CHAPTER TEN

PETRUS THOMAE’S DE DISTINCTIONE PREDICAMENTORUM
(WITH A WORKING EDITION) ¹

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1. Introduction

Plato and Platonism have continually attracted L.M. de Rijk’s attention. He is enchanted, I believe, by the constructive character of their philosophies, and by the part they attributed to the intellect. De Rijk’s interest is especially in semantics, in the way the ancient and medieval philosophers themselves related thought and speech to reality. ² For Plato this meant the problem of participation, in which logic and ontology are interwoven. Plato presented a problem to his pupils, of whom Aristotle was the most important. Aristotle solved it in his theory of the categories. His Categories are primarily a part of his logical treatises, the Organon, but he also discussed the categories, from a different point of view, in the Physics and the Metaphysics.

In this contribution I shall discuss the way the Scotist Petrus Thomae distinguished the categories from each other and try to place him in a historical perspective. This Peter was born around 1280 and died shortly after 1340. He was a follower of John Duns Scotus and perhaps a direct pupil. I add to this paper a working edition of his De distinctione predicamentorum. On the basis of the edition I hope to clarify some points in the pioneering work by G.G. Bridges, Identity and Distinction in Petrus Thomae O.F.M. ³ Hoeres’s short article on Peter’s ontology does not aim at giving a fresh study of the texts; he explicitly follows Bridges’s investigations and tries to appreciate their systematic import for other Scotist doctrines. ⁴

I shall discuss the problem of the relation between thought (language) and reality and how Peter interpreted it. Peter may interest us, I believe, because he systematises and clarifies Scotus’s somewhat scattered remarks on distinctions and the categories, and has some original views. ⁵ Peter dis-

¹ I would like to thank A.P. Runia (Groningen) for his corrections of my English.
² De Rijk (1978) 92.
³ 1959.
⁵ On the history of distinction in medieval philosophy, see Grajewski (1944).
discusses Aristotle’s theory of the categories from a metaphysical point of view. He can be labelled a Platonist, if one takes this label in a broad sense.  

De Rijk once made a provisional transcription of the text of manuscript Cambridge, University 1231, used in this paper, and suggested the period in which it was written. I am grateful for his permission to use this transcription.

2. Aristotle’s Categories. The problem of the nature of the Categories

First something on Aristotle’s Categories. There are many problems about this work. For our purposes, the problem of the status of the categories is relevant. Are the members of the categories things which one should understand ontologically? Or are they concepts, or linguistic elements? Are they a combination of both, i.e. things as far as known, or concepts as referring to things?

In 1984 Klaus Oehler published a translation of and commentary on Aristotle’s Categories. Oehler emphasises that in Aristotle’s Categories the terms for subject (ὑποκείμενον) and predicate (κατηγορούμενον) have no exclusive reference to linguistic items, but relate at the same time and primarily to extra-linguistic realities, which are said by words or expressed by sentences. In a recent work, L.M. de Rijk has defined the categories as names (designations) and as potential elements for statement making. De Rijk’s approach is logico-semantic, as he himself says, rather than ontological. His interpretation is different from that of Oehler. Though Oehler has included de Rijk’s studies in his bibliography, he does not discuss them in his introduction.

Aristotle’s Categories forms an important part of his logic and of the subsequent tradition. To gain a better understanding we should be aware, I think, that medievals started from a parallelism between thought and reality. There is no gap between the two that needs to be bridged. Thought, writing and speech approach reality from different points of view. Things are apprehended and expressed by terms. There is a subjective element, but due to the parallelism between thought and reality the thing conceived is also something in reality. In the Categories, the two elements of this relation can be approached from two sides, namely from the side of the thing, and from the side of thought. In Aristotle’s Metaphysics another set of terms forms the context of discussion. The point of view here is reality, without language playing a determinate part in the context.

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6 Blum (1989); Beierwaltes (1965) vii-xiv.