the modal-existential account of ontological dependence and the recent suggestions to conceive of ontological priority in essentialist terms, many Aristotle scholars argue that he does not conceive of ontological dependence and priority in modal-existential terms, but rather in essentialist or explanatory terms.¹⁸ Their strategy is to reconsider

¹⁵ See Simons (1991); Moravcsik (1965: 107); Tlumak (1983). As cited in Fine (1995).

¹⁶ Tahko and Lowe (2009) highlight that the modal existential account is specifically problematic when it is used to capture substancehood.

¹⁷ Fine (1995: 288–9).

¹⁸ Note that interpreters explicitly respond to the concerns raised by Fine and others. Cf. Koslicki (2013), Peramatzis (2011), and Corkum (2016).

the understanding of ‘*einai*’ in the statements about ontological priority and to understand ‘*einai*’ as ‘what it is’ rather than as ‘to exist’ (as in the traditional modal-existential reading). According to the essentialist reading of priority in nature, which is very popular among Neo-Aristotelian interpreters,¹⁹ the ontological dependence in question is an *essential dependence* (Peramatzis, 2011: 244): B is ontologically dependent on A iff ‘A makes B what it is’, but not conversely.²⁰

As I am going to argue in this study, the essentialist reading is unfortunately unpersuasive. I am not denying that in many passages Aristotle uses an essential dependence (especially when he talks about the relation between a form-matter compound and its substantial form). Certainly essential dependence plays a central role in the discussions of the *Metaphysics*. However, I argue that Aristotle is not talking about asymmetric essential dependence when speaking about *priority in nature* and *priority in substance*.

My own reading of the passages on ontological priority in Aristotle does not fit naturally with the classification of the ontological priority readings as either existential or predicative (especially essentialist). For ontological priority is often captured by means of a conditional where ‘*einai*’ (being) shows up both in the antecedent and in the consequent, and I argue that it can be the case that ‘*einai*’ should be read existentially in the antecedent and predicatively in the consequent, and vice versa. In my view, the understanding of ‘*einai*’ is dependent upon the relata. If, for instance, the prior item is a property and the later item its instance, ‘*einai*’ should be read existentially in the antecedent and predicatively in the consequent. By contrast, if both the prior and the posterior item is an object, both occurrences of ‘*einai*’ should be read existentially. Of course, one must bear in mind that Aristotle sees a close connection between the predicative and the existential reading, since he does not accept empty terms

¹⁹ Lowe (2009) and Peramatzis (2011).

²⁰ In addition to those who think that Aristotle has a univocal account of ontological priority (either in terms of existence (Kirwan (1993); Witt (1994); Makin (2003)) or in terms of essence (Peramatzis (2011))), there are those who maintain that he uses two distinct accounts of ontological priority, namely a modal-existential account of ontological priority and a teleological account of ontological priority (Panayides (1999) and Beere (2009)). This question arises specifically when it comes to Aristotle’s discussion of ontological priority in the *Metaphysics* and is not of central concern for the *Categories*. However, I intend to show that at least one line of interpretation – namely that Aristotle has a univocal account both in the *Categories* and in the *Metaphysics* – can be seriously called into question by this study. For on my reading, Aristotle already in the *Categories* employs two non-reducibly distinct criteria. (In a second study, currently under preparation, I argue that apart from the account he puts forward in the *Categories*, he uses in some passages a second account of priority, according to which A is prior to B if A is the aim (*telos*) of a teleological process of which B is also a part (but not the end part).)

in a science, so he might even worry less than present-day readers about the precise understanding of the account of ontological priority.

1.3 Aristotle's Use of 'Einai' (Being)

Since the notion '*einai*' (being) is crucial for understanding ontological priority in Aristotle, it will be helpful to give a brief account of Aristotle's use of this notion and its various occurrences, such as the noun '*ousia*' and participle phrases such as '*to on*'.

The Greek verb '*einai*' – like its English counterpart 'being' – has a number of different uses. Charles Kahn argues convincingly that we need to make a syntactic and a semantic distinction as regards the use of the verb 'to be' in the English language (Kahn, 1966). As regards the syntactic distinction, we need to distinguish between uses of 'being' that are absolute or complete and others that are predicative or incomplete. In the latter case, the occurrence of the term 'to be' is followed by a predicate such as 'a philosopher', 'known', or 'in the black box'.²¹ Kahn argues that insofar as the syntactic distinction is concerned, we find the same division in Ancient Greek (there are uses of *einai* that are complete and others that are incomplete). However, he draws attention to the fact that when we have a complete or absolute use of '*einai*', '*einai*' is used as 'to exist', but also as 'is true', 'is the case', or 'is real' (Kahn, 1966: 250). Kahn also convincingly argues that the incomplete or predicative use of '*einai*' does not merely serve to connect subject and predicate but can also be used as durative ('being' meaning 'enduring in time') or locative ('being' meaning 'being spatially located') (Kahn, 1966: 254–62). In addition, one must single out a special use, namely the 'is' of identity, within the various predicative uses. Thus, Kahn argues, as regards the Greek verb '*einai*', issues of syntax should be treated separately from issues of semantics.

As regards the interpretation of Ancient philosophers, one might wonder whether they explicitly or at least implicitly distinguished between the various uses.

At least Aristotle, one might argue, explicitly draws the relevant distinctions. In many passages Aristotle highlights that '*being*' is said in many ways (*Metaph.* IV 2; V 7; VIII 2), and there are some passages which strongly suggest that Aristotle draws a clear-cut distinction between the syntactically complete and incomplete use of *einai*, especially *An. post.* II 1, 89b32–5, *Soph. e.* V, 167a1–2, and *Soph. e.* V, 180a36–8. In these passages, Aristotle distinguishes between 'to be something' (*einai ti*) and 'to be without qualification' (*einai*

²¹ Whereas Kahn uses the labels 'absolute' and 'predicative', Brown (1994) uses the labels 'complete' and 'incomplete'. I will follow Brown.

haplôs), which suggests that we find the dichotomy between a syntactically complete and incomplete use of *einai* at least in Aristotle.

In a detailed study of the uses of ‘*einai*’ in Ancient philosophical writing (especially that of the Presocratics, Plato, and Aristotle), Lesley Brown questions this view and thereby pushes Kahn’s results further, arguing that even within the various syntactical uses, there is no sharp distinction between the complete and incomplete uses of ‘*einai*’ in Aristotle’s philosophical writings.²²

On the basis of these observations, Brown convincingly suggests that, even though Aristotle explicitly distinguishes a ‘being *something*’ from ‘being *simpliciter*’, he presumably did not see a semantic distinction between the ‘is *something*’ from the ‘is *simpliciter*’, and even the syntactical distinction is not as unambiguous as might be hoped. In sum, (1) Aristotle would not license the move from being *F* to being *simpliciter* only for some values of *F*; (2) he takes there to be a close connection between questions of existence and what-it-is questions; (3) the distinctions in which he is interested, namely the difference between accidental and essential being, and the different senses of being according to the ten categories, ‘cut across the syntactic distinction between complete and incomplete, and do not correspond to the semantic distinction between “exists” and the copula’ (Brown, 1994: 236).

My own findings in this Element with regard to Aristotle’s account of ontological priority further support Brown’s and Kahn’s results. Most importantly, I argue that it is often difficult to decide between an existential and a predicative reading, and that in some cases deciding between them actually makes no difference. Once again, Aristotle does not seem to present his treatment of ‘*einai*’ as clearly as one might expect.

1.4 Aristotle, Plato, and the Academy on Ontological Priority

Since I believe that Aristotle takes up some of the criteria for ontological priority from his teacher Plato, it will be helpful to briefly look at the similarities and differences between Plato’s and Aristotle’s treatment of ontological priority. I have three reasons for holding the view that Aristotle inherits many of the core features of his own account of ontological priority from Plato and other Academic philosophers: (1) Aristotle himself ascribes the account of ontological priority that he himself employs to Plato in *Metaphysics* V 11; (2) in a passage from the *Eudemian Ethics* I (*EE* I 8, 1217b2–15), Aristotle again ascribes this account to Plato; and (3) we know from fragments of Xenocrates

²² Brown (1994). The same is true for Plato (Brown, 1994: 216–33). See also Ackrill (1957) and Vlastos (1981) on Plato.

(another of Plato's students) that this kind of understanding of ontological priority was common in the Academy. An analysis of these passages shows that the discussion of ontological priority is an integral part of Aristotle's intellectual engagement with and criticism of Plato and other Academic philosophers, such as Xenocrates.

1.4.1 *Metaphysics V 11 and Eudemian Ethics I 8*

What initially supports my reading is the fact that Aristotle himself openly acknowledges this inheritance. In *Metaphysics V 11* he explicitly ascribes an account of ontological priority in terms of an asymmetric ontological dependence to Plato:

Some things are called prior and posterior in this way, while others are called so in nature and substance, those which can be without other things, but not the latter without them; this division was used by Plato. (*Metaph. V 11*, 1019a4–14; transl. Ross, 1924 with mod.)

A discussion of ontological priority in the *Eudemian Ethics* and a fragment by Xenocrates confirm that Aristotle ascribes this understanding of ontological priority in terms of asymmetric ontological dependence to Plato. As we are going to see, the *Eudemian Ethics* passage not only helps us to understand better how (Aristotle's) Plato thinks about the account but also how he applied it. Xenocrates' fragment shows that the account of ontological priority in terms of an asymmetric ontological dependence is widespread in the Academy.

In the *Eudemian Ethics I 8*, Aristotle discusses Plato's view of the priority in nature of the form of the Good over all other good things.²³

Aristotle says as follows:

[...] and it [sc. the form of the Good] is first among goods; for, if the object in which things share were destroyed, with it would go the things that share in the Form, and are called what they are called through sharing in it; and that is the way that the first stands in relation to the posterior. (*EE I 8*, 1217b2–15; transl. Woods, 1982 with mod.)

In his analysis of this passage, Peramatzis (2011: 212–16) correctly highlights that the striking notion in this characterisation is the '*anhaiweisthai*'. This notion often means 'going out of existence' (or 'being taken away' or 'annihilated' or

²³ Here and in what follows, I discuss passages in which Aristotle most plausibly discusses Plato's own view, although Aristotle does not say so explicitly, but rather speaks loosely of 'they'. See Woods (1982: 66–7). Note that Aristotle very often, when referring to Plato, speaks of 'they' rather than calling Plato by name.