Providing a philosophical justification for the specific number and identity of Aristotle’s categories is a task that dates back at least to Simplicius’s commentary on Aristotle’s Categories (ca. 6th century A.D.).¹ Scholastics from the thirteenth century onward addressed this issue, which they called sufficientia praedicamentorum, mostly in commentaries on Aristotle’s Categories.² Two related questions were pertinent. The first asked whether Aristotle provided an adequate list of categories and the second asked whether a philosophical justification could be given for the specific items on the list.³ Although the latter task predates Albertus Magnus (ca. 1208–80), he is credited as being the first scholastic to attempt it.⁴ Albertus established a method of arriving at a list of the

categories from the modes of predication. Thomas Aquinas followed Albertus’s lead and tried to establish an exhaustive categorial division of being by showing that there are only so many ways in which predicates are said of subjects. ⁵ Although Aquinas never wrote a commentary on Aristotle’s Categories, he provided two closely related justifications for the list of categories (praedicamenta) in his commentaries on the Metaphysics (Book V, lect. 9) and the Physics (Book III, lect. 3). ⁶ Moreover, Aquinas’s account was historically more influential than Albert’s, even though Aquinas’s discussions of the topic are relatively brief.

Although the division of the categories is metaphysically fundamental and interesting, as well as hotly debated among scholastics, the secondary literature on Aquinas’s contribution to the problem of sufficientia praedicamentorum is scant. In fact, not only is the literature devoted specifically to it meager, but the discussion is often altogether ignored in broad discussions of Aquinas’s metaphysics. ⁷ This is not surprising given Aquinas’s brief and elliptical treatment of it. The issue, however, has not escaped the attention of a few scholars, including John Wippel, who has provided the most detailed treatment of Aquinas’s view to date.

The purpose of this article is to offer an alternative interpretation of Aquinas’s view. The key passage is his statement that “those things that are said to be secundum se which signify in every manner the figures of predication [i.e., the modes of predication].” ⁸ I argue that this passage is crucial to a proper understanding of Aquinas’s derivation

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⁵ In “Categories in Aristotle,” Michael Frede interprets the Aristotelian categories as kinds of predications rather than kinds of predicates. In Studies in Aristotle, ed. Dominic J. O’Meara (Washington, D.C., 1981), pp. 1–24. He also claims 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). In contrast, Aquinas holds 1) that the categories (praedicamenta) are substance and nine accidents, and 2) the list of categories can be established according to formal features of propositions (namely, the modes of predication or figuras praedicationis).


⁷ See, for example, Eleonore Stump, Aquinas (The Arguments of the Philosophers), (New York, 2005) and Robert Pasnau and Christopher Shields, The Philosophy of Aquinas (Boulder, 2004). Etienne Gilson also does not mention it in Being and Some Philosophers (Toronto, 1952), p. 55.

⁸ In Met. 5.9, n. 889: “quod illa dicuntur esse secundum se, quaecumque significant figuras praedicationis.” For the passage of Aristotle to which Aquinas refers, see Metaphysics 5.7.