

THE EVIDENCE FOR DEGREES OF BEING IN ARISTOTLE

The topic of degrees of being in Aristotle is almost universally ignored. A very few scholars do discuss the topic or make use of it in passing.¹ This situation might be explained by a scholarly consensus that (a) Aristotle did have a doctrine of degrees of being, but (b) this doctrine is too uninteresting to be worth much discussion. Conversation with a number of scholars from several countries has convinced me, however, that a rather different consensus lies behind the current silence. It turns out that many experts in the subject deny that Aristotle believed in degrees of being. No one, to my knowledge, has defended this denial in print. But the reason for silence is not that the topic is dull, but that it is scandalous. Both defenders and opponents of the view that Aristotle had a doctrine of degrees of being tend, in conversation, to find the topic embarrassing. Our contemporary metaphysical prejudices are so opposed to degrees of being that people find themselves unable to make any sense of such a doctrine. As a result, one group of scholars is embarrassed on Aristotle's behalf at the suggestion that he might have held such a senseless doctrine. Another group, less sure of where the philosophical truth lies, finds itself in the interpretative embarrassment of being unable to explain and motivate the doctrine. So both groups avoid the subject.

This silence seems to me a shame, since if Aristotle did believe in degrees of being, it constitutes a very important difference between his metaphysical outlook and ours. I hope to say something about the philosophical significance of Aristotle's doctrine of degrees of being elsewhere. In this paper my purpose is to argue that he did in fact have such a doctrine.

Unfortunately, the evidence in favour of degrees of being in Aristotle is neither as clear nor as extensive as one might wish. Aristotle does not use the vivid Platonic expressions: 'what purely is' (τὸ ἐιλικρινῶς ὄν), 'what really is' (τὸ ὄντως ὄν), and so on.² In a very few places, Aristotle speaks of 'more being' (μᾶλλον ὄν) or 'less being' (ἧττον ὄν).³ He also speaks of 'primary being' (πρώτον ὄν)⁴ and what 'primarily is' (πρώτως ὄν).⁵ But what exactly 'more' signifies when Aristotle applies it to 'being', and whether 'primary' and 'primarily' have the same or a different significance is unclear.

Evidence is more abundant for a special case of 'being', namely οὐσία. Aristotle often says that one thing is more (μᾶλλον) οὐσία than another. Especially in the *Metaphysics*, he often also speaks of 'primary οὐσία', and of 'what is chiefly (κυρίως) οὐσία'. Since οὐσία is a nominalization of the verb 'to be' each of these locutions could be a way of saying of something that it has a greater degree of being.

¹ See G. Mainberger, *Die Seinsstufung als methode und Metaphysik* (Freiburg, Switzerland, 1959); V. Gomez-Pin, *Ordre et substance* (Paris, 1976); Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*³ (Toronto, 1978).

² For discussion of these expressions, with references, see G. Vlastos, 'A Metaphysical Paradox', and 'Degrees of Reality in Plato', both in *Platonic Studies*² (Princeton, 1981).

³ *Protrepticus* 14, *De Caelo* 282a8, *Met.* a 1,993a31, *Z* 2,1028b14, *M* 1088a30.

⁴ *Met.* Z 1,1028a14.

⁵ *Met.* Z 1,1028a30; Θ 1,1045b27.

A. THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF ΜΑΛΛΟΝ

The most important and promising of the various words used by Aristotle which might indicate degrees of being is μάλλον. *Prima facie*, μάλλον ὄν and μάλλον οὐσία signify degrees of being and of οὐσία in the same way that 'more blue' and 'less blue' indicate degrees of blue. Furthermore, the distinction between οὐσία and ὄν itself suggests a difference in degree of being. οὐσία means 'being', but not just every being, every ὄν, merits the appellation οὐσία. οὐσία is not a neutral term for 'being', like ὄν, but rather an honorific. And if οὐσία is the honorific term for 'being', then the point of calling something 'more οὐσία' would naturally be to intensify the honour. What is 'more οὐσία' will differ from what is 'less οὐσία' in the way that οὐσία differs from non-οὐσία, from mere ὄν: namely, in degree of being.

μάλλον belongs to a family of words which can be used to indicate degrees. μάλιστα ('most'), ἥττον ('less'), and ἥκιστα ('least'), all belong to this family. In what follows I shall treat μάλλον as the representative of the whole family. What I say in the rest of this section about the interpretation of μάλλον will normally hold true of the others, *mutatis mutandis*. Similarly, for ease of exposition I shall use μάλλον οὐσία as representative, standing in for such additional expressions as μάλλον ὄν ('more a being') and μάλλον ἔστι ('is more').

μάλλον can also mean 'rather', so that sometimes 'X is μάλλον οὐσία than Y' can mean 'X is οὐσία rather than Y (which is not οὐσία at all)'.⁶ But often both terms of the comparison are clearly οὐσῆαι, so that in saying 'X is μάλλον οὐσία than Y', Aristotle is distinguishing grades of being among οὐσῆαι. For example, in *Categories* 5 he says, 'The species is more οὐσία than the genus.' Both species and genus are secondary οὐσῆαι; primary οὐσῆαι, that is, the particulars, are more οὐσία than either the genus or the species.⁷ Thus Aristotle does use μάλλον οὐσία to signify that one οὐσία is more οὐσία than another. This alone is sufficient to justify the claim that Aristotle has some kind of a theory of degrees of being. Yet the precise significance of μάλλον in μάλλον οὐσία is not yet clear, and therefore precisely what kind of theory he holds is not yet clear. Different interpretations of μάλλον will yield different interpretations of Aristotle's theory of degrees of being.

The most straightforward and natural interpretation of μάλλον is also the strongest. On this interpretation, Aristotle uses the phrase μάλλον οὐσία to indicate that things can be more or less οὐσία in the same way that other things can be more or less blue or more or less hot. οὐσία is an attribute which can vary in 'degree' or 'intensity'. I shall call this the '**intensity**' interpretation of degrees of οὐσία.

A weaker interpretation takes Aristotle's use of μάλλον οὐσία to be implicitly metalinguistic. On this view, in saying that something is μάλλον οὐσία Aristotle means only to indicate that it is called οὐσία in a *stricter sense* than other things. οὐσία has different senses, and these senses can be ordered according to their degree of 'strictness'. But this interpretation, unlike the previous one, does not imply that οὐσία is a single attribute which comes in degrees. I shall call this the '**metalinguistic**' interpretation.

A third and still weaker interpretation takes μάλλον οὐσία as implying nothing more than a theory of *essential order* among οὐσῆαι. Some οὐσῆαι are *prior* to others. The priority relations among οὐσῆαι can be used to establish an order among οὐσῆαι.

⁶ Examples are: *Met.* H 1,1042a14, and Z 3,1029a1.

⁷ *Cat.* 5, 2b17. Other places where this is clear: *G&C* 318b11–15, 32–4; *Met.* B 1002a26; *E* 4,1027b31; *Z* 1,1028a14, 28, 30; *Z* 16,1040b22–4; *M* 3,1077b12. Aristotle uses 'nearness' to οὐσία to express degrees of οὐσία at *G&C* B 10,336b34; *De Caelo* IV, 3, 310b32; *Ph.* I 9, 192a6.

Aristotle is interested in discovering this order, and he is especially interested in determining which *οὐσίαι* are, relative to all the others, *first*. On this interpretation, when Aristotle says that some *οὐσίαι* are *μᾶλλον* or *μάλιστα οὐσία*, he means by this only that they are 'prior' *οὐσίαι*, or 'first'. In what follows I shall call this the '**ordering**' interpretation.

As theories of the meaning of *μᾶλλον οὐσία*, these three are mutually exclusive. But the philosophical doctrines they rest on are not. For example, the intensity interpretation might be right that Aristotle uses the expression *μᾶλλον οὐσία* to express his conviction that things are *οὐσίαι* to varying degrees. But this is compatible with the belief that *οὐσίαι* are essentially ordered, and even with the belief that the priority of an *οὐσία* implies that it is 'more *οὐσία*'. The difference between the intensity interpretation and the ordering interpretation is that the intensity interpretation maintains that the inference from 'prior *οὐσία*' to 'more *οὐσία*' is a real inference, whereas the ordering interpretation claims that, for Aristotle, these are two different ways of saying the same thing.

The doctrines of the metalinguistic and the ordering interpretations can also be combined. One way to establish priority among *οὐσίαι* might be to establish an order of priority in the 'senses' in which these *οὐσίαι* are called *οὐσία*. All *οὐσίαι* which are called *οὐσία* in sense 1 are prior to all those which are called *οὐσία* in sense 2, and so on. Conversely, one might hold that the priority relations among *οὐσίαι* segregate them into the groups which are the basis for the 'senses' of *οὐσία*. All primary *οὐσίαι* are *οὐσίαι* in sense 1, all secondary *οὐσίαι* are *οὐσίαι* in sense 2, and so on. On this view, any new distinction in 'priority' among *οὐσίαι* will be grounds for distinguishing one or more new 'senses' of *οὐσία* as well.

The doctrines underlying the intensity and the metalinguistic interpretations could also be combined, but this would leave the difference between them rather subtle. Aristotle might have held that *οὐσία* comes in various senses of varying strictness, and that whatever is *οὐσία* in a stricter sense is *μᾶλλον οὐσία* than what is *οὐσία* in a lesser sense, and yet have held that in calling something *μᾶλλον οὐσία* one is doing more than merely asserting that it is *οὐσία* in a stricter sense: one is going beyond that to assert that it is *οὐσία* to a greater degree. As before, the interpretation of the phrase *μᾶλλον οὐσία* depends on how the inference is treated. If inferring from 'X is called *οὐσία* in a stricter sense than Y' to 'X is *μᾶλλον οὐσία* than Y' is regarded as a genuine, substantive inference, then we have the intensity interpretation of *μᾶλλον οὐσία*. If these are regarded as two different ways of saying the same thing, then we have the metalinguistic interpretation.

The difference between the two interpretations is unusually subtle in this case for the following reason. If *οὐσία* has different senses, then in comparing two *οὐσίαι* which are *οὐσίαι* in different senses and saying that one is *μᾶλλον οὐσία* than the other, one is faced with the question: in what sense of *οὐσία* is one saying that it is *μᾶλλον οὐσία*? In the sense in which the first *οὐσία* is *οὐσία*, or the second, or in some third sense of *οὐσία*? It seems that a person can only say that one thing is more *οὐσία* than another in the sense which is required by the intensity interpretation if there is some one sense of *οὐσία* such that both things are *οὐσίαι* in that sense. Defenders of the metalinguistic interpretation will conclude from the 'ambiguity' of *οὐσία* that there is no single, overarching sense of *οὐσία* of the sort which the intensity interpretation needs. Further, from the lack of this overarching sense of *οὐσία* they will conclude that there is nothing substantive available for *μᾶλλον οὐσία* to mean, for it is a mere terminological variant for 'being called *οὐσία* in a stricter sense'. Defenders of the intensity interpretation who intend to combine it with the admission that *οὐσία* has several senses, face the challenge of clarifying how *μᾶλλον οὐσία* can have some

unified, substantive content even though it is applied across items which are *οὐσία* in different senses. We shall see later how this challenge might be met. For now, the important lesson to be learned is that it is much easier to have a robust theory of degrees of being if one believes in the univocity of being. Perhaps this goes some way toward explaining the greater popularity of degrees of being in the Platonist tradition.

B. THE EVIDENCE IN THE *CATEGORIES*

How can we decide between these three interpretations? The best place to start is with a famous passage in which traces of all three interpretations seem to be present. At the beginning of *Categories* 5 Aristotle says: 'That is most strictly and primarily and most of all (*κυριώτατά τε καὶ πρώτως καὶ μάλιστα*) called *οὐσία* which...' Here 'most of all' suggests the intensity interpretation of degrees of being, 'primarily' the ordering interpretation, and 'most strictly' the metalinguistic interpretation. That all three attributes modify 'called', rather than *οὐσία* directly, strengthens the case for the metalinguistic interpretation.

On the other hand, throughout Chapter 5 Aristotle moves freely between the metalinguistic mode and the object mode, between saying that something is *called* primary or more substance, and saying simply that it *is* primary or more substance.⁸ Especially significant are the two passages which have the idea of 'more substance' as their topic, 2b7–27 and 3b33–4a9. Aristotle's frequent shift back and forth in these passages between the metalinguistic and the object mode makes it clear that he means both seriously. In fact, his procedure in these passages is similar to the procedure elsewhere in his philosophy: he appeals to linguistic facts in order to establish a conclusion about how things are. The structure of the two passages is similar: Aristotle first states his thesis in the object mode (2b7; 3b33), then defends it with linguistic considerations (2b8–17; 3b35–4a7), and concludes with a restatement of the thesis in the object mode (2b21–2; 4a9).⁹ The metalinguistic interpretation of degrees of being is inadequate, at least for the *Categories*. Aristotle's move from 'X is (or is not) called more or less *οὐσία* (or man or animal)' to 'X is (or is not) more or less *οὐσία* (or man or animal)' is a real inference. When he says at 3b34 that a substance can be more a substance than another, he clearly means it.¹⁰

But what does he mean? We have ruled out the metalinguistic interpretation, which leaves the 'ordering' and the 'intensity' interpretations as possibilities. Important evidence for deciding between these can be found in 3b33–4a9. There Aristotle denies that any given substance is more or less that which it is, for example that any particular man is more or less a man than himself (e.g. at another time) or than another man. He contrasts this with attributes like 'pale', where one pale thing can be more or less pale than another thing, or than itself at another time. Aristotle is here denying to particular substantial predicates like 'man' and 'animal' the kind of 'more and less' variation exemplified by attributes like 'pale'. And the kind of variation exemplified

⁸ Further examples of the metalinguistic mode include 2a15, 2b17, 2b30, 3b35–56. Examples of the object mode include, for 'primary', 2a35, 2b5, 6^b, 7, 18, 31, and many others. Examples of *μᾶλλον οὐσία* in the object mode include 2b7, 22, 23, 27, 3b34, 4a9. The expression 'chiefly' (*κυριώτατα*) drops out of Chapter 5 after the first line.

⁹ The continuation of the first passage at 2b22–7 repeats the pattern: thesis, linguistic evidence, conclusion.

¹⁰ The argument against the metalinguistic interpretation given here is sufficient for the *Categories*. To dispose of this interpretation of degrees of being in the *Metaphysics* a stronger argument will be necessary (pp. 397–400 below); this stronger argument applies the *Categories* as well.

by 'pale' is just the kind of variation attributed to *οὐσία* by the intensity interpretation of degrees of being. So in this passage Aristotle denies to substantial predicates like 'man' and 'animal' precisely the kind of variation attributed to *οὐσία* by the intensity interpretation.

Now comes the crucial move. Aristotle introduces his topic by claiming '*οὐσία* seems not to admit of a more and a less' (3b33). He immediately wards off a possible misunderstanding by reminding the reader of what had been proved earlier at 2b7–21: 'I do not mean that an *οὐσία* is not more *οὐσία* than an *οὐσία* – for I have said that it is – but that each *οὐσία* is not more or less that which it is' (3b34–6).¹¹ In this sentence Aristotle contrasts his view about the predicate *οὐσία* with his view about predicates like 'man' and 'animal'. He is reminding the reader that he wishes to affirm of the predicate *οὐσία* the kind of 'more and less' variation which he wishes to deny to predicates like 'man' and 'animal'. But the kind of variation which he wishes to deny to 'man' and 'animal' is the intensive variation exemplified by predicates like 'pale'. So Aristotle must be meaning to affirm of *οὐσία* the kind of intensive variation exemplified by 'pale'. It seems that the intensity interpretation of degrees of being must be right, at least for the *Categories*.

The objection might be raised that we need not assume that Aristotle is ascribing the same sort of 'more and less' to *οὐσία* as he denies to 'man' and 'animal'. He might be using the word 'more' ambiguously in lines 34 and 36. But this is implausible. What is at stake for Aristotle in this passage is a certain *topos*, the topic of 'the more and the less'. He discusses certain aspects of this topic in *Topics* II 10 and 11,¹² and part of his programme in the *Categories* is to apply this topic systematically to all of the categories to see if it applies. The *Categories* is a work of constructive metaphysics, and Aristotle's basic method there requires us to suppose him to be affirming of *οὐσία* the same kind of 'admitting more and less' that he denies to 'man' and 'animal' and to quantities (6a19), affirms of certain relatives and denies to other (6b19–27), and affirms of qualities, while admitting certain doubtful cases (10b26–11a4).

A second objection to the claim that *Categories* 3b33–4a9 contains decisive evidence in favour of the intensity interpretation gets started by pointing out that this passage by itself is insufficient to determine the nature of the topic 'more and less'. Although Aristotle's use of the example of 'pale' suggests that he has in mind in the passage the sort of variation which pale exemplifies, it may be that the topic itself is more general. It may be that for the topic of 'more and less', as he understands it, to apply, weaker sorts of 'more and less' variation than that exemplified by 'pale' are sufficient – though the topic will cover cases like 'pale' as well. If the topic of 'more and less' is more general in this way, then when Aristotle claims that the predicate *οὐσία* admits of the more and the less, he need not be claiming that *οὐσία* admits of intensive variation, but might rather have in mind something weaker. Despite his use of the example 'pale' in this passage, then, if the topic of 'more and less' is understood by him to be wide enough to include, for example, things which vary merely in their order of priority, then it remains possible that, for example, the ordering interpretation of degrees of *οὐσία* is right after all.

This objection shows that the correct interpretation of this passage does depend on the results of a wider investigation into the topic of 'more and less'. Aristotle's habitual

¹¹ The view that particular substantial predicates do not vary in degree may also be expressed at *Met. H* 3 1044a10–11. However, a possible alternative interpretation of the passage would see it as denying that substances *qua* form vary in their *differēntiae*.

¹² The related topic of 'the superlative degree' (*μάλιστα*) is used by Aristotle as a test for sameness and difference in *Top.* VII 1, 152a5–30 and 152b6–9.

reliance on linguistic evidence might lead one to think that he construes the topic as widely as possible. Wherever we use the words 'more and less', there the topic applies. Thus if we use the words 'more and less' in cases where nothing stronger than order of priority is involved, the topic must apply to those cases also. There is a way to test this conjecture. In the *Topics* Aristotle describes certain inferences which he thinks follow from the topic of 'more and less'. If (1) those inferences are justified even in cases where nothing stronger than order of priority is involved, then we are free to suppose that he held the wider construction of the topic. But if (2) those inferences are not justified in these cases, one of three alternatives must hold. Either (a) Aristotle used the wider construal but made errors about which inferences were justified; or (b) he restricted the topic in such a way that he did not intend everything to which we apply the predicates 'more and less' to fall under it; or (c) he used the wider construction, but had supplementary beliefs about the 'weaker' cases which made the inferences valid.

The text of *Topics* II 10–11 is sufficient to rule out (1). At 114b37 Aristotle describes the topic that 'the greater degree follows the greater degree': if X is an essential predicate of Y, and Y admits of degrees, then greater degrees of Y must imply greater degrees of X. Aristotle's example is this: if pleasure is good, then a greater pleasure will be a greater good.¹³ Now this rule of inference does not hold in cases where the 'more and less' is merely a matter of ordering. *Qua* number, two is prior to three and four. Moreover number, *qua* number, is measurable.¹⁴ But on none of the interpretations of 'more' does it seem plausible to say that two is more measurable than three or four.

This leaves (2a), (2b) and (2c). (2a) is implausible, since the inferences involved are not very subtle or complicated. The defender of the intensity interpretation of degrees of *οὐσία* need not decide between (2b) and (2c), since both imply that everything to which the topic of 'more and less' applies does in fact vary in intensity. By ruling out (1) and (2a), we have defended the 'intensity' interpretation of *Categories* 3b33–4a9 against the current objection.

To conclude the discussion of degrees of *οὐσία* in the *Categories*, two suggestions of Simplicius are worth mentioning. He asks, 'How is it that the species is said to be more *οὐσία* than the genus?' (*in Cat.* 90, 17). The first answer he tries out is that 'it is not insofar as they are *οὐσία* that they take on the character of the more and the less, but rather because of their distance from perceptible substance' (90, 17–19). This is the sort of answer one would expect from advocates of the ordering interpretation of degrees of *οὐσία*. It is not due to any variation in their intrinsic character that *οὐσίαι* come in degrees – that is, it is not *qua οὐσίαι* – but merely due to a certain external relation by means of which they can be put in a certain order – e.g., their distance from perceptible *οὐσίαι*. Simplicius seems to accept this answer so far as it goes, but he finds it insufficient. For pale things, too, are more or less pale due to their distance from something, namely the palest thing.¹⁵ I need not discuss the further answers which Simplicius gives, for he overlooks the crucial point. Pale things not only differ in their distance from the palest thing, they also differ in *their degree of paleness*. In fact, it is because pale things differ in their degree of paleness that they can be placed in the ordering relation which makes it true to say, as well, that they differ in their distance from the palest thing. According to the ordering interpretation, paleness would differ from *οὐσία* in just this respect. In the case of *οὐσία*, there would

¹³ This passage is condensed and somewhat obscure. My interpretation relies on Aristotle's explanation at 115a3–5, where it seems that only 'essential' accidents are at stake.

¹⁴ See Bonitz' *Index* 94a9 ff.

¹⁵ See also *in Cat.* 111, 20.

be no intrinsic variation in οὐσία (or in 'being') to provide the basis for the ordering relation. Quite the opposite: the (externally defined) ordering relation would be what provides the basis for calling οὐσίαι 'more' or 'less'.

In his comment on the opening line of *Categories* 5, Simplicius glosses 'most of all' (μάλιστα) as follows: 'This is "most of all" οὐσία because οὐσία is characterized by underlying, and this οὐσία underlies certain things because the genera and species are said of it as of a subject, and other things because they are accidents which are in it as subject' (81, 2–5). This interpretation of 'most of all' fits well the intensity interpretation of degrees of οὐσία. οὐσία possesses a certain intrinsic character, namely underlying, which comes in degrees; and it is due to variations in degree of that intrinsic character that οὐσία, in turn, is said to come in degrees.¹⁶

C. THE EVIDENCE IN THE *METAPHYSICS*

(1) *Some initial evidence*

Aristotle's aim in the *Metaphysics* is to discover which being, of all the beings and kinds of beings in the world, is primary. The object of his inquiry is πρώτη οὐσία. Thus he is mainly interested in the 'essential order' among beings, and not in their degrees of being. Nonetheless he explicitly refers to degrees of being several times.

One important instance is *Metaphysics* Z 3,1029a6: 'So that if form is prior to matter and more a being (μᾶλλον ὄν), it will also be prior to what is compounded out of both, for the same reason.' Here μᾶλλον cannot mean 'rather', since 'form is rather a being [than matter]' would imply that matter is not a being at all, which is far from anything Aristotle would suggest. So μᾶλλον must mean 'more', and thus imply some sort of doctrine of degrees of being. But as we found with the *Categories*, precisely what sort of doctrine of degrees of being the author has in mind is not immediately clear. This issue will need to be addressed once the basic textual evidence has been considered.

Another passage which mentions degrees of being is *M* 2,1077b12: 'It has, then, been sufficiently pointed out that the objects of mathematics are not more substance (οὔτε οὐσίαι μᾶλλον) than bodies, and they are not prior to sensibles in being, but only in definition.' Aristotle here denies a thesis rather than asserts one. Still, the language of this passage (repeated οὔτε) suggests that he considers (a) the status of mathematical as 'more οὐσία' and (b) their priority to be distinct (though no doubt related) issues.¹⁷

¹⁶ The precise force of Simplicius' suggestion depends in part on whether what 'characterizes' οὐσία is meant to be a constitutive character, such as differentia or essence, or a 'property' in Aristotle's technical sense, or a mere *per se* accident. Simplicius' use of *χαρακτήρ* makes it evident that he means something at least as strong as 'property'. (See the passages cited in the Index Verborum at the end of *in Cat.*, p. 552; and especially 79, 7.) The intensity interpretation of degrees of being works best with the view that 'underlying' is a constitutive character of οὐσία. If it is a mere property of οὐσία, some further principle is needed to explain why its variation should carry with it variation in οὐσία. (A principle like that at *Topics* II, 10 114b37 ff. will do the job.)

Moreover the precise force of Simplicius' suggestion will depend on how 'underlying' is understood. If the variation in underlying is given the ordering interpretation – one form of underlying is only prior to another, not really 'more underlying' – this will carry over to οὐσία also.

¹⁷ I should note that it is doctrinally possible to interpret μᾶλλον in this passage as 'rather'. However, the grammatical parallel between οὐσίαι μᾶλλον and πρότερα (both with genitives) makes this an unnatural reading.

(2) *The 'evidential' interpretation of μάλλον: the case for*

Another passage which mentions degrees of being is *N* 1,1088a30: 'A sign that the relative is least of all an οὐσία and a being (ἡκιστα οὐσία τις καὶ ὄν τι) is that it has no proper generation or destruction or movement.' The coupling of οὐσία and 'being' in this passage is striking. In fact this coupling is characteristic of the *Metaphysics*, and will require discussion later. Here the presence of both οὐσία and 'being' creates a puzzle, since Aristotle's doctrine of categories implies that the relative is not at all οὐσία, though it is a being. This in itself guarantees that ἡκιστα cannot simply mean 'not at all', but must, at least for ὄν, in some way express degrees. But exactly what sort of degrees is not yet clear.

For one possible answer, we must turn to an interpretation of μάλλον which has not yet been considered. According to this interpretation, μάλλον sometimes means, roughly, 'there are more grounds for claiming that'.¹⁸ This seems to be the meaning μάλλον has in the famous class of arguments known as οὐ μάλλον arguments. Something is 'οὐ μάλλον X than Y' just in case there are no more grounds for claiming that the thing is X than for claiming that it is Y. This class of arguments was important to the ancient sceptics, but can be traced back to the Presocratics,¹⁹ and is present in Aristotle.²⁰

Even more significantly, in *Rhetoric* *B* 23 Aristotle explicitly identifies a kind of argument related to the οὐ μάλλον type, in which μάλλον seems to have the same sort of use. He calls this the argument 'from the more and less' (1397b12).²¹ It works as follows. First one establishes that A is more F than B is; then one establishes that A is in fact not F; from these two premises one is then entitled to conclude that B is also not F. For if B is less F than what is not F at all, then how can B be F?

For οὐ μάλλον arguments it was natural to take μάλλον as meaning 'there are more grounds for claiming that'. In the case of arguments 'from the more and less' it is difficult to do anything else. For in the premise 'A is μάλλον F than B is', how can μάλλον serve to intensify F, when we know from the immediately following premise that A is not F at all? Since A is not F, the μάλλον in 'A is μάλλον F than B is' cannot be interpreted straightforwardly as meaning 'more'. Instead, its function must be to make the entire sentence elliptic for 'There are more, or more powerful, arguments in favour of A's being F than in favour of B's being F.'

Aristotle uses an argument 'from the more and less' involving οὐσία at *Z* 16, 1040b22–4: 'Now of these things, being (τὸ ὄν) and unity are more substance (μάλλον... οὐσία) than principle, element, or cause, but not even the former are substance, since in general nothing that is common is substance.' Coming as it does at the heart of *Z–H*, the phrase μάλλον οὐσία here would be very important evidence for Aristotle's views in the *Metaphysics* about degrees of being. But if μάλλον in this sentence signifies something like 'there are more grounds for claiming that', then it has nothing to do with degrees of being.

Another connected set of passages making use of this form of argument is *B* 5, 1002a4–8; 1002a15–18; and 1002a26–8. I quote the last of these: 'Therefore, if on the one hand body is most substance (μάλιστα οὐσία), and on the other these [point, line,

¹⁸ I am grateful to Malcolm Schofield for urging the importance of this interpretation of μάλλον.

¹⁹ See Phillip De Lacy, 'οὐ μάλλον and the antecedents of ancient scepticism', *Phronesis* 3 (1958), 59–71.

²⁰ See *Met.* *Γ* 5, 1009b10–11.

²¹ At *Rhet.* *A* 2, 1358a14 he refers to this form of argument as 'the *topos* of the more and less'.

etc.] are more (*μᾶλλον*) this than body, and these are not *οὐσίαι*, then what being and the *οὐσία* of beings is becomes impossible to say (*διαφεύγει*).’ Each of the three passages states an *aporia* and hence does not provide direct evidence for Aristotle’s own view. However, on the straightforward interpretation, it would show that Aristotle took degrees of being to be part of what was at issue between him and his opponents. But if *μᾶλλον* here really means ‘there are more grounds for claiming that’, then this passage has nothing to do with degrees of being.

The passage with which this discussion began, *N* 1,1088a30, is not strictly speaking an instance of the argument from the more and the less. But it is very similar in form to the second premise of such an argument. Instead of ‘not F’ we have here ‘least of all (*ἥκιστα*) F’; but *ἥκιστα* can mean ‘not at all, by no means’. Moreover, a premise containing ‘least of all F’ rather than ‘not F’ will serve the purposes of an argument from the more and the less equally well.²² Interpreting ‘least of all’ here as applying to the strength of grounds rather than the intensity of a property is thus attractive. By saying ‘the relative is least of all *οὐσία* and a being’, Aristotle is merely saying that the arguments against the relative’s being an *οὐσία* or a being are as strong as the strongest arguments against being an *οὐσία* or a being that apply to any other thing. Since it is always possible that the strongest arguments rule out being *οὐσία*, but do not rule out ‘being a being’, this interpretation can accommodate the puzzling conjunction of *οὐσία* and ‘being’ in a way that other interpretations cannot.²³ A further consequence of this interpretation will be that *ἥκιστα οὐσία* in this passage has nothing to do with degrees of being.

Once one has grown accustomed to interpreting *μᾶλλον* in a few, clear passages as ‘there are more grounds for claiming that’, it becomes possible, even natural, to give *μᾶλλον* the same reading in passages where this interpretation is less clearly called for, but not ruled out. The first two passages I cited, *Z* 3,1029a6, and *M* 3,1077b12, can both be read in this way, though there is nothing in the passages themselves to suggest that they must be. Other passages I will cite later are subject to the same reinterpretation. The danger which the interpretation of *μᾶλλον* as meaning ‘there are more grounds for claiming that’ poses to degrees of being in the *Metaphysics* is thus clear. Starting from *Rhetoric B* 23, where some such interpretation of *μᾶλλον* is clearly needed, opponents of degrees of being in the *Metaphysics* can progressively extend this reading of *μᾶλλον* so as to rule out all of the explicit evidence in its favour.

(3) The ‘evidential’ interpretation of *μᾶλλον*: the case against

The problem with this strategy is that the required sense of *μᾶλλον* does not exist. In the *Rhetoric* passage the word *μᾶλλον* is, as we shall see, used as shorthand for *μᾶλλον εἰκός*, ‘more likely’, and in this phrase *μᾶλλον* has its normal use as intensifier. Moreover the *Rhetoric* passage is unique: in no other passage do we have good reason to believe that *μᾶλλον* is short for either *μᾶλλον εἰκός* or *μᾶλλον δοκοῦν*.

That *μᾶλλον* in *Rhetoric B* 23 is a shorthand expression is clear from the parallel

²² In a way it serves the purposes better, since it makes explicit the implication of ‘not’ on which the argument turns. *ἥκιστα* is a strengthened form of the *ἥττον* which Aristotle uses at *Rhet.* 1397b14.

²³ One might object; but not all putative beings are beings. Some arguments are strong enough to rule out certain putative beings as beings. The relative is not less a being than say, ‘goat-stag’, but more. So a problem remains. True enough, but the problem can be solved by supposing that the comparison class Aristotle has in mind in this passage is not ‘all putative beings’, but something more restricted, namely the class of things whose status is at issue between him and his opponents. This, I suppose, is roughly the class, in Aristotle’s terms, of categorial items.

passage in the *Topics*. In *Topics* II 10 Aristotle describes four different topics 'from the more and the less'. The second to fourth of these correspond to the one in the *Rhetoric*. The second runs: 'If one predicate is said of two things, if it does not belong to that to which it is more likely to belong, then it does not belong to the less likely; and if it belongs to that to which it is less likely to belong, then it belongs also to the more likely' (ένος περι δύο λεγομένου, εἰ ᾧ μάλλον εἰκός ὑπάρχειν μὴ ὑπάρχει, οὐδ' ᾧ ἥττον, καὶ εἰ ᾧ ἥττον εἰκός ὑπάρχει, καὶ ᾧ μάλλον). The third and fourth are similar, but with 'appears' or 'is generally thought' (δοκοῦν) replacing 'is likely'.

Both the logic and the language of the *Topics* tropes are the same as in the *Rhetoric*: except that instead of 'belongs more' we get 'is more likely to belong' and 'is more generally thought to belong'. On the assumption that the *Topics* is earlier than the *Rhetoric*, the transition is easy to understand. The logic of the argument is the same, whether μάλλον modifies 'likely' or 'generally thought'. By the time of the *Rhetoric* this fact has been noticed and exploited. In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle covers the same ground in a more abstract and economical way. By using only 'belongs more' and 'belongs less', without their complements 'likely' and 'generally thought', he can make one argument form do for two.

But the possibility of presenting the arguments in an abstract way without the complements 'likely' or 'generally thought' should not mislead one into thinking that no such complement is necessary. Rather, what Aristotle has presented is an argument *form*, to which some such complement must be added before a complete argument is present. μάλλον in *Rhetoric* B 23 does not all by itself mean 'there are more grounds for claiming that' or 'it is more likely that'. Rather, μάλλον here has its normal intensifying meaning, 'more', and requires a complement for it to modify, just as usual.

Moreover, the sort of shorthand jargon used by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* passage is appropriate only for a treatise on rhetorical theory, where the aim is to express the form of arguments as perspicuously and succinctly as possible. The actual arguments which fit this form will not be expressed in the jargon, but in the complete, everyday form. The truth of this is clear from the exemplifications of the topic 'from the more and the less' in the orators. Of the more than one hundred exemplifications of this topic given by Palmer, not one contains μάλλον or a related word used absolutely so as to mean something like 'is more probable' or 'there are more grounds for claiming that'.²⁴ On the other hand, πολὺν μάλλον εἰκός ('much more likely') does occur once,²⁵ and question-form πῶς εἰκός ('How is it likely?') occurs twice.²⁶ εἰκός shows up one more time,²⁷ and a form of δοκέω appears once.²⁸ Predictably, the orators have many other ways of expressing the difference in likelihood or plausibility between the two states of affairs compared when using the topic of the more and the less. The word for 'amazement' (θαυμάζω) appears four times,²⁹ and words for 'strange' or 'odd' (ἄτοπος, δεινός) nine times.³⁰ A half-dozen other expressions of likelihood or plausibility are used.³¹ What this evidence shows is that

²⁴ Georgiana Palmer, *The τόποι of Aristotle's Rhetoric as exemplified in the Orators* (Diss., Univ. of Chicago, 1934), 18–22.

²⁵ Dem. xl. 31, p. 1017.

²⁶ Dem. xlv. 38, p. 1092; Lys. xxxi. 31, p. 189.

²⁷ Lys. xxxv. 16, p. 172.

²⁸ τί χρὴ προσδοκᾶν, Andoc. iv. 15, p. 30.

²⁹ Lys. xiv. 11, p. 140; Isaeus v. 38, p. 54; Isoc. xx. 3, p. 396a; Dem. ii. 24, p. 25.

³⁰ ἄτοπος; Aesch. i. 85, p. 11; Lys. xxiv. 8, p. 168. δεινός: Isoc. xiv. 52; xv. 165, p. 86; Lys. vii. 29, p. 110; x. 13, p. 117; xiv. 17, p. 141; xviii. 12, p. 150; Dem. xx. 12, p. 460. The meaning of δεινός in some of these passages shades off into 'terrible', 'horrible'.

³¹ See Isaeus iii. 35, p. 41; Dinarchus i. 45; Aesch. i. 28, p. 4; i. 108, p. 15; Dem. xxvii. 57, p. 831; Lys. iii. 32, p. 99.

Aristotle was wise in the *Rhetoric* to make his description of this topic so abstract: the complements which he relies on in the *Topics*, 'likely' (εἰκός) and 'generally regarded' (δοκοῦν), are only two of many which can be used for the purpose. What this evidence does not show is that no such complement was necessary. Of course the orators are skilful enough often to convey the idea of comparative probability without using explicit vocabulary. But wherever in employing this topic they also do use μάλλον, they use it as an intensifier and with an explicit complement.

The way μάλλον is used in the description of the topic of the more and the less in the *Rhetoric* is, therefore, a shorthand use that is peculiar to rhetorical theory. We have no reason to believe that μάλλον was used in this shorthand way outside of that specialized context.³²

One might think that μάλλον is used in this way in one other context, namely in arguments of the οὐ μάλλον type, and be tempted to generalize from Aristotle's use of μάλλον in this context to rule out putative examples of degrees of being. However, the use of μάλλον in the context of οὐ μάλλον arguments is also of the normal type. At least down to the time of Aristotle, 'οὐ μάλλον X than Y' does not mean 'there are no better grounds for X than Y', nor 'X is more probable or persuasive (πίθανον) than Y'. Instead, the μάλλον in these arguments either indicates degrees, as in Democritus' famous statement that 'οὐθὲν μάλλον τὸ ὄν τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἶναι' (Arist. *Met.* 985b7), or it means 'rather', as in 'τί γὰρ μάλλον τοῦ κενοῦ ἐνταῦθα ἢ ἐνταῦθα' (Arist. *Phys.* 203b25).³³ And both of these are ordinary uses of μάλλον.³⁴ So the sense of function which μάλλον has in *Rhetoric B* 23 should not be read into any other passages, in Aristotle or his predecessors. Recall that the passages involving degrees of being which seemed to exemplify the *Rhetoric* topic of the more and the less are *Metaphysics B* 5, 1002a4–28, *Z* 16, 1040b21–4, and *N* 1, 1088a30. The word μάλλον (or ἡττον) in these two passages modifies οὐσία, and not an implicit 'more likely' or 'more generally thought'.³⁵ But this means that μάλλον in these passages does not have the same function as it does in *Rhetoric B* 23. Are these passages, then, really exemplifications of this topic? In fact they are not. Rather, these passages and the

³² There is an exemplification of Aristotle's topic of the more and the less in Plato which might seem to employ μάλλον in this shorthand way, at *Phaedo* 87b–c. Both παντὸς μάλλον at 87c4 and οὐδέν τι μάλλον at 87d1 might be thought to be implicitly completed by something like 'is more likely'. But παντὸς μάλλον is a fixed idiom in Greek (see LSJ s.v. πᾶς III 4). Usually the complement for the μάλλον in this phrase is taken from the context. Where there is no complement in the context, as here, the usual meaning of the phrase is 'most of all true'. For οὐδέν τι μάλλον at 87d1 the complements of μάλλον are φαυλότερον and ἀσθενέστερον. (On μάλλον with a comparative see LSJ s.v. μάλα II 3, Kühner–Gerth I, p. 26 (sect. 349c); Schwyzler II, p. 185.)

³³ A similar use of μάλλον ἢ is ascribed to Leucippus at Simplicius in *Phys.* 28, 8.

³⁴ For further support, see the evidence cited in De Lacy, pp. 59–63. He shows that in Democritus the phrase οὐ μάλλον was used to make statements about the nature of things, not about our knowledge of them. In the Sophists perhaps, and certainly in Plato and Aristotle, οὐ μάλλον arguments are used in order to make points about knowledge. However, the form of argument is *reductio*, and the οὐ μάλλον premise is a premise about the world. The epistemological consequences are drawn from the fact that we are led to the (paradoxical) conclusion 'οὐ μάλλον X than Y'. But 'οὐ μάλλον X than Y' is not itself an epistemological statement.

³⁵ For the *B* passage, some might be tempted to claim that the δόξεις of 1001b32 (μάλιστ' ἂν δόξειεν σημαίνειν οὐσίαν) is implicitly carried forward and understood at 1002a4, 15, and 26. But such a reading strikes me as extremely strained. A full Becker column is too long a distance for such a verb to be carried forward, when there is no grammatical parallelism to serve as a vehicle. Moreover at 1002a7, 18, and 30, Aristotle repeats verbs for 'seeming': if δοκεῖν were understood throughout, these verbs would be unnecessary. Finally, at 1001b32 Aristotle is reporting a particular widespread opinion concerning earth, air, fire, and water. The other three passages concern body and geometricals, which are a different case.

exemplifications of the *Rhetoric B* 23 topic belong to somewhat different species of an even more abstract 'topic of the more and the less' than the one which Aristotle describes. To see this, one must first recognize that the argument form described in *Rhetoric B* 23 depends for its validity on the basic logic of the comparative use of *μᾶλλον*. This argument form is restricted to cases where what is compared is 'likelihood' or 'persuasiveness' or 'general acceptance'. But the same style of argument is valid in all cases where *μᾶλλον* has its normal comparative use. 'John is more honest than Bill (because we have just heard testimony that he refused a bribe which Bill accepted). But John is not honest (because we have heard endless testimony about his shady dealings). So Bill is not honest. (And thus deserves to be convicted of the crime.)' The arguments in *B* 5,1002a4–28 and *Z* 16,1040b21–4 and the argument implied by *N* 1,1088a30 depend for their validity on the basic logic of the comparative use of *μᾶλλον*, and not on the restricted cases involving likelihood and plausibility which are the exclusive objects of attention in the forensic context of the *Rhetoric*.

(4) *The remaining direct evidence*

Beyond the texts already presented, there are four passages in the *Metaphysics* in which *μᾶλλον* or its variants appear to be combined with a word for being. These passages are by their very nature contestable territory. None of them *must* be read as referring to degrees of being, though all of them *can* be. The question is one of probabilities.

The first passage is *N* 4,1091b13–15: 'Some say that the one itself is the good itself; but they think that its unity is most of all οὐσία.' In this passage 'most of all' (μάλιστα) could possibly modify 'think', but the word order makes this unlikely. Grammatically it could modify 'is' (εἶναι) alone, but that yields no sense. So in this passage 'most of all' probably modifies either οὐσία or else οὐσία...εἶναι, and in either case indicates some sort of theory of degrees of being. But of course, the theory in question is one held by certain Platonists, and not Aristotle.

The second passage is *Z* 3,1029a1: 'For the primary substratum seems to be οὐσία most of all (μάλιστα).' Here 'most of all' may modify οὐσία, thus indicating some sort of degrees of being. Thus Ross's translation: 'That which underlies a thing primarily is thought to be in the truest sense its substance.' But the word may equally well modify 'seems', in which case the passage has nothing to do with degrees of being. So far as the grammar and context are concerned, the two readings are equally plausible.

The third passage is *Z* 1,1028a25: 'But these [the walker, the sleeper, and the healthy person] appear to be more beings (μᾶλλον φαίνεται ὄντα) because for them there is a determinate substrate.' Grammatically speaking, 'more' could easily modify 'appear', in which case this passage has nothing to do with degrees of being. However, 'more' has usually been taken by interpreters to modify 'beings'. Ross translates the crucial phrase: 'appear to be more real'. If *μᾶλλον* means 'more' and modifies 'beings', then Ross's translation must be basically the right one. But there is an alternative. In this passage Aristotle is contrasting 'the walker' and 'the healthy' with 'to walk' and 'to be healthy'. If it is taken for granted that both types are beings, then *μᾶλλον ὄντα* has to have Ross's meaning. But if the issue is whether 'to walk' and 'to be healthy' are beings *at all*, then *φαίνεται μᾶλλον ὄντα* will mean 'appear *rather* to be beings' – i.e., in contrast to the other class, which are not beings at all. Unfortunately, this latter alternative appears to be correct.³⁶ So in this case, contrary to what most scholars have thought, I conclude that degrees of being are not involved.

³⁶ See esp. 1028a21, reading ἢ μὴ ὄν.

The last passage is *H* 1,1042a14: 'And in another way [there are arguments from which it follows that] the genus is more [οὐσία] than the species, and the universal than the individuals.' The grammatical structure of this passage is difficult to reproduce in translation, since the words in brackets must be imported from the previous sentence. Three readings are possible. Aristotle could be saying (1) that the genus is *more* οὐσία than the species, or (2) that the genus is οὐσία *rather than* the species (which is not οὐσία at all), or (3) that the genus is primary οὐσία *rather than* the species (which, even if it is οὐσία, is not primary οὐσία). Only on reading (1) do degrees of being come into play. Again, Ross translates according to reading (1). In fairness, the word order and the necessity of importing οὐσία from the previous sentence seem to me to speak in favour of readings (2) and (3). Still all three readings are possible.

All of the passages in the *Metaphysics* in which μάλλον appears to modify οὐσία or some form of εἶναι have now been discussed. Where do we stand? Two passages, *Z* 3,1029a6 and *M* 2,1077b12, are most naturally taken as involving degrees of being. Three other passages, *B* 5,1002a26, *Z* 16,1040b21–4, and *N* 1,1088a30, are instances of an argument form in which μάλλον might be thought to involve degrees of evidence instead of degrees of the predicate at stake in the argument. But we have seen that μάλλον is used in this peculiar way only as part of a shorthand description of a general argument form, at *Rhetoric* *B* 23. This 'evidential' μάλλον is never used, and could never properly be used, in the context of any concrete argument. So the μάλλον in these three passages must be interpreted as an intensifier, thus as involving degrees of being. Finally, we have four passages which, usually for grammatical reasons, can be taken either as referring to degrees of being or not. Of these my own view is that *N* 4,1091b13–15 probably does involve degrees of being; *Z* 3,1029a1 can be taken with equal probability either way; and *Z* 1,1028a25 and *H* 1,1042a14 probably do not make reference to degrees of being.

I conclude that the direct evidence that Aristotle is operating with a notion of degrees of being in the *Metaphysics* is overwhelming. Those hostile to the idea will perhaps be impressed with how few passages I have been able to cite. But it is inappropriate to demand that the notion be expressly mentioned in many passages, since it is clear that Aristotle does not take the special theoretical interest in this notion which Plato does. The notion of degrees of being is present in Aristotle as an idea he takes for granted, as part – an important part – of the unthematized background of his thought.

(5) *The indirect evidence for degrees of being*

Moreover, once the direct evidence for degrees of being is in place, it can be expanded by appeal to indirect evidence. If Aristotle did believe in degrees of being, he had at his disposal more means than just μάλλον for expressing them. There is the language of 'nearness' to being and to οὐσία, which he uses at *E* 2,1026b13: 'For the accident appears to be something near to not being'. The language of 'nearness' recurs, attached to οὐσία, in *On Generation and Corruption*, *De Caelo* and the *Physics*.³⁷ The *Physics* passage contains a further expression for degrees of being, πως: 'The one [matter] is near to οὐσία and is οὐσία in a way (ἐγγὺς καὶ οὐσίαν πως), the other [privation] in no way (οὐδαμῶς). Again, πως and οὐδαμῶς are flexible words which need not be taken to express degrees of being, but they very strongly suggest it.

An important passage in which 'the more and the less' are connected with nearness and indirectly with being is *Γ* 4,1008b32–1009a5. Here Aristotle argues for the

³⁷ *G&C* *B* 10,336b34, *De Caelo* IV 3,310b32, *Phys.* I 9,192a6.

Principle of Non-contradiction on the grounds that there must be ‘a more and a less in the nature of things’ (1008b33). He defends this by arguing that the way we speak shows that we do think that, of incompatible predicates, the one is less and the other is more true. He continues: ‘So if what is “more” is “nearer”, there *will*³⁸ be something “true”, to which the more true is nearer. Even if that were not so, what has been said so far is sufficient to establish that there is something which is firmer and more true...’ (1008b36–1009a3).

In this quotation, the first sentence contains a typical Aristotelian *argumentum ex gradibus*: where there is a more there is a most. Such arguments are dubious. But the second sentence shows that he is mainly interested in establishing the existence of the ‘more true’: this will be enough to refute his relativist opponents. The significance of the concept ‘more true’ for degrees of being derives from Aristotle’s doctrine that truth is one of the four senses of being (*E* 2,1026a35, *E* 4). If truth is a kind of being, and truth comes in degrees, then so does being.³⁹

A second, similar source of indirect evidence for degrees of being in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is what he says about unity (τὸ ἓν). At *Γ* 2,1003b22 he declares that being and unity are the same and a single nature (τὰντὸν καὶ μία φύσις), and he repeats this doctrine at *I* 2,1054a13–19.⁴⁰ If being and unity are the same and a single nature – if, that is, the being and the unity of each thing are the same – then if unity comes in degrees, so must being. But unity does come in degrees. Aristotle makes this clear in his discussion of the kinds of *per se* unity in *I* 1. He begins: ‘The continuous is, either simply or at least most of all (μάλιστα γὰρ), that which is continuous by nature and not by touch or binding together (and of these more one and prior [μᾶλλον ἔν καὶ πρότερον] is that whose motion is more indivisible and more simple). Next, even more this way [i.e. continuous] is that which is a whole and has a certain shape and form, and most of all if it is this way [i.e. has this sort of continuity] by nature and not by force...’ (1052a19–23).

Continuity is a species of *per se* unity; but the species of being and unity are the same (*Γ* 2,1003b33),⁴¹ so continuity is also a species of *per se* being. Since continuity comes in degrees, so does being.⁴²

³⁸ The English future tense is somewhat more vivid than the Greek, which is optative; but I use it, together with italics, to capture the force of the immediately following γὰρ.

³⁹ The objection that in the *Γ* 4 passage ‘more true’ means nothing more than closeness to the absolute truth, and hence does not imply ‘degrees’, is wholly misguided. First, a doctrine according to which beings, or truths, have a rank order is a doctrine of degrees of being, although a fairly weak one. But second, there is no question in this passage of Aristotle wanting to *reduce* degrees of truth to any sort of closeness relation. His conditional ‘if what is more is nearer’ means: ‘if it is a principle of the logic of “more” that wherever there is a “more” there is something to which it is “nearer” (namely a “most”), then...’ This principle enables one to infer from an independently justified ‘more’ to a ‘nearer’, not the other way round.

⁴⁰ Where the qualification ‘somewhat’ (πῶς) corresponds to the qualification ‘but not in account’ of the *Γ* 2 passage.

⁴¹ The text only says that the species are ‘the same in number’, but the earlier ‘sameness of nature’ must imply that the species are the same in nature (if not in account) as well.

⁴² At this point a possible misunderstanding should be averted. One might raise the following objection. Since coming-in-degrees is a property which can belong to species without belonging to their genera (e.g. there are degrees of straightness and crookedness but perhaps not of shapedness), perhaps continuity, the species, comes in degrees but the genera, being and unity, do not. This objection misunderstands the issue of ‘degrees of being’, which is whether being, in any of its ‘kinds’ or ‘senses’, comes in degrees. Degrees of actuality or truth are degrees of being (and hence of unity) and degrees of continuity are degrees of unity (and hence of being), because actuality, truth, and continuity are all ‘senses’ or ‘species’ of being and unity. Contrast these with animal and figure, which are species of *beings* and *unities*, but not of being and unity as such.

All of the evidence which can be used to persuade doubters that degrees of being can indeed be found in the *Metaphysics* has now been presented. But once one is convinced that Aristotle did believe in degrees of being, good grounds are available for seeing them tacitly at work in many other passages as well. Given the way in which priority (of various sorts) serves as a criterion of οὐσία, it is reasonable to suppose Aristotle to hold the principle that what is prior (in these ways) to that extent has a higher degree of being. Thus in all of the many arguments in the *Metaphysics* which concern the priority of substance, or the priority of one being or substance over another, it is reasonable to suppose that an inference concerning degrees of being is being licensed; and that Aristotle was aware of this and intended it, even when he did not bother to make the point explicitly. Seen in this light, the *Metaphysics* is pervaded with degrees of being.⁴³

(6) *The interpretation of degrees of being*

But 'degrees of being' in what sense? Which of the three interpretations of degrees of being discussed earlier in connection with the *Categories* – the intensity, ordering, and metalinguistic interpretations – is it appropriate to ascribe to the *Metaphysics*?

Aristotle's discussion of degrees of unity in *I* 1 provides evidence in favour of the intensity interpretation. That thing is more continuous, he says, which is 'more indivisible and more simple' (ἀδιαίρετωτέρα... καὶ μᾶλλον ἀπλή, 1052a21). Indivisibility and simplicity both vary in degree; the intensity interpretation is clearly correct for them. So if continuity varies as indivisibility and simplicity do, then continuity varies in degree, and the intensity interpretation is correct for it. Since continuity is a species of unity and therefore a species of being, it follows that the intensity interpretation of degrees of being is correct for at least one species of being in the *Metaphysics*.

The ordering interpretation of degrees of being might seem especially attractive for the *Metaphysics*. Aristotle's main interest in this work is to establish the order of priority among beings, and especially οὐσίαι. Since most of Aristotle's arguments and conclusions are cast in terms of priority, it might seem reasonable to construe his occasional use of the language of degrees of being as rhetorical variation. When he says that something is μᾶλλον οὐσία, he would merely be making his usual point that it is a prior, or primary οὐσία, using superficially different language.

However, the evidence this line of reasoning relies on should be taken to have exactly the opposite significance. If Aristotle's sole interest had been in the order of priority among beings, he would have restricted himself to the language of priority. The language of degrees of being often appears alongside the language of priority.⁴⁴ If the two kinds of expression were equivalent, these texts would be uselessly redundant. In its handling of concepts the *Metaphysics* is subtle and precise: hence we should not attribute this sort of redundancy to Aristotle if we can avoid it. We can avoid it by assuming that these two kinds of expression are not equivalent, and hence that the ordering interpretation of degrees of being is wrong.

⁴³ Other criteria of substance may also imply degrees of being. For degrees of being τὸδε τι, including links between degrees of τὸδε τι and οὐσία see *G&C* 318b15, 32, 34. For degrees of being a form, see *Met.* *Z* 4–5, *G&C* 335a18.

⁴⁴ See *Z* 3, 1029a1, 1029a6; *M* 2, 1077b12.

⁴⁵ Notably G. E. L. Owen. See 'Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle', *Aristotle and Plato in the Mid-Fourth Century*, ed. I. Düring and G. E. L. Owen (Göteborg, 1960), 184.

⁴⁶ *Δ* 7, 8; *Γ* 2; and *Ε* 4 all make this clear.

Ruling out the metalinguistic interpretation of degrees of being for the *Metaphysics* is more complicated. Some⁴⁵ have been convinced by the following argument that in the *Metaphysics* degrees of being can only be interpreted metalinguistically. Aristotle holds as a firm doctrine that an attribute can only vary in degree where it is predicated univocally. One instance of an attribute cannot, *qua* that attribute, be more or less than another instance, if the attribute is predicated ambiguously in the two cases. An example: the ocean deep is neither more nor less blue than the mood of a lonely teenage lover. Despite what poets may say, the two 'blues' are just not comparable. But in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle shows full consciousness that both οὐσία and ὄν are homonymous.⁴⁶ Therefore he cannot have held an intensity interpretation of degrees of being in the *Metaphysics*. However, the importance of the notion of focal meaning to the *Metaphysics* shows that he had a keen interest in determining which things are said to be, and to be οὐσία, in a stricter sense than other things. Hence it is reasonable to interpret the language of degrees of being in the *Metaphysics* metalinguistically.

This argument requires that in Aristotle μάλλον, when modifying a predicate, can mean 'in a stricter sense' well as 'to a greater degree'. But there is no good reason to suppose that this is so. That μάλλον sometimes modifies λέγειν in such a way that 'X μάλλον λέγεται F' means 'X is F in a stricter sense' is uncontroversial. And that Aristotle is often willing to infer from 'X is μάλλον said to be F' to 'X is μάλλον F' and back again is also uncontroversial. But evidence for the stronger claim that 'μάλλον F' simpliciter, without a verb of saying, sometimes means 'is F in a stricter sense', as opposed to 'is more F', is scarce indeed. G. E. L. Owen made this stronger claim, and his view has been quite influential.⁴⁷ But the sole passage which he brought forward in support was *Protrepticus*, fr. 81–2 Düring (fr. 14 Ross).⁴⁸ The crucial lines are the following:

(81) When, therefore, each of two things is called by the same name, and one is called by that name because it produces or suffers the other, we shall say that the predicate belongs more to the latter (τούτῳ μάλλον ἀποδώσομεν ὑπάρχειν τὸ λεχθέν), e.g. [we say that] he who uses knowledge 'knows' more (ἐπίστασθαι μὲν μάλλον) than he who merely has it... (82) For we do not only use 'more' with respect to the excess of that which has one definition, but also with respect to being prior and posterior (οὐ γὰρ μόνον τὸ μάλλον λέγομεν καθ' ὑπεροχὴν ὧν ἂν εἰς ἡ λόγος, ἀλλὰ καὶ κατὰ τὸ πρότερον εἶναι τὸ δ' ὕστερον), e.g. we say that health is more good than healthy things, and that which is by its own nature worthy of choice than that which produces this, though we see that it is not by the definition's being predicated of both that the useful and virtue are each good. (57.6–19 Pistelli)

Owen cites the passage without comment. His reasoning seems to be this. First Aristotle claims (contrary to his normal practice)⁴⁹ that we can use the word 'more' to compare instances of a term used ambiguously. But then he draws the teeth from his thesis by telling us that in such cases the word 'more' is not used in its normal sense of 'to a greater degree', but rather means 'in a stricter sense'. Owen seems to be willing to translate 'said prior' as 'in a stricter sense'.⁵⁰ Thus he interprets 'being

⁴⁷ Ibid. My evidence for the influence of his view is mainly oral. In conversations about degrees of being in Aristotle, I have found that scholars frequently treat 'in a stricter sense' as an established use of μάλλον which will account for many, if not all, of its appearances in the *Metaphysics*.

⁴⁸ Düring, *Protrepticus, An Attempt at Reconstruction* (Göteborg, 1961), follows Owen's interpretation of this passage in his translation and notes. From Düring's preface it seems likely that the interpretation was the subject of discussion between the two men well before it appeared in print. See also Düring's later work, *Der Protreptikos des Aristoteles* (Frankfurt, 1969), 120.

⁴⁹ Owen cites *Phys.* 249a3–8; *Cat.* 11a12–13; and *Pol.* 1259b36–8.

⁵⁰ Op. cit. p. 183.

prior and posterior' in the quoted passage as invoking strictness of senses, and as recalling the phrase 'said truly and chiefly' (*φατέον... ἀληθῶς καὶ κυρίως*) earlier in the fragment.⁵¹

But this interpretation is strained. What are said to be prior and posterior in the sentence are not the definitions or senses of 'good', which is the ambiguous term, but health and the healthy, which are not ambiguous. A more plausible story is this. Just before the quoted passage, Aristotle has distinguished between stricter and looser senses of 'perceive' and 'know' and 'live'. From this he concludes ('therefore', *οὖν*) that in the stricter cases we can also say that a person 'more perceives', 'more knows' and 'more lives'. However, the predicate in such cases will often be used ambiguously, which violates his normal prohibition. So Aristotle hastens to explain the class of cases, to which these belong, where the prohibition does not hold. Normally one is not allowed to compare across ambiguity. But when the items to which the ambiguous predicate is applied are related to each other as prior and posterior, then comparison is allowed. Aristotle's point is not that 'more' can mean 'in a stricter sense' rather than 'to a greater degree'. Rather, his point is that when the subjects of predication are related as 'prior and posterior', then one is allowed to speak of the predicate applying 'to a greater degree' despite the multiplicity of senses.

Protrepticus, fr. 81–2 provide no support for the thesis that *μᾶλλον* can mean 'in a stricter sense'. Any further support which might be brought forward would need to belong to one of two types. The first type would be an explicit discussion by Aristotle of the meaning of '*μᾶλλον*' in which he distinguishes 'in a stricter sense F' as one of the possible meanings of '*μᾶλλον* F'. *Protrepticus* 81–2 was meant by Owen to be evidence of this type. The second type would be indirect evidence, in which an expression of the type '*μᾶλλον* F' is used without an accompanying verb of saying in such a way that it cannot be understood as modifying F in the normal fashion, but must be understood as meaning 'is F in a stricter sense'. Given Aristotle's habitual readiness to move back and forth between metalinguistic and object-language modes of expression, clear evidence of this second type will be hard to find. In fact, I am aware of no further evidence of either type. Once *Protrepticus* 81–2 is removed, there seem to be no grounds for believing that 'in a stricter sense' is one of the possible meanings for '*μᾶλλον*' when it modifies a predicate 'F'.

An interpretation similar to Owen's, but more sophisticated and more carefully argued, has been given by F. Émile de Strycker.⁵² De Strycker, like Owen, holds that Aristotle's purpose in fr. 81–2 is to distinguish the use of *μᾶλλον* when it is applied to terms like 'health', 'good' and 'living' from the normal use of *μᾶλλον* to mean 'more'. But unlike Owen, de Strycker does not hypothesize a special new meaning for *μᾶλλον*. Instead he argues that *μᾶλλον* in these cases has its familiar other meaning of 'rather'.⁵³ This *μᾶλλον* has an exclusive rather than comparative function, and is

⁵¹ Ross, p. 491.19 (see also 1.14); Düring, fr. 80.

⁵² In 'Prédicats univoques et prédicats analogiques dans les "Protreptiques" d'Aristote', *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 66 (1968), 597–618 (henceforth '1968') with supplementary material in the note 'Sur un emploi technique de *μᾶλλον* chez Aristote', *Mnemosyne* Ser. IV, 22 (1969), 303–4 (1969a). A shorter presentation of the view may be found in his important review of Düring's 1961 edition in *Gnomon* 41 (1969), 233–55 (1969b).

⁵³ In French *plutôt* (1968, p. 608); and in German *eher* (1969b, pp. 240ff.). (For both, see 1969a, p. 303.) De Strycker creates some confusion when he uses *par préférence* and *eher* for both (1) a general or neutral translation covering both kinds of *μᾶλλον*, and (2) a specific translation of the exclusive *μᾶλλον*. (Compare 1968, p. 608, lines 8 and 18 with p. 609, line 7, and 1969b, p. 241 line 14 and line 39.) In fact both *par préférence* and *eher* are quite imprecise, and each

often expressed by *μᾶλλον* δέ or *μᾶλλον* ἤ.⁵⁴ When Aristotle says that he who uses knowledge *ἐπίστασθαι* *μᾶλλον* than he who merely has it, he means to say that the first one has knowledge *rather than* the second.

Although de Strycker is not fully explicit about this, his idea seems to be that Aristotle is using this *μᾶλλον* here in order to establish a series of meanings of the predicate F which are ordered according to strictness,⁵⁵ but which cannot be compared in their degree of F-ness. If you want to speak really strictly, you must say that those who are using their knowledge of the highest objects are knowing, *rather than* (i.e.: but not) those who are using their knowledge of lesser objects. If you want to speak less strictly, you may say that those who are using their knowledge of anything at all are knowing, but not those who merely have their knowledge without using it. If you want to speak loosely, you may even say that those who merely have knowledge know.

In this way, without introducing a whole new meaning for *μᾶλλον*, de Strycker is able to arrive at a conclusion remarkably similar to Owen's: 'When a predicate is applied to two subjects, one can indicate by *μᾶλλον* that there exists between them, from the point of view of the characteristics designated by the predicate in question, a relation of priority and posteriority'.⁵⁶ The 'relation of priority and posteriority' in question is that of strictness of sense.

The problem with de Strycker's interpretation is that the crucial first sentence of fr. 82 does not distinguish two senses of *μᾶλλον*, as his interpretation requires, but rather two different types of case to which *μᾶλλον* can legitimately be applied. Since Aristotle gives no indication otherwise, one must assume that *μᾶλλον* gets applied in the same sense to each. Since no one doubts that, when applied to items having a single definition, *μᾶλλον* has the comparative sense, this must be the sense common to both cases.⁵⁷

De Strycker maintains that Aristotle does give explicit indication that the sense of *μᾶλλον* is different in the two cases, namely by his use of the phrase *καθ' ὑπεροχὴν* only for the first case and not for the second.⁵⁸ I believe he is right that wherever one finds the comparative use of *μᾶλλον*, the language of *ὑπεροχὴ* and *ἔλλειψις*, of excess and defect, must also be appropriate. (Compare, e.g., *HA I* 1,486b17.) But Aristotle's language does not imply that only the first kind of case allows *ὑπεροχὴ*. 'Being prior and posterior' need not contrast with 'excess'; more probably it contrasts with 'having a single definition'. Aristotle uses the word *ὑπεροχὴ* in the first clause because he is giving criteria for the use of 'more': it is by *excess* of that which has one definition, rather than *deficiency* or *equality* or some other characteristic, that 'more' is said. *ὑπεροχὴ* is not repeated in the description of the second case either because it is understood from the previous clause, or because the words 'being prior and

can bear both meanings of *μᾶλλον*. *Eher*, for example, means *lieber* more frequently than it means *mehr*, but it has both meanings, along with other related ones. 'Rather' and *plutôt* convey precisely the sense of the exclusive *μᾶλλον*.

⁵⁴ 1968, p. 608 n. 30; 1969b, p. 240.

⁵⁵ For the weight de Strycker places on *κυρίως* and *ἀληθώς*, see 1968, pp. 604, 608, and 610; 1969a, p. 303; 1969b, p. 240.

⁵⁶ 1968, p. 609.

⁵⁷ Although de Strycker is wrong to claim that he does so here, Aristotle does sometimes elsewhere use the exclusive sense of *μᾶλλον* when distinguishing between senses of a word. See e.g. *Phys. B* 1, 193b6-7 (interpreted as in the Hardie-Gaye trans.) and (for *μάλιστα*) *NE VI* 8, 1141b29-30.

⁵⁸ See 1968, p. 609, 610; 1969b, p. 241. I suppose that it is the phrase *καθ' ὑπεροχὴν* which de Strycker has in mind when he says 'comme Aristote le dit *expressément*...' in 1968, p. 610, n. 36 (my italics).

posterior' already convey the idea of excess and defect, so that a repetition of *ὑπεροχή* is not needed.⁵⁹

Neither Owen's nor de Strycker's interpretations of the *μᾶλλον* used in expressions for degrees of being has a solid basis in Aristotle's text. But the philosophical worry which motivated their interpretations retains its force.⁶⁰ In the *Metaphysics* both *οὐσία* and *ὅν* are acknowledged to be ambiguous; but Aristotle held that an attribute can vary in degree only where it is predicated univocally. If in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle permits degrees of being, then, the cost of doing so must be self-contradiction.

Fortunately Aristotle has a solution to this problem. Owen is right that Aristotle presents his solution to it in *Protrepticus* 81–2. But if the interpretation which I gave earlier is correct, this solution turns out to preserve degrees of being. For in this passage Aristotle points out an exception to his usual prohibition. If the ambiguous terms are related as prior and posterior, it is acceptable to compare them after all. Now it is clear that whenever in the *Metaphysics* one *ὅν* or *οὐσία* will be said to be *μᾶλλον* *ὅν* or *οὐσία* than another, the reason for this will be precisely that the first *ὅν* or *οὐσία* is prior to the latter. So all cases of degree of being will come under the exception.

This solution is not only philosophically acceptable; it is required. Those, like Owen and de Strycker, who deprive Aristotle of the ability to make comparisons in the strict sense across cases of Aristotelian homonymy deprive him of something that he needs. For in ordinary life we find it unavoidable to compare the value, for example, of instrumental and final goods. A well-made surgeon's scalpel is a good thing; but not as good as health. Aristotle's somewhat technical views about the definition of 'good' require him to hold that 'good' is ambiguous when applied, respectively, to a scalpel and to health. Surely it would be inappropriate for these views about definition to deprive him of the ability to make such perfectly everyday judgements as that a scalpel is less valuable than health.⁶¹

This point is generalizable. The quoted passage implies, and Aristotle's practice elsewhere makes clear that he holds, a view about definition according to which whenever a term essentially applies to two things which are essentially related to each other as prior and posterior, the term has a different sense – a different definition – in each case. This view about definition is highly theoretical. In part it can draw direct support from ordinary language, as when Aristotle says that a human being in a picture is not a human being in the same sense as a living human being. But in part it goes well beyond it, as in the case of good. If Aristotle were to maintain his principle of no comparisons across ambiguity for all cases of ambiguity, even those generated

⁵⁹ Moreover it is grammatically possible, and only slightly more difficult, to read the sentence in such a way that *καθ' ὑπεροχὴν* precedes the description of the first case rather than forming part of it. Thus: 'For we do not only use "more" for the excess (1) of that having one definition, but also (2) in cases where there is a prior and a posterior.' If this is the right translation, then part of Aristotle's point is to insist explicitly on the intensity interpretation of *μᾶλλον* for both cases.

⁶⁰ For de Strycker's philosophical worries, see 1968, p. 610.

⁶¹ Moreover it would not do to admit that health is better than a scalpel, but insist that the superior goodness of health consists merely in its causal and definitional superiority. The goodness of health consists in its being preferable to the scalpel. The comparative judgement of *greater choiceworthiness* is essential to practice and to practical philosophy, as Aristotle's language in *NE* I,1–2 shows he was aware.

Further evidence that Aristotle cannot have shared de Strycker's view that genuinely comparative judgements across relations of priority and posteriority are nonsense in his use of *ὑπεροχή* at *NE* I,6 1098a11. Although it is beyond my scope here, *NE* I,6 as a whole deserves detailed comparison with *Protrepticus*, fr. 14 Ross.

only by his particular theoretical views about definition, he could do so only at the cost of widespread conflict with normal usage. He would deprive us of the right to say many things which we ordinarily say. In fact Aristotle does not do this. Instead he moderates his principle by excepting those cases of ambiguity which are due to priority and posteriority, while retaining it for the physical and mathematical attributes to which it naturally applies.⁶²

It would be wrong to think that we have grounds for supposing that Aristotle first held the principle against comparisons across ambiguity in its fully general form, and then moderated it at some later point in his career. The *Protrepticus* is rather early, probably composed just before the death of Plato.⁶³ The principle is stated in unrestricted form at *Categories* 11a12–13 and *Physics* VII 4,249a3–8. On the other hand it is violated, in ways which fall under the *Protrepticus* exemption, by maxims presented at *Topics* III 1,116a23–8; 2,117b10–12; and 5,119a16–19. And all three works belong to an early period in Aristotle's career.⁶⁴

D. CONCLUSION

This ends my examination of the evidence regarding degrees of being in Aristotle. I have concentrated on the *Categories* and *Metaphysics*, for the crucial evidence is to be found in these two texts. In the *Categories*, I have argued, there is conclusive evidence for degrees of being: Aristotle's use of *μᾶλλον* and *μάλιστα* in *Categories* 5 can be understood in no other way. In the *Metaphysics* the evidence is not so uniformly firm. Several of the passages which seem to involve degrees of being could possibly be taken in some other way. But in most of these cases interpreting the passage as involving degrees of being is significantly easier or more plausible than not doing so. And there is a core of three or four passages which cannot plausibly be taken in any other way. When the direct evidence of these passages is combined with the indirect evidence for degrees of being, the case becomes overwhelming. Further, the degrees of being that Aristotle has in mind in the *Categories* and the *Metaphysics* are 'degrees' in the strong sense: they are genuine variations in the attribute 'being'. I have argued this for each work separately, and have shown how Aristotle's recognition of the ambiguity of 'being' need not create any obstacle to the claim.⁶⁵

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⁶² So generalized, these remarks provide at least a partial solution to the problem raised in section A, pp. 384–5, above. *Pol.* 1259b33–8 may seem to present a difficulty for this interpretation of Aristotle, since there the prohibition against comparison is applied to nobility of nature (*καλοκάγαθία*) in men and women, which are related, on Aristotle's view, as the prior to the posterior. But Aristotle's aim in the passage is not to argue against comparison (in fact, he presupposes it), but rather to argue against sameness of species (and hence of definition) for *καλοκάγαθία* in men and in women. The problem disappears if one sees that by *μᾶλλον καὶ ἥττον* in this passage Aristotle means what differs *only* or *precisely* by the more and the less; i.e. what does not differ in species.

⁶³ See the arguments in Düring's 1961 edition, pp. 33–5.

⁶⁴ The dating of *Physics* VII is, however, uncertain. For a summary of the problem see Ross, *Aristotle's Physics* (Oxford, 1936), 11–18.

⁶⁵ Part of this paper (along with some other material) was given as a lecture to the Cambridge 'B' Club and at Oxford University in May, 1986. I am indebted to those groups for provocative discussions, and to David Blank, Charlotte Witt and the editors of *CQ* for their written comments on a later version.