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Is There a Focal Meaning of ‘Being’ in Aristotle?

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At the beginning of *Metaphysics* Γ Aristotle claims that there is a science which is concerned with being qua being. ‘Being’ is said in many senses. Different beings are not said to be purely homonymous, but rather to be “related to one thing (πρός ἐν)”(1003a33-4). G.E.L. Owen translates this πρός ἐν formula as "focal meaning", and in his paraphrase, it means that all the “senses [of ‘being’] have one focus, one common element”, or “a central sense”, so that “all its senses can be explained in terms of substance and of the sense of ‘being’ that is appropriate to substance.” According to Owen, “focal meaning” is new and revolutionary in *Meta.*Γ, and introduces a “new treatment of to on and other cognate expressions”, which consists mainly in the following two thesis:

1. The “focal meaning” idea contradicts and replaces Aristotle’s earlier view in the *Organon, EE* and others that beings differ in different categories, and ‘being’ has various distinct senses.
2. The “focal meaning” idea makes it possible for Aristotle to establish a universal science of being qua being in *Meta.*Γ, which contradicts and replaces his earlier view that because beings differ, a universal science of being is impossible.  

The influence of Owen’s interpretation on Aristotelian scholarship cannot be exaggerated. The notion of the “focal meaning” has been widely adopted as a technical term and Owen’s above two theses continue to be embraced in their fundamentals.  

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2 Owen, 1960, 168-9, 189.
3 W.Leszl provides a lengthy criticism of Owen’s interpretation in *Logic and Metaphysics in Aristotle*, Padua, 1970), but his work seems largely ignored. The general sentiment towards Owen’s position is well summarised in M.T. Ferejohn’s remarks that its truth is “put beyond serious dispute by the relatively plain structure of *Metaphysics* I2” (“Aristotle on Focal Meaning and the Unity of Science”, *Phronesis*, 25 (2), 1980, 117). In his recent laudable book, D. Bostock proposes that when Aristotle in Z1 claims that being belongs primarily and in the simple way to substance, he changes
In this paper, I try to provide an alternative account of the πρός ἐν, which shows that the πρός ἐν of being in *Meta.* Γ2 is neither new nor revolutionary. Consequently, I will reject, respectfully, both claims made by Owen

I. Being is said πολλαχώς

So far as ‘being’ is concerned, Owen takes Aristotle’s notion of signification (verb, σημαίνειν, “to signify) to mean “sense” or “meaning”. Following this usage, to say that a word has a sense is to say that it has a distinct significatum. ‘Being’ has many significata and is thus said in many senses. Being in Aristotle, as is well-known, can either be the word that is signifying or the things signified. In modern language analysis it is thought that it must be the word ‘being’ that could have a “sense” or “focal meaning”, although Aristotle is dealing more often with the extra-linguistic entity, the significatum more than the word.

‘Being’ has many significata. Corresponding to each of these, there is a signifying category. The categories “signify” (*Cat.* 4.1b26), and what they signify are “things that are” (*ta onta* 1a20, cf. *Topics*, I.9, 103b27). When Aristotle lists “substance”, “quality”, “quantity”, “relation”, and so on, it is often not clear whether he is talking about them as signifying categories, or as the signified extra-linguistic beings. It is on the conception of signification that Aristotle affirms that there are as many beings as there are categories (*Meta* Δ7, 1017a 23-28). Indeed, the multivocity of being and the theory of categories are so closely associated that Aristotle simply calls substance, quality, quantity, etc. “categories of being”. Accordingly, the study of categories is therefore the study of beings. If we can determine how categories differ, we know how beings differ.

his earlier view that there are as many ultimately different beings as there are categories. The change is mainly based on the priority in definition: “now [in *Meta.* Z1] he [Aristotle] has come to the view that there is after all a common element in all definitions, namely substance, and this notably alters the position” (*Aristotle’s Metaphysics, Books Z and H*, Oxford, 1994, 67). Clearly this is in line with Owen.


5 As J.L.Ackrill remarks, “It is careless of him to speak as if it were substances (and not names of substances) that signify” ( Ackrill (tr.and ed.), *Categories and De Interpretatione*, Oxford 1963, 88).

We are therefore led to the two texts in the corpus which provide Aristotle's full ten member list of categories: *Cat. 4, and Topics I, 9.* Usually these two texts are viewed as presenting different procedures for reaching the same list. In both places, categories are thought to result from different answers to the Socratic “what is it?” question, and the main difference is that in *Cat. 4* different questions are asked about a single thing, while in *Topics 1.9* a single question is asked about different things. I would like to propose that these two texts are related in a different and philosophically more significant way. Whereas *Topics 1.9* provides a procedure to explain how categories differ, *Cat. 4* displays the structural relationship of these distinct categories. Furthermore, *Cat. 4* must be based on *Topics 1.9*. To see this, let us begin with an analysis of *Topics 1.9*, and then proceed to compare it with *Cat. 4*.

In the *Topics* scheme, the procedure for arriving at the list of categories goes like this: First, one points to different things, asks what each of them is and obtains an answer to these questions. For instance, if we point to a person, say, Socrates, and ask what the thing is, the answer is “This is Socrates”; if one points to a white color, the answer to the question is “This is white”.

Then the second step is: “each of these kinds of predicates, if either it be asserted of itself, or its genus be asserted of it, signifies what something is (τί ἐστι, 103b36-38)”. This second step shows that once we have an ostensive statement, a hierarchy of predicates will follow. In the sentence “This is Socrates”, the predicate “Socrates” is asserted of the subject Socrates. Yet this predicate can in turn be a subject and is predicated by its species word and genus word (e.g. “Socrates is a man” and “A man is an animal”). In this process, the predicate of the lower level predication becomes the subject of the higher level, and the predicates become more and more broad. The hierarchy ends if it reaches an ultimate predicate which does not fall under any other. If the series starts with “Socrates”, the ultimate predicate is “Substance”; if it starts with “white”, the ultimate predicate is “quality”; and so on. These ultimate predicates of each of these hierarchies of predication are categories. Each of them signifies a being.

Within each hierarchy of predication, the subject of predication and the objects predicated are items of the same nature. In “Socrates is a man”, both “Socrates” and “man” share the same kind of nature. In “White is a color”, both “white” and “color” are items of the same nature. Each of them therefore forms a genus-species-particular structure. In contrast, “Socrates” and “white” are clearly entities of a different nature, and cannot form a genus-species relation, and they cannot be in the same hierarchy of predication. Thus, the different nature of these hierarchies of predication determines a category’s classificatory function, that is, categorial difference. I hereafter refer to this type of predication, in which both subject-expression and predicate-expression are items in the same category, as the “same-category predication” (for brevity, SCP).

Seen in this way, categories are different from each other because each has underneath it a different hierarchy of SCP. For ten categories, there are ten different “forms” of SCP, and each category is the ultimate predicate of one type of SCP. The

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7 In other places, the number is usually reduced, or the list is open-ended in the form of “so on”, or ‘the rest’. cf. e.g. *Meta. Δ7, 1017a24-7; Z1, 28a11-13.*

generation of a category is related to the type or logical form of predication. The difference between categories is determined by the types of predication.

Such a reading of *Topics* I.9 connects this text with *Meta*. A7 where Aristotle says:

All those that the figures of predication (τὰ σχήματα τῆς κατηγορίας) signify are said to be in their own right (Καθ' αὐτά δὲ εἰσαί λέγεται); for 'to be' signifies in the same number of ways as they are said. Since, therefore, among things predicated some signify what a thing is, some a qualification, some a quantity, some a relative, some doing or beings affected, some where, some when, 'to be' signifies the same thing as each of these.⁹

This passage indeed establishes the correspondence between the figures of predication, categories and beings.

Yet why is it the case that beings which are the significata of categories are also signified by the figures of predication? For Aristotle, a name signifies, and a definition (λόγος) which explains the meaning of the name signifies as well. Definition and name signify the same thing (*Top.* 92b26-34; *Meta.* 1030a7-9). Typically, a definition of this type must be genus + differentiae (*Top.* 142b22-9; 143a29-b10; 144a5-22). *Topics* I.9 shows that categories are the ultimate predicates of different forms of hierarchies of SCP. Since in every SCP there is a particular-species (or genus) relation between subject and predication, each turns out precisely to be a genus + differentia definition which explicates the sense of each category member. For Aristotle, definition and name signify the same thing. So when he says here that beings are significata of both categories and the figures of predication, "the figures of predication" in this passage should be the same thing as the different forms of SCP in *Topics* I.9. Both of them are essence-stating definitions of categories.¹⁰

Aristotle frequently says that "being is said πολλάχως". The word πολλάχως, as is well-known, contains what Matthews calls a "sense-kind confusion".¹¹ The sentence can be translated as either (1) "being is said in many senses", or (2) "being is said in many

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⁹ *Meta*.1017a22-28: The translation is from Kirwan, *ibid*. 1993, with the first sentence modified. Kirwan's translation is: "All things which signify the figures of predication are said to be in their own right". The Greek allows both ways, yet it makes sense that beings in their own right should be what is signified instead of being signifying terms.

¹⁰ Such a reading might shed some light on the long standing debate whether category should be "predication" or "predicate". The Greek word "κατηγορία", from which the word "category" originates, is from the verb καταγερείν ("to predicate"), and can be translated either as "predication", or "predicate". Whereas traditionally an Aristotelian category has been understood as a predicate, Frede argues that in its technical sense κατηγορία literally means "predication" or "kind of predication", and in a derivative sense, it also means predicate ("Categories in Aristotle", in his *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, Oxford, 1987, 32-35. I tend to believe that the word is used by Aristotle both in the sense of predication (for various sensible textual evidence, see Frede, *ibid.* 32ff) and in the sense of predicates (i.e., when it refers to the single terms such as substance, quality, quantity, etc. These items are what the modern word 'category' refers to). Aristotle can use the word in both ways, because only predication can explicate what predicate signifies, and they signify the same.

kinds”. These two translations lead to significantly different understandings. According to (1), ‘being’ has many distinct senses rather than one single sense or meaning, and is hence not a unified concept. To be a substance (e.g. “to be a man”) differs from being a quality (e.g. “to be white”) in what it is for them to be. According to (2), there is a single meaning or sense of being which is shared by many kinds of being. In this case, to be a substance differs from being a quality because they are different kinds of the same being.

I would like to propose the we have to distinguish the different circumstances in which this phrase is used. When it applies to different categories, as it most often does,\(^ {12} \) it must mean that ‘being’ is said in many “senses”, since each being as a significatum of a category is explicated by a distinct genus-differentia definition. The same word ‘being’ has a different meaning in each category. Hence Aristotle can certainly claim that there is no such genus as being that stands above all categories.\(^ {13} \) There is no single general definition applicable to all categorial beings.

The same sentence, however, can also apply to different members within the same category. In Meta. H 2 we read:

Clearly then the word ‘is’ is said in just as many πολλαχώς; a thing is a threshold because it lies in such and such a position, and its being means its lying in that position, while being ice means having been solidified in such and such a way. And the being of some things will be defined by all these qualities ...(1042b26—1043a11).

Threshold is a member of the category of substance, and so is ice. They have the same genus and are members of the same category. To define them by means of their location or special ways of composition is to give their differentia. What distinguishes threshold from ice is not the nature of being a substance, but the differentiae that mark off different kinds of substance. Thus, the phrase “being is said πολλαχώς”, applied within the same category, should be translated as “being is said in many kinds (or ways)”.

II Cat. 4 and Topics 1.9

Now let us proceed to the list of categories in Cat. 4. It is usually thought that there is a single procedure here to generate the list of categories, that is, to ask many questions about the same thing. The text itself, however, does not really present such a procedure. Instead Aristotle simply says: “To give a rough idea, examples of substance are man, horse; of quantity: four-foot, five-foot; of qualification: white, grammatical; of a relative: double, half, larger; of where: in the Lyceum, in the market place; ...”(2a3-6). It is from these examples that we can infer that he is asking many question about the same subject. This same subject must be a member within the category of substance, such as a person, or a person-like entity. For only such a subject can at the same time possess attributions such as “grammatical”, “in the Lyceum”, “sitting”, and so forth. Expressed in the form of predication “S is P”, the idea in Cat. 4 is that “S” must be an item of substance, while “P” could be a member of any category. I would like to call this form of predication the “substance-subject predication” (for abbreviation, SSP). SSP is clearly different from SCP which underlies the Topics 1.9. For in SCP, “S” can be a member of

\(^ {12} \) See Met. Γ2, and Z1, Physics, 185a21; DA, 410a13; EN, 1096a24.

any category, not confined to substance, but "P" must be the subject-expression's own species or genus in the same category. Different predicates answer to different subjects in the same category, rather than to the same subject.

SCP and SSP are not parallel regarding category-generation. SCP provides us with an understanding of why categories differ, for categories are the ultimate genera of different forms of SCP. In contrast, SSP indicates that all predicates are related to one subject, but does not explain how and why these predicates are different as categories. No reason is offered here as to why a category can classify things. We lack in Cat. 4 a principle to justify what constitutes categorial difference. In An.Pr. 49a6-8 Aristotle says that "this belongs to that" "must be understood in as many senses as there are different categories". Accordingly, some commentators argue that since different forms of SSP, such as "Socrates is white" and "Socrates is 5 feet tall", can be paraphrased as "X belongs to some substance", we must suppose that they introduce different categorial relationships, and the items in each different category are differently related to the substances to which they belong. I find this interpretation unpersuasive. To say that "to belong to" has as many senses as categories, is not to say that "to belong to" causes categorial difference. On the contrary, it seems that we have to first understand how categories differ before we understand why "belong to" in these predications have different senses. What SSP itself indicates is that different things are related to substances, not how these things differ, let alone differ as categories.

I would like to propose that the Cat.4 passage is not intended to explain categorial difference. It simply "gives a rough idea", i.e., to list a few instances of each of these categories rather than explaining what each of them is. In Cat. 2 Aristotle suggests that all things (that categories signify) can be divided into four kinds according to the ties of "said of" and "being in". Cat. 4 introduces SSP. Cat. 5 provides a detailed picture of how different categories are related to the primary subject based on these two connecting ties. This context suggests that Cat. 4 is preparing the way for Cat. 5, and that SSP is to show how other categories are related to substance, rather than why each category counts as a category. It is the job of the Topics 1.9 to specify categorial difference, and the job is done by showing that the categorial difference is based on the different forms of predications. It seems to be the case that Aristotle first determines the types and numbers of categories in the Topics 1.9, and then proposes that these categories are predicated of one and the same subject in Cat. 4. Cat. 4 must have presupposed the categorial difference established in Topics 1.9.

Furthermore, we should be able to say that what is made explicit in SSP must have been implied in Topics 1.9. First, in the generation of a category, Topics 1.9 says that we first point to different things such as a person, a color, a relation, ask "what is it" for each of them, which then initiates each series of SCP up to the final genus. Yet it is clear that one cannot point to a color without being aware that it is something's color, and cannot

15 As a matter of fact, Cat. 4 does not even mention the word "kategoria". If Cat.4 is taken alone, the list might not be called a list of "categories". The word, however, appears in other chapters (twice in ch.5, 3a35, 3a37; and twice in ch.8, 10b19, 10b21. I owe the reference to John Anton, "On the Meaning of Kategoria in Aristotle's Categories", in Aristotle's Ontology, eds. Anthony Preus and John P. Anton, State University of New York Press, 1992), p.15.
point to a relation without being aware that it is a relation of certain substances. It is unlikely that when Aristotle presents his case in *Topics* 1.9, he is not aware of the relation of non-substance categories to substance. What he is doing is to show what it is for each category to be, isolated in abstract analysis, and he leaves the job of explaining how these categories are related to substance to the *Categories*.

Second, in the *Topics* 1.9, Aristotle on the one hand claims that each category signifies a “what it is” (τί ἐστιν, *Top*.1.9, 103b27-29) on the other, the first category, substance, is also called “what it is” (103b23, 27). Thus, “what it is” appears to have a broad and a narrow use. The broad use applies to every category, and a narrow or restricted use applies only to substance and even serves as a label for substance. This certainly implies that substance has a privileged position among beings.

It is not difficult to see that SSP in *Cat*. is precisely the predication form of the πρός ἐν structure, for it explains that substance is the common subject of all other things and therefore possesses a privileged position. In *Meta*. Z1 Aristotle claims that “being is said in many senses”, that is, substance, quality, quantity, and so on, but that which is primarily is the substance of the thing”. The reason is that all other things are said to be because they are, some of them, quantities of that which is in this primary sense, others qualities of it, others affections of it, and others some other determinations of it (1028a13-20).

In other words, substance is the subject of everything else. Substance is the underlying subject. Expressed in predication, this picture is SSP.

*Meta* Γ illustrates the πρός ἐν formula as follows:

Some things are said to be because they are substances, others because they are affections of substance, others because they are a process towards substance, or destruction or privations or qualities of substance, or productive or generative of substance, or of things which are relative to substance,...(1003b6-10).

Expressed in predication, the πρός ἐν is essentially also SSP.

In Γ2 when all other things are πρός ἐν, to substance, substance then becomes the primary sense of all beings (003b17-8). In Z4, it is also explained that πρός ἐν of being means that being is neither homonymous nor synonymous, and what it expresses is that “definition and essence in the primary and simple sense belong to substances. Still they belong to other things as well in a similar way, but not primarily” (*Meta*. Z4, 1030b4-6). The rank of primary and secondary senses (*Meta*. Z4, 1030a21-24) is, in my view, the same with the distinction between the broad and narrow uses of “what it is”(*Top*.1.9 103b27-29; cf. also *Meta*. Z1, 1028a12-3). Hence, SSP, the primacy of substance, and the πρός ἐν are indeed different expressions standing for the same thing.

**III: The “focal meaning” of Owen**

The picture which has emerged from our above discussion raises some grave difficulties to Owen’s “focal meaning” interpretation. First, if the πρός ἐν structure of being has been implied in the predication of SSP which lies behind the list of categories in *Cat*. 4, what Aristotle says in Γ says should be traceable to the *Categories*. Contrary to Owen, Aristotle in the earlier works of the *Cat*. or the *Topics* also believe that different beings are connected. Second and more important, we have shown that SSP and πρός ἐν are identical, and SCP indicates that there are as many beings as there are categories.
Owen’s developmental interpretation implies that there is a real tension between *Topics* 1.9 and *Cat.* 4; that is, between what SSP stands for and what SCP stands for. Since no tension exists between these two texts, Owen’s developmental picture seems foreign to Aristotle.

This leads us to examine the basis on which Owen establishes his arguments. When Owen claims that Γ 1-2’s introduction of “focal meaning” involves a “new treatment of being and its cognate expressions” and replaces Aristotle’s earlier view that beings differ, he has three arguments: (a) There is an earlier period in which Aristotle believes that being is homonymous; (b) The introduction of the προς εν structure in *Meta* Γ is new, and (c) The προς εν replaces the view that each being has a distinct sense.

Owen has two pieces of evidence to justify his first position that being is homonymous in earlier Aristotle: Aristotle directly mentions being as an instance of homonym at *SE*, 182b 13-27; and in the *Topics*, when a word is said in many senses, it is a case of homonym.16 Neither of these references, however, is conclusive. The contrast between the προς εν and homonym must be qualified. Aristotle appears to recognise that there are different sorts of homonyms. He contrasts the προς εν with “complete” (πάμπαν) or “chance” (ως ἔτυχεν) homonym (*EE* 1236a18, b25-6; *EN*, 1096b26-8),17 or “homonym, and in virtue of nothing common” (*Meta*. 1060b33-4). There seems to be a distinction in Aristotle between a complete homonym in which a word has many senses but with nothing common among them, and a non-complete one in which a word has many senses, but these senses are related. ‘Being’ can be a homonym in the latter sense, and is hence not incompatible with the προς εν formula.18 Moreover, it is equally inconclusive to say that multivocality is identical with homonym. As Irwin has pointed out, on many occasions, “Aristotle implies that things are multivocal but not homonymous.” The alleged identity between multivocity and homonym is further undermined if there are different kinds of homonym. If a word has many senses, and there is no connection among them, it is an instance of complete homonym. Yet a word can be said in many senses, with there being some sort of connection among them. The multivocity of ‘being’ is consistent with the latter case, but not the former case.

When Owen claims that the προς εν is a new device in *Meta.* Γ1-2, he is aware that he is challenged by various textual evidence. The προς εν appeared in *EE*, 1236a7-

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17 In *EN*, it is αφ’ ενος instead of προς εν but it has been thought that these two expressions are not generally distinguished (Owen, *ibid.* 1960, 66, n.7. J. Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in Aristotelian Metaphysics*, Toronto, 1963, 117-8).
18Owen is fully aware of the existence of the different usages of homonym, but he dismisses it lightly by saying that “Often he [Aristotle] takes no notice of this modification of homonym, treating homonym as the sole complement of synonymy where single expressions are concerned” (1965, 73, n.5). For a full defence of the position that there are two types of homonym in Aristotle, see Leszl, *ibid.* 1970, Parts iv-v; Irwin, “Homonymy in Aristotle”, *Review of Metaphysics*, 1981, 523-544 Irwin also believes that “focal meaning” is an instance of connected homonym. But surprisingly, he does not question Owen’s thesis that in his earlier period Aristotle recognised only that beings are unconnected.
33, a work Owen believes to belong to the earlier stage. Although there it applies to “friendship”, the analysis of the formula is the same with *Meta*. Z4, 1030a21-24 where it applies to being, “what it is”, essence, and definition. In both places the πρός ἐν is neither (strictly) homonymous, nor (strictly) synonymous, but rather it means that the primary sense of the term belongs to the first instance.

Owen recognises that the πρός ἐν formula appears in EE, and he also concedes that it is even implied in some passages of the *Topics*. However, regarding its presence in the *Topics*, he maintains that Aristotle does not “attach any importance to it”.²⁰ Regarding the presence of the πρός ἐν structure in EE, he insists that Aristotle “has not seen its application to such wholly general expressions as ‘being’ or ‘good’”.²¹ But there is stronger evidence against Owen. For in the *Categories*, although the πρός ἐν does not apply directly to the term ‘being’, it applies to some categorial beings, for instance, “quantity” at 5a38-b10. Being fully aware of this fact, Owen still insists that this “focal meaning” is “not in that logical ordering of different categories and different senses of ‘being’ which lies at the root of the argument in *Meta*. IV”²². However, the πρός ἐν is used to establish the priority of substance over other categories, and such a priority is demonstrated in *Cat.* 5. Again, Owen claims that “this priority was of an older Academic vintage which did not involve focal meaning”.²³ This is hardly convincing. As we will see shortly, the ground for establishing this priority in *Cat.* 5 is essentially the same as that in *Meta*. Z1 and Γ2.

Owen makes a strong claim that the idea of “focal meaning” replaces Aristotle’s alleged earlier view of being:

‘Being’ is an expression with focal meaning is a claim that statements about non-substances can be reduced to—translated into—statements about substances; and it seems to be a corollary of this theory that non-substances cannot have matter or form of their own since they are no more than the logical shadows of substance.²⁴ But his major argument for this is to insist that in his earlier period Aristotle does not recognise the existence of πρός ἐν structure of being. Earlier we raised objections to this argument. Given the common understanding between Owen and us that for Aristotle “to mean” is “to signify”, it is unclear how the πρός ἐν of being, which indicates that all others refer to substance, causes other beings to lose their own “matter and form” and to be reduced to the “logical shadow” of substance. If a “sense” or “meaning” is associated with a significatum, the existence of a “focal meaning” of being would require that there is one common significatum of “being”. Yet in *Meta*. Z4, Aristotle says that to say a term has a πρός ἐν structure excludes the case that it is about “one and the same thing” (οὐ τὸ αὐτὸ δὲ καὶ ἐν). 1030b1-2) and is not “καθ’ ἐν” (in accordance with one, 1030b4).

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²⁰Owen, *ibid.* 1960, 174
²¹Owen, *ibid.* 1960, 169
²²Owen, *ibid.* 1960, 175
²³Owen, *ibid.* 1960, 178
Although at one point, Owen claims that in *Meta. iv and vi* Aristotle is “anxious to minimise the contrast between synonymy and focal meaning”, he generally makes it clear that “focal meaning” does not collapse into synonymy, or strict synonym. For Owen, “the simple dichotomy ‘univocal’ or ‘multivocal, synonymous or homonymous’ is not sophisticated enough to catch such a word” and so “focal meaning” is indeed “the tertium quid”. Nevertheless, in Owen’s discussion, the precise difference between synonymy and this tertium quid is not quite clear, and what “focal meaning” is lacks a needed precision. Owen is aware of that but ascribes the ambiguity to Aristotle himself:

Aristotle has not solved the problem of defining focal meaning fully and exactly so as to give that idea all the philosophical power that he comes to claim for it: he has given only the necessary, not the sufficient, conditions for its use. But there is no reason to think that this problem can have a general answer. Aristotle’s evasion of it may come from the conviction that any answer would be artificial, setting boundaries that must be endlessly too wide or too narrow for his changing purposes.  

**IV πρός ἐν**

Although Γ2 is generally regarded as the *locus* of the πρός ἐν formula, the chapter does not really do much other than illustrate that substance is the subject of everything else by means of a comparison with the terms “health” and “medicine”. In general, *Meta. Γ* 2 leaves readers with the impression that it is a summary of discussions carried out elsewhere. Since we have shown that SSP, the primacy of being and the πρός ἐν are different expressions of the same thing (that is, substance is the subject of everything else), we can expect a reasonable understanding of these expressions by understanding how, and in what sense, substance is the subject of everything else. The major texts that provide detailed arguments for this are *Cat.5* and *Meta. Z1*. Both of these texts have been intensively discussed in the literature. The following discussion will be confined to showing that when these texts argue for the primacy of substance, they are not reducing the senses of other categories to substance. Let us start with *Cat. 5*.

In SSP, S refers to a substance member, and can be a substantial particular (primary substance), or substantial species or genus (secondary substance). When S is a primary substance, “P” includes both (a) secondary substances or substantial universals, such as “man”, and (b) non-substantial universals. When P is a substantial universal, SSP is indeed a type of SCP.

When Aristotle says that both secondary substances and non-substantial universals are predicated of primary substance, he makes it clear that these two kinds of predicates have different natures. When secondary substances are predicated of primary substance, both their names and their definitions can be predicated of primary substance. We say “Socrates is a man”, and since “rational animal” is the definition of “man”, we can also

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25 Owen, 1960, 185. Aristotle does say in one place that the πρός ἐν is “in a sense” (πρόπος ὁν νῦν) synonymous” (*Meta.Γ* 2, 1003b14-15). One might think, as is the case with homonym, there is a distinction between a strict synonym and a loose sense of synonym. But the point is not developed by Aristotle. In Γ 2, 1003b14-15 he seems to be talking in an analogical sense.

26 Owen, *ibid.* 1960, 179; *ibid.* 1966, 146.

say “Socrates is a rational animal”. Such a predicate reveals what primary substance is, its essence. On the other hand, when the non-substantial universals are predicated of primary substance, only their names (more properly, their adjective forms) are predicated, but not their definitions. We can say “Socrates is white”, but we cannot say “Socrates is a kind of color”. Hence, in SSP, non-substantial predicates cannot explain what primary substance is and are therefore accidental predicates. “White” does not signify what “Socrates” is and so its definition cannot explicate this significatum. In contrast, secondary substances are essential predicates. The name “man” signifies what Socrates is, and its definition explicates this significatum, and so can apply to explaining what Socrates is. This distinction suggests that the definition of a non-substance category and the definition of substance are different. Since definition explains what a name signifies, Aristotle clearly implies that different categories have different significata.28

Cat. 5 presents the structure of reality as follows: “All the other things are either said of the primary substances as subject or are in them as subjects” (Cat. 2b14-5). That is the picture of SSP, and the ontological implication of it is that “If the primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist” (Cat.2b5-6; cf.2b15-17, 2b37-38). What is demonstrated here is the ontological asymmetry between substances and non-substance categories, that is, the significatum of the category of substance underlies the significata of other categories. Since Aristotle still claims that each non-substance category has its own definition, this ontological dependency does not amount to sense-reduction.

The ontological dependency of other categories upon substance is argued in more detail in Meta Z1. Other categories, according to Z1, cannot exist independent of substance, because substance “underlies” them. The expression of any non-substance category will always imply some reference to a substance (that is, SSP). To say that this is a quality implies that it is a quality of some substance, yet to say that a substance is does not imply anything about other categories. Accordingly, “that which is primarily and is simply (not is something) must be substance” (1028a30-31).

Having claimed that substance is being in its primary sense on the basis of ontological priority, Aristotle further specifies that the primacy of substance over other categories can be understood in three ways: natural priority, priority in definition, and priority in knowledge. Natural priority means that “of the other categories none can exist separately, but only substance” (1028a34-35). Priority in definition—or what is usually called logical priority—means that the definition of substance must be inherent (ἐνυπάρχειν) in the definitions of other categories (1028a34-6). Priority in knowledge means that “we know each particular thing most truly when we know what ‘man’ or ‘fire’ is, rather than its quality or quantity or position”.29

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28 It must be noted, however, that the distinction between an essential predicate and an accidental predicate is valid only insofar as SSP is concerned. Each SCP is in fact a case of essential predication in the sense that the predicate can be predicated of its same-category subject in both name and definition. But when Aristotle discusses the “said of” relation in the Categories, he pays attention only to the individual-species relation of the category of substance, and ignores the same sort of relation in other categories.

29 It should be noted that “the particular thing (ἐκαστον)” in the passage must refer to substance, and Aristotle is talking only about SSP in which substantial predicates reveal what a substance is,
The idea of the priority in definition deserves special attention. Some commentators argue that since others categories contain a substance’s definition in theirs, they must share a common element. Accordingly, Ferejohn argues that this is what the “focal meaning” should be, and Bostock proposes that this implies an alteration of Aristotle’s earlier position. But this does not seem to me to be what the priority in definition implies. As mentioned earlier, for Aristotle, definition and names signify the same thing. Each category has its own essence-stating definition. When we define “white,” for instance, we say “White is a color.” Clearly, the definition of substance does not occur here. Since substance is neither the genus of any other category, nor the differentia, its presence does not seem to alter the distinct sense that each category’s genus + differentia explicates. Otherwise, we would again need a common significatum. Then, what does it mean to say that the definition of substance is present in the definitions of other categories? Judged from the structure of Meta. Ζι, the primacy of substance is mainly established on the ontological independence of substance, and the three priorities are supposed to be a further specification of that basic point. I am inclined to think that the presence of substance in the definitions of other categories is ontological rather than epistemological. It is present in other categories not because it is a part of their formula of definition, but because a non-substance category cannot be separate from substance. The distinct sense of “being”, on the other hand, is from SCP.

Ζι itself presents a challenge to the sense-reduction interpretation. When Aristotle argues forcefully that substance is the primary sense of being, he is aware that people might question the distinctness of other beings:

So one might raise the question whether ‘to walk’ and ‘to be healthy’ and to ‘sit’ signify in each case something that is, and similarly in any other case of this sort (1028a20-22).

Ζι does not deal with the issue directly. Nevertheless it maintains that “we know each of these predicates also, only when we know what the quantity or the quality is” (1028b1-2). That is, each non-substance category has its own “what it is”. Apparently, Aristotle himself does not believe that the primacy of substance alters the “what it is” of other categories.

Thus, SSP and SCP have different functions. While SCP indicates categorial difference, SSP or the πρός ἐν stands for a structure of ontological dependency. Aristotle’s view in this regard is remarkably consistent.

V. Beings: *per se* and *per acciden*

SCP indicates that being has its own sense, as “being per se” (καθ’ αὑτό, usually translated as “in its own right”, Meta. Δ 7, 1017a23). *Per se* is in contrast to “per acciden” (κατὰ συμβεβηκός, “accident” or “coincident”). SSP, on the other hand, indicates that every non-substance category is predicated of substance and is accidental. Thus,

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while all other predicates are not because they are accidental. For such a subject, what comes first must be the knowledge of substance rather than the knowledge of this thing’s quality or size, etc. However, to know what each non-substance category is in itself, we need to know each category’s own genus and differentiae. It is necessary to know what substance is, but it is not sufficient

30 Ferejohn, *ibid*. 1981. His discussion is based on EE 1236a18-23.
31 Bostock, *ibid*. 1994. His is based on Meta. 1028a34-6, 1045b29-32
given SSP, how can a category still be a *per se* being? How can a being be both a *per se* being and an accidental being? This must be the concern behind the question at Z1,1028a20-22 (quoted above).

The term *per se* in Aristotle turns out to be one which itself "is said πολλαχως". In *An. Po.*, 1,4, Aristotle lists four senses in which a thing can be said to be "*per se*". Of which, the second sense (73a38-b4) is about the idion properties and the fourth (73b10 - 73b16) is about a thing’s natural result. What interests us are the first and the third senses.

According to the first sense, one thing belongs to another *per se* "if it belongs to it in what it is—e.g. line to triangle and point to line (for their substance depends on these and they belong in the account which says what they are)" (73a35-8). According to sense (i), X belongs *per se* to Y if it is in Y’s essence or definition. A species or genus is *per se* to its sub-level members, for it is in their definitions. Aristotle further believes that if X is *per se* Y, Y is also *per se* X (Meta. Δ 18, 1022a27-8).

The third sense is that, "Things which are not said of an underlying subject I call things *per se*, and those which are said of an underlying subject I call accidents" (73b4-10). X is *per se* if it is not said of some other subject.

On the basis of this classification of the senses of *per se*, it is clear that when Aristotle says there are as many categories as there are *per se* beings, and that different figures of predications signify different *per se* beings, he is adopting the first sense. We have argued that figures of predication are the same with different forms of SCP. In SCP a predicate as a species or genus reveals what the subject is, and provides a definition for the subject. Every SCP is a definitional statement, which accounts for categorial difference, and explicates what a being is. A category is a generic element in any definition of its many-layers of subordinate items, down to the particular. It holds true necessarily of all and only the members of its type. A category is thus *per se*.

While SCP makes each being a being *per se*, the third sense of *per se* specifies substance as the only being *per se*, and all non-substance beings as "accidental" to substance, on the grounds that while substance is predicated of nothing further, "the things that do not signify a substance must be predicated of some underlying subject". In the third sense, only substance is a *per se* being, while other categories are accidental beings. This sense of *per se* explains precisely the picture that SSP presents. Every non-substance category is predicated of substance, while substance is not. It is in this sense that the contrast between substance and non-substance categories becomes a contrast between *per se* being and *per acciden* being, or a contrast between being *simpliciter* and being something.

Thus, if we put *Topics* 1.9 and *Cat.* 4 together, put sense (1) and (3) together, the result is that, while substance is always a *per se* being, other categories are both *per se* beings [in sense (1)], and accidents [in sense (3)]. A non-substance category can both be *per se* and *per acciden*, relative to different senses of *per se*. Hence these two different roles are not contradictory. A non-substance category’s status as a *per se* being is not affected by the fact that it is predicated of substance, for its perseity is achieved through

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32 All of them are contained also in Meta. Δ18, which is an entry about the term "*per se*".
33 *An. Po.* 1,22, 83a32, cf. 83b25ff..
34 *An. Po.* 83b18-25, 90a10ff; *SE*.167a1ff; Meta. 1028a29-31,
its own significatum and its own genus differentia definition, expressed by SCP. In the meantime, it is accidental to substance because it is predicated of the latter, as indicated by SSP. But SSP is not to determine what sense is, but to indicate the ontological relations of beings of different natures.

To summarize what we have said so far, there is no real tension for Aristotle to say both that (a) being has many distinct senses and is not a genus, (b) all beings are related to substance and substance is the primary sense of being. For (a) is a thesis about sense, while (b) is a thesis about the relations between categories. Indeed, it is in the combination of these two aspects, the combination of SCP and SSP that we understand why being is, in the strict sense, neither homonymous nor synonymous, but is a πρὸς ἐν term. Because of SCP, beings differ and each has its own definition; hence, each being has, as it were, its persity. Thus, the term ‘being’ is not a strictly synonymous word. SSP, on the other hand, makes other beings accidental to substance by setting substance as subject to all non-substance categories. Because of SSP, the term ‘being’ is different from such strictly homonymous terms as ‘bank’ (which signifies completely unrelated things such as “riverside” and “financial institution”). Thus, it is not right to believe that these two aspects belong to different stages of Aristotle, or to explain them by appealing to some development hypothesis.

VI The science of being

Now let us proceed to Owen’s other major claim that the introduction of the πρὸς ἐν enables Aristotle to found the universal science of being qua being and to replace his earlier view that such a universal science is impossible. It is indisputable that Aristotle offered us two seemingly contradictory views regarding the possibility of a single universal science of being. At EE 1217b25-36 we read: “For ‘being’, as we have divided it in other works, signifies now what a thing is, now quality, now quantity, now time, and again some of it consiste in being changed and in changing;... As then ‘being’ is not one in all that we have just mentioned, so neither is ‘good’; nor is there one science either of ‘being’ or of the good”. This passage is sharply in contrast to the announcement of Meta. Γ1 that “There is a science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature” (1003a23-4).

In Owen’s interpretation, these two views are really contradictory. The negative attitude belongs to Aristotle’s earlier thought when he was an anti-Platonist, whereas the positive attitude comes at Aristotle’s later stage which “looks more like a revival of sympathy with Plato’s aims”. Owen’s reason for claiming this is that in his earlier works Aristotle only believes that ‘being’ is a strict homonym without any systematic connection in its different senses, whereas the “focal meaning” in Meta. Γ1-2 unifies them into a systematic subject-matter, and thus makes a universal science possible.

Now we have demonstrated that there is not an earlier stage in which Aristotle believes that being is a strict homonym, and that the πρὸς ἐν structure has been described in the Organon and other earlier works. There is no tension at all between the view that beings differ in different categories, and to say that being has a πρὸς ἐν

35 Owen, ibid. 1960, 164.
36 For Owen, “The inquiry described in Meta. IV is not mentioned in the Organon, nor is it hidden in Aristotle’s sleeve” (ibid. 1960, 178).
structure. According to this alternative account of the πρόσ εν, it is unlikely to be the case, as Owen claims, that the πρόσ εν is responsible for a change of Aristotle's view on the science of being.

In place of Owen's interpretation, I would like to suggest that Aristotle's different attitudes towards the science of being result from the change of his view of what counts as a "science" (επιστήμη). This change, nonetheless, is an expansion of the original view rather than a replacement.

In the Organon, EE, and some other works, Aristotle claims that "a single science is one whose domain is a single genus" (An.Po. 87a38, cf. 74b24-6; 76a11-2. Let's call it "the strict notion of science"). Now in Meta.Γ2 where the study of being whose subject-matter is the πρόσ εν structured beings rather than a genus is called "science". A justification is certainly in order. Aristotle explains: "Not only (οὔ γάρ μόνον) in the case of things which have one common notion does the investigation belong to one science, but also (άλλα καὶ) in the case of things which are said of one nature (πρός μίαν...φύσιν)" (1003b12-4). The "not only...but also" structure of this sentence suggests that there are two cases in which a science is possible The first half of the sentence clearly refers to the strict notion of science in An. Po. If all things must be within a genus, the name that applies to all of them must be a synonym. Now Aristotle is saying that the word "science" applies "not only" to a study which is about a genus, "but also" to a study with a unified subject-matter based on the πρόσ εν structure. This passage sounds clearly like a defense for why the study of being can be called "science", and it is expanding the usage of the word "science".

When Aristotle announces the establishment of the science of being, he immediately says, "Now this is not the same as any of the so-called special sciences; for none of these others deals generally with being as being. They cut off a part of being and investigate the attribute of this part" (Meta.Γ1, 1003a23-25). The prevailing interpretation goes that Aristotle here is drawing a line between metaphysics and (natural) sciences in terms of universality and particularity. Yet precisely what their relation is has been subjected to various interpretations, depending on how one's own understanding of what the relationship between philosophy and natural science should be. I would like to propose that the real issue is a contrast between different notions of sciences rather than a contrast between the universal and the particular. According to the strict notion of science, all sciences have to be special or departmental, for they are concerned with a genus. It has never been their job to study being in general. Beyond the special genus is the field of dialectic. To declare the establishment of a universal science of being in Meta. Γ affects nothing at all for such a situation. When Aristotle compares this science of being with other sciences, he is actually emphasizing the fact that, whereas all the sciences are concerned with a single genus, this study is not. Since being concerned with a genus has been one basic condition for a discipline to meet in order to be called a "science", this immediate comparison Aristotle is making serves to remind his audience that the condition is no longer necessary. The two notions mentioned shortly afterward at 1003b12-4 echo this comparison and give it an explanation.

37 See note.25.
In Aristotle's rigid notion, a science must satisfy two conditions. In addition to being concerned with one genus, it must be demonstrative. Modeled on mathematics and especially on geometry, Aristotle claims that a science should start from a small set of axiomatic first principles which are self-evident (e.g. Top. 100a30-b2; An. Po.76b23-4), and grasped by *nous* ("intellect", e.g. 1005b5-17; EN 1140b31-1141a8; 1143a35-b3), and then proceed to a large set of theorems by deduction. The two conditions in the rigid notion of science are connected. For demonstration can only be conducted within a genus, and cannot pass from one genus to another: "Nor can the theorem of any one science be demonstrated by means of another science, unless these theorems are related as subordinate to superior" (An.Po. 75b8-16, cf. also 76a21-22; SE 172a36-8).

If being is not within a genus, the study of it cannot be demonstrative. Hence, when Aristotle claims that the study of being can also be called "science", he not only loses the requirement that a science must be about a genus, but he also no longer insists that a science has to be demonstrative: "There is no demonstration of substance and essence, but some other way of revealing it" (Meta. E1, 1025b14-15, cf. also, B2, 997a26-32; Γ4, 1006a5-11). The science of being is not demonstrative.\(^{38}\)

Accordingly, we are inclined to think that Aristotle denies the possibility of a universal science of being in his earlier works because he sticks to his rigid notion of science in An.Po that a science has to be a demonstrative, departmental discipline. Now in Meta.Γ the study of being can be called "science", not because this discipline satisfies the two conditions of the rigid notion of science, but because Aristotle departs from that notion. A study does not have to be about a genus and demonstrative in order to be called "science". It is the conception of science that is at issue.

Consequential to our view that the πρόσο ἐν of being is in the earlier works, a study of it should have been there as well, although it might not be called "science". This indeed seems to be the case. When Aristotle holds only the rigid notion of science, he does not deny that there is a study or discipline which covers more than one genus or deals with inter-category issues. He only claims that such a study cannot be called "science"; he calls it "dialectic" instead. Dialectic, according to Aristotle, is not concerned with a genus, and is not demonstrative. It deals with the material that is common to or relevant to all the departmental sciences and all fields of discourse, and is therefore a universal study (An.Po. 77a26-31; SE 172a11-15; Topics. 101a36-b4; Rhetoric 1355b8). This description

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\(^{38}\) Although Aristotle denies the methodology of the science of being to be demonstrative, he never offers a positive and explicit account of what its methodology is. In his defence of the principle of non-contradiction, Aristotle's argument is that although no positive demonstration is possible, its truth can be shown on the grounds that no one can reasonably reject it (1006a5-11-15; 1008b10-12). Irwin argues that the defence of PNC is "the model of argument in first philosophy" ("Aristotle's Discovery of Metaphysics", Review of Metaphysics, 1977, 223) and names it "strong dialectic" (Aristotle's First Principles, Oxford, 1988, 175). Yet, most discussion we find in the Metaphysics does not have such a quality, and it is not convincing to say that the defence of PNC exemplifies a universal methodology that Aristotle believes that first philosophy should have. Indeed Robert Bolton points out that even in the proof of PNC Aristotle's argument is characteristic of peirastic elenchus, as described in SE ("Aristotle's Conception of Metaphysics as a Science", in Scalsas, Charles and Gill (eds.), *Unity, Identity, and Explanation in Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Oxford, 1994, 321-354.)
of dialectic’s subject-matter sounds very similar to that of the science of being. As a matter of fact, Γ2 explicitly claims that philosophy and dialectic have the same subject matter, “Dialecticians embrace all things in their dialectic, and being is common to all things (Γ2, 1004b19-20); and, “Dialectic is merely critical where philosophy claims to know” (ibid. b25-6). The fields that dialectic and the science of being are concerned with are indeed mostly overlapping. While the science of being concerns all beings with substance as the common subject, this structure has been presented in the Organon. While the science of being deals with the first principles of deduction (1005b7), dialectic is said to be concerned with “common rules in the refutation and deduction” (SE 170a35; Rhetoric 1358a2-32). While the science of being discusses the contrary terms such as same and other, like and unlike, prior and posterior, etc. (Meta.Γ2.1004b30-4, 1005a15-16), these are already subjects of dialectic (Meta. B1, 995b18-25). At Meta.Γ1004a31-b4, he even says that if to investigate all these things is not the job of the philosopher, whose is it? Since he has already said that they are in the field of the dialecticians, we have reason to believe that it is the field of dialectic that is taken over by the philosopher. The scope of the science of being is expressed in a more systematic and refined way in Meta.Γ, but its basic framework, blocks, and timbers are already in the earlier works.

Γ 2, 1004b19-20 suggests that what distinguishes dialectic from the science of being is not the subject-matter, but their respective goals. For whereas dialectic is critical, philosophy is after positive knowledge. Even this distinction, however, has to be qualified. Dialectic has different senses and functions in the Organon. It is described as critical, examining, testing (SE 170a20-b11, 172a17-b4) and even “destructive” (EE, 1217b16), but it is also described to be “in the spirit of inquiry” (Topics, 159a25-37), leading to the discovery of truth: “For dialectic is a process of criticism wherein lies the path to the principles of all inquiries” (101b 3-4). There is no doubt, for instance, that the discussions in Topics 1.9 and Cat. 1-5 are not merely critical, but are also, as the science of being, about “how thing are” (Meta.1030a27-b7). The notion of dialectic which is in contrast to the science of being must only mean dialectic in its negative sense. The science of being, despite its overwhelming name, and various mysteries that the tradition has attached to it, turns out to be the successor to the positive dialectic of the Organon.40

40 It is interesting to notice that at one place this seems to be what Owen himself believes when he says that “the new science is not an axiomatic system; and lest it seem curiously like those non-departmental inquiries which Aristotle had previously dubbed ‘dialectical’ or ‘logical’ and branded as unscientific, dialectic is quietly demoted to one department of its old province so as to leave room for the new giant” (ibid. 1966, 146).

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