

Words, Concepts and Things: Cajetan on the Subject of the *Categories*

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As is well known, Aristotle's *Categories* was accepted through most of the Middle Ages as the first in a series of works on logic. The fact of its membership in the *Organon*, and its position within the *Organon*, more or less determined answers to two of the most important questions for readers and commentators approaching the work, namely, the question of its *subject matter* and the question of its *intent*. It is interesting to note that for modern interpreters, who do not necessarily assume the authority of this medieval tradition of interpretation, the questions of subject matter and intent again seem open and interesting—if not even pressing and difficult—with respect to the *Categories* more than any other of Aristotle's works.

Like so much else in medieval Latin philosophy, the traditional interpretation of the *Categories* can be traced to Boethius and Porphyry. Before Porphyry, we know that Greek-speaking philosophers, especially "Platonists," disagreed about the proper interpretation of the *Categories*. The main question for them, as again for modern Aristotle scholars, was whether Aristotle's *Categories* treated thinking or things, whether it was a treatise on logic or epistemology, or on metaphysics. It was the latter view that was taken by Plotinus, who famously criticized Aristotle's reflections on the "kinds of being" as dividing reality in such a way that can accommodate neither the separate intelligences nor the One (*Enneads* VI 1–3). It is in fact a very similar observation by modern scholars—that the *Categories* appears to talk about *being* in a way that is not even compatible with Aristotle's own reflections on being as found in the *Metaphysics*—that has prompted "developmentalist" hypotheses according to which the *Categories* is an "early" work, and the *Metaphysics* is more "mature."

It is probably in response to Plotinus' rejection of the *Categories* that Porphyry undertook to position the *Categories* as a work of logic, not of metaphysics.¹ In his questions-commentary on the *Categories*, Porphyry explains

¹ For Porphyry and Plotinus on the *Categories*, see Christos Evangelou, *Aristotle's Categories and Porphyry* (Leiden, 1996), and A.C. Lloyd, "Neoplatonic logic and Aristotelian logic,"

that “the treatise cannot be about genera of being nor about things *qua* things at all, but instead is about the words that are used to signify things” (57, 5–7).² Again, he says of the *Categories*: “The subject of this book is the primary imposition of expressions, which is used for communicating about things. For it concerns simple significant words insofar as they signify things” (58, 4–6). Thus, even admitting that words “get their generic differentiae from the things which they report” (58, 23), Porphyry nonetheless maintains that the “inquiry is incidentally concerned with the generic differentiae of beings, while primarily it is about significant expressions” (58, 27–29).

While Porphyry gives textual reasons for taking this interpretation of the *Categories*—based mainly on Aristotle’s own insistence that the categories come to affirmation or negation only in combination with one another (2a4–7)—it is important to note the overall effect, and advantage, of this interpretation for Porphyry. By positioning the *Categories* as a logical work, which treats primarily *words*, and only incidentally *things*, Porphyry renders it at least potentially compatible with the metaphysics which Plotinus had feared it threatened.³ Indeed, Porphyry could argue that Aristotle’s *Categories* was not only compatible with Platonic metaphysics, but was indeed propaedeutic to it.

It should not be a surprise that Porphyry’s positioning of the *Categories* was taken up by Boethius. Whether or not it was out of a shared desire to harmonize the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, Boethius saw the advantages of Porphyry’s characterization of the *Categories*, and several times in his commentary on that work reiterates that the intention of the work is to treat the primary names of things, insofar as they signify.⁴ He takes this so far as to

Phronesis 1 (1955–56): 58–72, 146–60. Lloyd notes that some have regarded Porphyry’s interpretation of the *Categories* as “nominalist” (155–57).

² Porphyry, *On Aristotle’s Categories*, trans. Steven K. Strange (Ithaca, 1992).

³ Thus in explaining why Aristotle calls sensible particulars the primary substances, Porphyry says: “I shall say that since the subject of the work is significant expressions, and expressions are applied primarily to sensibles—for men first of all assign names to what they know and perceive, and only secondarily to those things that are primary by nature but secondary with respect to perception—it is reasonable for him to have called the things that are primarily signified by expressions, that is, sensibles and individuals, primary substances. Thus with respect to significant expressions sensible individuals are primary substances, but as regards nature, intelligible substances are primary. But his intention is to distinguish the genera of being according to the expressions that signify them, and these primarily signify individual sensible substances” (91, 20–27).

⁴ Boethius, *In Categoriae Aristotelis*, lib. I (*PL* 64:159c): “In hoc igitur opere haec intentio est, de primis rerum nominibus, et de vocibus res significantibus disputare, non in eo quod secundum aliquam proprietatem figuramque formantur, sed in eo quod significantes sunt.”

conclude that “the intention of this work is not concerning things, but concerning names.”⁵

Of course it was primarily through Boethius’ translation and commentary that many later Latin-speaking philosophers were introduced to Aristotle and the *Categories*. It may be said that Boethius’ influence on medieval Latin philosophy, and especially on logic, was strongest in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, before the introduction of the “new logic,” and Boethius’ teaching on the *Categories* was among his most important legacies. Abelard, for instance, was so willing to follow Boethius in asserting that the *Categories* is about words, not things, that it appears to color his approach to the “problem of universals,” and many have found it fitting to call him a “nominalist.”⁶ Of course, even after the introduction of new alternative sources, Boethius remained a central authority in logic, and his teachings continue to be treated as authoritative through late scholasticism. Even those—such as Scotists and nominalists—who otherwise introduced a wide range of diversity into medieval approaches to logic, recognized especially Boethius’ claim that the *Categories* is about “words insofar as they signify things” as part of an authoritative tradition in logic.

So in light of this tradition, with its roots in Porphyry and Boethius, it might strike us as odd to find Thomas de Vio Cajetan remark in his commentary on the *Categories* that “if it is asked, whether this principally treats words or things, it must be responded that it treats things.” Even if we go on to read his qualification, that the *Categories* treats things “not absolutely, but as conceived incompletely, and by consequent necessity as signified,”⁷ it appears that Cajetan has reversed the careful Porphyrian-Boethian characterization of the *Categories*; instead of saying that the *Categories* is about *words* insofar as they *signify things*, Cajetan says that it is about *things* insofar as they *are signified by words*.

⁵ Boethius, *In Categoriae Aristotelis*, lib. I (PL 64: 166c): “... non de rebus, sed de nominibus libri huius intentio est.” It is worth looking at the argument, carried over several pages, that takes Boethius from the rather weaker position cited in note 4, to the stronger one formulated here.

⁶ Cf. John Marenbon, “Vocalism, Nominalism and the Commentaries on the *Categories* from the Earlier Twelfth Century,” *Vivarium* 30 (1992): 51–61. Marenbon notes that Abelard cites Boethius approvingly and even while preferring to speak of the categories as dividing ten “natures,” nonetheless Abelard says in his long commentary on the *Categories* that “this distinction into categories is based rather on the meanings of words than on the natures of things. For, as regards the natures of things, there is no reason why Aristotle should not have set out fewer or more categories than he did” (Geyer, 116:35–117:2) (quoted on 57).

⁷ “... si quaeratur, de vocibus an de rebus principaliter hic tractetur, respondendum est quod de rebus non absolute sed incomplexe conceptis et consequenti necessitate significatis.” *Commentaria in Praedicamenta Aristotelis*, ed. M.-H. Laurent (Rome, 1939) 5.

But Cajetan himself does not think that his new formulation of what the categories classify is a change of the traditional Boethian interpretation. In fact, he refers approvingly to Boethius, citing the “illustrious man” who held that “the intention of this book is to treat of incomplex words insofar as they are significative of incomplex things.”⁸ Our present question is, then, how does Cajetan get from Boethius’ position to what sounds like its (relative) opposite?

Cajetan’s starting point in describing the intent of the *Categories* is to affirm that it is a work of logic which corresponds to the first operation of the intellect, simple apprehension. As such, the work must be intended to regulate the simple apprehension of things. But since it is concerned with regulating the simple apprehension of things, this logical inquiry must consider those apprehended things not absolutely, as they are in reality, but as they are related to the intellect. So, Cajetan says, the “things” considered in the *Categories*

are not united and distinguished with their conditions, which they have in the nature of things, but as they are received by the intellect, that is, as they stand under the simple apprehension of the intellect—that is, as simple objects of apprehension of the intellect; and the things so received are nothing other than things said by interior words, or (which is the same) than things conceived by simple concepts, and the things of this sort are nothing other than things signified by incomplex words, since words are signs of concepts and concepts [are signs] of things.⁹

From the previous quotation, we see that for Cajetan the following are equivalent:

- (1) things as received by the intellect
- (2) things as they stand under the simple apprehension of the intellect
- (3) simple objects of apprehension
- (4) things said by interior words
- (5) things conceived by simple concepts
- (6) things signified by incomplex words

As implied in these equivalences, the two acts, simple apprehension and signifying, both require the mediation of an act of intellect, or a “concept.”

⁸ “... dicitur etiam ab illustribus viris quod intentio huius libri est tractare de vocibus incomplexis ut significativae sunt rerum incomplexarum,” *ibid.* 4.

⁹ “Et quum res incomplexae non adunantur et distinguuntur cum conditionibus, quas habent in rerum natura, sed ut sic acceptae per intellectum, id est ut stant sub simplici apprehensione intellectus, id est ut obiectae simplici apprehensioni intellectus, et res sic acceptae nihil aliud sunt quam res dictae verbis interioribus, vel (quod idem est) quam res conceptae conceptibus simplicibus, et res huiusmodi nihil aliud sunt quam res significatae vocibus incomplexis, quando voces sunt signa conceptuum et conceptus rerum ...” *ibid.* 4.

That is why Cajetan finds the equivalences on the general semantic principle that “words are signs of concepts and concepts [are signs] of things.”

Given the different role that concepts have played in different philosophical frameworks, and given the common charge that late scholastic concern with concepts, and particularly Cajetan’s concern with concepts, is more Scotistic than Thomistic,¹⁰ it is important to emphasize that the relevant sense of “concept” here is simply *that which mediates thinking and signifying*. The concept is the act of the intellect by virtue of which something is understood, and by virtue of which a word is said to signify a thing.¹¹ Cajetan spells this out more explicitly elsewhere: “a thing is understood at the time when we form its concept ... the formation of a concept is the making of the external thing actually known.”¹² Further, “words only signify things by the mediation of intellectual conception; therefore signification is caused by conception.”¹³ In short, a word signifies a thing by the mediation of a concept, and a concept is just what causes a thing to be understood.¹⁴

¹⁰ This is a concern that becomes particularly important when approaching Cajetan’s teaching on analogy, so much of which is concerned with characterizing the nature of the concept mediating analogical signification, and which has for this very reason been criticized: “Cajetan’s treatise *On the Analogy of Names* is an attempt to put order into the Thomistic notion of analogy. Whereas in St. Thomas’ writings analogy is used with great suppleness and flexibility as a means of approaching God, who is unknown in his essence, Cajetan proposes a rigid classification of the types of analogy that excludes all but the analogy of proper (or non-metaphorical) proportionality as the true metaphysical analogy. Throughout his treatment of analogy he tends to leave out of consideration the central notion of *esse* and to conceive analogy in terms of concepts rather than of judgment. In both regards he resembles the Scotists against whom he argued.” Armand A. Maurer, C.S.B., *Medieval Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1982) 351.

¹¹ For a careful distinction between talking about concepts in the here relevant semantic sense and other senses relevant in metaphysics or psychology, see Gyula Klima, “The Semantic Principles Underlying Saint Thomas Aquinas’s *Metaphysics of Being*,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 5 (1996): 87–141.

¹² “res intelligitur quando ejus conceptum formamus ... conceptus formatio est factio rei extra actu intellectae.” *In De Ente et Essentia*, ed M.H. Laurent (Turin, 1934) §67.

¹³ “voces significant res non nisi media conceptione intellectus; igitur significatio causatur ex conceptione ...” *Commentaria in Summam Theologiae St Thomae* (Rome, 1906) q. xiii, a. 1, ¶3.

¹⁴ Of course, what is called simply a “concept” here is what is, in other contexts, given the more technical name of “formal concept” to distinguish it from the “objective concept”: “... nota quod conceptus est duplex: formalis et objectalis. Conceptus formalis est idolum quoddam quod intellectus possibilis format inseipso repraesentativum objectaliter rei intellectae: quod a philosophis vocatur intentio seu conceptus, a theologis vero verbum. Conceptus autem objectalis est res per conceptum formalem repraesentata in illo terminans actum intelligendi, verbi gratia: conceptus formalis leonis est imago illa quam intellectus possibilis format de quiditate [sic] leonina, cum vult ipsam intelligere; conceptus vero objectalis ejusdem est natura ipsa leonina repraesentata et intellecta. Nec putandum est cum dicitur nomen significare conceptum quod

As a result, Cajetan argues, in some sense “it is the same to treat of things as conceived by simple apprehension and of words as signifying those things so conceived.” Of course, the sense of sameness here is “proportional.” Thus, it is true that “what is attributed to one is attributed to the other,” however “to the thing so conceived and signified it is attributed as to a thing, and to a word [it is attributed] as to a sign.”¹⁵

Despite the fact that it is the same, at least proportionally, to treat words as signifying as it is to treat things as signified, Cajetan gives priority to the latter. This priority is based on an observation which Cajetan attributes to Avicenna, that “to consider words is not the business of logic by intention, but comes to it by necessity, since the things so conceived we cannot express, teach, unify and order without words.”¹⁶ Indeed, Cajetan argues that if we could perform these operations without words, then logic would not treat words at all. So it is because reason only incidentally involves words, but essentially involves acts of the intellect, that logic, which regulates reason, is only incidentally concerned with words. So Cajetan agrees with the Boethian position that the *Categories* treats *words* insofar as they *signify* things; but nonetheless he argues that the truth of the Boethian position is preserved and explained by answering, if it is asked whether the *Categories* treats words or things, that it treats *things* insofar as they are *conceived*, and consequently insofar as they are *signified* by words.

In light of Cajetan’s well-founded reputation as a Thomistic “realist,” it is appropriate for a historically-minded philosopher to conclude with some remarks about what Cajetan’s interpretation of the *Categories* does and does not tell us about the relationship between realist and nominalist approaches to logic. At first glance it would be tempting to view Cajetan’s emphasis of things over words as confirmation of nominalist charges that realists neglect

significet alterum tantum: significat enim leonis nomen conceptum utrumque, licet diversimode, est namque signum conceptus formalis ut medii, seu quo, et est signum conceptus objectalis, ut ultimi seu quod. Unde idem est loqui de conceptu entis et de significatione ejus.” *In de Ente et Essentia* §14.

¹⁵ “Idem enim est tractare de rebus ut conceptis simplici apprehensione, et de vocibus ut significant illas sic conceptas, quoniam quicquid attribuitur uni, attribuitur reliquo, servata tamen proportione, quia rei sic conceptae et significatae attribuitur ut rei, voci vero ut signo ...” *Commentaria in Praedicamenta Aristotelis* 4–5.

¹⁶ “... memores tamen esse oportet eius quod optime ab Avicenna in principio suae Logicae dicitur, scilicet quod considerare de vocibus non est logici negotii ex intentione, sed necessitas ad hoc compulsi, quoniam res sic conceptas non nisi verbis exprimimus, docemus, adunamus et ordinamus.” *ibid.* 5

the properties of terms and proceed straight to things.¹⁷ However, as we have seen, it is precisely on the basis of the nature of terms that Cajetan argues that terms are necessarily, though incidentally, the concern of logic. Cajetan's argument that the *Categories* is about things as conceived and signified is not based on *ontological* considerations; the argument proceeds from *semantic* principles.

Moreover, it is an argument which appears to proceed on the basis of the very semantic principles realists share with nominalists—that to signify is to establish an understanding,¹⁸ and that to establish an understanding is to form a concept.¹⁹ Indeed, it seems that Cajetan's argument about the subject of the *Categories* rests on a basic thesis about the semantic triangle, shared by nominalists and realists alike, and summed up in Cajetan's assertion that "words are signs of concepts, and concepts [are signs] of things."

What accounts, then, for Cajetan's ability to emphasize that the *Categories* is about things, while nominalists consistently characterize it as a work classifying kinds of terms? The answer has to do with a further semantic assumption, unspoken in the prologue's arguments about the subject and intent of the *Categories*. For what is at issue between realists and nominalists is not the general principle captured by the semantic triangle—that words signify things by the mediation of concepts—but the details of *how* concepts mediate signification. More specifically, since all agreed that the relation of word to concept was established conventionally by an act of imposition,

¹⁷ According to "a letter which the Nominalist masters of the University of Paris sent to King Louis XI in 1473 or 1474" (translated by James J. Walsh from the text in F. Ehrle, *Der Sentenzenkommentar Peters von Candia* [Münster, 1925] 322–23, quoted in Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, eds., *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions*, second ed. [Indianapolis, 1973] 649), nominalists were those "who show diligence and zeal in understanding all the properties of terms on which the truth and falsity of a sentence depends, and without which the perfect judgment of the truth and falsity of propositions cannot be made," while realists "neglect all these things and ... condemn them, saying, 'We proceed to things, we have no concern for terms'."

¹⁸ Gabriel Nuchelmans offers as the standard definition of "significare" for late-scholastic philosophers: "representing some thing or some things or in some way to the cognitive faculty." *Late-Scholastic and Humanist Theories of the Proposition* (Amsterdam, 1980) 14. Paul Vincent Spade also notes that what he calls the common scholastic "psychologico-causal notion of signification," according to which "*significare*" means "to establish an understanding" (from Boethius, "*constituere intellectum*"). P.V. Spade, "The Semantics of Terms" (in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* [Cambridge, 1982] 188–98), 188. Cf. E.J. Ashworth, "Signification and Modes of Signifying in Thirteenth-Century Logic: A Preface to Aquinas on Analogy" (in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 1 [1991]: 39–67) 44: "to signify is to establish an understanding (*significare est intellectum constituere*)."

¹⁹ Cf. Gyula Klima, "Ockham's Semantics and Metaphysics of the Categories," in P.V. Spade, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham* (Cambridge, 1998) 118–42.

what separates realists from nominalists is their different accounts of the concept's *natural* signification of things. The realist, of course, can base the relation of natural signification on *formal similarity*; the concept is the same form—that is by specific, rather than numerical, identity—as the form of the thing it represents. This of course does not entail that we can only think or speak about forms, and never about particular things; rather it entails that when particular things are spoken or thought about it is always with respect to some form. For the nominalist, however, who fears that such forms would be extra semantic “entities” that might unnecessarily overpopulate the actual world of ontological entities, words cannot signify “forms,” and so the explanation of natural signification in terms of formal similarity is not available.²⁰ Behind the explicit claim that words signify things by the mediation of concepts, it is the realist assumption that the foundation of the natural signification of concepts is a formal similarity of concepts to their extramental significates that allows Cajetan to claim that it is *the same* to speak of *things insofar as they are signified* as it is to speak of *words insofar as they signify*. Rejecting the realist account of the relation of natural signification between concept and reality, no nominalist could accept this claim. And so no nominalist could accept Cajetan's semantic argument for why the *Categories* is about things, not absolutely, but as conceived, and consequently as signified by words.

²⁰ For a comparative analysis of the agreements and disagreements between nominalist and realist semantic principles along these lines see Gyula Klima, “Ontological Alternatives vs. Alternative Semantics in Medieval Philosophy,” in: J. Bernard: Logical Semiotics, *S - European Journal for Semiotic Studies* 3:4 (Vienna, 1991): 587–618.