

Aristotle's *Categories* in St. Augustine

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Because St. Augustine begins to talk about substance early in the *De Trinitate* (1, 1, 1), a notion which he later equates with essence in 1, 1, 4, before delving into what could be Augustine's understanding of substance or essence, one might begin with a look at St. Augustine's understanding of Aristotle's ten categories since substance ranks as one of these categories even as it is the first of these categories.

A useful starting point presents itself in how St. Thomas Aquinas understood these categories because of the influence that Aristotle's *Categories* exercised on Aquinas's own mind. And so, when directly responding to a question which asks if the human mind receives knowledge from sensible things, Aquinas replies affirmatively when he argues that the senses play a vitally constitutive role when they apprehend properties which are to be identified as material coordinates.¹ More specifically, in Book 4 of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (composed in 1264-65), Aquinas notes that "sense grasps a thing in its exterior accidents, which are color, taste, quantity and others of this kind."² Through the exterior senses and from their derivative descriptions, one employs categories which are drawn from the world of sense experience in order to describe any object which comes within the range of one's experience.³ As an apt example of this, Aristotle's logical treatise, the *Ten Categories*, accordingly lists ten attributes or *predicamenta*⁴ (predicaments) which can be used to speak about anything which engages one's interest to become an object of scientific investigation. Substance denotes a subject or thing in terms of what exists in itself and not in another; it cannot be attributed to another subject or thing. It is an

¹Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 6, ad 2; 2, p. 29.

²Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 11, 15; 9, p. 86.

³Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 420; *Caring About Meaning: patterns in the life of Bernard Lonergan*, eds. Pierrot Lambert, Charlotte Tansey, and Cathleen Going (Montreal: Thomas More Institute Papers, 1982), pp. 65-6.

⁴Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 380, nn. 1-2 (hereafter cited as the "*Confessions*" followed by technical reference to the original, and if a translation has been used, by the volume and page of the English translation); Bernard Lonergan, *Understanding and Being: The Halifax Lectures on Insight*, eds. Elizabeth A. Morelli and Mark D. Morelli; rev and aug. by Frederick E. Crowe with the collaboration of Elizabeth A. Morelli, Mark D. Morelli, Robert M. Doran, and Thomas V. Daly (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 8..

ens per se (a being by itself).⁵ The other categories (denoted by quantity, quality, relation, action, passion, place, time, posture, and habit) are then used to speak about a thing which has been identified as a substance. These last nine categories either inhere or exist in a substance *as a substance* and are affirmed of it (for instance, the quantity and quality of a given thing given the matter and form of a given thing⁶); or they refer to external causes and circumstances that should be noted in talking about any given thing (as for instance, habit, time, and place).⁷ These later properties come and go *as accidents* while the subject or thing to which they refer remains substantially the same. Some categories, however, refer to relations or connections which can exist between a substance and its external environment (as in the action and passion of a given substance: what a given substance does as a subject, and what it receives from as an object of activity coming from another source). In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine speaks of these categories in a way which reveals their descriptive heuristic character as this would be derived from an analysis of ordinary linguistic usage in terms on how subjects and verbs are related to each other.

The book [*The Ten Categories*] seemed to me to speak clearly enough of substances, such as a man is, and of what are in them, such as a man's figure; of what quality he is; his stature; how many feet tall he is; his relationships, as whose brother he is; where he is placed; when he was born; whether he stands or sits; whether he is shod with shoes or armed; whether he does something or has something done to him; and the innumerable things that are found in these nine categories, of which I have set down some examples, or in the category of

⁵Hardon, "Substance," *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, p. 523.

⁶Aquinas, *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 5, 9, 892.

⁷Aquinas, *Sententia super Physicam*, 3, 5, 322; *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 5, 9, 889-894; *Confessions*, trans. Ryan, p. 380, n. 2.

substance.⁸

Then, by applying this schema to the study of St. Augustine as a substantive being, as an autonomous subject, a combination of the following details emerges:

⁸*Confessions*, 4, 28; p. 110. In his *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, p. 420, Bernard Lonergan also speaks about Aristotle's ten categories or predicaments in a way which attests to their heuristic descriptive character.

A naturalist will assign the genus, species, and instance (substance) of an animal, its size and weight (quantity), its color, shape, abilities, propensities (quality), its similarities to other animals and its differences from them (relation), its performance and susceptibilities (action and passion), its habitat and seasonal changes (place and time), its mode of motion and rest (posture), and its possession of such items as claws, talons, hooves, fur, feathers, horns (habit).

Later, in his *Understanding and Being*, p. 199, Lonergan speaks about Aristotle's categories in the following terms:

We arrive at Aristotle's categories most simply by going into the woods, meeting animals, and asking, What kind of an animal is this? How big is it? What is its color? What relations does it have? and so on. They are categories of descriptive knowledge, and descriptive knowledge is science in a preliminary stage. It is something entirely different from science that has reached its explanatory stage. Aristotle himself had a very clear idea of the difference between these descriptive categories, which he sets up in an elementary work, and causes; consequently, he thinks of science as knowledge through causes. However, there has been a tendency to conceive of metaphysics as knowledge, not through causes, but through the predicaments. On the other hand, if one conceives metaphysics as concerned with the total heuristic structure of proportionate being [being defined as what of reality can be known by human acts of experiencing, understanding, and judging], one must be concerned with causes and not at all with predicaments, because a heuristic structure aims at what is known through understanding.

In other words, while Aristotle's categories talk about being, they do not talk about the causes of

Thus Augustine himself through the course of his life grew in size: an instance of the category of quantity. He acquired certain vicious habits that were in time replaced by virtues. He acquired great skill as a writer and great learning: virtues, vices, skill, and the like come under the heading of quality, as do colors and certain other aspects of our being. Augustine was taught by other men (passion) and he in turn instructed students (action). He existed at different moments (time) and in many places (place). He had countless relations with others; men and other things. He was a son, a brother, a father, a disciple, a master, a priest, and a bishop (relation). He was clothed in various ways and equipped with tools or armor at different times (habit, in the sense of wearing a monk's habit or a soldier's uniform). He assumed various positions, such as kneeling in prayer (posture).⁹

However, as Aquinas argues, descriptive conjugates, which he refers to as "external accidents [*exteriorum accidentium*],"¹⁰ do not reveal why a thing exists as it exists with the descriptive conjugates that it has. They fail to reveal a thing's inner essence or nature (its quiddity or "whatness"): what a thing is with respect to its inherent intelligibility, its meaning or form, why it is what it is. "When sense knows a thing through a form received from things, it does not know it as effectively as the intellect. Sense is led through it to a knowledge of external accidents but the intellect reaches to the essential quiddity of a thing."¹¹

In turning to Augustine's use of Aristotle's ten categories in his study of the Trinity elaborated in the *De Trinitate*, it is only in Book 5, chapter 2 that Augustine refers to Aristotle's ten categories but in a way which cannot be regarded as explicit or complete. In speaking about God, "substance" can be used as a meaningful category in order to refer to God as a distinct, subsistent reality. God is a distinct being or *ousia* who does not exist in some other kind of being. God possesses his own reality or existence. However, with respect to the other categories that can be used to talk about God, the other categories which are included in Aristotle's list can only be used in a suggestive or metaphorical way. God is not a datum of sense and so he cannot be talked about as if he possessed any external accidents which can be sensed by any of the human senses. Quoting early on from St. Augustine's *De Trinitate*, it is said that "divinity cannot be

⁹*Confessions*, pp. 380-1, n. 2.

¹⁰*De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 6, ad 2; 2, p. 29; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 11, 15.

¹¹*De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 6, ad 2; my translation. In the *Summa Theologiae* 2a-2ae, q. 8, a. 1 & ad 3; 3, p. 1198, Aquinas reiterates this thesis when he argues that "sensitive knowledge is concerned with external sensible qualities" while "intellectual knowledge penetrates into the very essence of a thing."

seen by human sight in any way whatever."¹² Other means must be used.

In terms of a deeper understanding of substance in Augustine, an Aristotelian notion of substance should be distinguished from a Thomist notion of it if we are to more fully appreciate the meaning that Augustine is probably working with. The key to a difference between an Aristotelian, Augustinian notion of substance and a Thomist notion of it lies early in the *De Trinitate* (1, 1, 4) where Augustine refers to substance in a way which is in apposition with essence. The two terms are used interchangeably although, admittedly, in his work, Augustine speaks more frequently about substance than essence. However, the apposition reveals an Aristotelian understanding of substance which emphasizes the primacy of form in understanding the being of any given thing. For Aristotle, being is form and form is being (cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 7, 17; Lonergan, *Insight*, pp. 390-1) since nothing exists apart from its specific determination through the agency of an active, intelligible principle which refers to the causality of a form. This form unites itself to what is able to receive it, and so some kind of passive principle is indicated. The result is a specific kind of being or thing, a specific kind of substance. A "this" rather than a "that" comes into existence. With respect to finite things which exist within the physical or material order of things, form causes being by giving being or reality to matter (cf. Aquinas's *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, cited in English as the *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 5, 2, 775 which summarizes the Aristotelian position by simply saying that "form gives being, and matter receives it"). Distinct beings or substances are brought into existence in a way which shows that essence is the same as substance since, in essence, a union of matter and form is what constitutes the existence of a particular kind of thing.¹³ A human being, for instance, is a substance or thing that is composed of a human soul that is united with the matter which is needed if a human being is to exist. When speaking about matter in a generic way, Aristotle speaks about "common matter" since he wants to distinguish this type of matter from any specific matter which exists in an individual and unique way in a particular thing. Each of us has a distinct set of bones and flesh which is peculiar to ourselves and so our own bones and flesh refers to specific matter. But, the bones and flesh of any human being is what is meant by "common matter." In Aristotle, only one explanatory principle accordingly accounts for the existence of things as a principle of activity, and this is the form of a given thing. This position is to be contrasted, however, with Aquinas's understanding of things since Aquinas postulated not one but two explanatory principles which are to be identified as causes or principles of activity: the principle of form, and the principle of act (which refers to an act of being or existence that confers reality on what had not existed and which is invoked to account for the existence of any contingent thing).

¹²Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 1, 2, 11.

¹³For a full explanation of the reasoning which led Aristotle to identify substances in terms of essences, see Michael Novak, "A Key to Aristotle's 'Substance'," *Substances and Things: Aristotle's Doctrine of Physical Substance in Recent Essays*, ed. M. L. O'Hara (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 188-208.

However, like Aquinas, Aristotle acknowledged the existence of "separated substances" which refer to things which do not exist in any kind of union with matter. These substances exist in a Platonic way: separately, as subsistent forms apart from matter. One might refer to them as instances of pure intelligibility, or as pure forms which possess a purely spiritual or intellectual nature. They can never be apprehended by any act of sense, although their purely spiritual or intellectual nature does not preclude the fact that they can be known by acts of understanding which, as acts of understanding, also possess a purely spiritual nature. Through acts of understanding which are joined to acts of faith and belief, one best moves toward apprehending the meaning of meanings in a way that can reveal something of the light or intelligibility which belongs to the inner life of God present within the Trinity.