1. *The Aristotelian Background*

As was remarked by Sten Ebbesen in his article discussing thirteenth-century dealings with the Parmenidean thesis *Tantum unum est*, the thirteenth century can be seen as a period in the history of logic in which people “experimented with Aristotelian concepts” in order to see whether they could be used in “areas they were not originally designed for.”¹ One pair of Aristotelian concepts we encounter in the logic of this century is that of *forma-materia*, which is used not only in descriptions of the different functions of specific classes of words, but also as a conceptual tool to account for differences in interpretation of certain sophisma-sentences. In this paper I would like to explore the uses of this distinction as well as other concepts associated with it. To begin with, let me give a brief outline of the Aristotelian origin of the terminology.²

For our present purposes, two groups of concepts are important to consider, the first of which are the concepts involved in Aristotle’s categorization of things in the outside world. As we know, Aristotle’s main division of the categories is into substance on the one hand, and the other nine non-substantial categories on the other. The ten categories are the names we give to things, to bring them up for discussion after one of their modes of being. We can name something either by making reference to what, in an unqualified sense, it is, or by making reference to what it is in some qualified way. The expression naming a thing after what it is came to be known as substance, whereas the other ways, by de Rijk termed as names after a thing’s coincidental modes of being, are known as accidents. So whatever is named is always a something, but

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we can bring it up in different ways, depending on the purpose of our talking about it.

Of course the names of things have their origins in reality, to the extent that what we focus on in our naming something is a reflection of some aspect of the thing’s being. What a thing is, in Aristotle’s view, is a composite of matter and form, particular forms, to be exact, enmattered in a particular piece of matter. The forms include substantial and coincidental ones. The substantial form is the form referred to when we say what a thing is. What the substantial characterisation of something involves is discussed in the Categories. The other categories are the ones named after a thing’s coincidental forms. The substantial form or *eidos* of something is its quiddity. By something’s matter two things can be meant, viz. the material constitution or materiality of something in general, or the thing’s proper, particular, individual pieces of matter.

In keeping with the idea that you can consider a thing as a representative of some quiddity or as a quiddity enformed in matter, Aristotle distinguishes two ways of defining things, namely by defining either the quiddity or form itself, or the composite of matter and form. By the latter what is meant is not the thing’s proper, individual piece of matter the form is enmattered in, but instead the material constitution in general of the thing, that is its being enmattered in some undifferentiated way (without indicating in what particular way). These two definitions correspond with two kinds of mental operation, i.e. ‘formal abstraction’ which disregards the entire materiality of the thing—in which case what is focussed on is the *forma* of the thing, the quiddity as such—and ‘total abstraction’ which only disregards the particular materiality of the thing—leaving the composite of matter and form as such untouched, but considering it in such a way that it applies to all members of the same class.

In the Middle Ages, the distinction between form and matter came to be used in the domain of linguistic and logical analysis as well. In itself this is not surprising, as the Aristotelian way of dealing with the world was to carefully analyse the modes in which we conceptualise it, and the many ways in which we can talk about its inhabitants. Our way of conceptualising the world is indeed reflected by the ways in which we can

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3 See de Rijk 2002 (*op. cit.* above, n. 2), 207-10; 236-40.