
Aristotle's Categories in the Byzantine, Arabic and Latin Traditions edited
by Sten Ebbesen, John Marenbon, and Paul Thom

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Reviewed by
Jonathan Barnes
Ceaulmont, France
jonathanbarnes@wanadoo.fr

The book contains 12 papers selected from among the contributions to three colloquia on the afterlife of Aristotle's *Categories*. Two of the pieces deal with the Byzantine tradition, two with the Arabic, and eight with the Latin.

First, Börje Bydén on Photius, the ninth-century Patriarch of Constantinople. Bydén asks whether Photius' account of the doctrine of the 10 'categories' had any influence on later Byzantine philosophers. He takes as his test case Photius' remarks on substances. According to Photius, the term 'substance' or «οὐσία» (taken in its special sense of 'self-subsistent item') is ambiguous: what Aristotle distinguishes as primary and secondary substances are called substance homonymously. Hence, *pace* Aristotle, there is no single class or category of substance. That view seems to have left no trace in later authors and Bydén's answer to his question is: '*Pro tanto*, no'.

Next, Ken Parry turns to the ninth century squabble over icons and he shows how some of the adversaries of the imperial iconoclasts—among them another Constantinopolitan Patriarch, Nicephorus—made occasional use of the logical terminology of the *Categories*. For example, they insisted on the fact that icons or images are, necessarily, images or icons *of* something or other, so that they are relative items and belong to the 'category' of τὰ πρὸς τι. Parry tells his story lucidly and the echoes of the *Categories* which he hears in the iconophile texts are genuine enough. But they do not amount to very much: it would be an exaggeration to say that Nicephorus and his allies exploited the *Categories*, or the doctrine of the 10 categories, in their denunciations of iconoclasm.

The next two papers turn to the Arabs. First, Heidrun Eichner on Avicenna. She is concerned with the question of Avicenna's philosophical development

and she asks whether a partial answer might not be elicited from what he says at different times about the categories. (For there is, on this subject, a quantity of material which has hitherto been disregarded.) She finds that, on certain issues, Avicenna does appear to have changed his mind—or perhaps rather to have elaborated views which he had earlier only sketched. (For example, on the relationship between the different categories and the different sciences, or on the metaphysical origins of the categories.) The business is complicated by the fact that the texts which it invokes are, some of them, in a bad state: Eichner's paper, which is densely argued, aims to show the existence and the importance of the evidence rather than to work out its implications in depth and in detail.

The fourth essay is by Cristina Cerami, who writes in French (the other papers all being in English). She deals with Averroes' solution to a familiar problem. According to Aristotle, certain sorts of substance are the primary or basic members of their class; but the *Categories* identifies these primary substances with individuals (this sheep, that goat); whereas in book Zeta of the *Metaphysics*, the primary substances are not individual things but rather their substantial forms (not the sheep but its sheepish form, not the goat but its goatish form). That looks for all the world like a contradiction (or else a change of mind)—in any event, it constitutes an exegetical problem. Averroes dissolves the problem; for, he suggests, the contradiction is only apparent. How so? Well, the *Categories* and *Metaphysics* have quite distinct concerns: the *Categories* speaks within the discipline of logic, the *Metaphysics* within that of metaphysics; the *Categories* offers a dialectical account of substance, the *Metaphysics* an analytical one; the *Categories* is concerned with what is primary 'for us' or chronologically, the *Metaphysics* with what is primary 'by nature' or causally; the *Categories* is provisional, the *Metaphysics* definitive; the *Categories* speaks of substance in one sense of the word, the *Metaphysics* in another; the *Categories* deals with substances at one level or degree, the *Metaphysics* with those at another. Those several contrasts (some of which are not genuine) are different from one another and they are not all mutually compatible—though Cerami does not remark upon the fact. Nor (so far as I can see) does Averroes explicitly present them as a solution, or as elements of a solution, to the familiar exegetical problem. Rather, he construes the *Categories* in this way and the *Metaphysics* Z in that way. As a result, there is no problem to resolve. It may be added that Averroes view of what's going

on in the *Categories*, which has much in common with the view elaborated by Simplicius, is scarcely plausible.

The remaining eight papers deal with the Latins. John Marenbon, one of the three editors of the volume, writes under this title: ‘The Tradition of Studying the *Categories* in the early Middle Ages (until c. 1200): A Revised Working Catalogue of Glosses, Commentaries and Treatises’. The catalogue, earlier versions of which were published in 1993 and 2000, is preceded by an introduction (which includes some suggestions for future research) and complemented by a bibliography. Anyone who works in this area or on its margins will bless Marenbon (for the third time).

Next comes another of the editors, Paul Thom. With him the volume moves into the 13th century and to Robert Kilwardby. In his remarks on the ‘category’ of relative items, Aristotle had suggested that correlatives are simultaneous by nature—that is to say, if there are masters, then there are slaves (and *vice versa*); if some larger items exist, then some smaller items exist (and *vice versa*); and so on. But he discovered counterexamples, or apparent counterexamples, to the suggestion: knowable items and bits of knowledge (say) are correlative but they are not simultaneous—for though there cannot be any bits of knowledge without there being some knowable items, there can be knowable items without any corresponding bits of knowledge (i.e., there can be unknown knowables). That is a juicy bone and all the commentators gnaw at it. Thom discusses three texts in which Kilwardby gnaws. The discussion is done with exemplary clarity but it is done in a historical vacuum. And you might also wonder why the matter excited so much philosophical ingenuity; for, on the face of it, there is no reason to think that correlatives somehow *ought* to be simultaneous and there appear to be any number of common and garden counterexamples—parents and their children are rarely exact coevals.

Costantino Marmo, the seventh contributor, also writes about relative items—and about their fate from 1350 to 1500. There is, first, a rather breathless survey of some of the things some of the people then said; and secondly, an account of the ways in which Radulphus Brito and William of Ockham applied their general views about relative items to the particular case of signs and, hence, to the theory of meaning. For they both held, as a matter of course, to the idea that ‘just as dark clouds are a sign of imminent rain, so the word “cloud” is a sign of a nearby thought of clouds’. Whether

that is true (and whatever exactly it amounts to), it is an unsatisfactory way of approaching a theory of meaning.

Fabrizio Amerini, eighthly, looks at what Walter Burley and others had to say about the old question: What do Aristotle's categories classify? Does the class of substance (say) contain lions or the word 'lion' or the concept of a lion? Porphyry had answered that the items classified are words (of a certain sort) and that the principle of classification is semantic: 'lion', and not this or that lion, is in the category of substance; but 'lion' is a substance term because it is true of lions and lions are substances. That answer put the question to rest but from time to time it re-awoke. According to Burley, the categories sort not words but things. Still, they sort 'things as signified by simple words' [22n15]; and that (so Amerini says) 'amounts to the same thing' as Porphyry's interpretation [222]. Amerini considers some objections to the 'ontological' interpretation of the categories which had been raised by Hervaeus Natalis and Peter Auriol. The objections purport to show that (on Burley's view) some items will be in more than one category and some in none. So far as I can see, the objections have no force against Porphyry and, hence, none against Burley, if his and Porphyry's view really do 'amount to the same thing'. And I suppose that they do: after all, what could 'classify things as signified by terms' possibly *mean* if it was not a cack-handed way of saying 'classify words according to the sort of things they are true of'?

The title of the next essay, by Joël Biard, is: 'The Status of Categories and Its Epistemological Stakes in the Fourteenth Century: The Case of Blasius of Parma'. Blasius held that the categories classify words, not things. Biard is concerned with what he says about quantities and about relations, namely, that 'every quantity is a substance or a quality' [250], so that, for example, 'a number is the numbered thing itself' [252]; and similarly for relations, so that 'a proportion is the things proportional to one another' [255]. (It is hard to see how that chimes with the view that the categories classify words but let that pass.) The 'epistemological stakes' show up when Blasius comments upon the science of mathematics, the subjects of which are quantities. He says that 'when arithmeticians talk about numbers, they distinguish a number from the things numbered' [257] and so indeed they do. But then whatever are they up to, given that numbers simply *are* the things numbered? The whole of arithmetic, it seems, rests upon a simple mistake. Biard offers an explanation: numbers 'are not treated as independent substances, as they

might be by Platonists; but the formal reason, that is to say the active mode of conceiving becomes the proper object of the mathematician' [258]. That is Delphic but it presumably connects with an earlier remark to the effect that 'Blasius...states that if we understand by 'number' the words or the concepts by which we count,...then number is an accident of the soul' [252]. So not all numbers are the same as the things numbered: there are also (as the old Peripatetics called them) numbering numbers and it is they which are the subject of arithmetic. That is better: save that numbering numbers are neither words nor concepts nor accidents of my soul. (It may be noted that this is the only place in the volume in which there is any explicit discussion of any science.)

With the 10th paper, we reach the 16th century. E. J. Ashworth talks about Domingo de Soto's vast commentary on the *Categories*, which raises all the stock questions and generally plumps for one or other of the stock answers: Ashworth sums de Soto up as 'a well-read eclectic' [280]. About half of Ashworth's short paper concerns 'denominatives' or paronyms; and here de Soto did have something new to offer. In the Boethian translation of the *Categories*, the definition of paronyms runs like this:

denominativa...dicuntur quaecumque ab aliquo solo differentia casu secundum nomen habent appellationem.

De Soto claims that the phrase 'secundum nomen' goes with what precedes it, not with what follows, and this construal forms the basis of his novel account of paronymy. The construal stretches the Latin but it is perhaps just about possible. But this is Aristotle's Greek:

παρόνυμα...λέγεται ὅσα ἀπὸ τινος διαφέροντα τῇ πτώσει τὴν κατὰ τοῦνομα προσηγορίαν ἔχει [1a12–13].

The phrase «κατὰ τοῦνομα»—Boethius' 'secundum nomen'—goes with the succeeding «προσηγορίαν». That is proved by the definite article which precedes it—and which the Latin cannot render. De Soto's interpretation is quite undone. He could not have made the error had he read the *Categories* in Greek. There must be a moral in that.

The penultimate paper, by Sven Knebel, discusses what certain 17th century Spaniards had to say about works of art and the *forma artificialis*. He sets out some entertaining eccentricities (and he quotes generously from the pertinent texts). He remarks in passing that artificial forms, as opposed to natural

forms, were generally taken to be not substances but qualities (and to fall into Aristotle's fourth sub-class of qualities). That is the only connection between his subject and the categories, and his paper hardly belongs in the volume.

Lastly, Sten Ebbesen has a characteristically lively piece about the fate of the *Categories* in Lutheran Denmark. The Lutherans did not think much of logic (or of any other science) but they thought that they needed it to parry the attacks of their religious adversaries. So, under regulations which derived from Melanchthon, the grim professors of the University of Copenhagen taught logic—Aristotelian logic, of course—and, hence, the *Categories*. That went on unexcitingly for a century or so. But then the old order changed: one Dane claimed that it was only Pythagorean superstition which fixed 10 as the number of the categories; another indicated that the doctrine of categories had no importance for logic inasmuch as, for syllogistic, 'only one type of predication is needed' [331]. And then logic itself withered away. After all, 'if it was not even a necessary auxiliary force to keep Calvinist and Papist enemies at bay,...what was the use of it?' [331].

The 12 papers, as those crude summaries suggest, are scholarly items: they are written by specialists for specialists and they make no effort to seduce readers from outside the club. (It should not—but it does—need to be said that that is anything but a Bad Thing.) The crude summaries also suggest that the papers are disparate in style and in approach and in scope. They do not cohere into a book, having nothing in common beyond the fact that each of them makes some sort of reference to the *Categories* or to the categories. The distinguished editors do not pretend otherwise—and it must be said that they have worked with a light hand: they have arranged the papers chronologically; they have compiled an index of names and an index of manuscripts but no general index; there are bibliographies to individual papers but no general bibliography; there is half a page headed 'Abstract' and half a page headed 'Introduction' but no general introduction; and no attempt has been made to link one paper to another by cross-references. (I noticed only two such cross-references in the whole volume.) In short, the book is less an edited collection of papers than a 'special issue' of a scholarly journal. Still, it provokes a number of general ruminations. Here are two, each of them melancholy.

The materials on which the several contributors work are, almost all of them, low-grade stuff. Even the best of their heroes can write the oddest

of things. So Ockham, according to Marmo, held that ‘there exist no real entities corresponding to our relational concepts’ [199]. Marmo observes that this is ‘a radical shift in the ontological interpretation of categories and relations’ [199] but he does so without raising his eyebrows. And yet it goes against the grain to deny the reality of (*inter alia*) sons and lovers. (‘Of course Ockham did not mean *that*’—but then why did he say it? And what on Earth *did* he mean?) To be sure, relatives and relations had flummoxed philosophers from Plato onwards. (And they persist in citing fathers and sons as paradigm correlatives.)

Or take Photius: he apparently thinks that substances are homonymous because (like numbers or geometrical figures) they form an ordered series; and he infers that the *echt* substances must be *infimae species*. But ordered series do not insinuate homonymy (the numbers 57 and 75 are not called numbers in different senses of the word); and if ‘substance’ has different senses, then the question ‘What are the *echt* substances?’ has no answer or at least no simple answer. (It is perhaps unclear whether these mistakes should be ascribed to Photius or to Bydén or to both men.) Or Avicenna: what Eichner generously calls his ‘highly unified ontological theory’ takes as its root-stock a reasonably sturdy Aristotelian plant—and grafts on to it some fearful nonsense about ‘emanations’.

And a lot of nonsense is scattered throughout the volume. So, for example, according to Amerini, ‘Hervaeus argues that *man* must be properly described as a thing to which the property of being universal accrues accidentally, rather than as an actual compound of thing and universality’ [233]. So far as I can make out, Hervaeus’ Latin, which Amerini there paraphrases, means nothing at all. To be sure—as the Israeli proverb has it, s**t is s**t but history of s**t is scholarship; and a history of astrology (say) may be both instructive and diverting. But as Peter Geach somewhere observed, it is difficult to discuss nonsense without falling into nonsense oneself: if a given sentence makes no sense, then neither does the result of preceding that sentence with such a phrase as ‘Hervaeus argues that’.

A second, and equally melancholy, rumination is prompted by the Abstract, which states, truly, that ‘hardly any other philosophical book has had as many readers over so many centuries as Aristotle’s *Categories*’. (It adds that ‘the influence of <the *Categories*> is manifest in our everyday language when we speak of quantities or qualities, of relations or of the substance of

the matter': so *that* is what the Walrus was thinking of.) And the Abstract claims that 'the twelve essays collected in this volume demonstrate the book's importance in all three language areas' ('the book' refers to the *Categories*). The volume may be said to cast some sidelights on the importance of the *Categories* but it does not *demonstrate* it (not that any demonstration is needed) nor does it do anything to explain it. Why did Aristotle's pamphlet enjoy such an eminent afterlife?

The answer is this: for centuries, the *Categories* was everyone's second book in philosophy (second after Porphyry's *Isagoge*). Why so? Well, before you learn a trade—so the ancient argument went—you must learn to use the tools of the trade. The tools of the philosophical trade are proofs. Proofs are syllogisms. Syllogisms are made up of propositions. The chief constituents of propositions are terms. So if you are to learn any philosophy (or indeed any science), you must first learn all about terms. And the *Categories* contains the true doctrine of terms. That argument, which obliged so many reluctant students to con the *Categories*, totters at each of its steps. And it falls flat on its face when it introduces the *Categories*: the doctrine of the 10 categories, far from being an indispensable preliminary to the study of proof or of syllogisms or of Aristotelian syllogisms, is entirely irrelevant to those grave matters; for, as the sapient Dane remarked, 'only one type of predication is needed' for syllogistic—that is to say, the *As* and *Bs* and *Cs* of the *Prior Analytics* represent any predicate-terms whatsoever, simple or complex, of substance or of quality or of relation and they take no notice of any possible classification of the things. That fact must surely have struck any intelligent student—even the dullest and most stick-in-the-mud of professors ought to have noticed it after a few decades of teaching Aristotelian logic. And yet the students did not complain that the *Categories* wasted their youth and the professors, too crabbed or too lethargic, did not care.

To be sure, Aristotle's *Categories* contains several paragraphs of some philosophical interest. (And no one with the slightest interest in the *history* of philosophy could, or would, want to give it a miss.) But phenomenal longevity as an introductory text on philosophy can only be accounted for by invoking the ineradicable conservatism of the philosophical tribe.