

ALBERT AT THE CROSS ROADS OF LOGIC

Albert the Great stands at the crossroads of logic. There seems to be a certain hesitation or ambivalence when he touches upon a question that can be seen as crucial in one's approach to logic. It is a question about the very aim or intention of the logician. And hence it affects our whole understanding of logic. Is it the aim or intention of the logician to consider names and, later on, speeches composed of names? Or is it by accident and some subsequent necessity that the logician is led to consider words or names? Albert seems to stand somewhere between Boethius in a tradition that goes back to the Greek Neo-Platonic commentators on the logical works of Aristotle and the later Cajetan in a tradition begun by the Arabs such as Avicenna. Before looking at Albert's fence-straddling, we should consider separately the two positions. Perhaps this can be done simply by looking at two texts: one from Boethius and the other from Cajetan following Avicenna. Both texts are from their respective commentaries on the *Categories* of Aristotle where the question first arises.

Following the Greek Neo-Platonic commentators on Aristotle's *Categories*, Boethius distinguishes between two placings of names: the placing of names upon things and the placing of names upon names. Since things exist before names, we necessarily first place names upon things. We place names such as *man*, *dog*, or *cat* upon different things. Then after we have named things, we have names that we can come back upon and also name. Thus we call names like *man*, *dog*, or *cat* by the name *noun*. The placing of names upon things is thus called by Boethius and the Greek Neo-Platonic commentators the first placing of names. And the placing of names upon names is called by them the second placing of names. Boethius then in continuity with the Greek commentators say that the intention of Aristotle's *Categories* is the first placing of names or, rather, the names so placed:

And the first placing is that names are placed upon things, but the second that the names themselves are designated by other names...The intention in this work therefore is to discuss the first names of things and the vocal sounds signifying them.¹

¹"et est prima positio, ut nomina rebus imponerentur, secunda vero ut aliis nominibus ipsa nomina designaretur...In hoc igitur opere haec intentio est, de primis rerum nominibus, et de vocibus res significantibus disputare..." Boethius,

Cajetan is, of course, aware that illustrious men (as he puts it) have before him said that the intention of the *Categories* is names or vocal sounds signifying incomplex things. He is also prepared to admit that in some way this position can be sustained. But then he thinks it is necessary to recall what Avicenna has said in the beginning of his *Logic* :

...nevertheless it is necessary to be mindful of what has been said in the best way by Avicenna in the beginning of his *Logic*, namely that to consider about vocal sounds is not the business of logic by intention, but necessity forces it to this, because we cannot express, teach, unite and order things thus conceived without words. For if we were able to complete all these things without exterior words, content only with interior speech, or these things came to be by other signs, vocal sounds would not be considered.²

Whence Cajetan thinks it is necessary to conclude that the *Categories* of Aristotle is chiefly about things rather than names:

And on account of this, if it is asked whether vocal sounds or things are chiefly considered here, it ought to be answered that it is about things, not absolutely, but as conceived in an incomplex way and signified by consequent necessity.³

In Categorias Aristotelis, Liber Primus, PL Vol. 64m pp. 159-160 - All translations by the author of this paper.

²"..memores tamen esse oportet eius quod optime ab Avicenna in principio suae Logicae dicitur, scilicet quod considerare de vocibus non est logici negotii ex intentione, sed necessitas ad hoc compulit, quoniam res sic conceptas non nisi verbis exprimimus, docemus, adunamus et ordinamus. Si enim absque verbis exterioribus haec omnia explere possemus, solo sermone interiori contenti, aut aliis signis haec fierent, de vocibus tractandum non esset." Cajetan, *Commentaria in Praedicamenta Aristotelis*, Prologus (Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1953), p. 3

³"Et propterea si quaeratur, de vocibus an de rebus principaliter hic tractetur, respondendum est quod de rebus non absolute sed incomplexis conceptis et consequenti necessitate significatis." Cajetan, *Commentaria in Praedicamenta Aristotelis*, Prologus (Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1953), p. 3

The disagreement between Cajetan and Boethius (or between Avicenna and the Greek Commentators) is not as to whether logic considers names or things. Both would see the logician's consideration as extending to both names and things in some way. Further, they would both see thoughts as involved in the logician's consideration of either names or things. Cajetan, for example, says that the *Categories* is about things, not absolutely, but as conceived in an incomplex way and signified by consequent necessity. The Greek Commentators speak of the *Categories* as being about vocal sounds signifying things through thoughts.⁴ The Greek Commentators and Boethius would also see the logician as talking sometimes about things as named through thoughts. Yet when they speak of the *skopos* or intention or aim of the *Categories*, they always put vocal sounds or names first. The difference, then, is not simply one of emphasis, but of order, of the order in which one uses names and things and thoughts in defining the aim or intention of a book in logic.

When we say that the difference is one of order, we do not mean in the order of importance. The Greek commentators and Boethius do not think that names are more important than things or thoughts. They put names first because of the instrumental character of logic. This is why they call Aristotle's works in logic the *organon*, the tool. We can now turn to some texts of Albert which seem to follow Avicenna and now Boethius.

In the *Tractatus* on the nature of logic, at the beginning of his *Commentaria in De Praedicabilibus*, Albert criticizes an opinion which is like that of the Neo-Platonic commentators and Boethius. And he indicates that he is following Avicenna here. The central text is as follows:

They say that the subject of logic in general is speech, insofar as it designates the things which are signified through it. Avicenna attacks this opinion saying that speech of itself signifies nothing. If it signified something of itself, it would signify that always and among all which is false. It takes therefore signification from the will of the one instituting it. Man however uses such speech as it thus signifies a concept to himself and to another...Whence the logician uses speech to himself and to another *per accidens* and

⁴See the commentaries on the *Categories* by Porphyry, Ammonius, Philoponus, Olympiodorus, Simplicius and Elias in the *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, Berlin: Academiæ Litterarum Regiæ Borussicæ, 1887-1900, Vols. IV, VIII, XII, XIII, XVIII

not *per se* because he is not able to proceed to making known what is unknown without signifying speech.⁵

Although seeing words as necessary for man in his thinking, Albert here speaks of speech as being *per accidens* to the logician. The reason is apparently that words signify not by nature, but by human agreement. Even though one might say that this must be a weak sense of *per accidens* since Albert here admits the necessity of words, nevertheless one could never say that the aim or intention of the logician or some logical work, like the *Categories*, is about words or names signifying things through thoughts. The *per accidens* is always outside of one's intention or, at least, of one's primary intention. And as in the passage quoted above from Cajetan, where he holds that the *Categories* is principally about things conceived in an incomplex way (without affirmation or negation) and by a consequent necessity signified, Albert also speaks at times as if logic is about things as they are in the mind and consequently signified. This can be seen in the following passage from the same *Tractatus* on the nature of logic:

Since logic however considers all things insofar as they are in the soul or in the understanding of the one who seeks to come to a knowledge of the unknown through what is known to him, on account of these things, he considers vocal sound signifying by agreement, both what and how it signifies.⁶

⁵"dicunt logicae generalis subjectum esse sermonem, prout est designativus rerum quae significantur per ipsum. Quam opinionem impugnat Avicenna dicens, quod sermo de se nihil significat: si enim aliquid de se significaret, semper et apud omnes illud significaret: quod falsum est. Significationem ergo accipit a placito instituentis. Tali autem sermone (secundum quod sic significativus est concepti) utitur homo ad seipsum et ad alium...Propter quod logicus et ad se et ad alterum utitur sermone per accidens et non per se: quia sine sermone designativo procedere non potest ad notitiam faciendam ejus quod ignotum est." Albert the Great, *Commentaria in De Praedicabilibus*, Tractatus I, Caput IV; Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1951, p. 9

⁶"Quia enim logica omnia considerat prout sunt in anima sive in intellectu ejus, qui quaerit per notum sibi venire in notitiam ignoti: gratia horum considerat de voce significante ad placitum, et quid et qualiter significet." Albert the Great, *Commentaria in De Praedicabilibus*, Tractatus I, Caput V; Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1951, p. 12

Albert had already quoted Avicenna's distinction about things considered either in their essential principles or according to their existence in singulars outside the mind or according to their existence in the reason; and that logic considers things in this third way.⁷

But when Albert comes to comment on the *Categories* and the *Peri Hermeneias* of Aristotle, his position is closer to the concrete one of the Greek commentators and Boethius. First, of all, when he does say that logic is in some way about things, he will explain that way (or begin to explain it) by using words or speech rather than by the remote from the senses explanation through the way things are in the mind or conceived incomplexly. This comes up naturally in his explanation of the first distinction in the *Categories* where Aristotle is clearly talking about things in some way:

And they are called univocal in an opposite way to the equivocal, namely things called univocally by one name so that things are referred to being said and to speech; because otherwise what was said would not pertain to logic for things considered in themselves and not as they stand under speech, pertain to the Philosopher and not to the logician.⁸

And in his commentary on the *Peri Hermeneias*, he says the following in determining to what part of philosophy the book belongs:

It is not a part of essential or real philosophy, but of rational or speech-concerned [*sermocinalis*]; for it considers being standing under speech [*ens stans sub sermone*].⁹

⁷Albert the Great, *Commentaria in De Praedicabilibus*, Tractatus I, Caput II; Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1951, pp. 5-6

⁸"Et dicuntur univoca per oppositum modum ad aequivoca, res scilicet univocatae in nomine uno, ut res ipsa ad dici et ad sermonem referatur, quia aliter non esset logicum quod dicitur, quia res in se considerata, non secundum quod stat sub dictione, non ad logicum, sed ad Philosophum pertinet." Albert the Great, *Commentaria in Praedicamenta Aristotelis* Tractatus I, Caput III; Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1954, p. 10

⁹"Non enim est pars philosophiae essentialis vel realis, sed rationalis sive sermocinalis: considerat enim ens stans sub sermone." Albert the Great,

Since we name and speak about things insofar as we know them in some way, this distinction of Albert is, of course, in harmony with what Avicenna and Cajetan say about the way the logician considers things. But it should be noted that it begins in a way closer to the senses since names or speeches can be heard.

But such a way of speaking can also lead us back to the position of Boethius and the Greek Commentators on the *Categories* of Aristotle. That such a transition is not fanciful as applied to Albert's thinking can be seen in this passage from his commentary on the *Categories*:

Since it has been already proven in the antecedents to logic that one does not come to a knowledge of the unknown through the known except by speech disposed for signifying, whether a man inquires by himself through interiorly disposed speech, or inquires with another through speech exteriorly put forth, it follows of necessity that the order of the predicables can not be determined except as the predicable is designated under a vocal sound...whence it is necessary to consider the predicables as they are signified by vocal sounds; whence Boethius says that this science, namely the book of the *Categories*, is about the ten vocal sounds signifying the first genera of things.¹⁰

There is a transition in this text from the necessity of speech in our thinking or for our thinking to the necessity of considering the order of the predicables

Commentaria in Peri Hermeneias Aristotelis, Tractatus I, Caput I; Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1951, p. 4

¹⁰"Quia autem jam in antecedentibus ad logicam probatam est, quod ad scientiam incogniti per cognitum non devenitur, nisi per dispositum sermonem ad significandum, sive homo inquirat apud seipsum per interius dispositum sermonem, sive inquirat apud alium per sermonem exterius prolatam, sequitur de necessitate, quod ordo praedicabilium non potest determinari, nisi secundum quod sub voce habet praedicabile designari...Propter quod praedicabilia oportet considerare secundum quod vocibus significantur: propter quod dicit Boetius quod haec scientia, scilicet libri praedicamentorum, est de decem primis vocibus prima genera rerum significantibus." Albert the Great, *Commentaria in Praedicamenta Aristotelis* Tractatus I, Caput I; Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1954, p. 2

insofar as it stands under speech; and from this Albert comes to the position of Boethius that the *Categories* is about vocal sounds.

One last text from Albert shows to what extent he inclines to the position of Boethius and the Greek commentators. In the beginnings of his commentary on the *Peri Hermeneias*, Albert states the position of Boethius without any attribution. And what is especially significant about this passage is that it involves a distinction between the *Categories* and the *Peri Hermeneias* in regard to vocal sound or speech. Albert admits that the *Categories* is closer to things in that the meaning of the vocal sounds it considers is according to the properties of thing. This is the passage:

The way of signifying in vocal sound differs in the *Categories* and here. In the *Categories*, the beginning of signification is from the thing and ends in the vocal sound. For the book of the *Categories* is about ten vocal sounds signifying the first principles and according to the properties of things, not of vocal sounds. But here in the science of interpretation...the beginning is from speech or vocal sound and it ends in the thing.¹¹

Albert's hesitation between these two positions or his making use of both is not simply an inability to decide which is correct. It would be a mistake to regard either position as simply false. And the proponents of either position would not regard the other position as simply false. In this respect, Albert's ambivalence is perhaps well taken in that there is an element of truth in both positions. What is more, perhaps both positions can be sustained in some way as Cajetan says.¹² Yet there is a difference between the two positions and it is not without importance for our understanding of and approach to logic. It is perhaps not without significance that Albert follows the position of Avicenna

¹¹"Differt autem modus significandi in voce in *Praedicamentis* et hic. In *Praedicamentis* enim est inchoatio significationis a re et terminatur in voce. Est enim liber *Praedicamentorum* de decem vocibus prima principia significantibus, et secundum rerum proprietates, non vocum. Hic autem in scientia de interpretatione...est inchoatio a sermone sive voce, et terminatur in rem." Albert the Great, *Commentaria in Peri Hermeneias Aristotelis*, Liber I, Tractatus I, Caput II; Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1951, p. 7

¹²Cajetan, *Commentaria in Praedicamenta Aristotelis*, Prologus (Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1953), p. 3

more in his *Tractatus* on the nature of logic and the position of Boethius when he actually comments on the first two logical works of Aristotle. This will appear when we ask which position is better and why.

The position of Boethius and the Greek commentators is better for a number of reasons. First, it preserves the character of logic as a tool or an art about tools. Names and speeches can be clearly seen to be tools for ordering our thoughts. The teacher, for example, uses them to order the thoughts of his students. And no one can clearly examine his own thoughts and try to put them in order without expressing them in words. But to say that logic is about things as they exist in our reason or as they are conceived in an incomplex way makes logic seem to be a theoretical science in the full sense, more about things than the tools of knowing things. Man needs tools that can be sensed and names and speeches fit this requirement very nicely.

A second reason why the position of Boethius and the Greek commentators is better is that it fits the teaching of logic to beginners. The beginner can more easily see that names exist and that things are named (since both names and some things, at least, can be sensed) than that things exist in our reason in some way. Further, he can be led from the diverse ways we name things to see that thought in some way intervenes in the naming process. He is led in this way from what he can sense (names and things) to what he cannot sense (thoughts and that things are in reason). The position of Avicenna fits more the wise man or metaphysician who is trying to understand why logic exists and why it is true and necessary because it has a foundation in reality; that is, in things.

A third reason why the position of Boethius and the Greek commentators is better is that it fits the text of Aristotle which both groups of thinkers are presumably trying to follow and expound. It is important to note here that at the crucial point where Aristotle first distinguishes the ten categories,¹³ Albert keeps the key word *signifies* in his paraphrase¹⁴ while Cajetan's paraphrase

¹³Aristotle, *Categories*, Chapter 4, 1b 25-28

¹⁴Albert the Great, *Commentaria in Praedicamenta Aristotelis*, Tractatus I, Caput VII; Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1954, p. 22

leaves this out.¹⁵ . It is, of course, names or vocal sounds that *signify* while things are *signified*.

One cannot, however, deny the importance of the position of Avicenna for the wiseman's defense of the scientific (in the sense of the *Posterior Analytics*) character of logic. The necessary truth of logic cannot be defended (as has been said) without finding a foundation for it in reality; that is, in things.

We can see perhaps then some reason why Albert should make more use of the position of Avicenna in the *Tractatus* on the nature of logic and follow Boethius more in the exposition of the logical works of Aristotle. For the first is closer to the work of the wise man and the latter to the actual teaching of logic. But Albert's somewhat eclectic approach does not lead him to distinguish clearly the reasons for using both of these positions.

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¹⁵Cajetan, *Commentaria in Praedicamenta Aristotelis* , (Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1953), p. 23