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# Philoponus on the Priority of Substances

RIIN SIRKEL\*

**ABSTRACT** One of the issues that deeply interested the philosophers of late antiquity, the Ancient Greek Commentators, concerns the priority of substances. While questions concerning ontological priority have recently attracted attention in Aristotelian scholarship and contemporary metaphysics, the Commentators' discussions have not yet received the attention they deserve. My aim is to start to fill in this gap, by focusing on John Philoponus's account of the priority of substances in his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*. In particular, I aim to show how Philoponus develops and defends the view that, while particular substances enjoy priority over accidents and concepts ("universals after the many"), they do not enjoy priority over *all* other things. Rather, a certain type of universal substance ("universals prior to the many") enjoys priority over particulars.

**KEYWORDS** Philoponus, Aristotle, ontological priority, substance, essence

QUESTIONS CONCERNING ONTOLOGICAL PRIORITY and dependence have recently received significant attention in Aristotelian scholarship and contemporary metaphysics. Indeed, contemporary metaphysics is undergoing what can be characterized as an "Aristotelian turn," and emphasis on priority and dependence is a central part of this turn.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the most detailed and systematic discussions of ontological priority in Ancient philosophy are to be found in the works of the Ancient Greek Commentators, and of the Platonic Commentators (300–600 CE) in particular. Their accounts of priority have not yet received the attention they deserve, and the aim of this paper is to start to fill in this gap. The paper focuses on John Philoponus's (fl. 6th century CE) account of the priority of substances, as it emerges from his comments on Aristotle's *Categories* and especially from his discussion of chapter 5 of *Categories*.

The notion of priority plays an important role in the Commentators' works on *Categories*, and their interest therein is at least partly motivated by their belief that Aristotle's philosophy is in harmony (*συμφωνία*) with Plato's. As Miira Tuominen suggests, the most probable reason why the Commentators' ontological debates

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<sup>1</sup>See Tahko, *Contemporary Aristotelian Metaphysics*; Sirkel and Tahko, *Aristotelian Metaphysics: Essence and Ground*.

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centered on *Categories* is that what Aristotle says in this work is more difficult to harmonize with Platonic assumptions than what he says in *Metaphysics*.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, Aristotle speaks of perceptible particulars such as humans and horses as “primary substances,” which suggests that he intends to ascribe to particular substances priority over all other things, both non-substances as well as “secondary substances,” the species and genera under which particulars fall. Therefore, the Commentators had some explaining to do to show that Aristotle’s answer to the question “What is prior to what?” is in harmony with the Platonic answer that it is Forms that enjoy priority over perceptible particulars.

What it means to say that Aristotle’s answer is “in harmony” with Plato’s is not an altogether simple matter; but minimally, it means that the Commentators take their answers to be compatible and so not in contradiction with one another.<sup>3</sup> It is reasonably clear that the harmony thesis lurks also in the background of Philoponus’s discussion, for he holds that the priority claim on behalf of particular substances is compatible with the existence of entities (“universals prior to the many”) that are prior to particular substances. Nevertheless, this paper is not concerned with the harmony thesis as such, but aims to offer a systematic examination of Philoponus’s views on priority in his comments on *Categories*. Since he follows rather closely his teacher Ammonius’s (c. 435/45–517/26) commentary on *Categories*, that is, a commentary anonymously drawn from the voice of Ammonius, much of what is said here about Philoponus applies to Ammonius as well (unless otherwise indicated).<sup>4</sup>

The paper is divided into three sections. In section 1, I will examine Philoponus’s notion of “priority by nature,” and his account of the priority relations between substances and non-substances, which are lumped together as “accidents.” Sections 2 and 3 will focus on his account of the priority relations within the category of substance, that is, between “particular substances” and “universal substances,” as he calls them. I will show how Philoponus develops and defends the view that, while particular substances enjoy natural priority over accidents, Aristotle does not intend to ascribe to them priority over *all* other things. Rather, a certain type of universal substance (“universals prior to the many”) enjoys natural priority over particular substances. While my main aim in this paper is to clarify Philoponus’s views on priority, I will end with a brief discussion of whether his views are in fact compatible with Aristotle’s.

<sup>2</sup>Tuominen, *The Commentators*, 201.

<sup>3</sup>For an association of ‘harmony’ with ‘compatibility,’ see Karamanolis, *Plato and Aristotle*, 1–5, and Tuominen, *The Commentators*, 201. See also Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, who says that ‘harmony’ does not mean merely “not in contradiction,” for “there are countless philosophical positions that are harmonious in this sense simply because they are logically unconnected” (3). I agree that to propose ‘compatibility’ as a general interpretation of ‘harmony’ might be insufficient, but it is sufficient for the purposes of this paper, which is concerned with Philoponus’s explanation of how the Aristotelian and Platonic answers to *one and the same* question—namely, “What is prior to what?”—are in harmony.

<sup>4</sup>See Sorabji, “Introduction,” 3–8. He argues that the commentary on *Categories* is a comparatively early commentary of Philoponus, and discusses Philoponus’s additions to the commentary anonymously drawn from the voice of Ammonius, i.e. the anonymous record of Ammonius.

Philoponus begins his commentary on chapter 5 of *Categories* by addressing the question of why Aristotle, after giving us a list of categories in chapter 4, starts his detailed discussion of them with substance. As Jonathan Barnes remarks, “[Q]uestions of order enormously interested philosophers of late antiquity, and are rarely of any significance.”<sup>5</sup> Rarely, perhaps, but Philoponus’s answer to this question is significant. He says that Aristotle proceeds in this way because substance is “prior by nature” (πρώτη φύσει) to all other categories (“accidents”), and the thrust of this sort of priority is plainly ontological. Part of the reason why this is significant is that Philoponus, like other Commentators after Porphyry, takes *Categories* to be a work that treats “expressions that signify things through mediating concepts” (9, 14–15; 10, 7–8; 12, 31–33).<sup>6</sup> In the general scheme of Aristotle’s works, he classifies it as a logical, rather than a metaphysical work, which treats things as they are (beings *qua* beings). From this it might be tempting to conclude that *Categories* is devoid of ontological commitments, which would certainly make the harmonization effort easier.<sup>7</sup> Yet this is not how the Commentators and Philoponus in particular proceed. His discussion of the priority of substances suggests that he takes *Categories* to have ontological commitments, although these commitments can be accommodated within a wider metaphysical framework.<sup>8</sup>

Philoponus thus associates the notion of substance with what is prior by nature. What sort of priority is “priority by nature”? He offers the following explanation:

[Substance] is brought along with [συνεισφέρεται] the others (no matter what kind of accident there is, in all cases there will be a substance to which it attaches as an accident), but it does not bring along the others (for even if there is a substance, it is not always the case that there is each of the others); and it does away with [συναναίρει] the others along with itself, but is not done away with [along with the others]. But what does away but is not done away with, and is brought along but does not bring along, was agreed to be prior by nature. Thus substance is prior by nature to the rest [of the categories]. (49, 10–16)

<sup>5</sup>Barnes, *Porphyry*, 28.

<sup>6</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Philoponus are to his commentary on Aristotle’s *Categories* (*in Cat.*). References to the Ancient commentaries on Aristotle give page and line numbers of Greek texts published in *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (*CAG*). I rely on English translations of the commentaries published in the Ancient Commentators on Aristotle series, edited by Richard Sorabji and Michael Griffin. The translation of Philoponus’s comments on *Categories* 1–5 is published in the same series, and is a combined effort of myself, Martin Tweedale, and John Harris. However, I have modified it in a few places following the suggestion of an anonymous referee.

The view that *Categories* is about expressions that signify things via concepts is usually ascribed to Porphyry. See Simplicius, *in Cat.* 10, 20–23. Philoponus, however, ascribes to Porphyry the view that *Categories* is about concepts alone (9, 4–6). This is surprising, as Porphyry nowhere says that the categories are mere concepts (or mere expressions). Rather, he emphasizes that *Categories* concerns “simple significant expressions insofar as they signify things” (*in Cat.* 58, 3–6), to which his student Iamblichus is reported (Olympiodorus, *in Cat.* 28, 25–28) to have made the qualification that signification works through concepts (νοήματα). See also n. 41.

<sup>7</sup>See Wehrle, *The Myth*, who uses the Commentators to argue that “the *Categories* should be regarded as *logical*, not *ontological*, and in particular, as *semantical*, not *metaphysical*” (167).

<sup>8</sup>A similar interpretation of Porphyry is defended by Strange, “Introduction,” 10.

He continues:

To put it yet another way, substance is self-subsistent [αὐθυπόστατος] and does not need others for its existence [ὑπαρξίς], while the others have their being [εἶναι] in it. For if substance exists, it is [not] necessary that there are the other categories; but if it does not exist, the others could not subsist [ὑποστήναι] either.<sup>9</sup> (49, 19–22)

According to Philoponus, then, something is prior by nature to something else just in case the latter is done away with along with the former but not conversely, and the latter brings along the former but not conversely. Accordingly, substances are prior to accidents in that accidents are done away with along with substances but not conversely, and they bring along substances but not conversely. Philoponus's continued discussion suggests that the claim that accidents bring along substances should be understood as meaning the same as this: if accidents exist, then so do substances. Similarly, the claim that accidents are done away with along with substances means that if substances did not exist, then neither would accidents.<sup>10</sup> Thus understood, these claims emphasize the requirements accidents need to meet in order to exist at all, namely they need substances to exist in order to exist—if you do away with substances, you have thereby done away with accidents. At the same time, Philoponus's claims in the second passage suggest that he does not want to assert merely that without substances accidents would not exist, but that they could not exist without them: it is *necessary* that accidents exist only if substances do, whereas it is *not necessary* that substances exist only if accidents do.

It is noteworthy that Philoponus offers the modal formulation as an explication of the claim that “substance is self-subsistent and does not need others for its existence, while the others have their being in it” (49, 19–20). This seems to be a general claim about the dependence relation between substances and accidents, namely substances do not depend on accidents for their existence, while accidents depend on substances for their existence—the dependence (or “needing”) is thus asymmetrical. Admittedly, there is more than one way to cash out the details of this general claim.<sup>11</sup> Philoponus construes their asymmetrical dependence relation modally, holding that accidents depend on substances in that they cannot exist without them, though not conversely. This suggests that he adopts what is now often called the “modal-existential” notion of priority:  $x$  is prior to  $y$  just in case  $y$  cannot exist without  $x$ , while  $x$  can exist without  $y$ . Or equivalently: necessarily,  $y$  exists only if  $x$  does, but not conversely.

This notion of priority is associated with what Aristotle calls in *Metaphysics* Δ “priority by nature and substance,” which is enjoyed by “those things which can

<sup>9</sup>Philoponus does not add ‘not’ (οὐκ) before ‘necessary’: οὐσίας γὰρ οὐσης ἀνάγκη τὰς ἄλλας εἶναι κατηγορίας, μὴ οὐσης δὲ ἀδύνατόν ἐστι τὰς ἄλλας ὑποστήναι. But if he intends to say that “if substances exist, it is necessary that there are the other categories,” then this conflicts with his previous claim that substances do *not* need others for their existence. Further, Philoponus's formulation is extremely close in wording to Ammonius's, which includes ‘not’ before ‘necessary’: οὐσίας γὰρ οὐσης οὐκ ἀνάγκη τὰς ἄλλας εἶναι κατηγορίας, ταύτης δὲ μὴ οὐσης οὐ δυνατόν τὰς ἄλλας ὑποστήναι (*in Cat.* 35, 15–16). All things considered, it is probable that the omission of οὐκ was an error or carelessness on Philoponus's part.

<sup>10</sup>These claims are understood in a similar way by Barnes, *Porphry*, 244–53, 361–64.

<sup>11</sup>See e.g. Correia, *Existential Dependence*, for different ways of explicating the claim that  $x$  depends on  $y$  iff  $x$  needs  $y$  to exist in order to exist.

exist without [ἐνδέχεται εἶναι ἄνευ] other things, while the others cannot exist without them—this distinction was used by Plato” (1019a1–4). A few comments are in order here. Aristotle’s formulation of natural priority proceeds in terms of εἶναι (“exist,” “be”), while Philoponus uses also the verb ὑποστήναι (“subsist,” “exist”), and its associated noun ὑπόστασις (“subsistence”). The precise force of this verb is not easy to determine, but in this context it seems to be synonymous with ‘exist,’ which should be understood as “exist in reality.”<sup>12</sup> Philoponus says that substances (unlike accidents) subsist by themselves, which is treated as equivalent to existing by themselves, that is, not needing accidents for their existence. Thus his claims could be translated by ‘exist’ throughout, although I continue to use ‘subsist’ so that the reader can track the word in the text. Further, the verb εἶναι in Aristotle’s formulation is standardly translated as ‘exist,’ but it need not be so translated. Using the more neutral terminology of ‘being,’ we may translate his formulation as: “Those things [are prior by nature] that can *be* without other things, while the others cannot *be* without them.” Accordingly, we may translate Philoponus’s assertion in the second passage as: “For if substance is, it is [not] necessary for the other categories to be; but if it is not, the others could not subsist either.” Nonetheless, the translation in terms of existence is more appropriate in this instance. The above assertion is a further explication of his initial account of priority, which proceeds in terms of ‘bringing along’ and ‘doing away,’ which have existential connotations, and thus support the existential construal of priority.<sup>13</sup> It is thus reasonably safe to conclude that Philoponus associates the notion of substance with the modal-existential notion of priority.

Aristotle says in *Metaphysics* Δ that this notion of priority was “used” by Plato, presumably in claiming that Forms enjoy priority over their participants. This may well be what Philoponus has in mind when he says that what satisfies this account of priority “was agreed to be prior by nature” (49, 15). He does not refer here to anything he has said earlier, so he might be emphasizing that the modal-existential notion of priority was agreed to be *the* notion of priority by both Plato and Aristotle. Whatever we make of this proposal, it is true that this “agreed upon” notion was for a long time *the* notion of priority, and for that matter, of substance.<sup>14</sup> It is only

<sup>12</sup>At 9, 17–18 Philoponus contrasts subsisting with being in bare thought, and offers the hippocentaur and goat-stag as examples of items that are in bare thought. Thus, subsisting implies existing in reality as contrasted with having mere conceptual existence. A similar contrast occurs in Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, at 1, 10–11. See also Barnes (*Porphyry*, 40), who emphasizes that Porphyry uses ‘subsist’ synonymously with ‘exist.’

<sup>13</sup>Peramatzis, *Priority*, chs. 8–9, sees Aristotle’s appeal to terms such as ἀναρπίσθαι (‘done away,’ ‘eliminated’) in his criticism of Platonist priority (in *Eudemian Ethics* 1217b2–15) as an indication that Aristotle ascribes to Plato a modal-existential notion of priority. He emphasizes, however, that in his formulation of ontological priority in *Metaphysics* D, Aristotle uses the weaker, less committal term ‘to be’ (εἶναι), which may imply either an existential or essential construal, and argues that Aristotle’s disagreement with Plato consists in rejecting the existential construal of priority. Similarly, Philoponus appeals to the notion συναρπίειν, which suggest an existential construal of priority; only he ascribes the modal-existential notion of priority to Aristotle himself.

<sup>14</sup>That is, substances are often construed as existentially independent entities. This construal is sometimes traced back to Descartes (see e.g. Tahko and Lowe, “Ontological Dependence”), though it can be found already in the Commentators. They seem to be the first ones to associate the notion of substance with the modal-existential notion of priority, whereas Aristotle, although he recognizes this notion of priority, never says that substances can exist without non-substances but not conversely.

relatively recently that it has been subjected to scrutiny both in contemporary metaphysics and Aristotelian scholarship. Even if we agree that Aristotle takes Platonic Forms to be prior to their participants in that they can exist without their participants but not conversely, it is not obvious that his substances could enjoy the same sort of priority over accidents. As Daniel Devereux says, “[I]t is just this kind of priority that Forms have in relation to their participants, but it does not seem to fit Aristotle’s conception of the relationship between substances and non-substances.”<sup>15</sup> For, he explains, “the claim that qualities, quantities, relations, etc. cannot exist without substances is at least understandable, but what could be meant by the claim that substance can exist without any of these attributes?”<sup>16</sup> Is it not the case that if substances exist, they must be of some color, of some weight, in some place, and so on?

The Commentators are aware of this difficulty, as is suggested by their discussion of objections leveled against Aristotle’s definition of “being in a subject” in chapter 2 of *Categories*: “I call ‘in a subject’ that which is in something, not belonging as a part, and cannot be separately from what it is in” (1a24). This was taken to be a definition of an accident, and one of the objections was that this definition turns bodies like Socrates into accidents; for, as Philoponus puts it, “[T]hey say that Socrates being in a place or in a time is in something, and not as a part in the whole (for he is not part of the place or time) and he cannot be separated from either place or time” (33, 10–12). A common response to this objection, found already in Porphyry, runs as follows: “Socrates is always in a place, but he departs from the place he was previously in and comes to be in different places, while an accident can in no way depart from what it is in” (*in Cat.* 79, 20–22, trans. Strange).<sup>17</sup> Porphyry thus agrees that Socrates cannot exist without being in any place whatsoever, but insists that he can exist without being in the place in which he is because he can move to another place. This response implies that the above definition applies to particular accidents, which are individuated by their subject and are asymmetrically dependent on them, for example, Socrates can exist without being in the place in which he is, whereas Socrates’s place cannot exist without Socrates. Nonetheless, to propose this as an account of priority of substances seems unsatisfactory. This response would allow us to ascribe to substances priority over particular accidents (e.g. this place in which Socrates is), but not over universal accidents (“generic place,” as Dexippus calls it).<sup>18</sup> Hence, this response restricts the class of things to which substances are prior to particular accidents, and this, as Devereux says, “does not seem enough to justify the blanket statement that ‘substance can exist without non-substances.’”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Devereux, “Separation,” 206. See also Corkum, “Dependence,” and Peramatzis, *Priority*, ch. 11, who both argue that the modal-existential account of priority fails to illuminate priority relations between substances and non-substances.

<sup>16</sup>Devereux, “Separation,” 206.

<sup>17</sup>A similar response is found also in Ammonius, *in Cat.* 27, 21–23; Dexippus, *in Cat.* 22, 32–33.

<sup>18</sup>Dexippus, *in Cat.* 22, 32–33. In the terminology of chapter 2 of *Categories*, this response would allow us to ascribe to substances priority over items that are “in a subject” but not “said of a subject,” though not over items that are both “in a subject” and “said of a subject.” The Commentators call these items “particular accidents” and “universal accidents,” respectively.

<sup>19</sup>Devereux, “Separation,” 206. See also Corkum, “Dependence,” 74.



Now Philoponus's response is somewhat different and quite interesting:

For an accident cannot be separated from what it is in, but its separation means instant destruction. Bodies, however, even if they were separated from every place, would be [εἶναι, exist] nonetheless. For a body, insofar as it is a body, does not need either a place or a time for its own subsistence [ὑπόστασις], but rather has these as concomitants [παρακολουθήματα] like a person walking in the light has his shadow as a concomitant that contributes nothing to his being [οὐσία, essence]. In contrast, bodies contribute to the subsistence of accidents, for without bodies, accidents would not subsist.<sup>20</sup> (33, 13–20)

This passage is evidently intended to support the conclusion that substances (or, more precisely, bodies) differ from accidents in that they are self-subsistent and do not need accidents for their subsistence/existence (ὑπόστασις). Philoponus says that “a body, insofar as it is a body, does not need either a place or a time for its own subsistence,” as place and time contribute nothing to its being (οὐσία), where ‘being’ appears to refer to essential being (i.e. its being what it is), whereas “bodies contribute to the subsistence of accidents.” His claim here seems to be that substances do not need accidents for their subsistence, as accidents do not contribute to what a given substance is (i.e. its essence), whereas substances contribute to the essence and so also to the subsistence of accidents.

Thus, substances are what they are independently of accidents; for example, Socrates is what he is (a mortal rational animal) without being in a place or time, and so he does not need them for his subsistence.

How are we to understand this? After all, we encountered the claim that “substance is self-subsistent and does not need others for its existence” also in his comments on chapter 5. There he construed this claim in modal-existential terms: substances do not need accidents for their existence in that they can exist without accidents. One option is to see Philoponus here as offering an alternative construal of this claim that is non-modal in character and proceeds in essentialist terms, for example, substances do not need accidents for their existence in that they are what they are independently of accidents (accidents contribute nothing to what they are).<sup>21</sup> This construal would start to address the problems with the modal-existential notion of priority, but we would also face the difficulty of reconciling it with Philoponus's discussion of natural priority, which proceeds in modal-existential terms. Another option is to see Philoponus not as developing an alternative notion of priority but as supporting the modal-existential priority of substances by linking it with their essential independence. That is, he assumes

<sup>20</sup>For a similar remark, see Ammonius, *in Cat.* 27, 25–28.

<sup>21</sup>There is presumably more than one way to cash out the details of this construal. If we want to preserve the existential implication (rather than develop this notion in purely essentialist terms), we might ascribe to Philoponus an “essential-existential” notion of priority:  $x$  is prior to  $y$  just in case  $y$  is essentially such that it exists only if  $x$  does, whereas  $x$  is not essentially such that it exists only if  $y$  does. Consider the difference from the modal-existential account: we may agree that Socrates cannot exist without being in a place or time, and yet deny that Socrates by his nature needs place and time for existence. Whether or not we agree with this proposal (we might want to argue that spatiotemporal features are essential for bodies in order to exist), it would give us a more subtle notion of priority, which starts to address the problems with the modal-existential account. For a further discussion of the difference between modal-existential and essential-existential approaches, see Correia, *Existential Dependence*, ch. 2; and Koslicki, “Ontological Dependence,” 38–51.



also in the above passage that substances do not need accidents in that they can exist without them, but specifies that their capacity for independent existence is tied to, or perhaps follows from, their essential independence. Thus, it is not necessary for a body like Socrates to exist in a place or time, given that he is what he is independently of being in a place or time.

The latter option is better supported by evidence. First, the passage opens with the claim that when accidents are separated from bodies, accidents are instantly destroyed whereas bodies are not. This is most naturally understood in a modal-existential way: bodies do not cease to exist upon the removal of accidents, and so can exist without them. Philoponus then expands on this by saying that accidents fail to contribute anything to what a given body is, suggesting that the body's capacity for independent existence goes hand in hand with its essential independence. Second, Philoponus says that accidents like place and time are "concomitants" (παρακολουθήματα), which follow a body like Socrates around like shadows (without contributing anything to what he is). The idea seems to be that if Socrates exists, he does exist in a place and time, but it is not *necessary* for him to exist in a place and time. This is confirmed by an immediately following passage, where Philoponus supports the proposal "place and time are more like concomitants of bodies" (33, 31) with the claim "Aristotle shows that the sphere of the fixed stars is not in a place" (33, 21). This is evidently intended to show that "concomitants" are not necessary for the existence of bodies.

If the above interpretation is correct, then Philoponus seems to assume that what does not contribute to the essence of a subject is such that the subject can exist without it. In other words, something is non-essential if and only if it is not necessary. Accordingly, he must also be committed to the assumption that something is essential if and only if it is necessary. This long-held assumption has been recently challenged, with several authors proposing that the implication need not run in both directions, that is, if something is essential, it is necessary, but the converse need not be true.<sup>22</sup> One of the often-used examples here are Aristotelian *propria*, which are taken to be necessary but non-essential attributes. It would surely be interesting to see how Philoponus would handle this objection, but this goes beyond the purposes of this paper, and might not be particularly urgent in the context of *Categories*, where Aristotle (at least as Philoponus understands him) operates with a basic distinction between substances and accidents, and makes no mention of *propria*.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Philoponus holds that substances are by nature prior to accidents, and claims that it is principally particular substances that serve as subjects for

<sup>22</sup>See Fine, "Essence and Modality," which triggered the discussion about the relation between essence and modality in contemporary metaphysics. See also Kung, "Aristotle on Essence and Explanation," who anticipates many of the topics currently discussed.

<sup>23</sup>The most controversial items in the context of *Categories* are *differentiae*, which Philoponus understands to be substances, thus maintaining a clear-cut distinction between substances and accidents. Also, the Commentators, including Philoponus, rely on Porphyry's account of *propria* (*Isagoge* 12, 12–22), and this account does not emphasize modal features (*propria* are that which belong to all members of a given species, and to them alone).

<sup>24</sup>At 62, 8–10 Philoponus says that "accidents are principally predicated of the individuals, as also Porphyry says, while on a second account, they are also predicated of the species and genera." The reference here is to Porphyry, *Isagoge* 13, 20, for which see Barnes, *Porphyry*, 239–41.

accidents.<sup>24</sup> One might doubt whether the modal-existential account of priority is the most satisfactory one, but no one would doubt that the ascription of priority to particular substances over accidents is in line with Aristotle's position in *Categories*. Now things get more complicated, for several considerations suggest that Aristotle intends to prioritize particular substances not only over accidents, but also over the species and genera under which they fall. He calls species and genera "secondary substances," while Philoponus refers to them as "universal substances" or simply as "universals." The three most important considerations are the following: (1) Aristotle calls particular substances "primary" and universal substances "secondary"; (2) he relies on the so-called subject criterion to establish the priority of particular substances: they serve as subjects for all other things, whereas there is nothing serving as a subject for them; and (3) the subject criterion underlies Aristotle's famous conclusion in chapter 5 that "if primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist" (2b3–6). Since this conclusion appears to establish that all things other than particular substances cannot exist without particular substances as their subjects, it seems to rule out the existence of universals that are by nature prior to particulars. Philoponus, however, wants to argue that these considerations are compatible with there being universals that are by nature prior to particulars, and thus Aristotle does not prioritize particular substances over *all* other things. In the following sections we will see how he develops and defends this view, with the next section focusing on the first two of the above-mentioned considerations.

## 2 .

Aristotle's calling particular things "primary substances" and the species and genera under which they fall "secondary substances" can be, and has been, seen as an indication that he intends to ascribe to the former priority over the latter.<sup>25</sup> Why else would he call particulars "primary"? Philoponus gives the following explanation:

He says of this [substance] that some are primary and some secondary, calling the particular [μερικός] primary and the universal [καθόλου] in the sense of species and genera secondary. As has often been said, his treatment is not about things that are *qua* things that are, but concerning whatever meaning ordinary people [οἱ πολλοὶ] refer to when talking about each of the categories. For if he were following the nature of things, he would have called genera and species primary and individuals [ἄτομα] secondary, since the former is the cause and the latter is the caused, and the cause is superior to the caused and the universal to the particular. In another way of putting it, things prior by nature are secondary to us and things prior to us are secondary by nature. Now since his discussion is aimed at beginners, he reasonably said that the particular substance is primary (for it is more evident to sense perception), and the substance in the sense of genera and species is secondary. For we proceed to universals from particulars, once reason has lit up in us. (50, 1–14)

Philoponus claims that if Aristotle had followed the nature of things, he would have called universals, not particulars, primary substances (though here he does not have in mind just any universals, but those that are causes, to which we will return in the following section). He offers two justifications for this claim. First, Aristotle's

<sup>25</sup>See e.g. Corkum, "Dependence," 70.

calling particulars primary and universals secondary is an indication that he does not treat things as they are, but as ordinary people refer to them. Second, particular substances are prior to us as they are the ones we encounter in perception, but this does not mean they are prior by nature, since “things prior by nature are secondary to us and things prior to us are secondary by nature.”<sup>26</sup> Philoponus proposes that Aristotle prioritizes things prior to us because his discussion is aimed at beginners, and to them things given in perception are more evident. So the picture that emerges from these considerations is that Aristotle, in teaching beginners, discusses things in accordance with how they are ordinarily thought of and spoken about. For example, when we speak of humans in our ordinary discourse, we refer to particular humans we can perceive, and so also Aristotle, in aiming to address beginners, calls particular perceptible things primary.<sup>27</sup>

Philoponus makes mention of *Categories* being a work for beginners once in his commentary, whereas the appeal to ordinary people plays quite a dominant role and occurs nearly two dozen times. It is often accompanied with the denial that Aristotle is expressing his own opinion, for example, “Aristotle’s aim here is to treat things that are, not *qua* things that are, but *qua* referred to by ordinary people, and not to discuss them as he held them to be” (34, 16–18).<sup>28</sup> Philoponus thinks that Aristotle’s concern with the opinion of *hoi polloi* is particularly obvious in his discussion of primary substances, and Aristotle’s distancing himself from their opinion is clear from the way he introduces this discussion: “A substance which is called a substance most strictly, primarily, and most of all is that which neither is said of any subject nor is in any subject, e.g. this human being or this horse” (2a11–14). Philoponus explains that Aristotle says “a substance which is *called* a substance” because he is not putting forth his own opinion on primary substances, since “whenever he is expressing his own opinion, he does not use λέγεται [‘is called,’ ‘is said’] but ἔστιν [‘is’]” (50, 19–20). So in saying “a substance which is *called* a substance,” Aristotle has in mind “that which is so-called among ordinary people” (50, 18).

A version of this view has recently been defended by Robert Bolton, who shows rather convincingly that, when looking at the way Aristotle formulates the main claims of *Categories*, it is “quite striking how much of this is directly presented as what ‘is said’ (*legetai*) or as what ‘is held’ (*dokei*).”<sup>29</sup> Like Philoponus, Bolton proposes that “what Aristotle aims to do here is not so much to give his own views . . . on certain metaphysical topics as simply to present what is, most of all, *said* or *held* on these topics.”<sup>30</sup> Further, Bolton says that this proposal would help to reconcile Aristotle’s claims in *Categories* and in *Metaphysics*, and this consideration is also in Philoponus’s mind. He supports his claim that Aristotle does not express his own opinion in *Categories* by showing that in *Metaphysics* Aristotle recognizes substances (e.g. the unmoved mover) that are prior to perceptible substances (50, 23–51,

<sup>26</sup>See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 72b2–6.

<sup>27</sup>Philoponus has also another defense of the priority of particular substances, which does not appeal to these two considerations mentioned here. For this, see section 3.

<sup>28</sup>See also 34, 30–31; 35, 6–8; 47, 24–26; 48, 1–6; 50, 4–6; 53, 10–12; 66, 33–67, 1; 70, 30–31.

<sup>29</sup>Bolton, “Two Doctrines,” 87.

<sup>30</sup>Bolton, “Two Doctrines,” 88.

21). Therefore, Aristotle's claims in *Categories* do not represent his considered opinion or final word on substance.

Although the proposal that Aristotle is not concerned with expressing his own views in *Categories* but rather the views of *hoi polloi* is not implausible, it creates some tension within Philoponus's commentary. For example, one might wonder whether this proposal is compatible with his claim in the introductory section that Aristotle expresses his views in all of his works (4, 10–22). Philoponus makes this claim in rejecting the view (presumably Alexander's) that some works of Aristotle, namely, the now-lost dialogues, do not express his own views. He insists that all works do so; the difference is that the dialogues are written for ordinary people (rather than for the members of his school), and hence "he expresses his opinions, not by means of demonstrative arguments, but rather by means of simpler [arguments] which ordinary people can follow" (4, 19–22). Further, Philoponus does not seem to think that Aristotle's concern with the opinion of *hoi polloi* runs through the whole work. For example, in explaining why Aristotle does not speak in chapter 2 of particular and universal accidents (and of particular and universal substances), but instead uses expressions "in a subject" and "said of a subject," he says that these expressions "pertain more closely to the nature of the things signified, while being unfamiliar to the common run of people" (29, 4–5).

Be that as it may, Philoponus is justified in assuming that Aristotle's terminology of "primary substance" and "secondary substance" does not, by itself, settle the question about priority within the category of substance. It does not follow from his terminology alone that primary substances enjoy ontological priority over secondary ones: it may well be that the labels 'primary' and 'secondary' do not have any implications for ontological priority, or they do not fix the direction of priority. Here one might reply that Aristotle does not use this terminology in isolation, but appeals to the subject criterion to explain why primary substances are deserving of their status as primary. Aristotle argues that primary substances that serve as subjects for all other things that are related to primary substances by being said of them or being in them, whereas primary substances themselves are not said of or in any subject. He emphasizes that "it is because the primary substances are subjects for all other things and all other things are predicated of them or are in them that they are called substances most of all" (*Cat.* 2b15–17). Thus, particular substances deserve to be called primary on account of being the ultimate subjects for all other things.

Philoponus calls those things that are in primary substances "accidents," and secondary substances that are said of primary substances "universals," presumably relying here on Aristotle's definition of a universal in *De Interpretatione* as "that which is by nature predicated of many things" (17a39–b1). He agrees that primary substances serve as subjects for both accidents and universals, and says that Aristotle wants to sing the praises of particular substances because, by being subjects, they provide a service (*χρείαν παρέχειν*) for all other things. Yet, they serve other things in two different ways: for accidents they serve as subjects in respect of existence (*ὑπαρξίς*), and for universals they serve as subjects in respect of predication (*κατηγορία*) (30, 25–29; 52, 29–31; 58, 12–13). The crucial difference is that accidents need to be in particular substances in order to exist, whereas

universals do not need to be predicated of particular substances in order to exist. Philoponus is very clear about this: “Universals do not need particulars in order to exist but in order to be predicated of them” (29, 10–11; 30, 29–30; 57, 6–7), for “if particulars did not exist, universals would not be able to be predicated of anything” (29, 11–12; 60, 16–17).

Philoponus thus draws a rather sharp distinction between the two relations—“being in” and “predicated/said of”—which tie accidents and universals to particular substances. He thereby challenges the nowadays-commonplace assumption that both “being in” and “predicated of” are relations of ontological dependence construed in a modal-existential way.<sup>31</sup> Philoponus agrees that accidents cannot exist without particular substances in which they are, but denies that universals cannot exist without particulars of which they are predicated—predication and existence come apart, as it were. Indeed, it would be difficult to deny that “being in” is a relation of ontological dependence. To say that something *is* in something as a subject immediately suggests that we are dealing with an ontological relation, and Aristotle’s definition of “being in a subject” (*Cat.* 1a24) leaves little doubt that it is supposed to be a relation of ontological dependence. But to say that something is *predicated of* something as a subject does not make the nature of this relation immediately clear (and Aristotle does not offer any definition of this relation). It may be interpreted, as Philoponus does, as compatible with universals that are predicated of particulars but do not need them for their existence.

So it seems that the first two considerations do not offer conclusive evidence in support of the view that Aristotle ascribes to primary substances ontological priority over secondary ones. His terminology does not settle the question about priority; and while his appeal to the subject criterion establishes that universals and particulars are distinct from one another in that the former are predicated and the latter are not, this does not yet show that universals cannot exist without the particulars of which they are predicated. Philoponus accommodates both of these considerations, arguing that Aristotle calls particular substances primary because they are prior to us: they are the first things we encounter in perception. Universal substances, however, are prior by nature: they do not need particulars for their existence, but only for their predication. At this point one might say, somewhat impatiently perhaps, that we have not yet discussed the well-known passage from *Categories* 5 (2a34–b6; I will refer to it as the “target passage”), where Aristotle brings out the ontological implications of the subject criterion. It may well be that the first two considerations by themselves are inconclusive; but when combined with the target passage, they make it reasonably clear that Aristotle takes particulars to enjoy priority over universals.

## 3 ·

In the target passage, Aristotle argues that “all other things are either said of the primary substances as subjects or are in them as subjects” (2a34–b6). For example, to predicate the genus *animal* of the species *human being* is to predicate

<sup>31</sup>For a discussion and defense of this assumption, see Ackrill, *Categories*, 75–76.

it, ultimately, of particular human beings, for “were it predicated of none of the particular human beings it would not be predicated of human being at all” (2a38–b1). From this Aristotle draws the conclusion that “if the primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist” (2b5–6). This conclusion establishes that both those things that are in primary substances as subjects as well as those predicated of them as subjects cannot exist without primary substances. Consequently, this passage seems to rule out the existence of universals that need particulars only for their predication, though not for their existence. For Aristotle, universals are the sort of things that are predicated of particulars as their subjects, and so they could not exist without there being subjects of which they are predicated—if you do away with the subjects, you have thereby done away with what is predicated of them.

How does Philoponus handle this passage? His explanation is worth quoting in full:

Since all the other things besides primary substance, he says, are either universal substances or accidents, primary substance performs a service for them all, as has often been said, and if it is done away with, all the other things are done away with along with it. For once primary substance is done away with, accidents are done away along with it, since there is nothing in which they can exist, and similarly also universals [are done away with along with it], since there are no things of which they can be predicated.

But we say that neither those prior to the many are predicated universally nor even these that are in the many.<sup>32</sup> For these [in the many], as was agreed, are done away with along with primary substance; there does not exist animal by itself which is neither a human being nor Plato nor any of the particular humans, for common things [τὰ κοινὰ] are found in the many, i.e. particulars. However, these [in the many] are not customarily predicated of individuals (for nothing is predicated of itself). Rather, only those after the many and conceptual are customarily predicated of the individuals, because we customarily predicate the concepts we have of things. These too are done away with once the particulars are done away with, for if things did not exist, the concepts of them would not exist either. Consequently, if there were no particular substance, there would neither be universals nor accidents. It is reasonable, then, for the particular substances to be called primary.<sup>33</sup> (58, 8–59, 1)

Here Philoponus seems to be saying that particular substances are not merely prior to us, but they are prior by nature to both accidents and universals, that is,

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Erismann’s translation: “The universals of which we say that they are predicated are not those before the multiple; it is not those which are in the multiple either” (“Philoponus on Individuality,” 153). The Greek text is included in the note below.

<sup>33</sup>τῶν γὰρ παρ’ αὐτῆν, φησί, πάντων ἤτοι καθόλου οὐσιῶν οὐσῶν ἤτοι συμβεβηκότων πᾶσι χρεῖαν παρεχομένη, ὡς πολλάκις εἴρηται, ἀναρρηθεῖσα συνανεῖλεν ἑαυτῆ τὰ παρ’ ἑαυτῆν πάντα· ἀναρρηθείσης γὰρ τῆς πρώτης οὐσίας τὰ συμβεβηκότα ἐν τινι ὑποστῆναι οὐκ ἔχοντα συνανήρηται, ὡσαύτως δὲ καὶ τὰ καθόλου μὴ ἔχοντα κατὰ τινων κατηγορηθῆναι. καθόλου δὲ λέγομεν κατηγορεῖσθαι οὐ τὰ πρὸ τῶν πολλῶν, ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ τὰ ἐν τοῖς πολλοῖς· καὶ ταῦτα μὲν γὰρ συναναιρεῖται ὁμολογουμένως ταῖς πρώταις οὐσίαις· οὐ γὰρ ἔστι τὸ ζῶον καθ’ ἑαυτὸ ἐν ὑπάρξει, ὁ μήτε ἄνθρωπος ἔστι μήτε Πλάτων μήτε τις τῶν κατὰ μέρος ἀνθρώπων· ἐν γὰρ τοῖς πολλοῖς καὶ καθ’ ἕκαστον τὰ κοινὰ θεωρεῖται. οὐ μέντοι ταῦτα κατηγορεῖσθαι εἰώθασιν τῶν ἀτόμων (αὐτὸ γὰρ τοῖς αὐτοῦ οὐδὲν κατηγορεῖται), μόνα δὲ εἰώθασιν κατηγορεῖσθαι τῶν ἀτόμων τὰ ἐπὶ τοῖς πολλοῖς καὶ ἐννοηματικά· τὴν γὰρ ἐννοίαν ἦν ἔχομεν περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων ταύτην εἰώθαμεν καὶ κατηγορεῖν αὐτῶν. ἄπερ καὶ αὐτὰ τῶν μερικῶν ἀναρρηθέντων συναναιρεῖται· τῶν γὰρ πραγμάτων μὴ ὄντων οὐδ’ ἂν αἱ περὶ αὐτῶν ὑπάρξαιεν ἐννοιαί· μὴ οὐσῶν οὖν τῶν μερικῶν οὐσιῶν οὐδὲ τὰ καθόλου ἔσται οὐδὲ τὰ συμβεβηκότα· εἰκότως οὖν αἱ μερικαὶ οὐσαὶ πρώται λέγονται. καλῶς δὲ πάλιν κἀνατῶθα ἐν μὲν τοῖς καθόλου τὸ <λέγεται> ἔταξεν, ἐν δὲ τοῖς συμβεβηκόσι τὸ <ἐστὶ>.



neither accidents nor universals can exist without particular substances though not conversely. However, he takes the truth of this statement to depend on what we mean by ‘universals’ and appeals to a threefold division of universals: (1) prior to the many, (2) in the many, and (3) after the many.<sup>34</sup> Philoponus agrees that in the target passage Aristotle speaks about universals that are such as to be predicated of particulars and that are done away with along with particulars of which they are predicated. He maintains, however, that the universals under discussion are not those prior to the many or even those in the many, but rather those after the many, which he takes to be concepts (ἔννοια).<sup>35</sup>

To sort out the details of this threefold division would require a full investigation of the problem of universals in the philosophy of the Commentators, which is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>36</sup> I will limit my discussion to what is required for understanding Philoponus’s views on priority, without venturing beyond his commentary on *Categories*. The universals prior to the many may be tentatively associated with Platonic Forms, although Philoponus does not make this association explicit in his commentary.<sup>37</sup> As also their name indicates, they are by nature prior to particulars, which is to say that they can exist without particulars but not conversely. When Philoponus says at 50, 2–5 that universals are prior to particulars as their causes, he has these universals in mind (more about their causal role shortly). The universals in the many, on the other hand, cannot exist without particulars. Philoponus says that “they are done away with along with primary substance” (58, 14), but specifies that Aristotle does not speak about these universals in the target passage, since they “are not customarily predicated of individuals (for nothing is predicated of itself)” (58, 18). How we are supposed to understand this?

Christophe Erismann argues that in his late theological work, *The Arbitrator*, Philoponus defends “ontological particularism,” and proposes that the commitment to this view can be found already in his commentaries on Aristotle.<sup>38</sup> Ontological particularism is the view that everything that exists is a particular, and the common nature or a universal is “a construct of the mind, an abstraction formed by our mind from the particular natures of the individuals.”<sup>39</sup> Philoponus’s acceptance of this view would help to illuminate his claims about the universals in the many

<sup>34</sup>The threefold division can be found in Ammonius’s teacher Proclus (*in Eucl. I*, 50, 16–51, 9). It was adopted by Ammonius (*in Isag.* 41, 10–42, 26; 68, 25–69, 11; *in Cat.* 41, 3–11), and by his students Philoponus (*in Cat.* 9, 7–11; 58, 13–21; 67, 18–68, 9) and Simplicius (*in Cat.* 82, 35–83, 20).

<sup>35</sup>Here we find an important difference between Philoponus’s commentary and the one derived anonymously from Ammonius. The latter holds that universals that are done away with along with particulars are universals in the many, and makes no mention of universals after the many (40, 26–41, 6).

<sup>36</sup>On this, see esp. Sorabji, “Universals Transformed,” and “Introduction.”

<sup>37</sup>As Richard Sorabji has pointed out to me, it is Proclus’s view that universals prior to the many are Platonic Forms (and Simplicius, too, adopts some such view, emphasizing that Forms are universal as causes). But Ammonius transforms them into *logoi*, rational concepts, in the mind of Plato’s Demiurge or Creator God, and Philoponus appears to agree with him at 38, 13–15 and 58, 9 of *in De Anima*. Philoponus does associate universals prior to the many with Platonic Forms *in An. Post.* 435, 28–30, but it has been doubted whether *in An. Post.* 2 is by Philoponus (see Ebbesen, “Analyzing Syllogisms”). My interpretation does not depend on this association, i.e. it does not assume that universals prior to the many are Forms.

<sup>38</sup>Erismann, “The Trinity,” and “Philoponus on Individuality.”

<sup>39</sup>Erismann, “The Trinity,” 292; see also “Philoponus on Individuality,” esp. 146–54.



in the above passage. If a universal in the many is individuated by its subject and particular to it, then it would not be able to exist without its subject (e.g. Socrates's humanity cannot exist without Socrates) or be predicated of it (as "nothing is predicated of itself"). Indeed, Philoponus appeals to the distinction between "prior to the many" and "in the many" also in his discussion of *differentiae*, where he says that *differentiae* in the many "are particulars for they are not predicated of any subject" (68, 8–9). Yet, the evidence is not entirely straightforward. For instance, Philoponus says in the above passage that "common things [τὰ κοινὰ] are found in the many" which might suggest that universals in the many are in fact common to more than one particular.<sup>40</sup>

Even if we bracket the question of whether universals in the many should be construed as common or particular, it is clear that Philoponus takes them to differ in kind from universals that function as predicates. In his discussion of *differentiae*, Philoponus denies that the *differentia* in the particular, e.g. rational in the particular, should be called '*differentia*' since it is not predicated of many things. The same is true of species and genera: "If a genus is predicated, in answer to 'What is it?', of many things which differ in species and the animal in Socrates is not said of many, then it would not be a genus" (67, 24–26). He says that these are rather *parts* of individuals (67, 32), that is, the animal in Socrates is not in him as a genus predicated of him, but rather as his part. Obviously enough, being a part and being a predicate are two different things. When we predicate *animal* of Socrates, we are using a concept, rather than a part of Socrates—parts do not function as predicates.

Now universals that function as predicates, according to Philoponus, are those after the many. He takes them to be concepts, "for we customarily predicate of things concepts we have of them" (58, 21), and holds that they cannot exist without particulars, for "if things did not exist, the concepts of them would not exist either" (58, 22). Philoponus then concludes that Aristotle reasonably calls particular substances primary, thus implying that the dependence here is asymmetrical: concepts cannot exist without things, whereas things can exist without concepts. But even though it is clear what the intended direction of dependence between concepts and things is supposed to be, it is not immediately obvious why the dependence should run in this way.

Perhaps the most obvious explanation why things are prior to concepts is that we derive concepts from things through some sort of abstraction process. This sort of explanation can be found in Porphyry (*in Cat.* 90, 12–91, 5), who agrees that in the target passage Aristotle aims to prioritize particulars over universals, and explains that "if it is from the perception of particulars that we come to conceive of the common predicate, which we no longer think of as 'this,' but as a 'such,' then

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<sup>40</sup>Erismann proposes that the best way to make sense of such claims is to hold that the *koīna* do not exist as common but only as particularized ("Philoponus on Individuality," 154). Here one might ask further what it means to be 'particularized,' and opt for a view that universals in the many are numerically distinct and particularized in this sense, though qualitatively (or, specifically) the same. See Lloyd, *Form and Universal in Aristotle*, 66. To fully settle this issue, we would have to examine Philoponus's views on form, matter, and enmattered forms. For a further discussion of Erismann's view, see Sorabji, "Universals Transformed in the Commentators on Aristotle."

if the particular animals are eliminated, what is predicated in common of them will no longer exist either” (91, 3–5, trans. Strange; see also 75, 24–29). Porphyry’s claim that we come to conceive (νοεῖν, ἐπινοεῖν) of the common predicate from the perception of particulars can be interpreted as establishing that common predicates are concepts that are abstracted from perceptible particulars.<sup>41</sup> Philoponus might have something similar in mind, for when he proposes at 50, 9–13 that particular substances are called primary because they are prior to us, he adds that “we proceed to universals from particulars, once reason has lit up in us” (50, 13–14). He does not expand on this, but he seems to envisage some sort of an abstraction process that leads from particulars to universals.

Leaving aside questions about the mechanics of this abstraction process, one might nonetheless worry that this sort of explanation does not establish the natural priority of particulars but merely confirms that they are prior to us. This is a sort of epistemic priority: our thinking and knowledge begins with the perception of particulars, and so perceptible particulars are prior in the order to knowledge. Jonathan Barnes raises a similar worry about Porphyry, arguing that his explanation only shows that particulars are prior to species and genera “in another and non-natural way,” namely, “they are prior in relation to us inasmuch as, in order to think of animal in general, you must first have thought of cats and ducks and mice and . . . ; and in order to think of cats in general you must have thought of (or have perceived) Cornelius or Ratty or some other cat.”<sup>42</sup> In response, it should be pointed out that the epistemic priority of particulars is not incompatible with their natural priority over universals as concepts. Philoponus evidently wants to show that universals that function as predicates are concepts abstracted from particulars. He might think that once this is established, their asymmetrical dependence upon particulars is clear enough: abstractions cannot exist without their sources, though not conversely. He can thus maintain that particulars that are prior in relation to us are also prior by nature to concepts we have of them.

Two salient questions arise with respect to Philoponus’s proposal that universals that are predicated of particulars and that are done away with along with particulars are concepts. First, is this proposal compatible with his assertion discussed above that “universals do not need particulars in order to exist but in order to be predicated of them” (29, 10–11; 30, 29–30; 57, 7–8)? Second, is this proposal compatible with Aristotle’s claims in *Categories*? Let us begin with the first question. Which type of universals does Philoponus have in mind when he repeatedly says that “universals do not need particulars in order to exist but in order to be predicated of them”? A possible response is to deny that this claim is supposed to apply to only one type of universals; rather, the first half applies to universals prior to the many (these do not need particulars for existence), and the latter half to universals after the many (concepts are predicated of particulars). But this is definitely not the most natural way to understand this claim. An alternative

<sup>41</sup>It might well be that this is how Philoponus interprets Porphyry, as he holds that Porphyry takes *Categories* to be about concepts, i.e. it is about genera which are “after the many and are later in origin [*husterogenê*], having existence in our thought [*dianoia*]” (9, 5–8). For a more detailed discussion of this sort of interpretation of Porphyry, see Ebbesen, “Porphyry’s Legacy.”

<sup>42</sup>Barnes, *Porphyry*, 275.

proposal is that Philoponus has in mind universals prior to the many, as these do not depend on particulars for their existence.<sup>43</sup> But if so, what would it mean to say that universals prior to the many need particulars in order to be predicated of them? Does he not say in his comments on the target passage that universals predicated of particulars are *not* those prior to the many? Yet, he seems to treat universals prior to the many as predicated also in his discussion of *differentiae*, arguing that *differentiae* prior to the many should be classified among things that are said of a subject though they are not in a subject (67, 20–22).

Lloyd P. Gerson argues that Platonic Forms do not function as predicates, but rather provide the explanation for the possibility of predication.<sup>44</sup> This suggests that although there may be a relation between universals prior to the many and predication, this need not imply treating the former simply as predicates. Several authors besides Gerson have emphasized the causal-explanatory role of Platonic Forms.<sup>45</sup> What does the causal-explanatory role of Forms amount to? The general answer is that Forms make particulars to be the kinds of things they are, or, equivalently, particulars are the kinds of things they are because of participating in Forms.<sup>46</sup> And by making particulars to be what they are, the Forms also account for the possibility of true predications about them. For example, it is possible to truly say that “Socrates is a human being” because there is a Form of Human Being, and Socrates is human in virtue of participating in this Form; by making Socrates human, the Form also makes the predication ‘Socrates is human’ true. In light of this interpretation, we might understand Philoponus’s claim that “universals do not need particulars in order to exist but in order to be predicated of them” as compatible with the denial that universals prior to the many are by nature such as to be predicated of particulars (if they were, they would need particulars in order to exist). Rather, they function as causes that make particulars to be what they are, and thus explain why we can make true predications about them.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>The anonymous referee proposes that some of the concepts we entertain, e.g. *unicorn* or *dodo*, do not need particulars for existence (presumably, in that they are not derived from, or apply to, any particular thing). This is an interesting proposal, but it seems that when Philoponus speaks of “universals [that] do not need particulars in order to exist but in order to be predicated of them,” he has in mind entities that exist in reality (even though their existence does not depend on particulars), not those that exist in bare thought; see also n. 12.

<sup>44</sup>Gerson, “Platonism,” and *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, ch. 3.

<sup>45</sup>See especially Sedley, “Platonic Causes”; Tuominen, *The Ancient Commentators*, 227–37; Sorabji, “Universals Transformed.”

<sup>46</sup>This answer, which is usually traced to Plato’s *Phaedo*, is rather common among scholars, though they use different terminology to express it. For example, Gerson (*Aristotle and Other Platonists*) appeals to the ‘because’ locution (e.g. “Socrates is a man because he partakes of the Form of Man”), while Tuominen (*The Ancient Commentators*) uses ‘making’ terminology (e.g. “forms make things the kinds of things they are”), and Sedley (“Platonic Causes”) argues that the ‘cause’ means “the thing responsible.” However, the claims “Socrates is a human being because he participates in the Form of Human Being,” “the Form makes Socrates to be human being,” and “the Form is responsible for Socrates’s being human” are equivalent (as also Sedley proposes), and suggest that we are dealing here with an *ontological* explanation. This sort of an explanation (“grounding”) has recently received significant attention in contemporary metaphysics; see Correia and Schnieder, *Metaphysical Grounding*. For a discussion of Platonic Forms as causes, see especially Sedley, “Platonic Causes.”

<sup>47</sup>Another interpretation would be to see Philoponus here as following Ammonius (*in Isag.* 42, 10–21), according to whom universals prior to the many exist in the mind of Plato’s Creator-Demiurge, where they would exercise creative power in the formation of sensible world. Philoponus does not

This interpretation would be compatible with, and illuminative of, Philoponus's claim that universals are by nature prior to particulars. It is clearly universals prior to the many that he has in mind when he claims, in various places in his commentary, that "in fact the universal is prior by nature" (53, 11–12), for "if there were no human being *simpliciter*, there would be no Socrates and Plato" (30, 31–32; 53, 28–30). It is also reasonably clear that Philoponus takes universals, which are by nature prior to particulars, to be causes of particulars, for "it is the substance concerning species and genera that is primary, given that it is the cause of individuals, and incorporeal and always just the way it is, whereas substance concerning individuals is secondary as being caused" (34, 22–24; 50, 6–9). He does not expand on the causal role of universals, but when he does make mention of it, he describes their causal role as making or determining the particulars to be the kinds of things they are. "Genera and species are completive of those things of which they are said to be [the genera and species] and of which they are predicated. As he himself says, they 'determine the qualification [ποιόν] of substance' [Aristotle, *Cat.* 3b21], i.e. they determine this or that kind of substance, and both define and discriminate [it]" (73, 3–6). So Philoponus evidently thinks that Aristotle himself ascribes to universals a causal role in determining the particular to be the kind of substance it is. However, this claim also raises some questions. Specifically, universals that Philoponus elsewhere describes as "completive" (σμπληρωτικά) of things are not universals prior to the many, but rather those in the many, parts of individuals (68, 6–9). How would the causal role of universals in the many relate to the causal role of universals prior to the many?

Simplicius's discussion of the threefold division of the common (κοινόν) suggests one, and to my mind plausible, answer. He emphasizes that the transcendent Form is common in the sense of being a common cause, and what the Form causes is a common nature, which "completes" the individuals in which it resides (*in Cat.* 82, 35–83, 20). This suggests that the causal-explanatory role of Forms is mediated by common natures in individuals. This might also be Philoponus's view. That is, the universal in the many causes the particular to be the kind of thing it is, determines its nature, while the nature in the particular is caused by the universal prior to the many. Assuming that causation is transitive, we can say that the universal prior to the many causes the particular to be the kind of thing it is. Of course, if Erismann is right in thinking that Philoponus is committed to "ontological particularism," then the important difference between Simplicius and Philoponus would be

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express this view in his commentary, but his comments on the target passage commit him to the view that what is predicated has conceptual existence. So, perhaps by saying that universals prior to the many need particulars for predication but not for existence, he has in mind that they are thoughts or concepts of some sort, though not the sort of concepts we derive from and apply to particulars and which are dependent on particulars for their existence, but rather thoughts in the mind of the Creator-Demiurge, which are prior to particulars. These two interpretations would be compatible. As Tuominen emphasizes, the Platonic Commentators are not just concerned with the question of what makes the particulars to be the kinds of things they are, but also with the question of how or why it is that the sensible world comes to exist at all (*The Ancient Commentators*, 231–34). In this process an important role was given to the Creator-Demiurge. So Philoponus may appeal to universals prior to the many both in an account of the creation of the world, as well as in answer to the question, "What makes things to be the kinds of things they are?"

that Simplicius takes the nature that resides in particulars to be common, while Philoponus takes it to be particularized, individuated by the subject in which it is.<sup>48</sup>

To sum up, then, Philoponus endorses, and ascribes to Aristotle, the following claims: (1) there are entities that play a causal-explanatory role, that is, they make particular substances to be what they are; (2) these entities are by nature prior to particulars, that is, they can exist without particulars but not conversely; and (3) particular substances are by nature prior to accidents and to entities predicated of them, that is, concepts. Although the main aim of this paper is to get clearer on Philoponus's views, the question inevitably arises as to whether these views are in fact compatible with Aristotle. Let me conclude by briefly addressing this question, without hoping to solve it here.<sup>49</sup>

Of these three claims Philoponus endorses, would the first or the third be compatible with Aristotle? The answer depends on what we take to be the role of secondary substances, that is, species and genera under which particular substances fall. We could ascribe to secondary substances a causal-explanatory role in making the particulars to be what they are. This would be compatible with a certain understanding of Aristotelian essentialism, according to which the essence of a thing makes the thing to be what it is.<sup>50</sup> So if species and genera are essential to primary substance, they make them to be the kinds of things they are. This would also be compatible with some of the claims Aristotle makes in *Categories*, especially the claim that Philoponus drew our attention to, namely, that secondary substances are not just any attributes, but the sort of attributes that determine (ἀφορίζει) what kind of substance the primary substance is (3b10–23).<sup>51</sup> However, this view on secondary substances makes it difficult to defend the position that primary substances enjoy some sort of ontological priority over secondary substances. We could not ascribe to primary substances modal-existential priority over secondary

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<sup>48</sup>A view similar to Simplicius's is defended by Gerson, who argues that Forms explain the sameness in difference, i.e. they explain why numerically different things can nonetheless be the same; see "Platonism," and *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, ch. 3. For example, the Form of Human Being explains why different humans have the same human nature. If we adopt the view that the natures are particular, then we could not say that Forms explain the sameness in nature, though we could say that they explain likeness in nature. For example, the Form of Human Being is the cause of Socrates's humanity, Plato's humanity (etc.), and it is in virtue of causing all humans' humanity that humans are alike in nature. Erismann might be sympathetic to this proposal, for in speaking of Philoponus's view on the three persons of Trinity, he says, "[S]ince these three substances are *resemblant*, the mind can create a common and universal concept of divine substance" ("The Trinity," 287, my emphasis). This proposal would help to explain why in addition to universals in the many we also need universals prior to the many. For even if universals in the many have causal power, it is limited, e.g. my humanity explains why I am human, your humanity explains why you are human, but nothing explains why we are both human (alike in nature). For this, you need a common cause.

<sup>49</sup>See my "Ontological Priority in Aristotle's *Categories*" (manuscript).

<sup>50</sup>It is common to say that essences for Aristotle are explanatory, though this idea can be developed in more than one way. See Kung, "Aristotle on Essence and Explanation," who argues that essential properties are explanatory in the sense of explaining the presence of other properties. One might also say that they are explanatory in the sense of explaining why particulars are the kinds of things they are, e.g. see Tuominen, *The Ancient Commentators*. This approach is dominant in (interpretations of) Aristotle's *Metaphysics Z*, where essence is associated with form, which is characterized as a "cause of being" (Z 17), presumably, something that makes the thing to be what it is.

<sup>51</sup>Here I rely on a widely accepted interpretation of this passage. See e.g. Ackrill, *Categories*, 88–89.

substances (if secondary substances are essential to primary ones, then primary substances cannot exist without them), nor could we ascribe them any causal-explanatory priority (assuming here that causal priority is distinct from modal-existential priority), and it is not obvious what other options we would have.<sup>52</sup>

Alternatively, we may deny that secondary substances play any causal-explanatory role. What kind of entities are they, then? The most natural answer here is that they are just predicable entities that lack explanatory power, that is, the kind of entities whose whole nature is exhausted by being predicated of primary substances. Aristotle himself emphasizes that secondary substances are tied to primary substances by being said of them, and this view on secondary substances underlies his conclusion that “if primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist” (2b5–6). This view would leave us more room to defend the priority of primary substances. For example, we may propose that it is primary substances that play a causal-explanatory role and explain why secondary substances are the kind of things they are (namely, predicable entities), whereas primary substances are what they are in and of themselves—there is nothing that explains why they are what they are.<sup>53</sup> But here one might raise a further question and ask what kind of entities these predicable entities are? If pressed, this question might point toward Philoponus’s proposal that they are not real entities at all but rather concepts. We might of course leave the question about the precise status of such entities (e.g. whether they are concepts, expressions, or something else) open, but Philoponus’s proposal is compatible with this view on secondary substances.

Philoponus accommodates both of these views, arguing that entities that are predicated of particulars are concepts, and particulars enjoy priority over concepts. Further, he seems to think that Aristotle also recognizes entities that make particulars to be what they are, and particulars do not enjoy priority over such entities. Thus, the first and the third claims Philoponus endorses are at least not incompatible with Aristotle’s claims in *Categories*. This leaves the second and most controversial claim, namely, entities that make particulars to be what they are enjoy modal-existential priority over them. Here we might immediately object that even if Aristotle allows there to be entities that play a causal-explanatory role, he would certainly deny that they can exist without particulars. That is, he would deny that there are Platonic Forms, entities that can exist without particulars though not conversely. Philoponus, however, assumes that the causal role of these entities goes hand in hand with their capacity for independent existence. He might here rely on the following line of reasoning: (a) if universals prior to the many are causes of particulars, they cannot be caused by particulars, that is, causation is asymmetrical; (b) if the causal role of these entities is to make particulars to be what they are, then particulars cannot in turn make them to be what they are; and (c) if universals prior to the many are what they are independently of particulars, then they do not need particulars for their existence in that they can exist without particulars.

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<sup>52</sup>See Corkum, “Dependence,” who discusses and rejects some other attempts to justify the priority of primary substances.

<sup>53</sup>See Corkum, “Dependence,” who appears to defend a version of this view, and my “Ontological Priority in Aristotle’s *Categories*.”



His reliance on this sort of reasoning would help to explain why he takes it for granted that universals prior to the many are such as they can exist without particulars though not conversely.<sup>54</sup> Further, I have suggested that he relies on the assumption that if something is what it is independently of something else, then it can exist without the latter also in his discussion of substances and accidents. For he seems to be arguing that substances are what they are independently of accidents, and so can exist without them. The above reasoning would simply add that there are chains of dependence: while accidents cannot exist without particular substances (but not conversely), particular substances cannot exist without universal substances (but not conversely). We might want to disagree with the assumption that if something is what it is independently of something else, then it can exist without the latter, but this assumption is not unreasonable. So if we want to challenge it, Philoponus might simply respond that the burden of proof is on us.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Of course, there might also be some other considerations that motivate this assumption, e.g. the eternity of Forms. See e.g. Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, ch. 6.

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