

Dissertation abstract

Aristotle's ambitions for ontology extend beyond determining what beings there are: he also thinks there is an order among the beings, i.e. that some things are prior in being to others. I argue that priority in being is a causal relation: one thing is prior in being to another when it is a cause of being for the latter.

My causal view gives us new interpretive resources for understanding Aristotle's claims about what is prior in being to what. Aristotle argues on the one hand that eternal things are prior in being to perishable things; on the other, he argues that substantial form (or essence) is prior in being to matter and, relatedly, that mature organisms are prior in being to immature ones. On Aristotle's view, for example, it's both true that the unmoved mover is prior in being to Perry the donkey, and that the mature Perry is prior in being to the immature Perry. Previous accounts have either treated priority in being as consisting in a specific ontological independence relation, or have identified differences among Aristotle's claims about what is prior in being to what without explaining how they are cases of the same relation. I argue that both of these approaches are mistaken: there is no specific ontological independence relation that explains all of Aristotle's claims about what is prior in being to what, but there *is* unity to be found in Aristotle's claims about what is prior in being to what. On my view, each prior entity is a cause of being for the entity it is prior to; but Aristotle believes that there are different ways of being a cause of being, which explains why he accepts such a wide range of claims about what is prior in being to what.

My causal view also explains why Aristotle endorsed this *prima facie* puzzling range of cases. Causes of being are what Aristotle sets out to investigate in the *Metaphysics* as a whole, and he begins the *Metaphysics* with criticisms of his predecessors's views about the causes of being, as well as with puzzles about the causes of being that his own view will aim to solve. My claim that priority in being is a causal relation for Aristotle thus allows us to use his engagement with these predecessors and his own puzzles about causes of being to explain why Aristotle's view about priority in being took the shape it did. A central puzzle that shaped these views, I argue, is about whether the causes and principles of perishable and imperishable things are the same or different. I argue that Aristotle accepted (in agreement with his predecessors) that eternal things are among the basic causes of everything else. But Aristotle also argued that we cannot explain everything about perishable being by reference to eternal beings, and as a result recognized additional distinctive causes of perishable things. Examining Aristotle's engagement with his materialist predecessors shows why Aristotle thought these distinctive causes of perishable things were formal-final causes rather than material causes. And this, in turn, allows us to understand why Aristotle accepted precisely the claims about priority in being that he did: not just that eternal things are prior in being to perishable things, but also that, within the perishable realm, the final cause or *telos* is prior in being to that which is for its sake.

Chapter-by-chapter summary

Chapter 1: Aristotle's teleological criterion for priority in being

In my first chapter, I argue that Aristotle uses two criteria for priority in being, the 'independence in being criterion' and the 'teleological criterion'. Each criterion accounts for a distinct range of cases: the independence in being criterion captures the priority of eternal things to perishable things, while the teleological criterion captures the priority of the form to matter and of mature

to immature organisms. But why are these two criteria in particular good criteria for priority in being? I argue that Aristotle thinks the teleological criterion is a good criterion for priority in being because the final cause is a cause of being for that which is for its sake, suggesting that, in general, what is prior in being is a cause of being for what is posterior in being. I further argue that Aristotle's critique of his materialist predecessors explains why he singles out the final cause and does not endorse, say, a material criterion for priority in being.

Chapter 2: Priority in being in the perishable world

In my second chapter, I argue that Aristotle thinks that the explanation of perishable being requires both eternal causes and causes distinctive to the perishable world. This explains why Aristotle uses two criteria for priority in being: the 'independence in being criterion' captures the priority which eternal causes have relative to perishable things, and the teleological criterion captures the priority relations distinctive to the perishable world. I also argue that the ways in which eternal causes and the causes distinctive of the perishable world act as causes are different enough that Aristotle thinks that no single criterion could capture them both; this explains why he uses two criteria and why Aristotle's cases of priority in being have been so difficult to unify.

Chapter 3: The priority of eternal things

In previous chapters, I argue that causes distinctive to the perishable world are required to explain change, coming-to-be, and passing-away. Here, I take up the explanatory contribution of eternal things. I argue that Aristotle's most explicit characterization of the way in which eternal things are causes for the perishable world treats eternal things as causes of the good ordering of the perishable world. I argue that the best way to make sense of this as an explanation for how eternal things are prior in being to individual perishable things is to see eternal things as causes of perishable things being good. I further argue that this coheres with Aristotle's claim at the very beginning of the *Metaphysics* that one of the central goals of first philosophy is to explain goodness in the cosmos.

Chapter 4: Exceeding in being

The bulk of my dissertation focuses on the kinds of explanations prior entities provide. But some of Aristotle's contemporaries, like Speusippus, thought that some entities exceeded others in being but did not explain those other entities. Such a view is plausibly one on which priority is a matter of exceeding in being but not a matter of providing explanations. In this chapter, I argue that Aristotle did connect priority in being with exceeding in being: the things that are prior in being *are* more fully than the things that are posterior in being. But Aristotle connects exceeding in being with explanation: on my view, it is because something exceeds in being that it is able to provide the kinds of explanations we've seen prior entities must provide.