



# UNIVERSITÀ DI PARMA

## ARCHIVIO DELLA RICERCA

University of Parma Research Repository

Elements of Boethian ontology

This is a pre print version of the following article:

*Original*

Elements of Boethian ontology / Pinzani, Roberto. - In: NOCTUA. - ISSN 2284-1180. - V:1(2018), pp. 1-31.

*Availability:*

This version is available at: 11381/2839115 since: 2019-01-30T17:55:49Z

*Publisher:*

E-theca OnLineOpenAcces Edizioni

*Published*

DOI:

*Terms of use:*

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available

*Publisher copyright*

note finali coverpage

(Article begins on next page)



what we would need and have not. What we would like to find is an in-depth metaphysical analysis of the notion of similarity, an analysis for instance that allows to explain the truth of 'every man is an animal' on the basis of the fact that in things in which the similarity of being man is instantiated, the similarity of being animal is also instantiated. Besides, we would like to know something more about the relation between similarities and individual things. However, Boethius does not take a clear position, nor move forward, apart from some observations on the different way in which a likeness can be and be understood.

We expect too much from Boethius? Yes and no. Yes for the following reason: Boethius is engaged in commenting (comments on) logical works of Aristotle in which - as we said - categorical entities are considered mostly in an abstract perspective. When in the commentaries on Porphyry Boethius must give up such abstract approach and take a stand, what he says constitutes a minimal ontology. If we wonder about the limits within which a philosopher logically minded, but interested in metaphysical issues, must keep himself, an example worthy of attention is that of Russell. In all his work, mostly oriented to the construction of a logical-mathematical system, Russell has certainly reflected on many interesting metaphysical issues, but how could one answer the question: what is the metaphysical system of Russell? Perhaps, taking a cue from the writings on logical atomism, he could say that Russell's world consists of individuals that are objects of immediate perception and general properties, providing in this way a faithful description of Russell's ontological stance.

No, we do not ask Boethius too much, because one can be thrifty on the metaphysical plane but up to a point. It is not sufficient to provide an ontology, it is also necessary to reflect and debate on how the entities brought up relate to each other. A realist philosopher, who believes that individuals and universal properties exist, should explain how these entities are combined with each other. If he says, as William of Champeaux (to take the most famous example) does, that several individuals have a relation of inherence with a universal property and this relationship has to be understood as physical presence of the universal in the particulars, then he has to explain other not easy things. From this point of view, we feel to ask Boethius, and even Russell, to be a little less reticent.

### 3.2. Boethius' classifications

In the commentary on *Categoriae*, Boethius observes that Aristotle intended to make an inventory of meanings of expressions rather than things.<sup>3</sup> however, our author does not appear to be always clear about the distinction between things and meanings, distinction which will play a key role in the 12<sup>th</sup> century commentaries. The categories are presented in the following text as an inventory of things in bi-univocal correspondence with names:

Everything is a substance, or a quantity, or a quality, or referred to other, or a doing, or an undergoing, or a when, or a where, or a having, or a place; therefore there will be as many expressions signifying these things, and this is the greatest division, to which nothing else can be added; the smallest division is the one into four classes: substance, accident, universal, particular. Indeed everything is a substance, or an accident, or universal, or particular. Just as nothing can be added to the ten classes mentioned, similarly nothing can be removed from these four.<sup>4</sup>

So, things are particular or universal, substances or accidents. The division between universals and particulars implies that universal things exist alongside particulars. The second distinction leads us to consider a different catalogue from the one of categories: two large containers, the first one apparently coinciding with that of substances; the second one holding the nine little boxes remaining. However, things are a little more complicated than they appear to be, since, in the strict sense, the accident is defined as something that can either be or not be in the entity to which it inheres without this latter ceases to be what it (essentially) is. However,

---

<sup>3</sup> BOETHIUS, *In Cat.*, 162B – 162C: «Singulum aut substantiam significat, aut quantitatem. Quod si de rebus diuisionem faceret, non dixisset "significat"; res enim significatur, non ipsa significat. Illud quoque maximo argumento est Aristotelem non de rebus sed de sermonibus res significantibus speculari, quod ait: Singulum igitur eorum quae dicta sunt, ipsum quidem secundum se in nulla affirmatione dicitur, horum autem ad se inuicem complexione affirmatio fit. Res enim si iungantur, affirmationem nullo modo perficiunt, affirmatio namque in oratione est».

<sup>4</sup> *In Cat.* 169C-D: «Omnis enim res aut substantia est, aut quantitas, aut qualitas, aut ad aliquid, aut facere, aut pati, aut quando, aut ubi, aut habere, aut situs; quocirca tot erunt etiam sermones qui ista significant, et haec est maxima diuisio, cui ultra nihil possit adiungi: paruissima uero est quae fit in quattuor, in substantiam et accidens, et uniuersale et particulare. Omnis enim res aut substantia est, aut accidens, aut uniuersalis, aut particularis. Sicut ergo decem superioribus nihil addi poterat, ita ex his quattuor nihil demi».













Boethius copes by suggesting that God, presiding everything, is also, in a sense, the foundation (thus the substance) on which all things are grounded.<sup>17</sup>

### *Quantities*

Boethius does not supply a suitable classification of quantities; he simply says that quantities have to do with numbers, precisely the rather sibylline formulation is: «*Definita quantitas est quae alicuius termino numeri coercetur*», which I would translate as «quantity in the strict sense of term is what is delimited by a numeric limit». If this sentence means that quantity is whatever is coupled with a number, quantities could be either numbers or numerable (orderable) things. These aspects apart, there are different sorts of things associable with a number: for instance, to limit ourselves to the Aristotelian examples, things in whose expression a number occurs (such as one metre, or one hour), geometrical entities, bodies in a possibly non-geometrical sense, speeches.

The presence of bodies among quantities poses some additional problem of categorial interference. Two possibilities are left open by the text of *Categories*: the first one is that quantitative bodies are a kind of abstract models of substantial (concrete) bodies, more similar to geometric solids than the things which fall under the senses; the second one is that the bodies are what they seem to be, that is world objects satisfying the conditions set for quantities. The former possibility is coherent with a view of categories as non-communicant boxes; the latter – instead – sees the categories as structures differentiated by the conditions established rather than by the element ‘contained’ in them.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Of course, the point is in what sense one speaks of God: we can speak of God in the unitary sense or in the sense of the three persons, at least one of whom had human nature. There exists a difficulty in the terminology; as L. Obertello explains: «per quanto singolare la dizione *una essentia, traes substantiae*, è data da Agostino come versione della classica forma dogmatica *mia ousia, treis upostaseis* (*De Trinitate*, V, VIII, 10); ma egli aggiunge che il nostro modo di esprimerci ha identificato essenza e sostanza, così che non si possa dire “una essenza e tre sostanze”, ma si debba invece dire “una essenza o sostanza e tre persone”» (Cf. OBERTELLO (1979), footnote 27, p. 331).

<sup>18</sup> In this regard H.G. Apostle observes how man is not divisible as such, but as a body (APOSTOLE (1952), p. 5). Book M of *Metaphysics* is usually quoted on this subject. I must confess I have some difficulty with this text. Apparently Aristotle maintains that a thing of the substance kind, for example Socrates, can be seen as a line or a number, quite apart from every irrelevant feature. I think it could be a form of radical indifferentism, but I do not know where it could lead: the medieval theory of non-difference (the specific man is non-different from Socrates) is rather complicated and exposed to all kind of criticism.

If the lower elements in the category of quantity are not the things having a quantity, then the standard metre kept at the Breteuil pavilion in Sèvres is not a quantitative *urelement*, but only a substance. We can think of the quantitative particulars as material entities abstract from their non-quantitative features:<sup>19</sup> the metre intended as quantity is the metre of Sèvres *minus* most of its physical properties, for instance being in a specific place or being made of a specific material. On the other hand, the material metre is in the right place in the category of substance as well as in that of quantity. The reason why it can be found in both categories is that it satisfies the conditions stated for substantial objects as well as those for quantities. This interpretation does not involve any stance on the ontological status of mathematical objects: material bodies share with numbers the feature of being countable or divisible; but this does not mean numbers and bodies are things of the same sort.

### *Relative things*

Relatives are quite different things, also from a categorical point of view: ‘servant’ refers to first substances, ‘double’ to a quantity, ‘position’ to a where. But Aristotle expressly denies that first substances must be included among relative things. In interpreting the text of *Categories* one can opt in favour of two easy ways out:

a) Relatives are a sort of qualities (in the broadest sense of the term), there is not a relative which is a servant, but a particular relative property.

b) Relative things must be considered in pairs.

The former interpretative hypothesis is perhaps closer to the text, as relatives *de facto* are one of the accident categories, that is the kind of things that are in other (i.e. in a substance), but it has the defect of rendering unnatural the way Aristotle speaks – for instance – of master and servant, in contexts where what entertains a certain relationship does not actually seem to be a property.

I see two possibilities again, a little more complicated or perhaps hazardous:

---

According other interpreters *Metaphysics* M2 is explainable on the basis of the Aristotelian abstraction theory (cf. e.g. MULLER (1970), 52, 2, 156-171).

<sup>19</sup> Objects belonging to other categories of accident are conceivable in the same way. After all the abstractive process which allows to conceive a generic man is the same one which allows to conceive a material body. Just as we can say of the generic man that he is mortal but not he is born on a certain day, we can say that a material generic body has extension but not that it has drunk Martini or hemlock.

c) When Aristotle speaks of substances, he is referring to something that must be taken together with certain specific relations, mainly that of predication; when instead he discusses of relatives, the relations in play are those linking things whose nouns are in some way connected. ‘Substance’ should be a term referring to objects *as they belong* to a certain categorial structure: if relations change, the structure changes, in other words, we call substances the elements of the SUBSTANCE, the same things – as elements of RELATIVES – are no longer called substances but relatives. The conclusive section of the chapter on relatives however speaks against this interpretative hypothesis (cf. *infra*).

d) There could be nothing ‘under’ the species of relatives (e.g. /servant/), differently from what happens in the case of /man/. This last proposal can help to explain why the servant is a relative and not a substance, but it perhaps does not suffice in itself, if relative objects like /head/ can be thought as a kind of substance. (Indeed Aristotle says that it is not clear whether things such as the head are *second* substances or relatives: cf. *Cat.* 7, 8a, 20-30).

What position does Boethius endorse on the issue of relative things? In the commentary on *Categories* there is not one interpretation only; it seems to me that three different ones can be isolated which present or suggest analogies with the possible readings listed above. Let us see what it is about:

*First interpretation:* relative things must be considered in pairs. At the beginning of the chapter dealing with relatives Boethius notes that Aristotle always speaks of pairs of relatives:

For this reason Aristotle does not speak of a singular relative thing, but, in the plural, of more relative things, showing in this way how one does not understand a relative thing in its simplicity but in plurality.<sup>20</sup>

Boethius may be glossing here what Aristotle says in the *Categories* about the fact that relatives refer to each other, or suggesting that relatives are not singular objects but pluralities.

*Second interpretation:* elements of different categories belong to the set (base) of RELATIVES. This thesis is formulated in a rather clear way in the following text:

---

<sup>20</sup> *In Cat.*, 217B: «Ideo non dixit Aristoteles: Ad aliquid uero tale dicitur sed, plurali numero, talia dicuntur, inquit, demonstrans relatiuorum intelligentiam non in simplicitate sed in pluralitate consistere».

There is no reason to doubt that Socrates as Socrates is a substance, as father and son he is a relative; so, nothing prevents the same thing from being found under different genera, depending on different attributions. Disposition, virtue and vice behave in the same way. Disposition can be placed in QUALITY, as men from it are said to be qualified; indeed we say somebody is having since they have a certain disposition. Virtue is a quality too; for men are said <virtuous> [...] duple and triple should be considered according to quantity.<sup>21</sup>

Boethius is commenting a passage on contrariety, but unusually he goes well beyond the text. It is true that Aristotle speaks of virtue and science as a species of relatives, but he never says one can consider first substances as relatives; instead he says – as we anticipated – the exact opposite. The passage is the following:

One wonders whether some substance can be said relative, as the case seems, perhaps for some second substance. As to first substances of course it is true that these and their parts cannot be said relative; indeed a certain man is not said that certain man of something, nor a certain ox is said that certain ox of something. The same holds for the parts, a certain hand is not said a certain hand of somebody, but someone's hand; and a certain head not a head of somebody, but someone's head. Something of this kind occurs for second substances, or at least for most of them. For example /man/ is not said /man/ of something, nor /ox/ /ox/ of something, nor /wood/ /wood/ of something, but property of something. Thus it is clear that this sort of things is not relative; for some second substances however one may wonder if that is the case: as /head/ is said /head/ of somebody and /hand/ /hand/ of somebody, and so on. For this reason these substances seem relative.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> *In Cat.*, 220D – 221A: «nihil prohibet Socrates namque in eo quod est Socrates substantia est, in eo quod pater uel filius ad aliquid; ita ad aliud atque ad aliud ducta praedicatione eandem rem sub diuerso genere nihil poni prohibet. Habitus quoque et uirtus et uitium eodem modo est. Potest enim in qualitate poni habitus quod ex eo quales homines nuncupentur, habentes enim dicimus aliquos rei habitus retinentes. Virtus quoque qualitas est idcirco quod ex eo [boni] homines dicuntur [...] Duplum et triplum secundum quantitatem (consideramus)».

<sup>22</sup> *In Cat.*, 233D – 234A: «Habet autem dubitationem an ulla substantia ad aliquid dicatur, quemadmodum videtur, an hoc quidem contingit secundum quasdam secundarum substantiarum. Nam in primis quidem substantiis verum est; nam neque totae neque partes ad aliquid dicuntur; nam aliquis homo non dicitur alicuius aliquis homo, neque aliquis bos alicuius aliquis bos. Similiter autem et partes; quaedam enim manus non dicitur alicuius quaedam manus sed alicuius manus, et quoddam caput non dicitur alicuius quoddam caput sed alicuius caput. Similiter autem et in secundis substantiis, atque hoc quidem in pluribus; ut homo non dicitur alicuius homo, nec bos alicuius bos, nec lignum alicuius lignum sed alicuius possessio dicitur. Atque in huiusmodi quidem manifestum est quoniam non est ad

I have translated Latin expressions such as ‘(quidam)(quaedam)(quoddam) *a<sub>CN</sub>*’ with ‘a certain...’. Due to the well known ambiguity of the *Categories* text, the descriptive expression can be understood as naming things or, metalinguistically, expressions. If we forget our convention /.../, what Aristotle says can be clarified by the following example: (the) man is not said man of something, as the single man, for instance Socrates, is not said relative to something; nor is the single head - let us call it ‘head sample n.125’ – said head sample 125 relative to something; however one could say – according to the text just quoted – that the head, generically understood, is a head of somebody.

*Third interpretation:* this position excludes categorial overlapping, for instance between substances and relatives. Boethius seems to perceive that what is said in the last text quoted contrasts with its second interpretation (‘*contra ea quae superius disputata sunt*’), but he does not try to explain how the previous thesis on the identification of substances and relative things matches Aristotle’s explicit refusal to consider the substances as relatives. Rather in the commentary Boethius keeps himself as close as possible to the text of *Categories*:

We consider relative not simply what is said (relative to something), but what is (relative to something). Relatives are those things we consider in a kind of comparison and habit with others; for instance the quaternary number is said to be what it is, that is four, and something else, that is double, if we compare it with the binary number.<sup>23</sup>

The double for Aristotle is an authentic relative, which meets the definition of relative according to which things whose being (and/or name) depends on something other are relatives. Boethius gives the example of the quaternary number, which is said to be a relative only in the less demanding sense of being put in relation with a binary number. The real question is that of the reference of a term like ‘double’. In the previous part of the commentary Boethius seemed to suggest that a number like four could be the terminal element of the series to which the

---

aliquid; in aliquibus vero secundis substantiis habet aliquam dubitationem; ut caput alicuius caput dicitur et manus alicuius manus dicitur et singula huiusmodi; quare haec esse fortasse ad aliquid videbuntur».

<sup>23</sup> *In Cat.*, 235D: «non enim in eo quod est dici, ad aliquid consideramus sed in eo quod est esse; ea namque sunt relatiua, quae in quadam comparatione et relationis habitudine consideramus, ut quaternarius numerus, et hoc ipsum quod est esse dicitur, id est quattuor, et aliud quoddam, id est duplum, ut si ad binarium conferatur».

relative /double/ belongs; he does not go beyond the text here, and limits himself to providing some clarifications (in addition to a faithful translation).

The doubt expressed by Aristotle in *Cat.* 7, 8a, 20-30 (cf. *supra*) as to do with some species of the substance; for a possibly revised definition of relative, any substance should be definitely excluded from the category of relatives. Nothing is said about other species (such as /number/), but there is reason to believe they should be considered in the same way. Relative objects in a strict sense, i.e. those whose nature consists in being in a relationship with something other, are similar to the double. The commentary on *Categoriae* does not contribute to the clarification of the problematic elements of the Aristotelian text; it seems to me that Boethius tries to say something new on relatives, and at the same time is afraid of going beyond what the Authority establishes expressly.

### *Qualities*

Aristotle characterizes qualities as something according to which things are said to be qualified (*quales*); Boethius introduces the issue in the following way:

Since we wanted know what quality is, he supplies these pieces of information: quality is what according to which things are said qualified. Actually he would be not less obscure and informative saying so rather than speaking of the quality itself. Indeed if those things which have a quality are qualified, in order to know if they are qualified, one must first be acquainted with quality. More generally it does not matter that he says quality is what according to which things are said qualified, rather than quality is quality.<sup>24</sup>

According to Boethius the issue raised here can be easily circumvented: white things are better known than whiteness, thus it is allowed to describe (not define) whiteness by utilizing the notion of white thing. What is more interesting for us is that a quality is said such because several bodies have it. Even if the discussion is on two different levels, the linguistic one, in which adjectives and abstract terms are distinct, and the ontological one, it is rather evident that the latter is the main one.

---

<sup>24</sup> In *Cat.*, 239D – 240A: «Volentibus enim nobis quid sit qualitas scire, illa respondet qualitas est secundum quam quales quidam dicuntur. Nihil enim minus erit obscurius atque ignorabilius quod ait: secundum quam quales dicuntur, quam si de ipsa sola qualitate dixisset. Nam si illi sunt quales, qui qualitatem habent, ut sciantur quales, prius qualitas cognoscenda est. Amplius quoque nihil differt dixisse eam qualitatem secundum quam quales quidem dicuntur, tanquam si diceret eam esse qualitatem quae qualitas sit».

Another difficulty emerges with the geometrical qualities such as figures and shapes. Here is the passage:

The fourth genus of quality is the form and figure of something; [...] the figure for instance is the triangle or square, the form of the figure is a certain quality [...] In a similar way we also say that men are shaped (form-having = *formosos*). The figure like being more beautiful or ordinary or something else, is called quality or form. Nobody doubts these are qualities. Like a thing is said to be figure-having (= *figuratus*) due to a figure, it is said form-having due to the form. More generally, the triangle too is said to be such due to the triangularity and the square due to the squareness. [...] The triangle and the surfaces are set among the continuous quantities, the surface itself is a quantity, the surface arrangement is a quality.<sup>25</sup>

So, the triangle and the square have a certain form, or, as Boethius says, their figure is moulded in a certain way. In this case the explanation is not entirely intuitive; if we remember the canonical example of a qualified thing (what is said white due to its whiteness) we should say that the triangle is such since it has the triangularity form. This way of putting things opens a passage to a world inhabited by an infinity of strange creatures: together with the familiar humanity and whiteness, for many objects belonging to the category of substance, quantity and relation there would be a split between the thing indicated by the substantive and the one possibly indicated by the abstract noun, for example, in the case of relatives: /double-/duplicity/, /great-/greatness/, /servant-/servitude/. Abstract objects such as geometrical figures would not be counted twice, as, for instance, elements of QUANTITY and QUALITY, but split into categorially different entities. Of course Boethius' text can be interpreted differently: one can expect that a lover of desolate landscapes tries to hide these texts or force their reading, conversely a lover of ontological jungles, or a sceptical on ontological commitments deriving from the use of language, can try – perhaps with more probabilities of success - to maintain a literal interpretation.

---

<sup>25</sup> *In Cat.*, 250D – 251A: «QUARTUM VERO GENUS QUALITATIS EST FORMA ET CIRCA ALIQUID CONSTANS FIGURA; [...] Est autem figura, ut triangulum uel quadratum, forma autem ipsius figurae quaedam qualitas est, [...] unde etiam formosos homines dicimus. Figura enim quaedam uel pulchrior, uel mediocris, uel alio quodammodo constituta, qualitas formaque nominatur. Has autem esse qualitates nullus dubitat. Siquidem et a figura dicitur figuratus, et a forma formosus. Amplius quoque triangulum etiam a triangulatione denominatum est, et quadratum a quadratura. [...] in continuae quantitatis speciebus et triangulum et superficies enumerata est, ipsa quidem superficies quantitas est, ipsius uero superficies compositio qualitas».



Having shown the ‘standard’ categorial entities, we will now consider the trans (extra)-categorial notions of form, matter, and essence, that seem to acquire greater importance as one approaches the field of mathematics and theology.

### *Forms*

The distinction between forms and qualities is particularly interesting and, in my opinion, constitutes one point of tension of the Aristotelian-Boethian ordering. The use of the term ‘form’ in the context of the commentary on *Categories* is limited and apparently incidental; speaking of quantitative forms Boethius limits himself to saying, rather cryptically, that only ordinary qualities are considered in the *Categories*; true science and ‘higher philosophy’ deal with other kinds of qualities. Apart from the passage just commented concerning geometrical figures, in the commentary on *Categories* the term ‘form’ is contrasted with ‘matter’ when Boethius discusses the composition of first substances. The same use is found in the first commentary on *Isagoge*:

A rather difficult passage follows, actually, more because of Victorinus’ translation than for what Porphyry says. (Porphyry) says that any corporeal thing consists of matter and form. In fact if we consider a statue, it appears to be made up of bronze and the figure the maker impressed in it; the matter of which it is made is bronze, the figure, i.e. the form, is that from which it is moulded. If I moulded a man from bronze, the form would be that of man, the matter bronze. The same applies to genus. In fact genus is considered as matter, difference as form. As everything consists in matter and form, every species is composed of genus and difference. In fact, the genus of man is like the bronze of the statue, the difference of man is like the form through which the bronze is moulded.<sup>26</sup>

The Aristotelian example of the statue becomes a common place of medieval literature. A collateral use of the term ‘form’ can be found towards the end of the

---

<sup>26</sup> BOETHIUS, *In Isagogen*, I, 94, 11-24 : «Sequitur locus perdifficilis sed transferentis obscuritate Victorini magis quam Porphyrii proponentis, qui huiusmodi est. Dicit omnem rem quaecumque est corporea, ex materia et forma constare. Namque si statuam dicas, constat statua ex aere uerbi gratia et figura illa quam ei suus fctor imposuit, et est materia ex quo facta est aeris, figura uero, id est forma, qua aes ipsum formatum est. Nam si hominem formabis ex aere, erit hominis forma, aes uero materia. Eodem modo etiam genus. Namque genus in modo materiae accipitur, differentia uero in modo formae. Etenim quemadmodum quaecumque illa res ex materia et forma consistit, sic etiam omnis species ex genere et differentia. Namque genus ita est hominis, ut est statuae aes, differentia uero sic est hominis, ut est forma illa ex qua aes effectum est».

passage quoted, where Boethius speaks of composition (of the meaning) of the definition elements: the genus is considered as the matter to which the differential forms are joined.

The term ‘form’ is not frequent in the second commentary too, and it seems to play different roles. I have made the following inventory:

a. sometimes ‘form’ seems to have the meaning of ‘kind’.<sup>27</sup> This suggests something more, i.e. a doctrinal conscious choice, but some caution should be exercised.

b. Form as property: an example is an important passage where Boethius speaks of the presence of particular properties in particular things: «this white in this snow [...] cannot be predicated of any other white which is in this snow, as it is reduced to the singularity and forced to an individual form from the participation to an individual thing».<sup>28</sup>

c. An interesting, but I would say, unique use in the logical commentaries is that of ‘incorporeal nature’, if I interpret correctly the passage: «(the soul) separates, according to its ordinary capabilities, the incorporeal nature from the bodies, and lonely and pure – as it is form in itself – considers it».<sup>29</sup>

d. The form is also a composition principle (e.g. rationality for man) as opposed to the material principle (the stones for the house), and to the causal one (the father for the son).<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> *In Isag.*, II, 160, 23 – 161, 4: «Duae quippe incorporeorum formae sunt (I would translate: there are two kinds or species of incorporeal things) ut alia praeter corpora esse possint et separata a corporibus in sua incorporalitate perdurent (ut deus, mens, anima); alia uero cum sint incorporea, tamen praeter corpora esse non possint (ut linea uel superficies uel numerus uel singulae qualitates).» It seems to me the same generic use is found in the text: «Animal igitur de pluribus praedicatur, homo uero, equus atque bos talia sunt, ut a se discrepent, nec qualibet mediocri re sed tota specie, id est tota forma suae substantiae» (*Ibid.*, 181, 21-24).

<sup>28</sup> *In Isag.*, II, 184, 7-11: «Sed hoc album quod in hac niue [...] non potest de quolibet alio albo praedicari quod in hac niue est, quia ad singularitatem deductum est atque ad indiuiduam formam constrictum est indiuidui participatione».

<sup>29</sup> *In Isag.*, II, 165, 13-14: «Aufert, ut solet, a corporibus incorporeorum naturam et solam puramque ut in se ipsa forma est contuetur». The notion of nature is clarified in the *Theological Treatises*, in particular in the *Contra Eutichen* Boethius distinguishes three meanings of the term: in one sense ‘nature’ is said of corporeal things, in another of substances (corporeal and incorporeal), in the last of all things that are, as they can be understood by the intellect.

<sup>30</sup> Also in the second comment Boethius compares the composition of the matter and form in the statue with the composition of the genus and difference in the definition, and calls the latter ‘form and quasi-quality’: «Ita etiam in specie, quod est homo, materia

e. A use of ‘form’, perhaps connected with (b), is introduced in commenting a text by Porphyry: «species is also said of the aspect of a thing, in the sense in which it is said: “an aspect worthy of regality”».

f. Boethius uses the term ‘form’ to speak of a second meaning of ‘species’ not considered by Porphyry: «(besides the aspect-form of a thing) there is the other species of substantial form which is called humanity, which is not subordinated to the animal, but shows the substance as the quality does».<sup>31</sup> The passage is not easy to understand. Prima facie one would say that Boethius introduces here a kind of things which are difficult to arrange in the Aristotelian classification: ‘humanity’ is an abstract term derived from a common noun of substance. The same noun of substance, ‘man’, is utilized to signify the species, whatever it may be. Boethius is saying that the form humanity is not the species, more precisely is not what is subordinated to genus: «it is different from that kind of form which determines the division of the genus into parts». It is not completely clear to me if ‘species of substantial form’ (with an exegetic use of the genitive) equals to ‘substantial form’; nor the exact meaning of the statement that the form-species serves to determine the division of the genus into parts. The species in some sense is a ‘part’ of the genus, but is not what determines the division of the genus. Later in the same text things become more complicated: the same humanity is considered as both a species determining the substantial quality, and that which ‘deduces itself in the participation of the animal and... forms the species of the genus’.

I have the impression that the use of the term ‘form’ – as well as that of other technical terms by Boethius – is not completely coherent. In commenting Porphyry’s text, our author may have been tempted by the idea of considering the species as forms, the substantial qualities expressed by abstract nominal forms. This route can lead to a certain (realist) solution of the problem of universals.

### *Theological Treatises*

In Chapter II of *De Trinitate*, Boethius speaks of forms considered by the different types of speculative philosophy: the science of nature deals with forms immersed in matter and in movement, mathematics deals with motionless forms

---

quidem eius genus est, quod est animal, cui superueniens qualitas rationalis animal rationale, id est speciem fecit. Igitur speciei materia quaedam est genus, forma uero et quasi qualitas differentia (*In Isag.*, II, 268, 18-22)».

<sup>31</sup> *In Isag.*, II, 200, 7-16: «Alia est enim species substantialis formae quae humanitas nuncupatur, eaque non est quasi supposita animali, sed tamquam ipsa qualitas substantiam monstrans [...] substantialem determinat qualitatem».

making abstraction from the matter in which they are located, theology considers forms immobile and separated from matter. The text which we refer to ends as follows: «in naturalibus igitur rationabiliter, in mathematicis disciplinabiliter, in divinis intellectualiter versari oportebit neque diduci ad imaginationes, sed potius ipsam inspicere formam quae vere forma neque imago est».<sup>32</sup> Modern interpreters, including Rand and Obertello, link the ‘neque’ to the last sentence, which speaks about theological forms; it follows that all forms, apart from those of theology, are to be considered as images or pseudo-forms. The interpretation is confirmed by Boethius’ remarks on the fact that forms immersed in matter are not worthy of being called forms, but it does not seem to be so certain (see *infra* my comments on the text just quoted).

The famous formula ‘omne esse ex forma est’ follows, which I would translate ‘everything that is depends on form’. Boethius explains it as follows: indeed one says a statue is a reproduction of an animal not because of the bronze, which constitutes its matter, but the form which was impressed in the bronze; the bronze itself is not called ‘bronze’ for its matter, but for its configuration (*figura*).<sup>33</sup> One can obtain some clues to what forms are supposed to be from the following text:

.. The other forms (different from the divine form or from those considered by theology) are subject to accidents, like humanity, which does not accept accidents as such, but as matter is subject to it; and indeed, while the matter subject to humanity receives accidents, it seems humanity itself receives them. Actually form without matter cannot be a subject, nor inhere in matter, otherwise, it would not be a form but an image. These forms which are in the matter and make (*efficiunt*) the body, come from those which are without matter. We shall be committing an abuse in calling forms the others in the bodies, as long as they are images.<sup>34</sup>

The final clause: ‘dum imagines sint’ matches the one just quoted (‘sed potius ipsam inspicere formam quae vere forma neque imago est’). My impression is that

---

<sup>32</sup> BOETHIUS, *De Trinitate*, 8, 16-20.

<sup>33</sup> Op. cit., 10, 20-26: «Statua enim non secundum aes quod est materia, sed secundum formam qua in eo insignita est effigies animalis dicitur, ipsumque aes non secundum terram quod est eius materiam, sed dicitur secundum aeris figuram».

<sup>34</sup> Op. cit., 10, 44-12, 54: «..ceterae formae subiectae accidentibus sunt ut humanitas, non ita accidentia suscipit eo quod ipsa est, sed eo quod materia ei subiecta est; dum enim materia subiecta humanitati suscipit quodlibet accidens, ipsa hoc suscipere videtur humanitas. Forma vero quae est sine materia non poterit esse subiectum nec vero inesse materiae, neque enim esset forma sed imago. Ex his enim formis quae praeter materiam sunt, istae formae venerunt quae sunt in materia et corpus efficiunt. Nam ceteras quae in corporibus sunt abutimur formas vocantes, dum imagines sint».

Boethius is saying that the materiated forms can be like the theological ones, without the matter in which they are currently immersed. If this indeed is the case, one would wonder if (the image of) humanity *in re* is something different from the archetypal form of humanity. It is an important point which can be traced in subsequent philosophical literature, for instance in Scotus Eriugena's *De Divisione Naturae*.

All forms, theological, mathematical and natural, have a predicative nature, thus they do not behave like subjects of predication. 'Matter' is said in different senses: either as a material of construction (bronze), or as specific/general subject of predication (/animal/ is like the matter from which /man/ is built). If common nouns of substance refer to a substantial matter, the derived abstracts should refer to something different, except for homonymy<sup>35</sup>. On the ontological level we should find an object for 'humanity' different from that for 'man'. One can economize by interpreting forms like humanity as what properly corresponds to genera and species; in fact, Boethius suggested such possibility in the commentaries on Porphyry (e.g., *In Isag.* II, 200, cit.). In the present context the forms are not a subject of predication, if not in a secondary or relative sense, as building material.

In the *Quomodo substantiae*<sup>36</sup> we find the famous distinction between *esse* and *id quod est*: Boethius establishes the following axioms which should set the relationships between these ontological categories:

1. being and what is are different; being itself is not yet, but what is, having received the form of being, is and subsists.
2. What is can participate in something, but being cannot. There is participation when something is already, but something is when it participates in being.
3. what is can have something else beyond what it is; the very being cannot have anything beyond itself.

The text, by admission of the author, is rather obscure and lends itself to various interpretations. The being Boethius speaks about seems to have a predicative nature, and look like the meaning of a predicate such as 'is an x' (where x stands for

---

<sup>35</sup> 'Homo' in Latin could be understood in *suppositio simplex* as denoting the same as 'humanitas' does.

<sup>36</sup> BOETHIUS, *Quomodo substantiae in eo quod sint bonae sint cum non sint substantialia bona*, in *Boethius*, 38 e ss.

a common noun); in this sense one understands how being cannot be a subject of predication.<sup>37</sup>

The term linked with ‘being’, ‘what is’, symmetrically appears as a subject of predication, that is as that which a term playing the role of subject in some way refers to. If we are here in the presence of a new categorization depends on how we interpret the text: for instance ‘what is’ could stand for the meaning of a grammatical subject, that is for the concrete individuals, natural kinds, abstracts, non-existent things, properties. A narrow interpretation is of course possible, according to which ‘being’ refers to Aristotle’s traditional differential qualities, and ‘what is’ to substances. The road Boethius opens leads in different directions, some of which will be explored by medieval commentators. For our purposes it is sufficient to indicate the lexical/ontological inventory which later philosophers will exploit.

The concept of essence plays a secondary role in the logical writings. In the commentary on *Categories* the term is used seldom, for instance in speaking of the fact that relative things, being given at the same time, in a certain sense, have a unique essence. In the commentaries on Porphyry I have not found much more than the following occurrences:

One wonders if genera and species are truly subsistent things, and if in some way the essences and constant things are grasped by the intellect.<sup>38</sup>

Differences, which divide the genus and give form to the species, since they complete the essence of the species, do not admit an increase or decrease.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> One must read the axiom together with the following one about the distinction between to be something and to be *in eo quod est*. The being of the second axiom is interpreted by Gilbert Porretanus as being *in eo quod*. On the other hand the same author considers different possible interpretations, perhaps all the ones possible; I would be inclined to consider the being of the second axiom as (the meaning of) *any* predicate. It seems instead clearer that Boethius’ being cannot be identified *tout court* with God (Obertello, op. cit., ‘Introduzione’ 18-19).

<sup>38</sup> *In Isag.*, I, 25, 11-13: «Ita ergo nunc de generibus, speciebus et ceteris quaerunt, utrum haec vere subsistentia et quodammodo essentia constantiaque intellegatur».

<sup>39</sup> *In Isag.*, II, 253, 2-4: «Differentiae quoque quae dividunt genus et informant speciem, quoniam speciei essentiam complent, nec intentionem recipiunt nec remissionem».

In the first text Boethius speaks of *essentia* (= existent things?) object of intellectual abstraction. The second text focuses on what corresponds in reality to the definition. The species as essence would be constituted by the genus and difference. The rare and uncertain use of ‘essence’ leads to think that Boethius does not attribute this notion a precise role in the discussion of the Porphyrian problem.

In the *Contra Eutychen* Boethius fills in a correspondence table between Greek and Latin expressions:

Greece... has expressions corresponding to our ‘essence’, ‘subsistence’, ‘substance’, ‘person’: ‘*ousia*’ corresponds to ‘essence’, ‘*ousiosis*’ to ‘subsistence’, ‘*ypostasin*’ to ‘substance’, ‘*prosopon*’ to ‘person’ [...] thus, man has an essence, i.e. an *ousia*, a subsistence, i.e. an *ousiosis*, a substance, *upostasis*, and a person, a *prosopon*. He has an *ousia* or essence because he is, an *ousiosis* or subsistence since he is not in any subject, an *upostasis* and substance as submitted to other things which are not subsistence, that is *ousioseis*. He is also a *prosopon* and a person because he is a rational individual.<sup>40</sup>

Boethius does not limit himself to translating technical terms from philosophical Greek, but – what is more interesting for us – provides some examples of things classifiable under these concepts. ‘Having an essence’ can be said with different meanings; what Boethius says leads to distinguish between things that are: essences and substances. One may doubt whether the same things is called in two different ways, according to certain features, i.e. the fact of existing or presenting themselves as subjects of predication.

In the *De Institutione Arithmetica* Boethius (Nicomachus) lists things ‘that are’:

We call beings those things that do not increase nor decrease, nor change their aspect, but maintain themselves grounded on their liveliness by support of their proper nature. These things are qualities, quantities, forms, magnitudes, smallness, equalities, habits, activities, dispositions, places, times, and all what is found in bodies. Such things are incorporeal by nature and, due to the immutable reasons of substance, they become mutable in adhering to bodies, [...]science supplies the

---

<sup>40</sup> BOETHIUS, *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium*, 88, 58 – 90, 87: «...Grecia... essentiam, subsistentiam, substantiam, personam, totidem nominibus reddit, essentiam quidem *ousian*, subsistentiam vero *ousiosin*, substantiam *upostasin*, personam *prosopon* appellans [...] Est igitur et hominis quidem essentia, id est *ousia*, et subsistentia, id est *ousiosis*, et *upostasis*, id est substantia, et *prosopon*, id est persona; *ousia* quidem atque essentia quoniam est, *ousiosis* vero atque subsistentia quoniam in nullo subiecto est, *upostasis* vero atque substantia, quoniam subest ceteris quae subsistentiae non sunt, id est *ousioseis*. Est *prosopon* atque persona, quoniam est rationabile individuum».

knowledge of these things that are, in particular any one of those called ‘essences’. There are two kinds of essences, the continuous ones - whose parts are connected and not delimited, such as /tree/, /stone/ and all bodies of the world, which are properly named magnitudes - and the ones disjointed and delimited in their parts, [...] such as /flock/, /people/, /crowd/, /heap/ and anything whose parts are delimited and discrete. The latter are called multitudes.<sup>41</sup>

The plane of Aristotelian ontology is in some way overturned: the main actors here are not substances, but forms, and some of the things that are traditionally named ‘accidents’. Substances are relegated to the background, by some law of nature they can only receive formal determinations which downgrade them to changeable accidents. Nicomachus’ list poses a similar problem to that of Aristotelian bodies. Apparently substances, removed from the list of beings, re-enter, so to speak, through the window, as essences; indeed continuous essences with connected parts (trees, stones and ‘all the bodies of the world’) seem to be very close to Aristotelian second substances.

Continuous essences, as abstract particulars, can constitute the terminal elements of a separate category or intermediate species in the category of substance, between first substances and their proximal species. When we make an abstraction from individuals to obtain abstract quantitative particulars, a deviation occurs from the line of ordinary abstraction, which allows us, for example, to obtain /man/ from Socrates *preserving* some of his individual features, such as being concrete. A constant ambiguity on the abstract nature of the universals is present in all the literature on Porphyry; the abstraction is driven from what we intend to obtain, in the case of quantities, a geometrical body, in the case of substances, something like a natural kind.

---

<sup>41</sup> BOETHIUS, *De Institutione Arithmetica*, 8, 1-23: «Esse illa dicimus quae nec intentione crescunt nec retractione minuuntur, nec variationibus permutantur, sed in propria semper vi suae se naturae subsidiis nixa custodiant. Haec autem sunt qualitates, quantitates, formae, magnitudines, parvitates, aequalitates, habitudines, actus, dispositiones, loca, tempora et quicquid adunatum quodammodo corporibus invenitur, quae ipsa quidem natura incorporea sunt et immutabili substantiae ratione vigentia, participatione vero corporis permutantur [...] Horum igitur, id est quae sunt, proprie quaeque suo nomine essentiae nominantur, scientiam sapientia profitetur. Essentiae autem geminae partes sunt, una continua et suis partibus iuncta nec ullis finibus distributa, ut est arbor, lapis et omnia mundi huius corpora, quae proprie magnitudines appellantur, alia vero disiuncta a se et determinata partibus [...] ut grex, populus, chorus acervus et quicquid quorum partes propriis extremitatibus terminantur et ab alterius fine discretas sunt. His proprium nomen est multitudo».



## REFERENCES

- APOSTOLE (1952) = APOSTOLE HIPPOCRATES G., *Aristotle's philosophy of mathematics*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1952.
- BOETHIUS, *In Cat.* = *In Categorias Aristotelis*, in PL 64
- BOETHIUS, *Contra Eutychen*, in Rand (1973)
- BOETHIUS, *De Trinitate*, in Rand (1973)
- BOETHIUS, *Quomodo substantiae in eo quod sint bonae sint cum non sint substantialia bona*, in Rand (1973)
- BOETHIUS, *In Isagogen* = *In Isagogen Porphyrii Commenta*, ed. S. Brandt, Vienna-Lipsia, Tempsky – Freytag, 1906
- BOETHIUS, *De Institutione Arithmetica* = *De Institutione Arithmetica*, in *Anicii Manlii Torquati Severini Boetii, De Institutione Arithmetica libri duo, De Institutione Musica Libri cinque*, ed. G. Friedlein, Lipsia, Teubner, 1867. Versione elettronica al seguente indirizzo web: <http://digital.library.cornell.edu/m/math/index.php>
- MULLER (1970) = MULLER JOZEF, «Aristotle on Geometrical Objects», *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 52, 2, (1970), 156-171
- OBERTELLO (1979) = OBERTELLO LUCA (ed.), Boethius, *La consolazione della filosofia. Gli opuscoli teologici*, Milano, Rusconi, 1979.
- PINZANI 2007 = PINZANI ROBERTO, «I commenti di Boezio a Isagoge 1, 9-13», *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 35, XIX, (2007), 53-87
- RAND (1973) = *Boethius. Tractates, De Consolatione Philosophiae*, edd. H.F. Stewart - E.K. Rand – S.J. Tester, Cambridge – London, Harvard University Press – William Heinemann LTD, 1973,