Platonic Background of the *Topics*

It is generally recognized that the *Topics* is an early work of Aristotle's and that it may be treated as a primer of dialectical practice within the Academy.\(^1\) Therefore, if we find some statements that do not reflect mature Aristotelian views, we should not be too surprised because that is consistent with the character of dialectic as he conceives of it. On the other hand, if he accepts without question a view of essence or substance diametrically opposed to his later view, we should at least be curious and perhaps puzzled about this. This happens in Book VI, for instance, where Aristotle outlines different ways of refuting or rejecting definitions proposed by one’s opponent within the framework of a dialectical joust. In keeping with that purpose, he gives a number of ways in which one might overthrow such proposed definitions: (i) One could show that the description cannot be applied to the subject named; for instance, that the proposed definition (ὄρισμός) of man does not apply to everything called a man. (ii) One might also show that, although the definiendum has a genus, your opponent has neglected to put it into any genus or has not placed it in the proper genus (τὸ οἶκεῖον γένος). This would destroy his proposed definition because the definiendum must be placed in its proper genus with its appropriate differentiae if there is to be a genuine definition, especially since the genus is generally taken to indicate the substance of the definiendum (τῆν τοῦ ὀριζομένου οὐσίαν). Furthermore, (iii) one could overturn a proposed definition by showing that the description is not peculiar to the definiendum, given that this is at least a necessary condition for a correct definition. Finally, (iv) even if your opponent has satisfied all the foregoing, he may still have failed to give a definition inasmuch as he has not stated the essence (τὸ τί ἐν ἐνα) of the definiendum.

For the purposes of this monograph, the last way in which a proposed definition can fail turns out to be of most interest. We find it taken up again and elucidated in the fourth chapter (of Book VI) where Aristotle suggests some rules for determining whether or not one’s opponent has stated and defined the essence of the definiendum:
First of all, see if he has failed to make the definition through terms that are prior and more intelligible. For the reason why the definition is rendered is to make known the term stated, and we make things known by taking not any random terms, but such as are prior and more intelligible, as is done in demonstrations (for so it is with all teaching and learning); accordingly, it is clear that a man who does not define through terms of this kind has not defined at all.

The clear message here is that a genuine definition must be framed in terms that are both prior and more intelligible, otherwise the essence of the definiendum will not have been given. Aristotle claims that the basic purpose of definition (i.e. making known the thing in question) cannot be achieved through any chance terms but only through those that are prior and more intelligible. Thus he is assuming without explanation that such terms are essential for making known the essence of the thing to be defined. Yet, when he draws an explicit comparison with the procedure in demonstrations (ἐν ταῖς ἀποδεικτέοις), he gives us a clue as to where an explanation might be found. An additional justification for turning to the *Posterior Analytics* can be found in the echo of its opening line that is here contained in Aristotle’s parenthetical remark about “all teaching and learning” (πᾶσα διδασκαλία καὶ μάθησις).

**An Important Distinction in the *Posterior Analytics***

Since I am mainly seeking clarification for a passage from the *Topics*, I do not propose to say much here about the general project of the *Posterior Analytics*. For my purposes it is more enlightening to focus upon the statement in Book I (ch. 2) where Aristotle insists that demonstrative knowledge must proceed from premises that are true (όληθρον), primary (πρῶτον), immediate (άμέσως), more intelligible than and prior to (γνωριμωτέρων καὶ πρωτέρων) the conclusion in respect to which they are causes (αἰτίων); cf. 71b20–23. He goes on to say that demonstrative knowledge will only be possible when all of these conditions are fulfilled and when, as a result, the starting points (αἱ ἀρχαι) are appropriate to the demonstrandum. Taking each one of the conditions in turn, he briefly explains its role in demonstration. As Barnes points out in his commentary, these conditions fall roughly into two groups that contain absolute and relative features, respectively. While this helps us to understand why “priority” seems to be duplicated in the list, we still need to elucidate the precise relationship between its absolute and relative senses. Aristotle appears to equate premises that are primary in a simple sense with those that are indemonstrable
Platonic Background of the Topics • 9

(ἀναποδείκτων) and, therefore, immediate. For instance, he argues that if these premises are not primary and nondemonstrable then we must have knowledge of them through demonstration. But any such demonstration would require other premises that are themselves either primary and indemonstrable or secondary and demonstrable. Since the latter option would lead to an infinite regress, Aristotle insists there must be some premises that are simply prior and indemonstrable if genuine demonstration is to be possible. But, since such demonstration is possible, it follows that there are immediate premises that have no other premises prior to them; cf. 72a6–8. Thus, judging by the course of this argument, it would appear that the simple (or unqualified) sense of priority applies to premises (rather than terms) that are immediate and indemonstrable.

By comparison, it would seem that priority in the relative sense may be applicable to terms as well as to premises. Aristotle consistently links relative priority with what is more familiar (γνωριμώτερον) and finds it necessary to distinguish two meanings of these concepts:

There are two senses in which things are prior and more knowable. That which is prior in nature is not the same as that which is prior in relation to us, and that which is (naturally) more knowable is not the same as that which is more knowable by us. By “prior” or “more knowable” in relation to us I mean that which is nearer our perception, and by “prior” or “more knowable” in the absolute sense I mean that which is further from it. The most universal concepts are furthest from our perception, and particulars are nearest to it; and these are opposite to one another.

Though the context for this passage is not my concern here, I think it may be helpful to notice some things about the way in which the above distinction is elaborated upon by Aristotle. First, it is obvious from the Greek that πρότερον and γνωριμώτερον are comparatives frequently used in conjunction to describe related characteristics of premises and their terms. Second, having conjoined these characteristics in such a consistent fashion, he also makes the same distinction for both between their two different senses; i.e. what is prior and better known by nature (τη φύσει) is distinguished from what is prior and better known to us (προς ἡμᾶς). Yet, I have doubts about Tredennick’s conjecture that “naturally” should be supplied from the context as the implicit qualifier of the first γνωριμώτερον; cf. An. Pst. 72a1. The very fact that Aristotle leaves it without qualification suggests that ἀπλῶς would be a more appropriate epithet. Third, the close link between priority and greater intelligibility is reinforced when he goes on to explain that things closer to perception (τὰ ἐγγύτερον τῆς αἰσθήσεως) are both prior and more intelligible in relation to us. By contrast, those things that are fur-
other from perception (τὰ πορρωτερον) are both prior and more intelligible in an absolute sense (ὑπλῶς). Within the context, I think we can confidently equate this sense with priority by nature (τῇ φύσει).

Thus we can infer from what Aristotle says about the most universal things (τὰ καθόλου μάλιστα) being most remote from sensation that he would hold them to be more intelligible absolutely and prior by nature. On the other hand, particular things (τὰ καθ’ ἐκαστα) are closest to perception and, presumably, are prior and more familiar in relation to us. Such a contrast between universals and particulars with respect to natural priority should immediately strike us as odd, since it appears to reverse what is generally accepted to be the order of reality according to Aristotle. Another oddity is the apparent move from priority as a characteristic of premises to greater priority and intelligibility as characteristics of terms. Perhaps this move has something to do with the overlapping senses of priority in the original list of six characteristics Aristotle associates with the premises of a demonstrative syllogism. For instance, what is prior in an absolute sense seems to be a whole premise only, whereas the relative sense may also refer to the terms that constitute such a premise and that could have greater priority either in relation to us or by nature. If universal terms are prior by nature, as the passage suggests, they would satisfy the logical conditions applicable to premises in a demonstrative syllogism of the paradigmatic sort; i.e. first figure (Barbara).

I think that further light can be thrown on the priority condition for demonstrative premises when we look at another passage from Posterior Analytics A3, where Aristotle refutes what he regards as two false views about first principles. According to him, the necessity of knowing the primary truths (τὰ πρῶτα) has led some people to think that there is no knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), while others admit the possibility of knowledge but think that everything is demonstrable. Aristotle responds that neither view is true nor logically necessary and he refutes each of them in turn. Even though he does not identify the authors of these views, he gives us enough information to reconstruct their arguments. The first group of people, who claim that there is no knowing whatsoever, appear to give an argument in the form of a dilemma: (i) either there is an infinite regress of premises with no absolute firsts (ii) or if there are firsts these cannot be known, since they cannot be demonstrated. The basic assumption in the argument is that demonstration is the only form of knowledge, and as a result of the dilemma, it concludes that knowledge is impossible. I find the first horn to be of greatest interest because it depends on the claim that we cannot know posterior things (τὰ ὅστερα) through prior things (τὰ πρῶτα) that are not simple firsts (πρῶτα); cf. An. Pst. 72b9–10. Here we see the distinction be-
between relative and absolute priority doing some important work, since Aristotle agrees that there will be an infinite regress if none of the things that are relatively prior can be identified as something absolutely prior. On the other hand (the argument continues with the second horn), if there is a stand (ιστατω) and there are first principles (ἀρχαι), these will be unknowable because they cannot be demonstrated; cf. An. Pst. 72b11–13. Thus, if it is not possible to know the primary things (τῶν πρῶτων), neither can the inferences drawn from them be known in the simple or strict sense (ἀπλῶς ούδε κυρίως) but only hypothetically (ἐξ ὑποθέσεως). Even if we accept the conjecture about Antisthenes being the author of this dilemma, we must assume from the language that he is drawing upon the example of mathematics and its hypothetical starting points. In the Republic Plato had also noted this paradoxical feature of the paradigm science and, by way of solution, proposed that it be grounded in the highest science of dialectic. But so far as we can tell from the Posterior Analytics, Aristotle has rejected such a “mistress science” of reality and thus he offers his own resolution of the dilemma by challenging the fundamental assumption upon which it is based.

“We say,” he begins, “that not all science is demonstrative but that knowledge of immediate things is indemonstrable.” Aristotle insists it is obvious that this must be the case and goes on to offer an argument that implicitly depends upon the distinction between priority in the relative and absolute senses. Since it is necessary to know the prior things (τῶν πρῶτων) from which the demonstration is made and since this potential regress stops at the immediate things (τῶν ἀμεσῶν), he argues that these latter must be indemonstrable. Yet Aristotle is clearly aware that his solution to the dilemma is incomplete as it stands because the question about how these absolutely first things are known remains unanswered. Clarifying his position, therefore, he adds that there is not only (demonstrative) science but also “some principle of science by which we become familiar with the definitions.” Aristotle does not explain further but I think that “principle of science” must be a reference to nous, which is denoted elsewhere by precisely the same phrase. In fact, in a subsequent chapter (A 23) that rejects the possibility of an infinite regress in demonstration, we get the following suggestive parallel: just as an immediate premise (πρῶτας ἀμεσα) is the unit in a syllogism, so nous is the unit in demonstrative science; cf. An. Pst. 85a1–2. Within the context of Aristotle’s discussion, what this parallel suggests to me is that nous is the indivisible unit of measure for demonstration in the sense that it terminates any regress by being the simple principle (ἡ ἀρχὴ ἀπλοῦν) that grasps the immediate premise or the crucial middle term.
While the first group is thus refuted by the argument that there is something which is prior in an absolute sense, the claims of the second group are met with the distinction between two different senses of relative priority:

And that it is impossible to demonstrate *simpliciter* circularly is clear, if demonstration must depend on what is prior and more familiar; for it is impossible for the same things at the same time to be prior and posterior to the same things—unless one is so in the other fashion (i.e. one in relation to us, the other *simpliciter*), which fashion induction makes familiar. But if so, knowing *simpliciter* will not have been properly defined, but will be twofold. Or is the other demonstration not <demonstration> *simpliciter* in that it comes about from what is more familiar to us? 14

Briefly put, the position of the second group (sometimes conjectured to be Xenocrates and his followers) is that all knowledge is demonstrative and that everything may be demonstrated, since circular or reciprocal proofs are acceptable. In his attempted refutation, Aristotle argues that circular proof cannot be demonstration in the strict sense (ἀπλῶς), since such a demonstration must come from premises that are both prior (πρῶτα) and more intelligible (γνωριμοτέρων). Here he is obviously referring back to some of the essential conditions for demonstrative premises, which he has explained and justified in the previous passage that we examined. Appealing to the principle of contradiction, Aristotle insists that it is impossible for the same things to be simultaneously prior and posterior (άμα πρῶτα καὶ ὑπότερα) to the same things in the same respect. He concedes, of course, that this is possible in different respects, such as when something is prior to us (πρὸς ἡμᾶς) but posterior in an absolute sense (ἀπλῶς).

When he adds that this difference is made familiar by induction (ἐπαγωγή), I presume that Aristotle has in mind something similar to the previous passage, where he says that particulars are prior to us because they are closer to sensation whereas universals are prior absolutely, since they are most distant from sense perception. Thus the distinction between different senses of priority would become obvious through the ‘way’ from the particular to the universal, which is called “induction.” Now there are clear hints in the above passage that Aristotle considers the second group of thinkers to be trading upon these ambiguities in ‘priority’ so as to make their case for circular proof. If they are including induction as a kind of demonstration then his response is that knowing in the strict sense (ἀπλῶς) has not been well defined, since it would now have two senses. But even if one were to concede that the other kind of showing forth (ἡ ἑτέρα ὑπόδειξις), which begins from things more familiar to us (ἐκ τῶν ἡμῖν
Platonic Background of the Topics • 13

gνωρμωτέρων), is a sort of proof, this does not make it demonstration in the strict sense. Hence we can see that the distinction between different senses of priority and intelligibility helps Aristotle here in specifying his epistemological position vis-à-vis contemporary thinkers who held competing views on scientific knowledge. Yet, it is possible that he was initially indebted to Plato for the distinction between the way from the principles (ἀπὸ τῶν ἀρχῶν) and the way to the principles (ἐπὶ τὰς ἀρχὰς); cf. EN 1, iv, 1095a30–b3.15 Perhaps he is simply developing that distinction when he claims that there are two ways in which things can be prior and more intelligible.16

Platonic Sources for the Distinction

Let us leave this digression into the Posterior Analytics and return to the original task of clarifying a puzzling passage in the Topics. The conclusion of the passage quoted above (VI, 4, 141a26–32) is that whoever does not frame his definition in terms that are prior and more intelligible has not given a definition at all. If this were not the case, the argument goes on, there would be many definitions of the same thing. Suppose that someone gives a definition of X, while someone else gives another definition of X in terms that are prior and more intelligible. In that case both would have given definitions of the same thing, even though it is clear (according to generally accepted principles) that the latter has given the better definition. But such a state of affair is unacceptable because each thing is thought to have a single essence that makes it be just what it is.17 If there were a number of different definitions of the same thing X, this would lead to the impossible result that X has many different essences. Therefore, the argument concludes, it is obvious that whoever has not framed his definition by means of prior and more intelligible terms (διὰ προτέρων καὶ γνωρμωτέρων) has not really given a definition.

If we did not read any further into the passage, we might think that Aristotle is ignoring the distinction between different senses in which things can be called ‘prior’ and ‘more intelligible.’ But it is precisely at this point in the argument that he introduces the same distinction:

That the definition has not been stated in more intelligible terms can be taken in two senses, namely, that it is composed either of terms which are less intelligible absolutely or of terms which are less intelligible to us; for both meanings are possible. Thus absolutely the prior is more intelligible than the posterior; for example, a point is more intelligible than a line, a line than a plane, a plane
than a solid; just as also a unit is more intelligible than a number, since it is prior to and the starting-point of all number. Similarly a letter is more intelligible than a syllable. To us, however, the converse sometimes happens; for a solid falls most under our perception, and a plane more than a line, a line more than a point. For most people recognise such things as solids and planes before they recognise lines and points; for the former can be grasped by an ordinary understanding, the latter only by one which is accurate and superior.

What is of great interest about this passage is that it prompts us to ask whether Aristotle’s own metaphysical stance here is not characteristically Platonic. Before addressing these general issues, however, let us take a closer look at the passage itself. Just as in the parallel passage from the Posterior Analytics, Aristotle draws a general distinction between what is more intelligible absolutely (ἀπλοῦς) and what is more intelligible to us (πρὸς ἡμᾶς). At first sight it would appear that priority has been dropped from the distinction but a more careful scrutiny shows that this is not the case. The notion of priority, in fact, serves as an objective point of reference in the explanation of what it means to say that something is “more intelligible” in an absolute sense. When we look at the examples that are used in this explanation, it becomes more obvious that a certain schema of priority is already present as a background assumption. For instance, the point is said to be more intelligible in an absolute sense than the line because it is prior to it. Similarly, within the same schema of priority, a line is held to be more intelligible than a plane, while a plane is in turn more intelligible than a solid. We are not told explicitly what kind of priority Aristotle has in mind but we may hazard a guess from the guiding example in the passage. The unit is said to be more intelligible than number because it is prior to (πρῶτον) and the principle of (ἀρχή) all number. From such an explanation one can safely conjecture that natural priority is involved and this is confirmed by the close link between this kind of priority and greater intelligibility in an absolute sense. Since the relationship between unit and number is made the paradigm for such priority, we can also apply the explanation generally to the other parallel examples. Thus we can say that the point is more intelligible than the line, and the line more so than the plane, and the plane more so than the solid, since each is a principle of the other and hence prior to it by nature.

In fact, what is being used here by Aristotle for the purposes of illustration is recognizable as an Academic scheme of natural priority according to which the plane, for instance, is prior to the solid because planes both limit and mark off a body as a definite thing. Hence (the argument goes), when these limits are destroyed, the whole body is also destroyed—ὅν ἀναρκομένον ἀναρκεῖται τὸ ὅλον—cf. Met. 1017b18–19. When Aristotle
is listing the various meanings of 'substance' (οὐσία) at *Metaphysics* Delta 8, he uses this formulaic phrase together with the same examples to characterize this way of thinking about substance. Furthermore, at Beta 5 (1002a4–12), he reports a similar criterion as guiding some unnamed thinkers to the conclusion that the body (τὸ σώμα) is less substantial (ἡπτον οὐσία) than the planes and lines that limit and define it. 22 The basic reason given for this conclusion is that these defining boundaries "are thought to be capable of existing without body, whereas the body cannot exist without them." 23 Clearly, this passage presents us with a concrete application of the formula contained in the Delta passage. In fact, both passages may be taken as parallel accounts of the same way of thinking about substance, which was probably influential within the Academy. 24 When pursued to its logical conclusion, Aristotle claims, this line of thinking yields the result that numbers are prior in substance to everything else because they are the defining limits without which other things would not exist. 25

Now, when we recall that the numerical unit (μονάς) is sometimes described as a point without position, 26 we can recognize the influence of such thinking in the *Topics* passage under scrutiny. It is plausible to see the schema of point, line, plane, and solid as having been ultimately derived from the unit through the addition of a dimension in each case. This appears to be in the background also at *Posterior Analytics* A 27, where Aristotle says that the science of arithmetic is more accurate than and prior to the science of geometry because the former depends upon fewer principles than the latter science, which brings in additional principles. In explaining what he means by "from addition" (ἐκ προσθέσεως), he contrasts the point with the unit as follows: whereas the unit is a substance without position (οὐσία ἄθετος), the point is a substance with position (οὐσία θετος) and hence involves the addition of a dimension within which a point can be located. I find it very significant that Aristotle should use 'substance' terminology here with reference to mathematical objects like the unit and the point, especially within the context of his discussion of the priority and the accuracy of the sciences in relation to each other. What it suggests to me is that the metaphysical framework for such a discussion is still being structured by the Platonic assumption that priority in knowledge also involves ontological priority. 27 If one accepts this assumption, then it follows that the unit is prior in substance to the point, the point to the line, the line to the plane, and the plane to the solid. This constitutes a system of non-reversible ontological dependence, which was probably reflected in the Academic rules for the proper order of mathematical demonstration. Such a system can also be seen to result from an application of the specific crite-
rion for priority "according to nature and substance" (κατὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐσίαν), which Aristotle attributes to Plato by name in *Metaphysics* Delta 11. But I will postpone my discussion of this criterion until chapters 2 and 3, where I will be comparing Aristotle's different treatments of the many senses of priority.

Having established this Academic perspective, I can now bring out some implications hidden in the above passage from the *Topics*. When Aristotle distinguishes between what is more intelligible to us and what is more intelligible absolutely, it is clear from his examples that he has in mind the practice of mathematics within the Academy. He feels compelled to make this distinction because he recognizes that the mathematical sciences require a kind of thinking that is different from the ordinary. Thus, at the end of the passage, he contrasts our ordinary intelligence (τῆς τυχόντος ... διανοίας) with the precise and extraordinary (ἀκριβοῦς καὶ περιττής) understanding demanded in mathematics. Since our ordinary understanding of things is dominated by sense perception, what is more intelligible to us sometimes happens to be the complete reverse of what is more intelligible by nature, especially in the case of mathematical objects. For instance, as Aristotle points out, the solid (τὸ στέρεον) is most obvious to sense perception, while the plane (τὸ ἐπίπεδον) is more obvious than the line (τῆς γραμμῆς), and the line more so than the point (τοῦ σημείου).

Hence we can see that the order established by perception cuts completely against the order of definition in mathematics. Yet, in spite of this, Aristotle goes on to insist that the mathematical order of definition is "more scientific" (ἐπιστημονικῶτερον), and on this basis, he gives the following advice:

Absolutely, therefore, the attempt to come to know what is posterior by means of what is prior is better because such (a way) is more scientific. But yet, for those who are unable to come to know by means of such (prior) things, it may perhaps be necessary that the account be given by means of those things which are familiar to them. Among definitions of this kind are those of a point, a line, and a plane, all of which clarify the prior through the posterior; for they say that a point is the limit of a line, a line that of a plane, a plane that of a solid. However, one must not hide the fact that those who define in this way cannot show the essence of what they define, unless it so happens that the same thing is both more familiar to us and also absolutely. The reason for this is that a correct definition must define a thing through its genus and its differentiae, and these belong to the order of things which are absolutely more familiar than, and prior to, the species. For the genus and the differentia destroy the species, so that these are prior to the species.
The emphatic position of "absolutely" (ἀπλάς) clearly establishes the point of view from which Aristotle insists that it is "better" (βέλτιον) to try to gain knowledge of posterior things (τὰ ύστερα) by means of what is prior (διὰ τῶν πρῶτων). From what has gone before, we may conjecture that he has in mind the mathematical procedure of defining what is posterior in terms of what is prior by nature, according to the criterion of priority already outlined. Therefore, given the paradigmatic role of mathematics within the Academy, it should not surprise us to find such a procedure being called "more scientific." Still, in contrast to this, there is another approach to definition that Aristotle seems ready to concede as being necessary in the case of people who are not used to acquiring knowledge in the scientific manner. Possibly he has in mind the situation of a learner with an untutored intelligence who is making his first approach to a new subject matter. In such a case it may be necessary, for instance, to describe a figure as "the limit of a solid" (στέρεον πέρας), just as Socrates does in the Meno (76A) for the benefit of a particularly obdurate student. Our own appreciation of the irony involved in this exchange between Socrates and Meno is further enhanced by the knowledge that such a definition would be treated as unscientific within the Academy.

But the whole passage in the Meno (75–77) seems to provide evidence for the existence of an alternative tradition of "concrete" definition among some Presocratic thinkers. This appears to be confirmed by Aristotle in the present passage from the Topics, where he gives examples of such alternative definitions for mathematical entities like the solid, the plane, the line, and the point. For instance, we find him giving a 'definition' of the plane as "the limit of a solid" (στέρεον ... πέρας) and this is just one of a series of such definitions proposed by some unnamed thinkers. According to Aristotle, all of these definitions provide examples of defining what is prior in terms of what is posterior.

But he clearly hews the Platonic line when he insists that those people who define in this way cannot show the essence (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι) of the definiendum, unless it should so happen that the same thing is both more intelligible to us (ημᾶς ... γνώριμωτερον) and more intelligible absolutely (ἀπλάς). In view of what has gone before, I think we may safely conclude that Aristotle does not consider such a coincidence of the two senses of 'more intelligible' to be the usual state of affairs with respect to mathematical entities. Furthermore, in a subsequent passage (142a9–12), he says that what is intelligible absolutely (τὸ ἀπλάς γνώριμον) is not identical with what is intelligible to everyone (τὸ πάσι γνώριμον) but rather with what is intelligible to those who are in a sound state of understanding (τοῖς ἑ
Similarly, he says, what is healthy absolutely (τὸ ἀτλάντος υγειόν) is identical with what is healthy for those in sound physical condition. In order to avoid any subjectivist misunderstandings of this whole passage, we must interpret it in the light of a prior discussion (141b34–142a8) emphasizing that a true definition is not given merely in terms more intelligible to any individual, since such terms may change over time according to the state of knowledge of the person involved. At the beginning, for instance, sensible things may be more familiar to him but this is reversed as his knowledge becomes more accurate. Nevertheless, those who claim that a definition must be given in terms that are more familiar to each individual are thereby implying that there are at least two definitions of the same thing. But this yields the absurd conclusion that the same thing has two or more essences. Therefore, the only way to guarantee that the same thing will have one and the same definition is to insist that it be formulated in terms that are more intelligible absolutely.31

We can see from this whole discussion that Aristotle does not intend to deny the existence of absolute standards of health and intelligibility. In fact, he is clearly presupposing such standards when he talks about people who are in a sound state of physical or intellectual health. The point is that only a few people ever come close to reaching these standards, and hence, they are the best available measures of what is healthy or more intelligible in an absolute sense. He implicitly suggests that some process of education is usually necessary to bring what is more intelligible to us into line with what is more intelligible by nature. This is the case especially for exact sciences like mathematics, which require a mode of thought that is different from the ordinary and it also seems to be true of the Platonic science of dialectic, so far as we can judge from the above passage where Aristotle explains that a good definition of a thing must be framed in terms of its genus and proper differentiae. Obviously, these conditions for correct definition are part of the legacy of Plato, since they are intimately related to the method of division in dialectic.

This is implicitly confirmed by Aristotle himself in this Topics passage when he goes on to explain why the genus and the differentiae are absolutely prior to and more intelligible than the species. In explaining why they are prior, he appeals to what is recognizable as a Platonic criterion; i.e. that the removal of the genus or differentiae can destroy (συναναβαι) the species and hence they are prior to it.32 In other words, the species cannot exist without the genus and the differentiae; whereas the reverse is not the case. This may be taken as a specific application of the general criterion for priority with respect to substance and nature, which Aristotle attributes to Plato elsewhere. Hence, from the point of view being adopted here, there is no
doubt the genus is naturally prior to the species. Indeed, the Platonic perspective throws more light on Aristotle's emphatic statement that the essence (τὸ τί ἐστὶ) can be made known only through terms that are prior and more intelligible in the absolute sense. It is clear how the definition of a species by means of its genus and appropriate differentiae satisfies this condition, since they are prior to, and more intelligible than, the species according to the relevant Platonic criterion. Another reason for this being the correct mode of definition has already been given at the beginning of Book VI, where Aristotle says that the genus seems to indicate the substance of the definiendum. Hence, in order to give a true definition of any species, it is crucial to find its proper genus. The failure to give such a definition can be detected through the so-called commonplace (τὸνόμος) dealing with the prior and the more intelligible; cf. Top. 142b20-22.

Yet, in spite of the dialectical character of this whole passage from the Topics, Aristotle's espousal of a Platonic view on correct definition should raise some question in our minds about his ontological stance. There is a prima facie case for saying that he uncritically adopts some fundamental elements of Plato's ontology. For instance, Aristotle seems to accept without reservation that the genus is naturally prior to, and more intelligible than, the species in an absolute sense. But surely this conflicts with what he says elsewhere about the universal genus being less substantial (and hence posterior by nature) than the particular species. From my perspective, however, what is most interesting about this passage is Aristotle's apparent acceptance of the natural priority of point to line to plane to solid. This would suggest that, at a certain point in his philosophical development, he accepted the mathematical ontology of the Platonists because it fitted the "more scientific" procedure of definition. As evidence for this, we might count his refusal to accept that any alternate definitions could show the essence (τὸ τί ἐστὶ) of the definiendum. But, on the other hand, we should perhaps note that essence is the most logical of Aristotle's four causes. Thus he need not be making a specific ontological commitment when he insists that the essence of a definiendum can be given only by a definition that is formally correct; i.e. with proper genus and appropriate differentiae. In order to illustrate such correct definitions, he might be simply drawing upon the standard examples of mathematical definition within the Academy, without accepting the concomitant ontological framework. But such a difficult balancing act Aristotle only perfects later (if at all) in Metaphysics Mu, and there is no evidence in the Topics that he has distinguished between logical and ontological implications. Furthermore, the present passage contains no hint that he is trying to distance himself from Platonism in mathematics.
What is clear from this passage, however, is that the question about priority is a central one in the Platonic tradition that Aristotle inherited. Therefore, in developing his own problematic, he is likely to rethink this question. My proposal in this monograph is that a revealing way to study this problem-situation would be to compare and contrast a number of the different elaborations on the many senses of priority we find throughout the Aristotelian corpus. In fact, I find this more revealing in certain respects than his thesis about the many senses of being, even though there is a close connection between the two. Within the compass of a short monograph, however, I can only cover this ground with reference to some particular aspects of Aristotle’s thought and I have already made a start with the epistemological distinction between what is prior to us and what is prior absolutely or by nature.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to locate within the epistemological contexts of the Topics and the Posterior Analytics what I take to be an early use by Aristotle of the distinction between different senses of priority so as to resolve inherited problems. By means of such an approach, I hope to promote a fresh understanding of Aristotle’s philosophical problem-situation by unearthing its Platonic background with reference to the topic of priority. There is every reason to believe that Plato attached great importance to priority in his own thinking, since a superficial survey of the dialogues yields at least five different senses that have philosophical significance. Thus it should be quite revealing to examine how Aristotle develops his own philosophical views with reference to this preestablished matrix of meanings. Even though I am confining myself of necessity to his logical and metaphysical works in which priority seems to play a greater role, there is no reason why this line of inquiry could not be pursued also for his ethical and physical works.