ABSTRACT. The paper first distinguishes ontological priority from epistemological priority and unilateral ontic dependence. Then explications of ontological priority are offered in terms of the reducibility of the actual existence or identity of entities in one ontological category to the actual existence or identity of entities in another. These explications lead to incompatible orders of ontological priority for individuals, properties of individuals and states of affairs. Common to those orders is, however, that the primacy of the category of individuals is abandoned. This primacy is challenged in the paper also by epistemological arguments, and an onto-anthropological explanation is offered for the very common but false idea that individuals are ontological prior to all other kinds of entities. Finally ontological priority is discussed with respect to a fully specified system of ontological categories.

In medieval times it was a familiar philosophical idiom that one entity is prior to or precedes another entity. This, of course, did not normally mean – in philosophical discourse – that an entity is (or exists) in a temporal sense before another, but it did include a judgment of value: the entity which was prior to another entity was in a sense also more valuable than the latter, although this judgment of value surely did not constitute the central meaning of the phrase “x is prior to y”. Today we prefer to say that one entity is more fundamental or more basic than another. Note that the valuative aspects of meaning have disappeared from the modern expression. For brevity’s sake, I will here use “x is prior to y” instead of “x is a more fundamental entity than y”.

As in medieval times, there still are two ways of understanding “x is prior to y”: it may be understood as “x is epistemologically (in ordine cognoscendi) prior to y”, or as “x is ontologically (in ordine essendi) prior to y”. The two orders of priority can differ radically in their ranking of entities. For example, to later medieval philosophers, for whom God was still indisputably first in the order of being, God was nevertheless last in the order of (our) cognition. I will concentrate in this paper on an elucidation of the relation of ontological priority, keeping in mind that ontological priority cannot be entirely separated from broadly epistemological issues. After all, in analyzing the relation of ontological priority we have to use...
concepts, our concepts, the concepts that are available to us, and in making judgments of ontological priority we are judging according to our lights, according to how instances of ontological priority appear to us. We have no cognitive grasp of the relation of ontological priority as it would be without our cognitive grasp of it.

In clarifying the relation of ontological priority there are many questions that have to be answered, foremost the question whether there is indeed the relation of ontological priority. Are there not several relations of ontological priority? There immediately appear to be at least two such relations. According to relation 1 of ontological priority, it is in each instance a personal affair, as it were, between two entities. According to relation 2 of ontological priority, it is in each instance merely a matter of which ontological categories the two compared entities belong to; this has the consequence that entities that belong to the same ontological category will be equals in the ontological ranking. Thus, what is in fact ranked according to relation 2 of ontological priority are not individual entities, but categories of them; or in other words, individual entities are ranked merely qua representatives of ontological categories.

I will restrict my attention to the second relation of ontological priority because only the second relation really deserves being called a “relation of ontological priority”. For the first relation, the designation “inverse of the relation of unilateral ontic dependence” would be more appropriate, since that relation, in contrast to the other one under consideration, presupposes no comprehensive categorial system of entities. To provide such a system is the main theoretical aim of ontology, and only such a relation should, properly speaking, include the epithet “ontological” in its name that intrinsically refers to the theoretical aims of ontology. In addition, ontological priority has certainly been understood, and still is understood, more frequently in the sense of relation 2 than in the sense of relation 1; thus, established ontological usage also justifies the choice I have made among the two relations.

Before I continue with the explication of ontological priority in the sense of relation 2, let me briefly comment upon how ontological priority (in the sense now chosen) is related to unilateral ontic dependence (or its inverse). Both relations are in fact independent of each other. Even without further explications, it is clear that an entity $X$ may unilaterally ontically depend on an entity $Y$, although $Y$ is not ontologically prior to $X$. If $X$ and $Y$ belong to the same ontological category, then $Y$ is not ontologically prior, but ontologically equal to $X$; nevertheless, it may well be that $X$ is unilaterally ontically dependent upon $Y$, that it cannot exist without $Y$, although $Y$ can exist without $X$. A hemisphere of a sphere made of metal is