

Paul Symington

On Determining What There is

The Identity of Ontological Categories in Aquinas, Scotus and Lowe

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The Identity of Ontological Categories
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To my wife Eliza,
With a deep gratitude that transcends expression

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INTRODUCTION

A necessary condition for knowing the world is identifying common features or patterns in it. One of the basic tasks of children in learning how to successfully interact with the world is to identify these common patterns across the range of their sometimes very diverse experiences. For example, little Clara's knowledge of the world consists in her identifying that the family cat Alexander, which is a source of play for her today, is the very same cat that she played with yesterday. A successful understanding of the way the world is also includes knowing that Alexander is not the same as Felix, the father of Alexander, even though they are similar in color, shape, and behavior. Furthermore, Clara's learning about the world also involves identifying some likeness between Alexander and Bessie the cow despite the fact that they are less alike than Alexander and Felix. In the process of cognitional development, we discern a hierarchical order in the way things resemble each other; namely, that the things in the world—broadly considered—resemble each other in a way more characteristic of the likeness between cats and cows than the likeness found among cats. In this way, the world is known through a process driven by a grasp of identity and distinction, commonality and difference, and through a process of classification.

The process through which a fundamental knowledge of the things in the world is obtained is systematized into bodies of knowledge, or sciences. Every science designates a subject matter that is to be investigated according to an established methodology. The subject matter of a science consists in considering a group of entities under a common aspect or, as Thomas Aquinas would say, "formality," which allows the science which studies them to be a unified subject of investigation.¹ For example, biology studies entities insofar as they are organisms, or related in some essential way to organisms (for example, a biologist may study the diet of certain organisms). The objects of sciences overlap but each discipline looks at their objects under a distinct aspect proper to its programme as a distinctive science. A way of thinking about this notion of a formality or aspect under which some objects are examined is by looking at the relationship between a material thing and perception. Although one and the same thing may be perceived by each of the five senses, it is taken under a different aspect

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Expositio super librum Boethii De Trinitate*, ed. by B. Decker, (Leiden, 1959), esp. q. 5.

when perceived by different senses: sight sees the thing, touch feels it, hearing hears it, etc. Similarly, although two distinct sciences may examine the same things in the world, yet, each science investigates them under an aspect or formality common to that particular science.

In this sense, metaphysics is taken to be a science. Metaphysics is understood by some philosophers to be a discipline that, among other things, seeks to determine the most general features of reality—to distinguish which entities are the most basic constituents of reality and which are not.² It seeks to establish the general features of reality *tout court* in such a way that any entity whatsoever will have a general feature that has been established by a correct metaphysical investigation and determination. The designation of these general features obtained through such a metaphysical investigation have been traditionally called ‘categories.’ These general features are presupposed within any understanding of the less general features or aspects under which entities are investigated. For example, biologists mapping the human genome, although their subject matter necessarily includes how these are related to organisms, presuppose that what they are investigating is a concrete thing. And, it seems that being a concrete entity is a feature common to entities beyond that which is considered by biology. In this context, an aim of metaphysics would be to determine whether “concrete entity” is a general feature of reality or, if it is not, how it can be accounted for by another more general feature.³ For example, a philoso-

² Of course, even the notion that metaphysics is the discipline that studies categories is not universally accepted. For example, Benedict Ashley, O. P., in his *The Way toward Wisdom: An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), argues that natural philosophy is the discipline that properly studies categories. He also claims that this is the view of Aristotle as well: “Aristotle treats them [categories] primarily as part of natural science, not of metaphysics or logic, and demonstrates empirically that these categories are required for any adequate description of physical phenomena,” p. 78. The reason why he holds this is largely due to his emphasis on the necessity of doing in natural philosophy before metaphysics. Just as natural philosophy studies changeable things, so too categories are themselves the fundamental and distinct ways that things change. Even though I recognize the value of Ashley’s approach, my consideration involves the fundamental ontological status of categories themselves (as we shall see in the second chapter) as well as determining in an ontologically relevant way, the number of the categories.

³ Panyot Butchvarov, in his “Categories,” in *A Companion to Metaphysics*, edited by Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa (New York: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), pp. 74-59, identifies a major consequence to obtaining a list of categories: to find out

pher may argue that “concrete entity” is not a most general feature of reality because some substances have a feature common (viz., being a non-dependent entity) to both concrete entities (such as dogs) and abstract entities (such as numbers). Other candidates for categories that have been put forth by philosophers are tropes, universals, time, states of affairs, etc.

Up to this point, it has been assumed that categories are the most general features of reality. However, conceptions of the nature of categories have taken many forms, some which (i) deny that categories are features of reality, and others which (ii) deny that categories are in any way “most general.”

Regarding (i), some philosophers argue that categories are not features of reality at all. This question involves the ontological status of categories. In *Metaphysics and its Task*, Jorge J. E. Gracia identifies different ways philosophers have understood the ontological status of categories.⁴ The first view is that categories are transcendental entities. On this view, categories are unchanging entities that are independent of the world but somehow account for entities in the world. The second view is that categories are immanent constituents of things.⁵ On this view, categories are things in the world, although different entities are thought to belong to the same category. The third view holds that categories are similarities among entities. This view avoids the problem faced by the immanentist view of categories in which two independent entities have the same categorial designation in common by holding that two entities in the same category are similar in some basic respect. The fourth view holds that categories are collections or classes. In one way, a category is a whole that is made of those individual entities that belong to the category as its parts. In another way, a category is a set of entities such that the identity of the set is established by the members of it. A fifth view understands a category as a concept through which many entities are understood. A sixth view holds that a

which entities are *bona fide* entities and which can be reducible to *bona fide* entities. This is a standard view of what is at stake in a category theory.

⁴ Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Metaphysics and its Task: The Search for the Categorial Foundation of Knowledge* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 181-217.

⁵ For example, Arthur Child, in his “On the Theory of the Categories.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 7, 2 (1946), pp. 316-335, refers to categories somewhat ambiguously as “predispositions,” p. 323. He does reject the notion that categories are concepts: “categories are not concepts, and concepts are not categories,” p. 329.

category is a type or a universal sign or text. In contrast, a seventh view holds that a category is a token rather than a type. On this view, a category is equated with an individual printed sign or spoken word. An eighth view holds that categories are in themselves ontologically neutral and are not essentially identified as having an ontological status of being mental entities, or extra-mental entities.

Regarding (ii), there are philosophers, such as Gilbert Ryle, who argue that categories cannot in any sense be considered as “most general” (whether it be most general features of reality, most general concepts, or most general linguistic types).⁶ In fact, not only does Ryle hold that categories can only be understood in terms of linguistic analysis but also that they are not the most general kinds of linguistic types. For Ryle, categories are understood as proposition-factors, which are logical places in propositions. Because proposition-factors are dependent on the sense of the terms through which they are expressed, the logical places of propositions can be expressed in terms of components of sentences. Thus, Ryle states that a sentence factor is “any partial expression which can enter into sentences otherwise dissimilar.”⁷ Sentence-factor x in sentence p can be substituted for sentence-factor y in sentence q (where p and q express propositions). For example, in ‘John throws a baseball’ and ‘July is a hot month’, ‘John throws’ can be inserted into the latter sentence for the sentence-factor ‘July is’, or ‘is a hot’, or ‘hot month’, etc. Sentence-factor x expresses a different category expressed by sentence-factor y when x cannot be substituted for y in q without an absurd or non-sensical sentence arising, even in cases where the new sentence is syntactically sound. For example, ‘John throws’ is in a different category from ‘July is’ because whereas ‘July is a hot month’ is not absurd, ‘John throws a hot month’ is absurd. It is important to note that absurdity arising from sentence-factor substitution is sufficient to establish that two sentence-factors are of different categories, but non-

⁶ Gilbert Ryle, “Categories,” in *Collected Papers*, vol. 2 (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971).

⁷ Ryle, “Categories,” p. 173. For a comparison of Ryle’s view with Kant, Aristotle and Suárez, see Jorge J. E. Gracia, “The Language of Categories: From Aristotle to Ryle, Via Suárez and Kant,” *L’Élaboration Du Vocabulaire Philosophique Au Moyen Âge: Actes du Colloque international de Louvain-la-Neuve et Leuven 12-14 septembre 1998*, ed. by Jacqueline Hamesse and Carlos Steel, in *Rencontres de Philosophie Médiévale*, 8, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), pp. 337-55. For earlier discussions and criticism of Ryle’s view, see A. D. Carstairs, “Ryle, Hillman and Harrison on Categories,” *Mind*, 80, 319 (1971), pp. 403-408; and, J. J. C. Smart, “A Note on Categories,” *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 4, 15 (1953), pp. 227-228.

absurdity arising from sentence-factor substitution is insufficient to establish that the same category is expressed. Ryle's view, although holding a view of categories, does not take them to relate to most general features of things for two reasons: first, categories are not features of things, but rather are features of propositions; second, since Ryle does not hold that two sentence-factors can be established as expressing the same category, a category cannot in any way be established as most general.

Beyond the question about the ontological status or nature of categories, or whether they are in a sense, "most general," there are a variety of other questions that pertain to categories.⁸ One important question is intensional: what exactly is a category, what should one mean when they use the term, and what is the definition of a category? Another important question is extensional and asks, how many categories are there? A third question is, what are the causes of categories? How do they arise? A fourth question is, how can one know what a category is? Can they be definitively established or justified? Other questions regarding categories can be raised such as, what discipline studies categories? And, what is the relationship between category theory and the philosophy of mind?

Nevertheless, some contemporary philosophers, such as, Ingvar Johansson, Roderick Chisholm, Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz, and E. J. Lowe, stand in a long tradition that maintains that categories are indeed the most general features of reality, and questions involving categories are central to metaphysical inquiry.⁹ For these philosophers, because categories are the most general features of reality, whether to include or exclude a given category in one's metaphysics, has a radical effect on the accuracy of that view's explication of reality. A category in one list may include entities that ought to belong to a different category in another list. Therefore, the task of providing a comprehensive and accurate list of categories is an important one. This tradition includes Aristotle, who was the first philosopher in Western history to provide an explicit list of categories.¹⁰ In *Categories*, he gives us his list: "of things said without any com-

⁸ These questions have all been identified by Jorge J. E. Gracia and Lloyd Newton in their "Medieval Theories of the Categories," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = < <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/medieval-categories/> >

⁹ See Amie Thomasson, "Categories" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = < <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/categories/> >.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Categories* (1b25-2a4) and *Topics* (103b20-104a2), primarily. Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. J. L. Ackrill (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2 vols.

bination, each signifies either, substance [e.g., man] or quantity [e.g., four-foot] or qualification [e.g., white] or a relative [e.g., double] or where [e.g., in the Lyceum] or when [e.g., yesterday] or being-in-a-position [e.g., is-lying] or having [e.g., has-shoes-on] or doing [cutting] being-affected [e.g., being-cut].”¹¹

Even within the metaphysical school that holds that categories identify basic features of reality, there is still widespread disagreement about what the members of this list are. Each philosopher has his or her own list, and no two lists are the same. Whereas the ability to distinguish common features among objects that are involved with every day experience is easily mastered, the task of determining the list of categories is much more difficult. This task involves discerning the necessary conditions of the greatest number of entities as well as distinguishing among the most diverse basic entities. The difficulty in establishing categories lies in their supreme generality and universality; the scope is too broad. It is one thing to start with a determinate general characteristic, say, “living” – and the conditions that hold for every living thing – and specify the less general characteristics among the diversity of entities that fall under that characteristic. It is quite another thing to start with the general characteristic of “being” or “reality” and then determine the next less general characteristics and their conditions through which being is divided. The task of determining the basic features of being lacks an intuitive heuristic that can be found at lower levels of investigation and taxonomy. Moreover, whereas at more concrete levels of investigation the designation of something as an entity is fairly straightforward, at more abstract levels even the designation of something as an entity becomes controversial. For example, are holes or concepts beings? Or are they merely epiphenomena of other entities? The task of identifying categories becomes a daunting task. In this sense, metaphysics is a unique discipline from other sciences in that it has to determine not only what aspect under which to consider entities, but also to identify on *a priori* grounds whether a given object of investigation qualifies as an entity at all!¹²

¹¹ Aristotle, *Categories* (1b25-ab27), p. 4.

¹² Roderick Chisholm discusses ontological commitment in relation to establishing the existence of the category “Attributes” in his *A Realistic Theory of Categories* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 20: “...under the following circumstances, we would have a good reason for believing that there are attributes. (1) We consider a belief for which we do have a good reason. (2) We find that the belief can be adequately expressed in statements (a) that contain terms purporting to designate attributes and (b) that these terms in that use are subject to existential generaliza-

A great diversity of opinion has arisen regarding the matter. Some argue that there are substances and some that there are no such things; others argue that tropes are the only category of entities, others hold that only particulars and universals exist; and still others claim that only states of affairs exist, whereas others argue that there is no way of determining any categories (even when acknowledged in principle that categories are the general features of reality). Given this diversity of opinion, three questions are pertinent:

- (1) Is there a way of establishing a definite list of categories?
- (2) How is each category established and how are categories distinguished from each other?
- (3) What is the justification for such a procedure?

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is the first modern philosopher to specifically address these three questions in *Critique of Pure Reason*.¹³ He criticizes Aristotle for not providing the principles from which a list of categories can be systematically established and notes that as a result of this, Aristotle's list is deficient. In contrast to the failings of Aristotle, he proposes to establish the list systematically and critically, "from a common principle, namely the faculty for judging."¹⁴ Kant claims that all twelve categories in his list are "deduced" from the most basic types of judgments in Aristotelian logic. For example, the category "unity" follows from universal judgments and the category "of inherence and subsistence (*substantia et accidens*)" is related to categorical judgments. The overall justification for the possibility of establishing an exhaustive list of categories is obtained from Kant's so-called Copernican revolution in which the categorial structure of reality is restricted to human cognition and its conditioning of experience.¹⁵ Because logic and categories have a unified origin in cognition, one can pass isomorphically from an understanding of one to an understanding of another.

Despite Kant's claims of originality, providing a philosophical justification for the specific number of Aristotle's categories is a task dating back at least to Simplicius's (*ca.* 490–*ca.* 560) commentary on Aristotle's

tion. And finally, (3) we find that we cannot express the belief in question without using terms that thus purport to designate attributes."

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Ibid. (A80/B106), p. 213.

¹⁵ Ibid. (Bxvi).

Categories.¹⁶ In the thirteenth century, philosophical questions surrounding the problem of the adequacy of the Aristotelian categories were gathered under the topic of *sufficientia praedicamentorum*. This issue involved two related questions. The first asked whether Aristotle had provided an adequate list of categories and the second inquired into whether a comprehensive philosophical justification could be given that sufficiently establishes each item in the list.¹⁷

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) provides an influential justification of the categories by adopting the method of his mentor, Albertus Magnus (*ca.* 1200-1280), of establishing the list of categories from the modes of predication. For Albertus and Thomas, the modes of predication provide an adequate heuristic to sufficiently identify each of the categories. The general purpose for such a justification is to determine an exhaustive division of being by showing that there are only so many ways in which predicates are said of (or predicated of) subjects.¹⁸ The justification for the sufficiency of Aristotle's categories through the modes of predication has been charac-

¹⁶ *Simplicius: On Aristotle's "Categories 1-4*, trans. Michael Chase (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), esp. pp. 74-91. In fact, although, the problem of identifying the specific elements in Aristotle's list of categories is explicitly addressed by Simplicius, Simplicius is himself only one in a line of NeoPlatonic philosophers (such as Iamblicus and Ammonius) who are addressing the question of the rationality of Aristotle's categories as more than a mere enumeration. In a broader sense, this problem goes further back to Plotinus, who criticized Aristotle's list of categories as unprincipled due to the fact that the latter denies that the categories are divided according to a genus-species designation. Simplicius defends the rationality of Aristotle's list as an inclusive division of being via induction. For a discussion of this important background element, see Javier Cumpa, "Categoriality: Three Disputes Over the Structure of the World" in *Ontological Categories*, edited by Javier Cumpa & E. Tegtmeier, Ontos Verlag, 2010.

¹⁷ Giorgio Pini, "Scotus on Deducing Aristotle's Categories," *La tradition médiévale des Catégories (XIIe-Xve siècles): XIIIe Symposium européen de logique et de sémantique médiévals*, eds. Joël Biard and Irène Rosier-Catach (Louvain: Peters, 2003), p. 24.

¹⁸ In Michael Frede's, "Categories in Aristotle," *Studies in Aristotle*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1981), pp. 1-24, Frede equates the Aristotelian categories with kinds of predications (most generally reduced to the four predicables named in *Topics* 103b1-103b17: genus, definition, *proprium* and accident) rather than kinds of predicates (p. 5). He also says that in Aristotle's works there is not "any sign of a systematical derivation of the categories, e.g., in terms of a set of formal features" (p. 22). Aquinas holds that the categories are the most general kinds of predicates but that they can be derived from the most general kinds of *per se* predications.

terized as a ‘derivation’ or ‘deduction.’¹⁹ Although there is no direct textual counterpart for the terms ‘derivation’ or ‘deduction’ in Aquinas’s texts, this terminology is generally used to describe Aquinas’s approach by John Duns Scotus (1265/66-1308) and others engaged in the debate in the late thirteenth century. Therefore, I also use these terms to characterize the task of identifying the categories.²⁰

For Aquinas, it is reasonable to establish the categories from the modes of predication for two main reasons. First, the standard way of cognitively dividing and differentiating essences from each other (e.g., “human” from “cat”) cannot be used to understand the most general divisions of being. Essences are divided according to the concepts, “genus,” “species,” and “difference.” One grasps the essence “human” when one understands it as the species “human,” which itself is divided into the separate concepts “animal” and “rational” (which stand in a genus-difference relation). But, this type of division cannot be used to understand being because it would misrepresent the notion of “being.” In order for a concept to function as a difference in a definition, it cannot be included in the concept of the genus. Since there is no concept that does not include the concept of

¹⁹ John F. Wippel uses ‘derivation’ both in his “Thomas Aquinas’s Derivation of the Aristotelian Categories (Predicaments),” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 25 (1987), 13 and in *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), pp. 208-228. Giorgio Pini uses the term ‘deduction’ in “Scotus on Deducing Aristotle’s Categories.” This is also the case with E. P. Bos and A. C. van der Helm, “The Division of Being over the Categories According to Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus,” *John Duns Scotus: Renewal of Philosophy: Acts of the Third Symposium Organized by the Dutch Society for Medieval Philosophy Medium Aevum (May 23 and 24, 1996)*, E. P. Bos (ed.), Band 72, ELEMENTA: Schriften zur Philosophie und ihrer Problemgeschichte, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 183-196. My suspicion is that it is a notion borrowed from Immanuel Kant’s famous so-called deduction of the categories in *Critique of Pure Reason*.

²⁰ In “Argumentations and Logic,” John Corcoran states that the ‘derivation’ according to its logical sense indicates “a chain of reasoning that is cogent per se, i. e. that shows, makes clear, makes evident the fact that its final conclusion is a logical consequence of the propositions it uses as premises.” *Argumentation* 3 (1989), 34. This is not the way to understand the justification for the list of categories by reflection on modes of predication. Whereas in logic a given conclusion is derived from a given set of premises, the list of categories are not derived from a set of premises. Rather, what Aquinas has in mind is showing that there is a correspondence between the logical structure of a proposition and what the copula of the proposition signifies. It is important to keep this difference in mind when considering Aquinas’s identification of the categories as a ‘derivation.’