

ARISTOTLE'S *CATEGORIES* IN ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS' *DIALECTICA*

I. The Aristotelian Categories

The purpose of this paper is to study and discuss the influences exerted by Aristotle's *Categories* on St. John of Damascus' philosophical writings and the "*Capita Philosophica*" or "*Dialectica*" in particular¹.

The notion of dialectic is a small piece of intellectual currency which, like the currency of cash, is more used than understood. Most of those who frequently use it are primarily aware of it only in its more recent cultural forms and are unfamiliar with its historical genesis among the philosophers of Ancient Greece. In fact Aristotle's official presentation of the theory of dialectic comes in the *Topics* and the *Categories*. The precise position to be assigned to the *Categories* in Aristotle's philosophical speculation has always caused certain difficulties. The *Categories* include both an exhaustive division of the kinds of being and a complete scheme of his logic². In his constructive metaphysics, they retire into the background, giving place to other notions, such as causation, change, becoming, actuality and potentiality³. There has been an attempt to correlate Aristotle's *Categories* with the Kantian *Categories*, with which they have obvious points of contact. It has been stressed that Kant's formal *a priori* concepts, the «tools» of mind's understanding of the world, imply an attitude to knowledge and reality so utterly opposed to the Aristotelian, that the attempted comparison

1. J. Ackrill, *Aristotle's Categories and De Interpretatione*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963, *passim*; G. Richter, *Die Dialektik des Johannes von Damaskos: Eine Untersuchung des Texts nach seinen Quellen und seiner Deutung*. Ettal 1964, *passim*. P. B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos; Institutio Elementaris, Capita Philosophica (Dialectica)*, Berlin 1969, *passim*.

2. Aristotle, *Anal. Post.*, I 22, 83 b 15.

3. Idem., *Metaphysics*, © 1. 1045b- 1046 a. 6. 1048 a-b.

has eventually tended to specific confusion rather than elucidation⁴.

The Aristotelian *Categories* are primarily connected with the immediate use of linguistic thought to make assertions about reality and hence with the proposition and the judgement as expressed in language. Aristotle himself uses the *Categories* to solve a philosophical problem and St John of Damascus makes abundant use of these *Categories* to define more accurately the Christian dogmas⁵. While Aristotle explicitly opposes the solution offered by the Platonic Academy, he frankly maintains that the *Categories* should be set against the Platonic doctrine of the indefinite dyad⁶. The Platonists attacked the Parmenidean dictum and established the existence of «what is not»⁷. In the corresponding passage of the *Physics* I₂, Aristotle solves the Parmenidean difficulty through the multiplicity of the *Categories*⁸ and alludes to the inadequacy of the Academic solution⁹. The entire scheme of the *Categories* and of the *Topics* was evolved in the course of steady efforts to establish a basis doctrine of judgement which should settle various philosophical problems. There are three distinct aspects of this scheme to have special significance: a) between accidental predication (κατὰ συμβεβηκός) and essential predication (καθ' αὐτό)¹⁰. b) The subject (ὑποκείμενον) is the necessary precondition for all *Categories* (including both substance and predicate). It is the focal point of real connexion between the predicates and provides the basis of their co-existence. c) The main work of the *Categories* is to arrange the relation between the genera and the species in a reciprocal way. It is evident that the *Categories* have close links with the predicables which finally lead to the complete formation of the dialectic.

4. Cf. J. Moreau, "Aristote et la dialectique platonicienne", in G. E. L. Owen (ed.) *Aristotle on Dialectic: The Topics*. Proceedings of the Third Symposium Aristotelicum, Oxford, University Press, 1968, pp. 81 sq.

5. Cf. J. Meyendorf, *Byzantine Theology. Historical trends and doctrinal themes*, London-Oxford, Mowbrays, 1974, pp. 180 sq.

6. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A 5. 986 a. *Nichomachean Ethics* I 6. 1096 b. Aristotle makes various attempts to identify a material principle on Plato. For the "indefinite dyad", cf. *Metaphysics*, A 5. 987 b. 988 a.

7. Cf. Plato, *Sophist*, 237 a, 256 d. F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, London, Routledge-Kegan Paul, 1973, pp. 200 sq.

8. Aristotle, *Physics*, 1 2. 184 b 13.

9. *Ibid.*, I 3. 186 a 25.

10. *Ibid.*, I 3. 187 a 1 sq. R. E. Allen, "Substance and predication in Aristotle's *Categories*", in *Phronesis*, Suppl. I. 1973, 362.

Obviously there are points in common between the scheme of the *Categories* and the technique of the Platonic dialectic¹¹.

If we are to understand the dialectical logic in its full formation and entire functioning, we must bear in mind that it was developed in connexion with the practice of dialectical discussion, which demanded rules of debate in order to avoid any aimless conversation. The ancient commentators on the *Categories* distinguished three relations as implied in the logical argument: a relation asserted between things, a relation between the terms and the verbal signs, and a relation between ideas in the mind of him who forms the judgement¹². All these were considered to be parallel and especially the third was recognised by Aristotle as «a combination of thoughts», but is treated merely as a «psychological presupposition» of the logical proposition or judgement¹³.

From all the Aristotelian *Categories* the concept of *ousia* has been thoroughly studied and means «substance» or «essence». The question what is *substance* (τὸς ἡ οὐσία) of the *Metaphysics* Z 1 has been answered by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* Z 17, where he suggests that it is the nature or form of a thing which is the substance we are looking for. While in Plato the term *ousia* does not have any specific philosophical meaning, in Aristotle it is applied to the sensible things and referred to as «being qua being» (ὅν ᾗ ὄν). Thus substance deals with the being «what was for a thing to be» (τὸ τί ᾗν εἶναι) and determines the «what is» (τί ἐστὶ) of a thing and at the same time declares the identity of that particular thing. The ingredients of a concrete object are its essence, its universal, its genus, its accidents and its substratum. The last one covers matter, form and their product, which is the composition of the other two¹⁴.

In *Metaphysics* Z 3 Aristotle defines matter as «what in itself is neither something nor a quality nor belongs to any other of the Categories by which being is determined». It is at first sight strong, for it is

11. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Δ 6. 1015 b 16, 7. 1017 a 7. Cf. G. E. L. Owen (ed.) *Logic, Science and Dialectic. Collected papers in Greek Philosophy*, London, Duckworth, 1986, pp. 151 sq.

12. Cf. R. Heineman, "Non substantial Individuals in the Categories", in *Phronesis* 26, 1981, 295 sq. Also see, G.E.L.Owen, *op. cit.* p. 152.

13. W. D. Ross, *Aristotle*, London 1956, p. 24. n. 1. R. D. Hicks, *Aristotle. De Anima*, Cambridge 1907, p. 416. B. Jones, "Individuals in Aristotle's Categories", in *Phronesis* 17, 1972, 407. J. Annas, "Individuals in Aristotle's Categories: Two Queries", in *Phronesis* 19, 1974, 146.

14. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Z 13, 1038 b 4.

what is left if all else is taken away. Matter is «substance» potentially not actually, for it underlies and persists through every sort of change. In *Physics* I 9, matter is more close to substance, for only deprivation is not. Yet in *Metaphysics* Z 3 Aristotle states that «substance» is an *immanent form*, from which, together with matter, the concrete substance is so called; but substance *per se* is not the individual; it is the «what is» (τί ἐστί), the essence, which is neither individual—for it is the intelligible form of the concrete object—nor purely universal for it is bound up with matter. The Aristotelian phrase «What - it - is - to - be» of such and such and such a thing of an individual substance was rendered by the Latin abstract noun «quidditas» and its equally unsatisfactory English equivalent «quiddity», as paralleled by Duns Scotus «Haecitas=thisness»¹⁵.

J. Annas, G. E. L. Owen and G. Vlastos have discussed the relationship between matter and form in a concrete object, especially the Aristotelian statements of the *Categories* 5, 2b 11 and the *Metaphysics* A 9, Z and H. Whatever the existing problems of interpretation are, it is certain that Aristotle's arguments tend to prove that the forms are more substance than genera, for they are more close to the individual. Despite this statement of the *Categories*, in the *Metaphysics* Z 3 he suggests that forms are more being than matter, and by the same reasoning, than the compound of the two.¹⁶

Aristotle's classification of primary and secondary substances marks the distinction between individual substances and their species and genera. In fact primary substances are usually contrasted with their accidental properties which, with their species and genera, are called secondary substances. The latter cannot exist apart, but must be supplemented by the qualities of their individual members, i.e. the primary substances¹⁷. D. M. Mackinnon argues that the secondary substances are in the ontological realm: the individual factor, which equals an empty substratum in change and growth, includes four causes: material, final, formal and efficient. For Aristotle every given substance does not admit

15. Idem, *De Anima* B 1. 412 a sq, 412 b 22, 413 a 3-5.

16. Idem, *Metaphysics* A 9. 990 b 27- 991 a 8, M 4. 1079 a 19- b 3. Cf. J. Annas, "Aristotle on Substance, Accident and Plato's Forms", in *Phronesis* 22, 1977, 146-160. G. E. L. Owen, "A proof in the Περὶ Ἰδεῶν", in *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 57, 1957, 103-111. G. Vlastos, "The two-Level paradoxes in Aristotle", in his *Platonic Studies*, Princeton, University Press, 1981, pp. 323-334.

17. Cf. J. Ackrill, *Aristotle's Categories...*, p. 81.

variation of degree with respect to that which it is. Hence no subject underlies the primary substance, for that it is a «this», which maintains its numerical oneness and identity, while being capable of conceiving opposite qualifications¹⁸.

The supreme manifestation of being and the only pure substance is God, who is absolutely free from matter. The understanding of the divine, equated with pure actuality and what is most knowable in our own nature, is the final goal of First Philosophy, especially referring to the facts of the physical world. Thus search for form or essence in the visible imperfect world is the basic level of the philosopher's speculation, which, if he argues on sound Aristotelian principles, will bring him in the end face to face with God-such God, at least, as Aristotle allows Him. Especially in *Metaphysics* and we face the problem of God appearing to be a substance in the sense of substratum, and whose activity is defined as «reflexive» contemplation of His own contemplation. In fact the theology of the *Metaphysics* is a further explanation of certain problems of His ontology, and that of whether ontology can be a science in particular. It seems to be simply an insight into what is familiar or universal but it is not a universal science. Aristotle links what is self-existent to what is supra-sensible, by positing degrees of self-existence, showing a relationship of substance to other forms of beings¹⁹.

III. The Aristotelian Categories and the Commentators

The Aristotelian *Categories*, especially as commented by certain sholiastes prevailed in Christian Philosophy and assisted the philosophising Church Fathers to conceive and construct certain dogmas by lending them the necessary conceptual tools for this. All beings, either spiritual or material, are none other than realised ideas, not in Plato's ideocentric manner, but according to a presence immanent within things and especially through «participation» in the divine essence, the eminent model of all that exists. Therefore essences come into being by way of creation or divine efficiency. The divine essence in its transcendent

18. D. M. Mackinnon, «Aristotle's Conception of Substance», in *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (ed.), R. Rambrough, London, Routledge-Kegan Paul, 1965, pp. 97-120. C-H.Chen, «Aristotle's Concept of Primary Substance in Books Z and H of the *Metaphysics*», in *Phronesis* 2, 1957, 46-59.

19. Cf. D. M. Mackinnon, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.

intelligibility is thus the remote foundation of every created essence²⁰.

These Aristotelian statements have been analysed by the Alexandrian Commentators, who considered the first of the *Categories*, and especially primary substance, of less importance compared to secondary substances, because for them, that which is superior to nature, i.e. the universal, is for the knowing subjects posterior, the reverse of the Aristotelian doctrine in all its dimensions. Indeed, both John Philoponus and Simplicius stressed the superiority of the secondary substances, based on the principle that «the cause has a higher degree of existence than the effect». In fact, the search for substance in the *Categories* starts out from a semantic relationship (ἀπὸ σημαντικῆς σχέσεως)²¹. Hence, the universal is the truly «first substance», maintaining an independent reality of the knowing subject and possessing an existence truer than that of sensible things. Within the realm of the universal, the particular has an even truer existence than it has by itself. In this sense, the universal substance is something distinct from concrete particular substance and defines substantial quality. It is obvious that the universal, in the words of Ammonius, does not use the particular substance in order to be expressed in it. Concepts, such as essence, substance, hypostasis est., have immediate reference to speculations on God, as they have been analysed and treated by Christian thinkers²².

It should be stressed here that in *Metaphysics*, Aristotle clarifies the existing relationship between *theology* and *ontology* and links what is self-existent to what is supra-sensible (ὕπερουσιον), by positing degrees of self-existence. Among the Fathers, St Athanasius, the forerunner of St John of Damascus, discussing the distinction made by Aristotle between primary and secondary substance, applied it to the Son as «homoousios to the Father» (ὁμοούσιος τῷ πατρί). Here he thought out the identity between the Son and the Father; this identity for him lies in the close relationship between the primary and the secondary substances²³. I think that St Athanasius cleverly explores the rich meaning

20. Cf. L. Benakis, «The problem of general concepts», in *Neoplatonism and Byzantium* (ed.) D. J. O'Meara, New York, University Press, 1982, pp. 80-82.

21. Cf. Idem, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81. J. Ackrill. *op. cit.*, pp. 81 sq.

22. Cf. F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. II: Augustine to Scotus*, London, Burns and Oates, 1966, pp. 13 sq.

23. C. Kannenglessner (ed.), *Athanase d'Alexandrie sur l'incarnation du Verbe*, Paris, Source Chretien, 1973, pp. 79, 141. Cf. R. W. Thomson, *Athanasius Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 134.

of the concrete self-existence and the formal ideas of essence integrated together. Primary substance as self-existence is prior to essence; yet essence makes it determinate. In fact the Son is of one substance with the Father, but this touches on the nature of the Godhead; ontologically the sharing appears as part of the Oneness. Hence, the doctrine of the Divine Trinity, comprising the three Hypostases, united in one essence, is a personalised improvement on the Platonic or the Aristotelian concepts.

For Aristotle self-existence is the ultimate though not in the metaphysical sense. The ultimate in ontological terms must show itself naturally. So the Christian thinker who uses substance and ontology must follow out the whole conceptual system of this world until he reaches the ultimate. This Aristotelian ultimate, self-existent and self-centred Intelligence, is identified by Plotinus with the second of the three Hypostases and very often with Plato's artificer. Thus Plotinus kept the number of Hypostases to three, and so to do full justice to the trinity in Plato's *Second Letter*.

III. ST John of Damascus' *Dialectica*

The scheme of the *Categories*, in both Aristotle and John of Damascus is based on the sharp distinction between *accidental* (κατὰ συμβεβηκός) and *per se* (καθ' αὐτό). Aristotle makes use of terms in an accidental sense, as it appears in the *Metaphysics* Δ 2, where the accidental use of cause (αἰτία) is illustrated by the terms sculptor, animal, man etc., and John of Damascus follows the same examples²⁴. It should be stressed here that the Aristotelian scheme of *Categories*, inherited by the Fathers and John of Damascus in particular, had no immediate connexion with the Platonic «greatest kinds» (μέγιστα γένη) «same-different», and «rest-motion», for these distinctions cover the whole field of existence and knowledge. They cannot be *Categories*, for the distinction of sameness and difference is a condition of the scheme as a whole²⁵.

It is true that *Category* and *Predicable* together constitute a joint system of preparing the material for formal dialectical discussion, that

24. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Δ 3. 1013 b 34.

25. Cf. G. M. Gillespie, «The Aristotelian Categories», in *Articles on Aristotle*, 3: *Metaphysics*, London, Duckworth, 1979, *passim*.

this system grew up in the Platonic School as Socratic methodology and was completed by Aristotle. It was a vast number of Church Fathers who took over the Aristotelian dialectic, which was transformed to the needs of the teaching of the Church. Finally St John of Damascus systematized the Aristotelian doctrine and presented accurately his teaching with the additional notes and the necessary divergencies for the purpose to safeguard the purity and integrity of the Orthodox teaching of the Church. He also observed in the Aristotelian system the ideas of predicable and categories as a larger structures of scientific knowledge, just as the clay must be made into bricks before it can be used by the builder.

John of Damascus follows a mid-way between Aristotle and his commentators. To him, what Aristotle taught about the Categories was not entirely concrete, in view of the Stagirite's modification of the teaching of the *Categories* to that of *Metaphysics* Z and H. It is evident that in many cases John of Damascus goes beyond Aristotle's terminology and defines the Categories in a different manner. Let's take an example: the «hypostasis» means either an existence, or the existence of an individual substance signifying the individual as numerically different, i.e. Peter, Paul, or a certain horse²⁶. According to John of Damascus the term «hypostasis» is properly applied to the Aristotelian *τότε τί*, since in the hypostasis the real substance to which the accidents have been added, actually subsists²⁷.

Moreover, John of Damascus follows Aristotle in suggesting that every essence should not be more or less of what it really is and needs not be in a substratum in order to exist. The equivocal definition of essence through the distinction of their differences, leads to the individual substance *per se* (καθ' αὐτό)²⁸. Substance does not require any opposite factor, and can never be thought of as being more or less of what actually are. In any case the term «ousia» declares the primary substance of being. Aristotle argues that the other instances of being, in order to be understood, presuppose the correct conception of ousia

26. Cf. P. B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos I (Institutio Elementaris), Capita Philosophica (Dialectica)*, D b. 66. G. Richter (ed.), *Johannes von Damaskos, Philosophische Kapitel*, Stuttgart, Hiersemann, 1982, *passim*. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Δ 8, 1017, b 25-26.

27. Cf. P.B. Kotter, *op. cit.*, D μγ 9. D. M. Mackinn, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

28. Aristotle, *Categories* 5. 3 b 34, 3 a 7. *Metaphysics* Z 3, 1029 a 3-7, P. B. Kotter. *op. cit.*, D λ 5, D θ 66.

which is the very core of being²⁹. Similarly John of Damascus argues that ousia, in relation to the other categories, indicates the being itself, but it does not accept the whole definition of the being. It is therefore obvious that for John of Damascus essence accepts half of the definition of the being, and consequently the accident the remaining other half³⁰.

I trace a certain influence on the thought of John of Damascus by Porphyry, who has stated that substance cannot exist *per se* but exclusively through the notion of hypostasis, the primary substance. This is shown in two ways: a) proximately and b) remotely. It is evident that the Plotinian system of the three hypostases has been used as a model for both Porphyry and John of Damascus³¹. In fact the genus is predicated as to what something is (what is a man, an animal?). Obviously the more general is superior, the more particular is inferior and subject to predication. In this respect John of Damascus simply reproduces the Aristotelian definition in the *Categories*, where it is stated as the concrete thing with no need of anything else in order to exist *per se*. Species is also an equivocal term in different sources. Therefore «that which is» immediately above the individual and contains the individual substance, as we speak of the human species, is used in two ways: on the one hand as the form of anything and on the other with genus predicated of it³².

While Aristotle held all elements of being as constituting a substance, the philosophising Fathers, and John of Damascus in particular, declared the basic difference between substance and hypostasis in clarifying the complexities concerning the Christian triadic structures. They identified ousia with nature, opposing the views of the Philosopher, according to which ousia is mainly referring to the many and different in number³³. Essence denotes the species and the nature *per se* while hypostasis declares the «what is this» of the essence³⁴. In fact the relationship between essence and nature is important, since it denotes the actual existence of a thing. Aristotle argues that nature as the form of natural

29. Cf. Syrianus, *In Metaphysics* 55. 12-13.

30. Aristotle, *Topics* 13 b 15 sq. P. B. Kotter, *op. cit.* D i 131-132.

31. Cf. Porphyry, *Isagoge*, ch. 2. P. B. Kotter, *op. cit.* D μ 3; Aristotle, *Categories* 5. 2 a.

32. Cf. P.B. Kotter, *op. cit.* D b 1 sq.

33. Cf. Leontius of Byzantium, *Sect.*, I 1: Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 86. 1193 A.

34. Cf. Maximus the Confessor, *Opuscula*, Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 91. 260 D-261 A.

beings confers on them a degree of unity that is not achieved by artifacts³⁵. At the same time nature as an immanent principle of movement, confers a dynamic teleological unity on the successive stages in the development of the individual. In *Metaphysics* A 3 Aristotle considers both natural being and artifacts as mere substances, yet he calls a natural entity the very essence of a being³⁶. The incorporeal essence is primarily referring to God and lies beyond any known concept of essence, for it is «supra sensible essence». The supra sensibility of God is a basically Platonic and Plotinian doctrine, which was further elaborated by Dionysius the Areopagite and John of Damascus in the East, and in the West by Eriugena³⁷. But if God is Aristotle's form, as Lacey suggests, we are trapped in the ontological argument³⁸. Indeed Aristotle attempts to define the soul as the form of the potentially living body, but such a definition is not of use for incorporeal spirits³⁹. There are two divergent views in Aristotle's arguments here, which John of Damascus underlies: a) that a spirit as the Unmoved Mover cannot be the form of a body and b) he expects his Unmoved Mover to be very actual, resulting in its separation from matter and thus pure form. But in this case cannot talk of any existence since the disappearance of matter will take away the shaped concrete object. What exactly Aristotle wants is an unchanging source without matter, i.e. the Unmoved Mover, lying beyond any conceivable kind of essence. This Aristotelian model has exerted substantial influence on John of Damascus' concept of immaterial and suprasensible divine essence.

Conclusion

St John of Damascus was a great systematiser not only in the field of theology, but to a large extent in the field of philosophy. In a sense he can be looked as the forerunner of the scholastics of the West.

35. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Δ 6. 1016 a 4. 26. 1023 b 35-36. I 1. 1052 a 19.

36. Ibid. Z 7. 1032 a 18-19; cf. P.B. Kotter, *op. cit.*, D ζ 25.

37. Plato, *Parmenides* 142 b, *Sophist* 245 a. Plotinus, *Enneads* V 3, 12-15. Proclus, *Elements of Theology* (ed.), E.R. Dodds, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963, prop. 119. Cf. A. Angelou (ed.), *Nicholas of Methone: Refutation of Proclus' Elements of Theology*, Athens. The Academy of Athens, Leiden, Brill, 1984, pp. 107 ff. Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus* 1, 1, Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 3, 588 A. John of Damascus, *Jacob.*, 2. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 94, 143 A.

38. Cf. A. R. Lacey, «Ousia and Form in Aristotle», in *Phronesis* 10, 1965, 67.

39. Aristotle, *De Anima* B 1. 413 a 6 sq.

At first sight he appears to preserve the thoughts of both philosophers and holy and learned men, but in his systematic and well arranged presentation of the ideas of his predecessors a certain originality may be ascribed to him. He gives a clear sketch of the Aristotelian logic and ontology, with frequent references to Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry and others. He expresses his deep respect for Aristotle and his work *Dialectica* reflects the great inspiration and influence which he received by his master. Especially the Aristotelian ontological arguments were modified by John of Damascus in order to fulfil his chief aim of establishing on philosophical grounds the theological doctrine concerning essence and substance in terms of hypostasis, genus, species, difference and accident. Certain divergences from the Aristotelian outlook led him to define these terms more suitably with the purpose of stating properly the hypostatic union of the three persons within the trinity. In this sense John of Damascus was not led astray by the Aristotelian philosophical speculation and his thought remains as the excellent example of the interrelationship between philosophy and theology in the best possible manner.