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*Knowledge and Structure of Reality
in the Commentary on the Categories of John Buridan*

Abstract

As is well known, in the *Categories* Aristotle sketches the main features of his ontology and semantics (which in turn are the ground of these medieval disciplines), since he sets out the basic elements of the world (namely, individual and universal substances, individual and universal accidents) in their mutual relationships, and shows their links to language. The treatise is not only a composite text, but also a rather ambiguous one, since the Aristotelian categorial fields can be considered as both a classification of things and a classification of the signs which signify those things. Therefore, from late Antiquity onwards many disputes took place about the subject, purpose, and importance of the work. Depending on the general evaluation of the *Categories*, whether it primarily deals with world things or their signs, it is customary to classify medieval authors as being Realists or Nominalists. Nominalists, like Ockham, maintained that in the world there are two supreme genera of beings only (that is, substance and quality), but that we grasp and signify the items falling into those two real categories by means of ten semantically different kinds of terms. On the contrary, Realists, like Duns Scotus and Walter Burley, held that the ten Aristotelian categories are the supreme genera of beings, irreducible to one another. William Ockham was the beginner of the Nominalist trend in the Late Middle Ages. He considered the categorial table to concern terms alone and not things, and translated Aristotle's statements on the ontological and physical status of substances, quantities and so on, into rules for the correct use of terms.

In his turn, John Buridan was the most important Nominalist author of the generation after Ockham: his commentary on the *Categories*, which relies on Ockham's, must be viewed as the most mature output of the Nominalist interpretative tradition. Buridan's theory of categories is a very interesting example of that dissolution of the traditional Aristotelian doctrine which took place in between the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th centuries. In Buridan's philosophical system, the relationships between primary (or individual) substances and secondary (or universal) substances, and between substances and accidents, that is, qualities (both abstract and concrete) as well as the inner natures of essential and accidental predications are so different from their Aristotelian originals that the general meaning of the categorial doctrine is deeply modified. In so doing, Buridan detached himself from Ockham, since he appears to be receptive to some non-Nominalist principles and requirements. Whereas the semantics that Ockham wished to construct was a sort of formal language, Buridan rather directed his efforts towards building up a semantics as a sort of empirical analysis of our language, a study of essentially the same kind as that occurring in

modern linguistics. For him, to understand an expression is not merely to be aware of the entity (or entities) somehow connected with it, but also to be aware of its actual or potential use.

Given the main goal of this thesis, namely to clarify the most important aspects of Buridan's theory of categories, trying to set it in relation to the Aristotelian background and to its main source (the theory expounded by Ockham in his writings), in the first chapter, Aristotle's treatise of the *Categories* (viewed as a complicate text open to different interpretations) is accounted for. The second chapter deals with Ockham's theory of the categories, as it is developed in the commentary on the *Categories* and in the central chapters of the first part of his *Summa logicae*. The third chapter concerns Buridan's semantics. Unlike Ockham, who followed the Terminist tradition and affirmed that spoken and written terms directly signify the (individual) things in the world, Buridan follows Boethius and states that the direct meaning of any expression is a conceptual entity in the mind. In the fourth chapter some crucial questions from Buridan's commentaries on the *De anima* are analyzed, so that the general features of his theory of cognition can be drawn, and particularly the way in which our mind produces universal concept and builds up the categorial fields. In the fifth chapter, Buridan's commentary on the *Categories* is explained. And finally, in the concluding remarks, Buridan's and Ockham's semantics and ontologies are compared.