Abstract

Pros hen—usually translated as ‘focal meaning’—is the device by which Aristotle shows that a universal science of being qua being is possible: his metaphysics project. This essay argues for an interpretation of ‘pros hen’ that differs significantly from the currently dominant one. Specifically, it will take issue with Owen’s claim that ‘pros hen’ amounts to reductive translation, assimilating the notion to synonymy, and it will emphasize the aspect of content-neutral referentiality that is operative in Aristotle’s notion, but not adequately represented in Owen’s reconstruction. A close reading of Aristotle’s characterization of pros hen in *Metaphysics* Γ 2 will be offered, and some implications of pros hen in this re-interpretation for Aristotle’s metaphysics project will be sketched. The main emphasis of the paper will be on the clarification of what Aristotle means by pros hen.

Without a doubt, ‘pros hen,’ usually translated as ‘focal meaning,’ is the central device employed by Aristotle to secure the possibility of a science of being qua being: his general metaphysics. Any view taken on pros hen therefore has fundamental and far-reaching repercussions for an understanding of Aristotle’s metaphysics project as a whole: its goals, its scope, its nature, and its relation to the departmental sciences, especially to Aristotelian physics. The present paper argues for a significant modification of the current standard view on pros hen. I will argue that it does not amount to the kind of reductive translation that G. Owen, and many following him, have assumed it to be. It is not an extension of synonymy, and it is content-neutral in a way synonymy is not. For the senses of ‘being,’ it does not entail reducibility to, or derivability from, ‘substance.’ It is decidedly one-sided. It is not intended to stand in for derivability καθ᾿ ἕν, as a weaker form thereof. Its sole purpose is to establish the possibility of a systematic inquiry into being, a science of a very special sort (ἐπιστήμη τις, *Metaph.* Γ 1, 1003a21). It is not a device or actual tool to be used within metaphysics for analysis and argument, because it denotes the non-analyzable substructure of all discourse, and not a type or actual part of discourse. ¹ It reflects

¹ I agree with Berti (1975, 216) that the function of pros hen is not to explain the categories’ relations to substance (in fact, they are taken as given, as determinations of the categories), but to explain the unity of being.
the transcendental nature of being and its foundational role on Aristotle’s terms.

It will not be possible to pursue the consequences of the shift in perspective on *pros hen* that is advocated here in any detail. Nor does space allow a detailed discussion of more recent scholarship on *pros hen*, where reductive translation is usually taken for granted in one form or other. Instead, a brief discussion of two aspects of Owen’s focal meaning with which I shall take issue here, and an outline of two major trends that emerge out of it for the assessment of Aristotle’s metaphysical project will be presented. A close reading and evaluation of Aristotle’s own exposition of *pros hen* as the device that secures the possibility of a general metaphysics in *Metaphysics* Γ 1-2 follows. This section constitutes the core of the present essay. The final section contains a survey of the consequences Aristotle draws from the *pros hen* connectivity of ‘being’ in *Metaphysics* Γ 2-3 for a blueprint of his general metaphysics project, and an outline of how this might be put to use, on the basis of the re-interpretation of *pros hen* argued for here, for a reading of the later books of the *Metaphysics*. Some general considerations on the relation of metaphysics towards the departmental sciences, especially physics, as it presents itself on the basis of the proposed reading of *pros hen*, will be put forward in this concluding section as well.

I. Focal Meaning and Reductive Translation

The term ‘focal meaning’ for the Aristotelian phrase ‘*pros hen legomenon*’ was coined by G. Owen in a seminal article in 1960: *Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle*. On his reading, focal meaning establishes a kind of “reductive translation” (Owen 1960, 169 and 180) of statements about anything in the general field of being to statements about substance:

The claim of IV that ‘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 non-substances are no more than the logical shadows of substances. (Owen, 1960, 180)

Though not completely unchallenged from the beginning, Owen’s reading has dominated the view taken on the Aristotelian device in recent scholarship. Even authors who heavily disagree with Owen on important issues tend to take over this aspect of his reading of focal meaning, or agree with it, and diverge in their interpretation only on this common basis.