Aristotle on Focal Meaning and the Unity of Science

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This study owes its impetus to a group of suggestions put forward by G. E. L. Owen in his 1960 article, “Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle.” In that work, Owen gives predominantly textual arguments for the chronological scheme represented by the following three theses.

(I) In the earliest works of the Corpus (including those treatises which comprise the Organon), Aristotle was convinced that the verb “to be” [E'LvotL] and its cognates were ambiguous expressions, and that this ambiguity foredoomed the Platonic and Academic program of constructing a single, unified, and all-encompassing science of Being.

(II) During an intermediate stage of Aristotle's development (represented by the seventh book of the Eudemian Ethics), he regularly noticed and worked with the possibility of systematic, or non-accidental, ambiguity, though he did not view this possibility as having any bearing on his negative claim in (I).

(III) In Metaphysics Γ2, which reports his mature views on this subject, Aristotle finally struck upon the discovery that the verb “to be” itself was a case of systematic ambiguity (of a sort which Owen labels focal meaning ambiguity). Moreover, this discovery influenced him to reverse his previous estimation of the prospects for a universal science, and even to resurrect in the Metaphysics the Platonic program that he himself had dismissed as futile in his earlier works.

Most of what I have to say concerns (III). What will be at issue, however, is not its truth. That matter is put beyond serious dispute by the relatively plain structure of Metaphysics Γ2. The chapter opens with the observation that the expression ov, which I shall translate here as “existent”, is “said in many ways” [πολλαχως λέγεται], but that this ambiguity is not the sort Aristotle calls simple “homonymy” (wherein two or more wholly unrelated meanings come to be associated with a single expression as a result of etymological happenstance). Rather, the various applications2 of ov are said to be interrelated in that they all “make reference to (or “point toward”) a one” [πρὸς ὑπ' (1003 a 33), which remark Owen paraphrases as saying that the term has focal meaning. Then, after a few lines of sketchy argumentation (which will be scrutinized below), Aristotle extracts from this the ”obvious” conclusion (cf. δηλον ov at 1003 b 15) that the study of beings, qua beings, falls within the scope of a single science.
But even though (III) is securely grounded in the text of Metaphysics Γ2, it nonetheless presents something of an impediment to full and precise understanding of Aristotle's doctrines. This is because he never explains in adequate detail just how the different applications of ὀν are all supposed to "point towards a one." Nor do his essentially programmatic remarks at 1003 a 33 - b 15 more than hint at the line of reasoning by which he moves from the missing focal meaning analysis of ὀν to his "obvious" conclusion (which is anything but obvious) that there can or must be an all-encompassing field of inquiry which studies the totality of existent things. Owen's (III) therefore sets before us two exegetical projects, the completion of one of which will be necessary for the other. We have first to reconstruct the focal meaning analysis of ὀν which is presupposed but not stated in Metaphysics Γ2. From this reconstruction will emerge materials, in the form of premises, which can then be used in combination with supplementary principles drawn from Aristotle's theory of demonstrative science to develop a plausible interpretation of the argument of Metaphysics Γ2.

The Elements of Focal Meaning Analysis

What, first of all, is the sort of the things that are supposed to "point towards a one" in the case of a πρὸς ἕν term? Owen infuses a distinctly intensional character into this condition when he paraphrases Aristotle as saying that all the senses of a πρὸς ἕν term "have one focus, one common element." But this is to import an alien ontology into a philosophical system where it has no place. Aristotle's usual manner of theorizing about language proceeds without reference to such intensional entities as meanings and senses. Instead, his style of analysis characteristically makes do with a relatively lean ontology containing nothing more than pieces of language (words and phrases) and the extra-linguistic entities they signify [σημαίνω] (i.e. stand for, or denote). Hence, an explication of the πρὸς ἕν condition which is framed in this limited ontology will be considerably truer to Aristotle than the intensional reading given to it by Owen.

A first step towards this more restrained interpretation will be to develop a general understanding of ambiguity along these lines. We may begin by noting that corresponding to every unambiguous term there is a very special phrase, called its logos, which not only signifies precisely the same thing or things signified by the term, but also stands with it in a quite intimate relation which approximates what we now think of as synonymy (De Interpretatione 21 a 30-4, Prior Analytics 49 b 5, Topics 101 b 39 - 102 a 1,