Chapter 2
From Being to Substance

Meta. iv.2 claims that being is said in many ways, yet all are *pros hen*, that is, all "are focally related to" one central point (1003a33-34). This central point is substance, and substance is therefore primary being (1003b17-8). Consequently, Aristotle insists that the science of being should be concentrated on the study of substance: "It is of substance that the philosopher must grasp the principles and the causes." (1003b18)

Probably owing to the prevailing indifferent attitude toward Aristotle's distinction between *per se* being and potential/actual being, the scholarly discussion regarding the focal structure of being has been concentrated on the relation between substance and other *per se* beings (or categories). Potential/actual being has been rarely mentioned in this context.

Since it was shown in the previous chapter that the items that are focally related to substance include both *per se* beings and potential/actual beings, to say that all other beings are focally related to substance suggests that substance, as the focal point, is not only an entity that possesses attributes, but also an entity that exists both potentially and actually. Given this, when Aristotle reduces the study of being to the study of substance, he should also be taken to imply that there should be two studies of substance: one is to treat substance as a *per se* being, and the other is to treat substance as a potential/actual being. In other words, one is to investigate substance *per se*, and the other is to investigate the potentiality and actuality of substance. It is indeed the case that in the central books of the *Meta.* Aristotle's study of being focuses on substance rather than on other *per se* beings, and focuses on substantial potentiality and actuality rather than on other potential/actual beings.

The aim of this chapter is to explore how *per se* beings are focally related to substance, and how potential/actual beings are focally related to substance. I seek to understand Aristotle's rationale of reducing the study of *per se* being to the study of the *per se* being of substance and of reducing the study of potential/actual being to the study of the potentiality and actuality of substance. I also examine, in the final section of this chapter, the relation between the focal structure of being and the nature of the science of being.

I. THE FOCAL CONNECTION OF *PER SE* BEINGS

I first discuss how other *per se* beings are focally related to substance. With regard to this relation, the dominant interpretation is G.E.L. Owen's theory of "focal meaning", developed in his classic paper "Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle". "Focal meaning" is a term Owen uses to render the Greek *pros hen*. Although "focal meaning" has gained wide currency, it is hardly a satisfactory phrase to render *pros hen*. For it gives the impression that Aristotle is talking about meaning or sense, whereas in fact Aristotle is more concerned with the ontological relations of non-linguistic beings. For this reason, I tend to avoid using it, except where it is necessary to clarify Owen's own view. A better translation should be the more literal and neutral rendering of "focal connection" or "focal relation". However, to minimize the potential confusion, I will often leave *pros hen* untranslated.

Pros hen literally means "to point towards one" or "to be related to one", and it is a metaphorical expression. In Owen's understanding, the *pros hen* of being 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." Based on this, Owen claims that the *pros hen* or "focal meaning" of being is new and revolutionary in *Meta.* iv because it introduces a "new treatment of *to on* and other cognate expressions."[1] The new treatment, according to Owen, is this. In Aristotle's earlier view in the *Organon, EE*, and others, 'being' is a homonymy and has various distinct and unconnected senses. Now the "focal meaning" treatment suggests that there is "a central sense" of being, the being of substance, so that all other beings, as being, must be explained in terms of this central sense, and they do not have the nature of being themselves. Owen's claim is a strong one:

> 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 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.[2]

Aristotle's theory of being, according to Owen, undergoes a process of development. The "focal meaning" (*pros hen*) account of being in *Meta.* iv is contradictory to, and replaces, a multiplicity account of being Aristotle held in

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[1] G. E. L. Owen, 1960, 168-9, 189. The position is further defended in Owen, 1965, 69-75, and 1966, 125-50.

[2] G. E. L. Owen, 1960, 180.

the earlier works such as the *Organon, EE.* and others, according to which beings differ in different categories, and 'being' has various distinct senses.[3]

The influence of Owen's interpretation on Aristotelian scholarship in the past several decades can hardly be exaggerated. Over the years his position has been scrutinized by different commentators in importantly different ways. Nevertheless, it remains to be the dominant framework within which to understand Aristotle's theory of being.[4]

In this section, I attempt to develop an alternative view to the alleged tension between Aristotle's multiplicity account and the *pros hen* account. Given the dominant influence of Owen's "focal meaning" interpretation, I will present my position through a comparison with it. I would like to argue that there is no radical development involved between these two views of being. These two views are not incompatible because they are making different points. The point that the multiplicity account makes is that being is said in as many ways as there are categories, and each of these ways of being is autonomous in the sense that a member in any category has a self-contained genus-differentia mode of definition which makes no reference to substance. The point that the *pros hen* account makes is an ontological one, that is, substance is the subject of other beings, and this point is already expressed in what Owen regards as early works such as the *Categories.*

It might be helpful to start with a brief summary of Owen's main arguments for his thesis that the *pros hen* account of being replaces the

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[3] Owen also proposes a related and influential view that when Aristotle holds his earlier view that beings differ and have many senses he rejects the possibility of a universal science of being, but the idea of "focal meaning" makes it possible for Aristotle to establish a universal science of being as being in *Meta.* iv (Owen, 1960, 168-9, 189). I'll examine this view in section III of this chapter.

[4] For instance, M. Ferejohn believes that the truth of Owen's position is "put beyond serious dispute by the relatively plain structure of *Metaphysics* iv. 2." (1980, 117) Recently, Owen's position seems to be re-formulated by D. Bostock in his 1994 book. Bostock conducts a careful analysis of various features of the verb 'to be' in Aristotle and articulates that there is a tension in Aristotle's view that being is said in many ways. The tension is between what Bostock calls "Account A" and "Account B". According to Account A, being applies to all kinds of things, but to primary substances in a primary way and to all other things in a derivative way. According to Account B, being applies to all kinds of things, but each application has its own distinct sense. Account B, but not A, explains why there are as many (ultimate) kinds of being as there are categories. In contrast, Account A, but not B, establishes the priority of substance. Since it is the *pros hen* structure that makes substance primary being, what Bostock calls Account A and B correspond, respectively, to the *pros hen* account and the multiplicity account of being that Own distinguishes. How, then, can these Accounts be reconciled? Like Owen, Bostock also appeals to a developmental scheme. He claims that Account B belongs to an earlier stage; and on that account, "two things from different categories will have no common element in their definitions, and therefore there can be no unified study of all the things there are. But now [in Account A] 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. For it means that we are now entitled to take the being of substance as the central or primary case of being, regarding all other cases as derivative from this." (Bostock, 1994, 67)

http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-1537-3

The Structure of Being in Aristotle's Metaphysics

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2003, XX, 238 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-1-4020-1537-3