ALBERTUS MAGNUS ON THE SUBJECT
OF ARISTOTLE’S CATEGORIES

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If the natural and metaphysical works written by Albertus Magnus (c. 1200–1280) have received attention from a relatively important number of researchers, it is nevertheless the case that his logical writings have been largely ignored by twentieth-century scholars. One can only hope that the publication of the critical edition of his logical commentaries, by the Albertus-Magnus-Institut, will help change this situation. It seems to me that many reasons militate in favour of a closer and deeper study of his commentaries-paraphrases on Aristotle’s Organon and on the treatises that tradition has added to it. It is too early to say much about the precise degree of originality of his logical writings, but we know that Albert the Great was among the very first medievals to produce a complete or nearly complete logical corpus, similar to

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1 Thank you to David Zettel, Cynthia Tremblay, and Lloyd Newton, for their kind and numerous suggestions concerning my use of the English language throughout this paper. It goes without saying that all remaining awkward wordings are my responsibility.

2 The reasons for this fact are numerous and cannot be explained here. William A. Wallace enumerates some of them on pp. 11 and 15 of his “Albert the Great’s Inventive Logic: His Exposition on the Topics of Aristotle,” American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly 70 (1996), 11–39.

3 Besides his commentaries on Aristotle’s Categories, Peri Hermeneias, Prior Analytics, Posterior Analytics, Topics, and Sophistical Refutations, we have his commentaries on Porphyry’s Isagoge, on Boethius’ De divisione, and on the anonymous Liber sex principiorum. Some passages from his works might lead us to believe that he also commented on one of Boethius’ opuscula on categorical syllogisms and that he wrote a book on poetics, but these works, if they ever existed, are now lost. See Analytica posteriora 1.1.1, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris, 1890), p. 4A, and Metaphysica 3.2.10, ed. Bernhard Geyer (Münster, 1960), p. 127, l.34–35, and 5.5.5, p. 280, l.32.

those which already existed among Arabic philosophers, and that he
actually played an extremely important role in the assimilation to the
West of Arabic thought, particularly in the field of logic.\(^5\) The time in
which Albert made his contribution to logic is also crucial: the writing
of his logical corpus (or at least most of it) probably took place in the
1250s,\(^6\) when Albert was in Cologne after having left the University
of Paris, which situates this corpus just after those of Parisian masters
of arts like Johannes Pagus, Nicholas of Paris, and Robert Kilwardby,
but before the large number of commentaries from the last third of
the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth. There is a
definite possibility that Albert’s teachings in logic influenced later com-
mentators,\(^7\) and, combined with his general strength as a philosopher,
it warrants a closer look at his writings in this discipline.

Further, Albert’s teachings on the *Categories* deserves even more atten-
tion, if only because of the importance that has been traditionally given
to this particular treatise within Aristotle’s thought, and because of the
very serious difficulties that its interpretation poses, notwithstanding
Augustine’s famous claim that, as a young man, he easily read and
understood it.\(^8\) At the core of these difficulties lies the precise identi-
fication of the subject of the book, and whether it is about things, concepts,
or words, or all three. This problem is significant, both in itself, and
also because of the hearing it has on questions like the method of the
treatise, its division, or the part of philosophy it belongs to. The dif-
ficulty and significance of this problem were seen by medieval thinkers,
and in particular by those of the thirteenth century, which of course
does not mean that they were any more unanimous about its solution
than we modern readers of Aristotle are. This presentation is obviously
not the right place for an overall comparison of the different views
on the subject of the *Categories* that dominated the thirteenth century,

\(^5\) Assimilation and influence that are especially evident in Albert’s general introd-
unciation to logic. See Bruno Tremblay, “Albert le Grand: De ce qui vient avant la logique,”
*History and Philosophy of Logic* 25 (2004), 165–203.

\(^6\) Hugo Stehkämper, ed. *Albertus Magnus: Ausstellung zum 700. Todestag* (Cologne,
1980–81), pp. 135–136. See also the editor’s introduction to Albert’s *Super Porphyrii

\(^7\) I am thinking here about commentators from the second half of the thirteenth
century, but the same can be said about fourteenth- and fifteenth-century thinkers. See
for instance E. P. Bos, “John Vorsor’s Albertism in his Commentaries on Porphyry and
the *Categories*” in *Chemins de la pensée médiévale. Études offertes à Zénon Kaluza*, ed. Paul J. J.
M. Bakker, Textes et études du Moyen Âge 20 (Turnhout, 2002), 47–78.