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Aristotle's *Categories* from Plotinus to Iamblichus

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Abstract

This article focuses on the reception of Aristotle's Categories by the first three representatives of Greek Neoplatonism: Plotinus (204/205–270 CE), Porphyry (ca. 234–ca. 305 CE), Iamblichus (ca. 242–ca. 325 CE). The first section argues that Plotinus' acquaintance with Aristotle's treatises marked a fresh start vis-à-vis the previous Platonist tradition. Aristotle's views, arguments and vocabulary are ubiquitous in Plotinus writings (the Enneads) and they must be considered an essential part of his philosophical project. Plotinus, however, does not share some of Aristotle's key theories and is critical of them. The second section focuses on Plotinus' discussion of Aristotle's Categories in the tripartite treatise On the Genera of Being (6.1–3). There he rejects the Peripatetic division into ten categories as providing an incomplete account of the genera of being that unduly omits "those which are most authentically beings", i.e. Plato's separate Forms. While drawing on earlier Platonist objections to Aristotle, Plotinus' approach is original insofar as he criticizes Aristotle and his followers not only for omitting intelligible beings in the division of categories, but also for being unable, for this very reason, to work out an adequate division of sensible beings

themselves. The third section is devoted to Porphyry, a student of Plotinus' and the editor of his works. Porphyry worked intensively on Aristotle's Categories, which he regarded as an introduction not only to logic, but to philosophy as a whole. Unlike Plotinus, Porphyry aimed to integrate Aristotle into Platonism and his engagement with the Categories was a key part of his project after Plotinus' in-depth criticism. Porphyry's approach is connected to his view of the subject-matter of the Categories, which he sees as focusing on words insofar as they signify beings, and not on beings as such. The fourth section focuses on some parallels between Plotinus' Genera of Beings and Porphyry's works, which may reflect the debate within Plotinus' school. The fifth section focuses on Iamblichus of Chalcis. Both in theology and in the interpretation of Aristotle's Categories, Iamblichus aimed to both continue and supplant Porphyry's work. While Plotinus criticizes Aristotle's categories for omitting intelligible beings, and while Porphyry accepts Aristotle's categories insofar as they focus on words signifying sensible things, Iamblichus incorporates his Neoplatonist and Pythagorizing metaphysics into the interpretation of the Categories.

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Plotinus and Aristotle's works

Plotinus (204/205–270 CE) is one of the most influential ancient Greek philosophers and is generally regarded as the founder of Neoplatonism, the philosophical movement which characterized the last centuries of Greek pagan philosophy and shaped the way in which it was transmitted to other (contemporary and later) traditions. Plotinus' writings have all come down to us thanks to the edition prepared by his student Porphyry (ca. 234–ca. 305 CE), who organized his teacher's works into six groups of nine treatises (the *Enneads*), preceded by an introductory essay (Porphyry's *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books* [*Vita Plotini* = *VP*]). One of the salient features of Plotinus' work is his constant reference to Aristotle. Porphyry reports the following information: 1) Plotinus' writings contain Stoic and Peripatetic doctrines; 2) they are filled with Aristotle's *Metaphysics*; 3) Plotinus had the Aristotelian commentaries of Aspasius, Alexander of Aphrodisias and Adrastus, among others, read in his school (Porphyry *VP* 14.4–14). Building on the information in Porphyry (*VP* 13–14) and Plotinus (see Plotinus 3.7.1), scholars have distinguished three steps within Plotinus' classroom teaching, as reflected in his treatises: (i) reading and explanation of the texts of the ancients, including their commentators; (ii) general reflections inspired by these readings; (iii) discussion of questions from Plotinus' students (see Snyder 2000, 116–18). Aristotle is included in Plotinus' teaching both through his doctrines (*dogmata*) and through the reading of his treatises and

commentaries. Plotinus mentions Aristotle four times (2.1.2.12; 2.1.4.11; 2.5.3.18; 5.1.9.7); elsewhere Plotinus refers to both Aristotle and his commentators using a generic plural (see 4.7.8(5).2; 4.7.8(5).15–16; 6.1.1.15–19; 6.1.1.29–30; 6.7.2.14–15; 6.7.4.26–27). In countless passages, a reference to Aristotle is detectable in the doctrines and vocabulary incorporated into Plotinus' arguments. Plotinus' use of the commentators, especially Alexander of Aphrodisias (see upcoming article), is also significant. He does not mention them by name (as is always the case with philosophers after Epicurus), but their presence can be detected in the theories and arguments outlined in the *Enneads* (e.g. the doctrine of Intellect, Plotinus' second metaphysical principle after the One: see Merlan 1963).

Scholars debate whether the use of Aristotle's treatises was common in philosophical debates before and around Plotinus' time, or whether it is a peculiar feature of his work. Sources are scanty, but from the extant evidence it can reasonably be inferred that Platonist philosophers before Plotinus (the so-called Middle Platonists from the first century BCE to the second century CE) did not rely on an extensive knowledge of Aristotle's acroamatic writings. The *Categories* were an exception, as Platonist, Aristotelian and Stoic philosophers had been reading and discussing Aristotle's short treatise since the first century BCE. However, works such as Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics* have only a limited presence in pre-Plotinian Platonist debates. The same holds for the characteristic terminology of these treatises (e.g. Aristotle's distinction between potentiality [*dunamis*] and actuality [*energeia*]). There are exceptions, such as the use of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 12 in Alcinous' Platonist handbook (the *Didaskalikos*: see Alcinous *Didaskalikos* 10.164.18–165.34). But this is a somewhat isolated case, and Alcinous' treatise is possibly late and chronologically close to Plotinus (see Chiaradonna 2017). Apparently, Plotinus represents a turning point (for a different account, see Karamanolis 2006). Aristotle's views, arguments and vocabulary are ubiquitous in the *Enneads*, so that they must be considered an essential part of Plotinus' philosophical project. Plotinus does not share some of Aristotle's key theories and is critical of them (e.g. Aristotle's hylomorphism and physical essentialism). Nevertheless, Aristotelian arguments and vocabulary are essential in Plotinus, who often uses Aristotle against Aristotle, i.e. he uses Aristotelian terms and ideas to support arguments that ultimately go against Aristotle's views. Because of this situation, scholars sometimes argue that Plotinus aimed to integrate Aristotle's philosophy into Platonism, and that he adapted Aristotle's views to a Platonist philosophical framework (Horn 1995; de Haas 2001). Other scholars instead emphasize Plotinus' critical intention, while also arguing that Plotinus' anti-Aristotelian stance differs from that of Middle Platonist critics of Aristotle (Wurm 1973; Chiaradonna 2002).

The immediate background to Plotinus' reception of Aristotle is unclear. The Neoplatonist Hierocles (fifth century CE) reports in his *On Providence and Fate* (excerpts in Photius *Library* cod. 214.172a2–9; 173a18–21; 173a32–40; cod. 251.461a24–39 = Schwyzer 1983, test. 12–15) that Ammonius "Saccas", Plotinus' teacher in Alexandria, tackled the question of the harmony between Plato and Aristotle. According to Hierocles – possibly following Porphyry – Ammonius put an end to the conflict between the philosophical schools by showing "that the thought of Plato is in accord with that of Aristotle as regards the essential and most necessary doctrines" (Photius *Library* cod. 214.172a2–9 = Schwyzer 1983, test. 12, trans. Karamanolis 2006, 193). This account is controversial, however, and it is unclear whether Ammonius relied on Aristotle's treatises and the Aristotelian commentators (see Karamanolis 2006, 191–215; Chiaradonna 2016). This dossier can be supplemented by M. Rashed's work on Ptolemy "al-Gharîb", the author of the *Letter to Gallus on the*

Life, Will and Writings of Aristotle, which is preserved in Arabic and contains a famous list of Aristotle's works. Rashed identifies the author as the Peripatetic philosopher Ptolemy mentioned by the Platonist Longinus (Porphyry *VP* 20.49) and places his activity in Alexandria in the early third century (Rashed 2021, CCXCVIII–CCCII). According to Rashed, Ptolemy was the representative of a scholarly trend in Aristotelianism typical of the Hellenistic tradition, which differed from the philosophical Aristotelianism based on commentary work, represented by Alexander of Aphrodisias in Athens at the time. The same conclusions could apply to Ammonius, whose reception of Aristotle, typical of Alexandria's learned cultural environment, should thus be distinguished from the Aristotelianism of the commentators (cf. Rashed 2021, CCXCVI–CCXCVII). A possible, though speculative, hypothesis is that the study of Aristotle was practiced in Alexandria when Plotinus' was a student in Ammonius' school; however, this kind of Aristotelianism was different from what we find in the *Enneads*, where the reception of Aristotle is based on the close interpretation of the treatises and the work of the commentators. This does not mean that the commentators were unknown in Alexandria. However, it is safer not to infer that Plotinus' extensive use of Aristotle and of the Aristotelian commentators depended on Ammonius' approach. Plotinus may have marked a fresh start for the previous Platonic tradition, probably because of the influence of Alexander's commentaries.

Plotinus and the *Categories*

Plotinus focuses on Aristotle's *Categories* in his tripartite treatise *On the Genera of Being* (6.1–3). More precisely, Plotinus dedicates chapters 6.1.1–24 to Aristotle: there he critically discusses the division of the ten categories (see Wurm 1973; Horn 1995; de Haas 2001; Chiaradonna 2002; Griffin 2022). Plotinus' treatise 6.2, the second part of the *Genera of Being* contains a metaphysical reading of the five greatest genera of Plato's *Sophist* (being, motion, rest, sameness and otherness), which Plotinus sets out as the fundamental constituents of the intelligible realm. In the third treatise (6.3) Plotinus develops his own account of the five genera of the corporeal world (substance, quantity, quality, motion and relation), drawing on the discussion in 6.1.

Plotinus presents his enquiry as focused on beings (see 6.1.1.1: *peri tôn ontôn*). Accordingly, he regards Aristotle's categories as the most basic and fundamental division of types of beings. The Peripatetics "divide beings into ten" (6.1.1.15, here Armstrong's translation of Plotinus is used with slight alterations when necessary). Before Plotinus, the subject of the *Categories* had been the focus of debate, and Peripatetic commentators such as Boethus of Sidon (first century BCE) and Alexander of Aphrodisias had identified the subject of Aristotle's treatise with linguistic expressions, insofar as they are related to or "signify" things (see Chiaradonna 2020). Plotinus ontological approach is different from theirs. The Peripatetic position, however, did not rule out a reference to ontology: beings too are involved in Aristotle's enquiry, at least insofar as they are the *correlata* of linguistic expressions. In his commentary on the *Metaphysics*, Alexander of Aphrodisias refers to the categories with the formula "genera of being" (*On Aristotle's Metaphysics* 245.33–35) and this passage provides the obvious background for Plotinus' approach.

As Plotinus remarks, the Peripatetics correctly contend that being is not a single genus: "For they say, and say rightly, that being does not mean the same thing in all ten" (6.1.1.18–19). Therefore, Aristotle's division does not distinguish ten species ranked under a universal highest genus that

includes everything. Plotinus, however, modifies the original sense of this statement. While Aristotle and his followers focus on the basic divisions of sensible beings, Plotinus addresses a different and, in his view, more fundamental question, namely whether Aristotle's division can be applied equally to intelligible (i.e. Platonic separate) and perceptible items. The division into ten must therefore be assessed against the background of the difference between intelligible and sensible beings (their "homonymy": see 6.1.1.22–25). Plotinus' general criticism of the Peripatetics arises from this fact. Their list is incomplete since they "did not want to classify all beings, but left out those which are most authentically beings" (6.1.1.29–30; on the modern reception of Plotinus' criticism in Emil Lask, see upcoming article).

Simplicius (*On Aristotle's Categories* [*In Categorias* = *In Cat.*] 73.15–28; 76.13–17) cites Plotinus along with two earlier exegetes who had critically assessed Aristotle's list against the background of Plato's dualism: Lucius and Nicostratus. Plotinus' discussion in 6.1–3 is certainly indebted to earlier debates on the *Categories* (see Griffin 2015). That said, Plotinus' approach is original insofar as he criticizes Aristotle and his followers not only for neglecting the homonymy between sensible and intelligible items and for leaving out intelligible beings in the division of categories, but also for being unable, for this very reason, to work out an adequate division of sensible beings themselves. This position emerges in the chapters on substance (*ousia*: see 6.1.2–3), where Plotinus focuses on the distinctions established by Aristotle and his followers within the *ousia* while showing that such distinctions lack an adequate foundation. In 6.1.3.12–16, Plotinus accordingly reports the typical Peripatetic characterizations of substance (being a *tode ti*, not being in anything else as in a subject), and he cursorily refers to the argument – typical of Alexander of Aphrodisias (see Chiaradonna 2008) – that the constituent parts of substances (e.g. genera and species) are substances, whereas accidents such as the property white are not parts of substances, but inhere in subjects independent of them (see 6.1.3.16–19; cf. 6.3.5.8–25). By Plotinus' lights, the account of the Peripatetic arguments shows their inadequacy because such characterizations accumulate features by which the Peripatetics attempt to distinguish substance from other items (*pros ta alla*: 6.1.3.20). However, they are not sufficient to explain the concept and nature of substance (6.1.3.21–22), i.e. they are not sufficient to provide an adequate account of *ousia*. In Plotinus' vocabulary, then, the term "category" designates a collection of items with no internal classificatory principle (see 6.1.1.16–18; 6.1.4.50–41: from this point of view, Plotinus' remarks on Aristotle's categories can be compared with Kant's critical approach, see upcoming article). This fact prevents Aristotle's categories from being genuine genera (according to Plotinus, genuine genera, i.e. Plato's intelligible genera, are both genera and principles *vis-à-vis* the items ranked under them: see 6.2.2.10–14). Aristotle's lack of reference to Plato's intelligible beings not only makes his division of categories incomplete (since the Peripatetics omit intelligible beings), but also prevents it from providing an adequate account of the basic and fundamental divisions of sensible beings.

Within his critical discussion, Plotinus devotes an interesting section to the categories of acting and being acted upon (*poien*, *paschein*), which he proposes to rank under motion (6.1.15–16). In developing this view (based on an earlier Stoic discussion: see Simplicius *In Cat.* 307.1–6), Plotinus criticizes Aristotle's definition of motion as an incomplete activity (Aristotle *Physics* 3.2.201b31–32), and he contends instead that physical motion is an activity in the full sense (*energeia pantôs*), which is also characterized by the fact that it occurs "over and over again". Motion is therefore complete throughout the course of its unfolding and independently of the time in which it takes place (see 6.1.16.6) (see Chiaradonna 2023, 64–88).

Plotinus' approach clearly emerges from his criticism of Aristotle's distinction between primary (i.e. particular) and secondary (i.e. universal) substances in the *Categories* (see 6.3.9.23–34). He makes two interconnected points. (1) Aristotle's distinction between universals and particulars is not relevant to establishing a hierarchy of substances; (2) the relevant distinction separates what is generic and what partakes in it, i.e. incorporeal principles and what partakes in them. From this perspective, sensible particulars are secondary, while their principles are genuine primary substances. Plotinus begins by noting that the difference between particular and universal is not a difference in substance, for even in quality there is a particular white thing and white, a particular literary skill and literary skill. This is a plainly Aristotelian point, since Aristotle applies the distinction between universal and particular items both to substance and to the other categories (see Aristotle *Cat.* 2.1a23–1b2, which is the obvious source for Plotinus' examples: white, literary skill, science). At the same time, this remark acquires further significance in Plotinus' argument, which aims to replace Aristotle's distinction between particulars and universals with the Platonist (and, according to Plotinus, genuinely essential) distinction between sensible particulars and their incorporeal principles. Accordingly, Plotinus then moves on to Socrates and human and, when discussing this example, he introduces the typical Platonist vocabulary referring to participation. He thus states: "[…] but the human gave being a human to Socrates, for the particular human is such by participation in the human" (6.3.9.29–30). Finally, the distinction is framed as that between the form alone – i.e. human as such – and the form in matter – i.e. the form as a constituent of the concrete individual (e.g. Socrates) – which has an ontologically secondary and derivative status. In sum, Plotinus' argument is structured according to a progression that leads from the spurious hierarchy dividing particular and universal items (Aristotle's distinction between primary and secondary substances in the *Categories*) to the genuine essential hierarchy that separates incorporeal principles and their non-essential images in matter (see 6.3.15.24–38).

Porphyry

Porphyry, Plotinus' student and the editor of the *Enneads*, attached great importance to the *Categories*, which he regarded as an introduction not only to logic, but to philosophy as a whole (Porphyry *In Cat.* 56.28–29). This stance explains Porphyry's intensive work on the treatise. He wrote a short commentary on the *Categories* in a question-and-answer format, which has been preserved and is the only extant commentary on Aristotle by Porphyry (see Bodéüs 2008). He also wrote an extensive commentary dedicated to someone called Gedalius, which is now lost. Through Simplicius we have a few fragments of it (see Smith 1993: 35–59 = 45T.–?74F Smith). Furthermore, the so-called Archimedes Palimpsest contains a section from a commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, which is probably to be identified as Porphyry's *Ad Gedalium* (see Chiaradonna, Rashed, and Sedley 2013). Porphyry also wrote an introduction to logic, the *Isagoge,* in which he explains what genus, differentia, species, proper and accident are (see de Libera and Segonds 1998; Barnes 2003). The *Isagoge* is so closely connected with the *Categories* that Porphyry's short treatise has sometimes been regarded as an introduction to the theory of categories rather than an introduction to logic as a whole.

Porphyry's interest in the *Categories* was certainly related to the role that this treatise had played in the previous reception of Aristotle from Andronicus of Rhodes onwards (see upcoming article), but this is only part of the story. To the best of our knowledge, Porphyry was the first Platonist to write commentaries on Aristotle *tout court*, thus establishing Aristotle's treatises as part of the Platonist curriculum (see Karamanolis 2004). In fact, Porphyry is known to have written two works comparing Aristotle's philosophy with Plato's: one focusing on their harmony (cf. *Suda* 4.178.21–22, sub nomine *Porphurios* = Porphyry 239T Smith), the other on their divergences (cf. Elias *On Porphyry's Isagoge* [= *In Isag.*] 39.6–8 = Porphyry 238T Smith). The engagement with the *Categories* was a key part of Porphyry's project after Plotinus in-depth criticism. In order to show that Aristotle agrees with Plato, Porphyry had to take up Plotinus' challenge and devote an in-depth exegetical work to this treatise (see Chiaradonna 2016).

In his exegesis of the *Categories*, Porphyry starts from the traditional problem of how to determine the purpose (*prothesis*) of the treatise (Porphyry *In Cat.* 58.4–20; Simplicius *In Cat.* 10.20–11.22 = Porphyry 46F Smith; 11.23–29 = Porphyry 47F Smith; 13.11–18 = Porphyry 48F Smith). His view is based on the earlier Peripatetic tradition and particularly on Boethus of Sidon: categories are simple signifying words that are investigated *qua* signifying things as differing in genus. In short: Aristotle's *Categories* is a work on semantics that investigates words insofar as they "signify" things (so things are also involved, insofar as there is an ontology underlying semantics). Porphyry distinguishes in fact two kinds of words by distinguishing two impositions or uses of terms. On a first approach, human beings impose terms to indicate or signify things. On a second approach, they use terms to indicate other terms. Examples of first imposition terms are "human", "dog", "sun", "black", "white", "magnitude", etc. (see Porphyry *In Cat.* 57.25–27); examples of second imposition terms are "noun" (*onoma*) and "verb" (*rhêma*) (Porphyry *In Cat.* 57.30–35). The *Categories* focuses on the most general first imposition terms that signify the most basic and general differentiae in things, i.e. the categories (*In Cat.* 58.3–15). Porphyry distinguishes this view from two rival interpretations: one which sees the *Categories* as dealing with words *qua* words (*In Cat.* 59.10–14), the other which sees the *Categories* as dealing with beings *qua* beings (see *In Cat.* 59.5–6). Porphyry quotes a passage from the commentator Herminus in which this view is refuted (*In Cat.* 59.20–33): so the ontological reading of the *Categories* was certainly an ancient one, but it was also Plotinus' view (see above, section 2). Porphyry's section on the subject-matter of the *Categories* is a tacit response to his master.

The account of the subject-matter of the *Categories* allows Porphyry to integrate Aristotle's doctrines into his philosophy. An interesting example is that of primary substance. As we have seen, before Porphyry, Lucius, Nicostratus and Plotinus had criticized Aristotle's division of the categories for neglecting intelligible beings. Alexander, possibly in response to Nicostratus, suggested that Aristotle's account of primary substance in the *Categories* could actually apply to separate forms (i.e. to the unmoved movers) too (see Simplicius *In Cat.* 82.6–7; 90.31–33). Porphyry's solution is based instead on the subject-matter of the treatise. Categories are words that signify things, and human language primarily refers to perceptible beings (Porphyry *In Cat.* 91.7–12 and 91.19–25). Furthermore, words are "messengers of things" and derive their basic mutual differences from things (Porphyry *In Cat.* 58.23–29). For Porphyry, therefore, the division of categories reflects the basic distinctions of (sensible) beings. Sensible particulars are the primary object of our language: this explains why Aristotle regards them as primary substances, even though elsewhere Aristotle himself takes intelligible substances as being primary (Porphyry *In Cat.* 91.14–17). Sensible

particulars are primary substances *quoad nos* and not in themselves (Porphyry *In Cat.* 91.19–27 see below, section 4). This is consistent with the subject-matter of Aristotle's *Categories*, for this treatise focuses on words that signify things (see Porphyry *In Cat.* 57.19–59.18; Simplicius *In Cat.* 10.20–11.22 = Porphyry 46F Smith), and language primarily refers to sensible particulars (see Porphyry *In Cat.* 91.5–12). Note that Alexander of Aphrodisias never claims that Aristotle's particular substances are primary because the *Categories* focuses on signifying terms, and language primarily refers to sensible particulars. He certainly claims that Aristotle's *Categories* focuses on simple words signifying simple things *via* simple concepts (Simplicius *In Cat.* 10.18–20), but he does not use this view (his interpretation of the subject-matter of Aristotle's treatise) to explain why particular substances are primary. This seems to be Porphyry' own move in order to make Aristotle's distinction compatible with the Platonist hierarchy of being.

Debates in Plotinus' School

In the preface to the *Isagoge*, Porphyry explains what he aims to do in his short treatise: "I shall attempt to show you how the old masters – and especially the Peripatetics among them – treated, from a logical point of view, genera and species and the items before us" (Porphyry *Isagoge* 1.14–16, trans. Barnes). The *Isagoge* is based on the previous tradition: parallels can be found in Middle Platonist writings, Galen, the commentaries on Aristotle, etc. Scholars have detailed Porphyry's sources, but we would like to know more about his school background. Ammonius and Elias report that Porphyry wrote this treatise when he was in Sicily (Ammonius *In Isag.* 22.12–22; Elias *In Isag.* 39.12–19). In a famous passage from his *Life of Plotinus* (*VP* 11.11–17), Porphyry says that he left Plotinus' school when he fell sick with melancholy and Plotinus urged him to take a holiday: Porphyry heeded his advice and went to Lilybaeum in Sicily. Scholars have suggested 268 as the date for this episode (see Goulet 1982, 213). If Ammonius and Elias are to be trusted, we could surmise that Porphyry wrote the *Isagoge* at Lilybaeum shortly after leaving his teacher's school. H. D. Saffrey made a further inference: Porphyry's story about his melancholy would conceal the true reasons for his departure from Plotinus' school, i.e. disagreement with the master about the interpretation of Aristotle's *Categories* and, therefore, about Aristotle's role in Platonist teaching and philosophy (see Saffrey 1992). Whereas Plotinus was critical of Aristotle and especially of the categories (note that Plotinus wrote 6.1–3 just before Porphyry's departure), Porphyry had a much more conciliatory attitude and aimed to show that Plato and Aristotle agreed on most issues. This philosophical disagreement caused a break; therefore, Porphyry left his teacher. The *Isagoge* would be part of Porphyry's project to integrate Aristotle into Platonism and would therefore mark a tacit change to Plotinus' approach (see de Libera and Segonds 1998, VIII–IX). Saffrey's hypothesis is as challenging as it is speculative. However, some parallels between Plotinus' *Genera of Beings* and Porphyry's works may lend it some support. The arguments in these passages are characteristic of Plotinus and Porphyry and we find no precise parallel for them in the previous tradition. We must be cautious, of course: since all commentaries on the *Categories* before Plotinus have been lost, we have to rely on later authors such as Simplicius, and it is quite possible that both Plotinus and Porphyry drew on earlier sources that are now lost. Even in this case, however, the parallels remain interesting, for Plotinus seems to be criticizing the very arguments accepted by his student. It is tempting to infer that these passages bear traces of school debates pitting Plotinus against Porphyry.

[a]Simplicius *In Cat.* 78.23–24 = Porphyry 58F Smith	**[a']** Plotinus 6.3.3.15–17
For that which is productive of substance is substance-like and therefore substance (*to gar poiêtikon ousias ousiôdes kai dia touto ousia*). For indeed the composite is substance most of all in virtue of the form (trans. de Haas).	If we mean by form that which is productive of substance and by formative principle that which is substance-like according to the form (*ei de eidos legomen to poiêtikon ousias kai logon ton ousiôdê kata to eidos*), we have not yet said how substance should be understood.
[b]Simplicius *In Cat.* 79.26–28 = Porphyry 59F Smith	**[b']**Plotinus, 6.3.5.20–23
For to call a particular human being a human being is no different from calling Socrates Socrates (*to gar ton tina anthrôpon anthrôpon legein ouden diapherei tou ton Sôkratê Sôkratê legein*). In a way then it is said about itself, and it will not be predicated of something else nor will it be in something else (trans. de Haas).	[...] for in saying that Socrates is human, I am saying that a particular human being is human, predicating humanity of the human in Socrates; but this is the same as calling Socrates Socrates (*touto de tauton tôi ton Sôkratê Sôkratê legein*), and again as predicating living being of this particular rational living being.
[c]Porphyry *In Cat.* 91.23–25	**[c']**Plotinus, 6.3.9.37–40
Thus with respect to signifying expressions sensible individuals are primary substances, but as regards nature, intelligible substances are primary (*hôste hôs pros tas sêmantikas lexeis prôtai ousiai hai atomoi aisthêtai, hôs de pros tên phusin hai noêtai*) (trans. Strange).	The prior by nature is also simply prior: how then could it be less? But the particular is prior with respect to us because it is more knowable (*to kathekaston pros hêmas gnôrimôteron on proteron*); but this does not make a difference in actual fact (*en tois pragmasi*).
[d]Porphyry *Isagoge* 2.7–10	**[d']**Plotinus, 6.1.3.1–5
First, the origin of anyone's birth was named a genus; and after that, the plurality of people coming from a single origin (for example, from Hercules), demarcating which and separating it from the others we say that the whole assemblage of Heraclids is a genus (trans. Barnes).	But ought we really to call substance one category, collecting together intelligible substance, matter, form and the composite of both? This would be like saying that the genus or the Heraclids was a unity, not in the sense of a unity common to all its members, but because they all come from one ancestor: for the intelligible substance would be so primarily, and the others secondarily and less.

[a]and **[b]** come from the lost commentary *Ad Gedalium*, and Simplicius makes it clear that his source is Porphyry (possibly via Iamblichus: see Simplicius *In Cat.* 78.21; 79.29). The parallel between **[a]** and **[a']** is suggested by the rare expression *to poiêtikon ousias* (the parallel with Plotinus, 6.3.3.15–16 speaks in support of the reading *poiêtikon* in Simplicius *In Cat.* 78.23 [MSS LA] over the reading *poiôtikon* [MSS JK] adopted by Kalbfleisch) and by the connection between the expression *to poiêtikon ousias* and the term *ousiôdes* ("substance-like"). Porphyry is criticizing here the Peripatetic Boethus of Sidon, who had equated enmattered forms with non-substantial

qualifications of the material substrate. Against Boethus, Porphyry remarks that the form is not an external qualification inhering in a substantial subject: rather, it is "what is productive of substance" and is therefore "substance-like" (*ousiôdes*). The composite is a substance in virtue of its form. Plotinus adopts the same terms we find in Porphyry: the form is "productive of substance" and the formal principle is "substance-like" according to the form. But, as Plotinus remarks, possibly in reaction to his student's view, in saying this "we have not yet said how substance should be understood". This is Plotinus' usual remark against the Peripatetic account of sensible substance (see above Section 2): characterizing some features in sensible beings as prior *vis-à-vis* the others is a merely factual distinction and it is not sufficient to ground the priority of substance. A genuine understanding of substance requires that it be conceived of as a Platonic separate formal principle. The parallel between **[b]** and **[b']** is suggested by Porphyry's characteristic comparison between essential predication within substance (predicating human being of a particular human being) and the tautology resulting from predicating Socrates of Socrates. Porphyry sets out this comparison by outlining the distinction between the "unallocated" (*akatakakton*) and the "allocated" (*katatetagmenon*), corresponding to predicate and subject in essential predication. Porphyry's view is that, in essential predication within substance, subject and predicate are not two different items, but rather the same item insofar as it is considered in two different ways (insofar as it is "allocated" with the subject – human being in Socrates – and insofar as it is "unallocated" and taken in itself): hence the comparison with the tautology "Socrates is Socrates". Plotinus reports the same comparison between essential predication within substance (predicating human being of a particular human being) and the tautology resulting from saying that Socrates is Socrates. This is part of a preliminary section in 6.3 where Plotinus reports Peripatetic arguments about sensible substance while at the same time outlining some inconsistencies within them (this is what happens with the remarks on the differentia at 6.3.5.25–30). Note, however, that this is only the first part of the account of substance in 6.3, which ends up questioning the very notion of a substance situated at the level of bodies: as Plotinus shows, sensible substance is in fact no substance at all, but a mere conglomerate of matter and non-substantial qualities (see 6.3.8; 6.3.15: see Hutchinson 2022). In other words, Plotinus mentions the same account of essential predication we find in Porphyry, but this is only the first step in his argument, which ultimately aims to dismantle the very notion that there are essences at the level of bodies and, therefore, that there is anything like Aristotle's essential predication within substance. In fact, Plotinus suggests that any classification of bodies is necessarily based on perceptible attributes and is thus pragmatic and conventional to some extent (for example, one could regard this or that cat as a quadruped and a mammal, but also as a white and furry being) (see 6.3.10.14–17; cf. 5.5.1.1.12–19). The parallel between **[c]** and **[c']** is suggested by Porphyry's characteristic argument that Aristotle's primary substances in the *Categories* are primary *quoad nos*: while this argument becomes common in the Neoplatonist commentators on the *Categories* after Porphyry, there is no trace of it in the tradition before Porphyry (see above, section 3). In **[c]** Porphyry contends that intelligible substances are primary by nature, whereas sensible particulars are primary with respect to signifying expressions, i.e. insofar as our ordinary language primarily refers to them. **[c']** occurs at the end of Plotinus' critical discussion of Aristotle's distinction between primary and secondary substance (see above, section 2), the aim of which is to replace Aristotle's spurious distinction with that between intelligible formal principles, which are genuinely primary insofar as they primary by nature, and their sensible images. At the end of his discussion, Plotinus makes a remark which closely resembles Porphyry's point: granting that intelligible substances are primary by nature, we could nonetheless regard sensible particulars as

primary insofar as they are primary *quoad nos*, since the particular is prior insofar as it is more known to us. Plotinus, however, resists with the usual critical approach: this is a merely verbal distinction which makes no difference in actual fact (in actual fact, intelligible substances are primary substances) and does not make of substance a single genus encompassing sensible and intelligible items. The parallel between **[d]** and **[d']** has long been detected (see Hadot 1990, 128) and is suggested by the example of the Heraclids, which elucidates a genealogical sense of the genus. In the *Isagoge*, Porphyry conceives of the relation between the genus and the subordinated items (i.e. the subordinate genera and species down to the indivisible species) as a kind of genealogy, with the highest genus acting as the origin. The genus substance is thus analogous to the genus Heraclids, which takes its name from the ancestor Heracles. In doing so, Porphyry combines rather than contrasts the genealogical and the predicative accounts of genus. Indeed, Porphyry sets out the genus-species relation as a kind of genealogy in which the highest genus acts as the principle of the items under it – as an ancestor, so to speak. Note that Aristotle suggests precisely the opposite, since he mentions the Heraclids in order to separate the genealogical sense of the genus from the genus-species relation (see Aristotle *Metaphysics* 10.8.1058a24). Porphyry also mentions Plato in his account of the genus (*Isag.* 6.14), and although the *Isagoge* omits metaphysics, it is at least tempting to infer that Porphyry adopted the genealogical sense of the genus in order to pave the way for a metaphysical account in which Plato's intelligible substance acts as a principle of the items ranked under it, down to Aristotle's sensible substance. Plotinus mentions the Heraclids in his critical account of Aristotle's substance after remarking that the Peripatetics omit intelligible beings and that their factual characterization of substance does not explain what substance really is. The hypothesis that substance is a genealogy similar to the Heraclids would make it possible to regard *ousia* as a single category after all, and Aristotle's divisions could be integrated into a gradual unity with Plato's intelligible substance at the top and Aristotle's sensible substance at the bottom. Plotinus, however, is skeptical. He says that if this were the case, everything should be included in substance, since all beings ultimately derive from (intelligible) substance (6.1.3.5–7). Indeed, one might respond that there are two kinds of derivation: that within the genus *ousia* and that of other beings from substance (6.1.3.7–8). But Plotinus further remarks that this does not solve the problem, if we do not grasp what the most essential thing about *ousia* is, which enables other things to derive from it (6.1.3.8–10). Plotinus emphasizes in fact that intelligible and sensible beings cannot be seen as species falling under the same genus. In his view, different levels in the hierarchy must rather be seen as heterogeneous (homonymous): more precisely, being and *ousia* are intelligible genera, whereas the sensible realm is being and substance only homonymously (see Chiaradonna 2023, 138–162). Once again, the parallel between Plotinus and Porphyry suggests that Plotinus is here criticizing a view held by his student.

None of these parallels is conclusive but taken together they provide sufficiently strong evidence to infer that Plotinus was aware of the arguments worked out by his student and that he discussed them critically. We have evidence that Porphyry referred to Plotinus' oral teaching in his works. P. Henry suggested that Plotinus' oral teaching on the *Categories* lies behind some objections reported by Simplicius and Dexippus and drawn from Porphyry's lost commentary *Ad Gedalium* (see Henry 1987). Furthermore, in his treatise *On Division*, probably based on Porphyry's lost commentary on Plato's *Sophist*, Boethius reports that Plotinus praised Andronicus' book *On Division* (Boethius *On Division* 4.1 = Porphyry 169F Smith). Finally, Porphyry's work on principles and matter, transmitted in a Syriac translation and recently edited by Y. Arzhanov (possibly part of Porphyry's lost commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*?), offers information about Plotinus' teaching on matter in the

Timaeus in connection with Middle Platonist debates (see Arzhanov 2021 and Michalewski 2024). We can infer that in his lost commentaries Porphyry reported on Plotinian classroom teaching and thus supplemented the *Enneads* by elucidating their sources and background. This would not be surprising: Porphyry does the same in his *Life of Plotinus* (see Porphyry *VP* 13–14). The above parallels, however, point to a different situation: Plotinus' treatises would bear traces of school debates and of his disagreement with Porphyry. Is this plausible? In the *Life of Plotinus*, Porphyry says that he provided topic summaries (*kephalaia*: *VP* 5.62) for Plotinus' treatises and that Plotinus asked him to edit his writings (*diorthoun*: *VP* 7.50–51). It is apparently unlikely that Porphyry edited Plotinus's works while leaving traces of their dispute on Aristotle's categories. Wouldn't Porphyry have rather tried to conceal their disagreement? As a matter of fact, this hypothesis is questionable. It is much more plausible that Porphyry treated the master's writings with reverence, leaving their content unaltered and without manipulation. Porphyry probably defended his role as Plotinus' philosophical heir in a different way: through the preparation of his edition of the *Enneads* (including the *kephalaia* and the *Life of Plotinus*: see Saffrey 1992), through commentaries on Plato and Aristotle in which he took up Plotinus' teaching, and through his own works, such as the *Sententiae*, in which he elaborated on the master's teaching by providing a revised version of it, but without ever overtly disagreeing with it.

Iamblichus

The Syrian Neoplatonist Iamblichus of Chalcis (ca. 242–ca. 325) was Porphyry's disciple and rival. The main disagreement between the two philosophers concerned religion and theology. Porphyry followed the teachings of Plotinus and believed that the purification of the soul consisted in intellectual contemplation alone. Hence Porphyry's condemnation of the blood sacrifices and the ritual practices of "theurgy". For Iamblichus, on the other hand, the soul's fall into the body makes any access to the divine impossible without having recourse to revealed ritual practices. Porphyry's instead gave a negative assessment of theurgical practices, which he saw as a departure from philosophy and rationality. Porphyry criticized Iamblichus' view in the *Letter to Anebo*, probably written between 295 and 300: it is a fictitious letter addressed to an Egyptian priest named Anebo, but actually addressed to Iamblichus. The *Letter to Anebo* is lost, but fragments of it are preserved through quotations from Iamblichus. Through the Egyptian framework, Porphyry inscribed his theological manifesto within what Iamblichus regarded as the oldest and most authoritative religious tradition. Iamblichus continued the Egyptian fiction by replying to Porphyry under the pseudonym of Abamon and defending theurgical practices in the work *Master Abamon's Reply to Porphyry's Letter to Anebo and Solution of the Difficulties It Contains*, to which Marsilio Ficino assigned the misleading title *De mysteriis Ægyptiorum, Chaldæorum, Assyriorum.* (see Saffrey and Segonds 2013).

In the interpretation of Aristotle's *Categories*, as in theology, Iamblichus aimed to both continue and supplant Porphyry's work. He wrote an extensive commentary, fragments of which are preserved by Simplicius. There he often followed Porphyry's *Ad Gedalium*, while adding two distinctive features noted by Simplicius. Firstly, Iamblichus applied his intellective theory (*noera theôria*) everywhere, to

almost all of the chapter-headings (Simplicius *In Cat.* 2.13–15). Secondly, Iamblichus took Archytas' treatise *On the All* (*peri tou pantos*) as Aristotle's source and developed a thoroughly Pythagorizing interpretation of the *Categories* (Simplicius *In Cat.* 2.15–25, see Opsomer 2016).

Iamblichus' interpretation of Aristotle, in other words, was characteristically shaped by his Neoplatonist and Pythagorean doctrines. While Plotinus criticized Aristotle's categories for omitting intelligible beings, and Porphyry accepted them insofar as they focus on words signifying sensible things which are primary *quoad nos*, Iamblichus incorporated his Neoplatonist and Pythagorizing metaphysics into the interpretation of the *Categories*. An example of Iamblichus' approach is his reference to analogy, which according to him makes it possible to apply Aristotle's view to all levels of being. For example, as Simplicius reports, Iamblichus argued that the property of being receptive of contraries while being one and the same in number (see Aristotle *Cat.* 5.4a10–11) applies to all levels of substance by analogy (*kata analogian*, Simplicius *In Cat.* 116.25–26). In another passage, Iamblichus starts from Porphyry's distinction between the "allocated" and the "unallocated" (see above, section 3) and goes beyond Porphyry's speculations by suggesting that the genus is a separate *ante rem* Form and that sensible particulars partake in it (Simplicius *In Cat.* 53.10–12). More precisely, Iamblichus presents Aristotle's essential predication within substance as a way of expressing, with due qualification, the participation of corporeal beings in their separate genera. Accordingly, Iamblichus compares the essential predication "Socrates is human" to the formula "the vine is white" (Simplicius *In Cat.* 53.12–14). Both are ways of expressing a condition which involves a reference to something not explicitly mentioned in the predicative statement: "Socrates is human" means that Socrates partakes in the Form of human (that is, that Socrates has a participation in the Form human: participation is not overtly mentioned); "the vine is white" means that the vine bears white grapes.

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