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Doctoral Thesis in Ancient Philosophy

***The Problem of Categories: Plotinus as Synthesis of Plato and Aristotle***

*Paper contents*

Introduction: motivation of choosing the theme, presentation of the methodology and structure of work

Part I. Plato as preparing ground for a theory of category

1. The problem of categories in Plato: foreshadowing a theory of categories in the *Theaitetos* dialogue
2. The theory of supreme genera in the *Sophist* dialogue

Part II. Aristotle as the first to set out a theory of categories

1. The philosophical context in which the problem of categories arises\
2. The *Categories* treatise
3. Categories in *Metaphysics*, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Topics*
4. Neoplatonic commentaries on Aristotelian categories: Porphyry, Dexippus, Ammonius
5. Medieval interpretations of the problem of categories and modern interpretations: Brakas G. and P. Aubenque

Part III. Plotinus as a synthesis of Platonic-Aristotelian categories

1. Framing the problem of the categories in the general context of the philosophy of Plotinus: the relation between categories and the Plotinian *hypostas*
2. The Plotinian critique of Aristotelian categories
3. The Plotinian critique of Stoic categories
4. Categories of the intelligible realm: the reinterpretation of Plato's supreme genera
5. The five Plotinian categories of sensible realm
6. Conclusion: the ontological legitimacy of the Plotinian categories

Conclusion: the importance of studying categories as philosophical problem specific to Western thinking

Key words: category, supreme genera (being, motion, rest, sameness, otherness), Aristotelian categories, Stoic categories, ontology, Neoplatonism, *hypostasis*, the One, Intelligence, being, Soul, essence (*quidditas*), accident, predication, copula, substance, quality, quantity, relation, relative, time, place, action, passion, motion, actuality, potency, homonymy, Praedicamenta, Antepredicamenta, Postpredicamenta, sensible/intelligible, realism, nominalism

### *Synthesis of the main chapters*

This paper aims at analyzing the theory of the categories in the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus' approach. Its assumption is that the thinker has built his own theory of categories synthesizing two previous philosophical theories: the famous Aristotelian table of categories is reinterpreted to apply to the sensible world, while Plato's supreme genera to characterize the intelligible realm, both philosophical theories becoming part of the Neoplatonic dualist and hierarchical philosophical view.

In the introduction we justify the choice of this topic and argue the need for this work by the small number of studies currently existing on this issue. It also presents the general methodology of the work and announces its structure, which essentially is organized to study the three aspects of the Plotinian synthesis: the supreme genera of

Plato, Aristotle and the Plotinian categories. The paper is thus structured in three sections: the first is devoted to Plato, the second to Aristotle and the third to Plotinus, all three approaches being analyzed in the perspective of category theory.

The first part begins with a brief overview of how we should understand categories in the Greek philosophy before Plato; the purpose of these considerations is to demonstrate that in the Greek thought there were different categories, which Presocratic philosophers often used to describe the world; however, beyond the instrumental use of the categories as world describing criteria, a proper theory of categories was never elaborated as such in the pre-Platonic philosophy.

In the first chapter we undertake an analysis of the *Theaetetus* dialogue, on the assumption that there is a theory of categories understood as principles of thought (or of the soul) which orders the manifold of sensibility and this theory is previous to that of the supreme genera of the *Sophist* and by which Plato anticipates the Kantian view of the categories.

In Plato's dialogues the ground for the forthcoming of a theory of categories is prepared, especially by addressing the problem of predication in the *Sophist*, which makes the object of Chapter 2. Predication is founded by the simultaneously ontological and logical relations that take place between the supreme genera (being, motion, rest, identity, difference) that are deducted from each other dialectically. Plato seeks in his attempt to save the very possibility of discourse, threatened by the theories, aporias and objections coming from rival philosophical schools (Eleatics, Megarian, Cynic and Sophists). The supreme genera, although it represents a significant advance in the analysis of the structure of predication, it still does not stand for a proper theory of categories; it is subordinated to other platonic concerns such as resolving the relation of participation of particular things to forms, the admission of motion alongside being but also of not-being as relative non-being or Difference in order to avoid Eleatic aporias and the foundation of dialectic, understood as the science that studies the communion of supreme genera.

The second and most extended part of this paper begins with an analysis in the chapter of the philosophical context in which categories appear, based on the assumption that Aristotle has „discovered” categories from the constraint to admit, when trying to lay

the foundations of a science of Being *qua* Being, that Being is said in many senses (Being as true and false, as essence and accident, as actuality and potency and Being as categories) but also to solve some difficulties concerning the language (especially those arose by the Sophists).

In chapter 2 and 3 we present the Aristotelian table of categories among other aspects related to them: substance, quantity, quality, relation, time, place, action, passion, possession and position; then, the Antepredicamenta (homonymous, synonymous and paronymous terms) and the Postpredicamenta, meaning the four ways in which things may be considered contrary to one another, the different sense of priority and simultaneity and the six types of motion (generation, destruction, increase, diminution, alteration and change of place). The categories are presented in their various occurrences in the Aristotelian work, in particular in the *Categories* treatise, one of the most commented works in the history of philosophy; then in *Metaphysics*, in which we compare the categories with the previous treatise. *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Topics* interest us in as in the first treatise Aristotle proposes a solution for the problematic relation of the other categories with the substance, called *pros hen*, and in the second the Stagyrice apply the categories in the dialectics and the study of the common places of the *praedicabilia* or predicables (genus, species, difference, property, accident). These chapters study the most debated aspects of the theory: the object of the categories, their number, the characteristics of each, the possibility of their definition and deduction, their philosophical significance.

In Chapter 4 we make a detailed presentation of three Neoplatonic commentaries on categories, those of Porphyry, Ammonius and Dexippus in order to understand how Aristotelian categories were perceived in the history of philosophy and also to anticipate a comparison between the Plotinian approach of the Aristotelian categories (that goes against Aristotle) and the those of the later Neoplatonic (who pretended to defend the classical doctrine of Aristotle).

In Chapter 5 we engage in a brief overview of the medieval approach of the categories in order to emphasize the continuity of interpretations until today and the main directions of modern interpretation as well, with the illustration of two of them: that of G. Brakas and that of P. Aubenque, which we find most convincing. The latter approach, as

preferring to justify the contradictions of Aristotelian texts by the very problematic nature of being as object of the metaphysical science, will help us to formulate some conclusions on the interpretation of categories, which we refer throughout the following analysis.

The third part of the paper focuses on how Plotinus interpreted and integrated Aristotle's categories in his own philosophical system.

In the first chapter we try to identify the place of the categories at the level of each Plotinian *hyostasis* or reality in the general context of Plotinian philosophy. After doing so, we find that categories find their place in the third reality or *hypostasis*, the Soul, because Soul is the creator of things in the sensible world; categories, they were first settled by Aristotle, had the purpose of describe the sensible world, whose existence is subjected to becoming by the ten categories.

The soul represents to Plotinus the source categories, because it creates all sensible things, but also produces the rational means of ordering them. By their subjective, accidental and nominalist character, we anticipate about Plotinian categories that they have a completely different ontological status than the Aristotelian ones.

In the second chapter we present the main criticisms of Plotinus on Aristotelian categories which consist of a general line of critiques that concern all categories (such as their applicability to the intelligible realm) and of a particular one, designed for each Aristotelian category in part. The chapter concludes that Plotinus has elaborated such a systematic and detailed critique especially for two reasons: firstly, it is the recognition of categories as a philosophical problem that already had a remarkable career in the history of philosophy, so important that it could not be neglected by any future philosophical approach, regardless of the philosophical affiliation or of the philosophical views. Second, Aristotelian categories will inspire his own theory of categories, as the most general aspects under which we describes the sensible world, but can not be applied to the intelligible realm.

In the third chapter we take an account of the Plotinian critique of the Stoic categories (subjects/matter, quality, relation and modality) and its legitimacy, noting in particular that the Neoplatonic's objections are based on assumptions completely strange to Stoic philosophy.

These critiques are followed by Plotinus' own view of the categories of the intelligible realm (Chapter 4) and of the material world. To describe the first, he uses the supreme genera taken from Plato's *Sophist* which he reinterprets as part of the plural unity of his second *hypostasis*, *Nous*, in which they coexist in a perfect unity and which only our discursive thinking sees as distinct.

Plotinus also makes a deduction of these supreme kinds but not in the same manner as Plato, who considered the opposition between some of them, their account also taking the form of praise of the intelligible realm.

At the end of the third part (Chapter 5) we present the Plotinian table of categories whose number is reduced to five: substance, quantity, quality, motion and relation. They are analyzed and interpreted taking into account the observations of modern exegetes of Neoplatonism which dealt specifically with the category theory (E. Bréhier, A. H. Armstrong, C. Rutten, C. Evangeliou, Gerson LP, Frans AJ De Haas, R. Sorabji).

In the conclusions of the last chapter we propose the expression of „ontological legitimacy” by which we evaluate the significance and status of Plotinian categories: they rather have a status similar to the Stoic incorporeal, philosophical nominalism, because of the low status and the precariousness of the sensible world to which these categories apply. In other words, the Plotinian categories do not have the ontological legitimacy of those of Aristotle, which show us the real characteristics of things, in their triple value, logical, linguistic and ontological. Ultimately, Plotinian categories cannot hold an objective and realistic value, as neither the sensible world to which they apply is, in the Neoplatonic view, real and authentic.

As a closing remark we emphasize the importance of a theory of categories in general as a philosophical problem arising in the context of Western philosophical thought. It should concern us as far as the same thought is characterized by its ability to go beyond itself and to design alternatives: as far as categories are concerned, it can legitimately ask itself how our world would look if shaped by totally different aspects than those inherited by the Western philosophical tradition.