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A LITTLE IDEALISM IS IDEALISM ENOUGH: A STUDY ON IDEALISM IN ARISTOTLE'S EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract: Given the evidence available today, we know that the later Middle Ages knew strong forms of idealism. However, Plato alone will not do to explain some of its features. Aristotle was the most important philosophical authority in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but until now no one dared explore in his thought the roots of this idealism because of the dogma of realism surrounding him. I challenge this dogma, showing that the Stagirite contained in his thought the roots of idealist aspects that will be developed, namely by Dietrich of Freiberg and Eckhart of Hochheim, into a fully idealist epistemology.

I

To approach the thought of Aristotle today is like penetrating a sacrosanct bulk of long-established views that 'guide' one's interpretations of it. Because of the major influence of his thought in the whole of Western culture and of philosophical thinking in particular, studies on the history of philosophy are greatly constrained by those same views. Their weight is so overwhelming that neither the Aristotelian interpretation nor the study of the history of Western thought advance.

Particularly two all-powerful dogmas guard the access to Western thought: (D1) Aristotle was an impenitent realist; and, undoubtedly connected with this, (D2) medieval epistemology was almost exclusively a realist one.¹ The problem with this, and namely with D2, is that we have a hard time explaining modern philosophy and one of its main—if not *the* most important—features: idealism. Looking for the sources of modern idealism solely in Plato will not do, and not even those who first opposed D2 realized that much of its source was to be found in Aristotle and in the late medieval reception of his thought.²

The fact is that it is manifest that the Middle Ages knew strong forms of idealism (with Augustine, John Scottus Eriugena, and Anselm of Canterbury, for instance), and that the late medieval thought in particular, precisely the one which most absorbed from Aristotle, was greatly characterized by an epistemological idealism: even a superficial reading of some texts of Dietrich of Freiberg (ca. 1250–1310) and of Eckhart of Hochheim (ca. 1260–1327/8) will show the undeniably idealist features pervading their noetics

and theory of knowledge.

When I started researching on idealism in the late Middle Ages, I obviously kept coming across Aristotle, but I could not do anything with him as far as idealism was concerned. Yet, Plato, alone, would not do: although his influence was to be found everywhere, it did not explain the kind of idealism I was looking for. Transmitted to the medieval philosophers by Augustine and by the Neo-Platonists, Platonic idealism was detectable mainly in such aspects as the mind-body dualism and the epistemic superiority of the former over the latter, the transcendence of a wholly intelligible supernatural world, knowledge as divine illumination, and the thought-being identity, all aspects that comfortably fitted into the Christian thought. It so happened that in the above-mentioned later medieval philosophers I could find such astonishingly modern and even contemporary idealistic features as a constituting subject and the productive power of the mind—in other words: the tenet that reality is subjective or mind-made—for which Platonism could not account.

Since the major revolution in medieval thought was caused precisely by the rediscovery and translation throughout the twelfth century of almost all of Aristotle’s works, many of them brought to the Latin world by his Arab commentators, it seemed only too probable that he had had something to do with the abrupt emergence of idealism in the late thirteenth century. With this in mind, I decided to *read* the Stagirite putting aside the dogma that he was an inflexible realist. I focused on two major works of his, in which he concentrates much of his onto-epistemology: the *Categories* and the *De anima*, the former having a long history of influence in Western thought, namely in the genesis and prolongation of the problem of universals, and the latter, freshly discovered and thus profoundly agitating the later medieval thought. In reading the *Categories* from an epistemological point of view, I intended to escape the dogmatic ontological reading, according to which Aristotle’s categories are an attempt to describe real objects as they are in themselves. As for his treatise on the soul, I aimed at reading it as it is: a doctrine on sensation, perception, and intellection, i.e., on cognition, as we would put it today.

My focusing on these two works proved fruitful: I found out that these texts stand for two ways in which Aristotle propelled idealist epistemologies in late medieval philosophy. I do not mean that he was some sort of consummate idealist; for that matter, I do not think he saw himself as a realist, either, since “idealist” and “realist” are too recently formed ‘girdle-concepts.’³ What I definitely want to say is that there are aspects of Aristotelian thought, namely of his theory of knowledge, that today would be unequivocally labeled as idealist, and those aspects ‘inspired’ a more precise kind of idealism in some late medieval philosophers upon their reception of his works. This is the reason why I speak of idealism in Aristotle (or in his epistemology, to be more precise) rather than of Aristotelian idealism. Besides, the latter would easily tend to support a dogmatic view, while expressions such as “Realism in X” or “Idealism in X” do not favor such approaches. However, these two ways were of different weights, in what concerns that transmission, and, though interconnected, had to be somehow separately tracked: the *Categories* stands for a weak path of transmission of idealism; the *De anima*, for the strong path.

II. The Weak Path of the Transmission of Idealism in Aristotelian Epistemology: The Categories

Any realist epistemology has to come forward with an ontology on which to base its claims: if one defends the stance that objects (also: beings, things) exist independently from the human thought and that, yet, they can be known by it, one has to state clearly what the properties of objects are that make them knowable to a knowing subject, albeit their independence from him/her; but because they are believed to exist independently, or in themselves, the realist philosopher *first of all* has to list the kinds of objects that exist (ontology proper) and the properties that they have in themselves. This is obviously a daunting task, unpromising from the start, since it is evident that any such list can only come from the grasping mind of the subject, the object remaining wholly silent concerning what *is said* about it. As a matter of fact, one can say no matter what about objects, even that they have mysterious faces to them, such as the Kantian things-in-themselves, because there is no way to prove the contrary. The truth is that any attempt to make a list of categories, as those kinds and properties of objects are technically termed in metaphysics following Aristotle’s first use of the word *katêgoria*, if ‘honest,’ has to be restricted to a list of categories of the thought of the knowing subject. Kant claimed to be the first to have realized that the categories can only be of this kind, i.e., a priori principles or concepts of the human mind, and that is what he called his Copernican Revolution, since, like Copernicus, who had displaced the focus of observation from the object to the subject, he had similarly shifted the focus of attention in metaphysics.

But that was also how Dietrich of Freiberg clearly grasped it, kicking the endless discussion on the universals aside and taking the Aristotelian categories for what they really were, i.e., formal principles in the mind of the knowing subject:

And thus the intellect in a certain way constitutes (*constituit*) its own object, which is its essence, formally from its formal principles.⁴

After which he went on to “assemble those things that firstly and essentially concern the object of the intellect, and without which nothing can be intellectually captured”:⁵ the a priori categories of the human mind!⁶

So much for the Kantian Copernican Revolution,⁷ and so much for the pretensions of the realists: categories, whatever they might be, are nowhere in the object but only in the human mind. Whatever *is said* of an object is what one perceives of it, and one’s perception of it is obviously dependent on one’s perceptive and cognitive apparatus. No objects are yellow if you are colorblind, no ripe apple smells wonderful if you are anosmic, no urban traffic is deafening in case you are hard of hearing, and none of these—color, smell, noise—will appear as effects to anyone lacking the principle of causality: there really are

no ontologies, but solely mental principles of perception and cognition. And this is one of the major tenets of idealism; its consequence is that epistemology wholly absorbs ontology—and the whole of metaphysics, for that matter—since an object’s being or essence is identified with a thought content.

With this in mind, it was easy to find the weensy thing which caused Aristotle’s list of categories to represent a specific source and path of transmission of idealism: although he presumably intended to present a list of categories *of* (the) objects, he actually created a list of what *is said* (Gr. *legetai*) about them,⁸ never explicitly stating that its items corresponded to what things really are in themselves. This immediately sparked the ‘rumor’ that his were not categories of objects, but grammatical or speech categories,⁹ and Dietrich of Freiberg thought as much when he reflected upon the Aristotelian table of categories.¹⁰

In *Categories* II, 1a16–19, Aristotle distinguished between what is said in combination (a man runs, a man wins) and what is said without combination (man, ox, runs, wins), and in IV, 1b25–27 he specified that what is said without combination corresponds precisely to the ten items known since then as categories: essence (e.g.: man, horse); quantity (four-foot, five-foot); quality (white, grammatical); relation (double, half); place (in the Lyceum, in the market-place); time (yesterday, last year); posture (lying, sitting); state (with shoes on, with armor on); action (cutting, burning); passion (being cut, being burnt). This first distinction corresponds to what is said (*tôn legomenôn* = of the things said), but he immediately comes forward with a second distinction, this time concerning what is (*tôn ontôn* = of the things that are). This might mean that Aristotle’s ontology actually is about independent things, but it is not so: again, the things that are, are distinguished among themselves according to the way each of them is spoken of (*legetai*).¹¹

Alone, the categories make no statements or affirmations (*kataphasis*); only in combination with each other do they form statements.¹² Does this mean that, like Plato, Aristotle sustained that mere categories or words in isolation capture nothing of the world?¹³ He truly believed that the definition of a thing (saying what its genus, species and difference(s) are)¹⁴ captured its “essence,” but he also claimed that this is first of all (the first essence) a singular thing, a *tode ti*, a “something this” or, less literally, a given thing (a given man, a given horse). However, it is not likely that he meant by this that the essence of a thing is captured by its mere being named, and thus he followed Plato more closely than he would probably have liked to, and his categories were ever since seen as what is said of a thing.

Hegel himself defined category as such,¹⁵ which is only in agreement with his entire philosophy: since language is one of Mind’s contents, it is true, i.e., it corresponds to reality, for whatever is in the Mind is real. That for him the categories are of thought means that they are categories of language and of the object itself, too. More recently, namely in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a heated debate in France on whether Aristotle’s ten items were language or thought categories, but none of the thinkers involved in the debate (Émile Benveniste, Pierre Aubenque, Gilles-Gaston Granger, to cite but a few) realized

that they could only be thought of as language categories in the absence of a constituting subject: if Aristotle had had such a subject, no one would have mistaken his categories for parts of speech, and the whole issue of the universals in the Middle Ages would probably not have taken place, since what it amounted to was, in fact, a debate on whether what *is said* of a thing resides in the mind of a subject (the nominalist view), or is some sort of thing, *res*, that singular things share (the realist view).¹⁶

When Boethius, picking it up from the Neo-Platonic Porphyry, first states in Latin the question whether universals were ‘things’ apart from the material objects or subsisted only in them, he clearly stated this to be a choice between Platonism and Aristotelianism.¹⁷ Thus, and since the former was taken for idealism and the latter for realism (now in the epistemological sense), the Aristotelian position was wrongfully transmitted as the realist choice: there are things in the sensible world, wholly independent of our minds. Aristotle never said this; as a matter of fact, that he claimed that the universals only subsisted in things, being *objects of knowledge*, is more of an idealist affirmation than Plato’s: for the latter, the Ideas were real things in a separated world, but for the former, they (now the universals) were only certain ‘properties’ that made things cognizable to the human mind.¹⁸

As for Ockham, when he decided that there are no universals but in the mind¹⁹—and by this he meant that there were no universals not even in the Verb, the way Christian philosophers had viewed the former Platonic world of Ideas—he did no more than keep to the spirit of the times which cried for a conception of the constituting subject to be formed. Together with a more explicit idealism from the aforementioned Rhenanians, he can be said to have contributed to the emergence of the conscious subject in the late Middle Ages; and, in all cases, what prompted these philosophers to proclaim the mental character of the universals or categories was to a great extent the Aristotelian *legesthai*, to be said, to be called, or the morphologically and semantically related *katêgoreisthai*, to be categorized or predicated.

I see Aristotle’s doctrine of the categories as the weak path of transmission of an idealist epistemology as far as late medieval idealism is concerned precisely because it carried in itself, since its inception, what was but a hint of a constituting subject: a more profound reflexion would sooner or later reveal the truth under the surface, and, to my knowledge, Dietrich of Freiberg was the first to fully carry that out. If the later medieval philosophers were the first to do this, it was because they not only had access to the entire work of Aristotle (i.e., his surviving writings, all scholarly ones), but also because they were confronted with a whole history of reflexion on his philosophy carried out by the Arabs who themselves had assimilated much from the Neo-Platonists and from the Peripatetics. Because this tradition was more directly interested in Aristotelian noetic and epistemological matters, and the idealist features of these are far from being mere hints, being quite patent, it corresponds to what I call the strong path of transmission of idealism having its source in Aristotle.

III. *The Strong Path of the Transmission of Idealism in Aristotelian Epistemology*

1. *Aristotelian phantasia, or representation*

Aristotle did not like Plato’s doctrine of Ideas or Forms and he criticized it harshly,²⁰ but he did not escape its spell entirely. As a matter of fact, if the theory of Ideas can be said to found an idealist epistemology—which it obviously can, the Ideas being the true essence of a thing, whether in the separated world or in the mind which remembers them—our Stagirite could not be more of an idealist himself, since he, too, founds his epistemology on the existence of ideas: his definition of the universal as that which is at rest in the soul, apart from multiplicity, one and identical in all particular subjects²¹ is as close to Plato’s definition of the Idea as it could be: in the *Phaedo*,²² Plato had stated the Idea to be one, indivisible, and identical to itself. In truth, Aristotle succeeded in being more of an idealist than his master, since for the latter the Idea was a *noêton*, an intelligible thing, which resided in a place beyond the heavens,²³ while for his disciple the idea was in the human soul!

It is precisely the psychology unequivocally founded on the idea as the intelligible character of a thing present in the human mind that Aristotle expounded in his *De anima*. This single aspect would be enough to undermine any exclusively realist claims about his theory of cognition, but it would leave the question of a constituting subject, essential for idealism, very superficially treated. Ironically, it is precisely to his realist quota that we have to turn in our search for idealist features; one cannot show that he was an idealist, since as said before he lacked an elaborate concept of the subject, but he had the beginnings of one in his *representative realism*.

Defining the soul, *psuchê*, as “the first actuality of a natural body endowed with organs,”²⁴ the Stagirite tells us at the start—against Plato—that there is a *natural* union between the soul and the body, and that the soul is responsible for the “actualization” or “actuality” (*entelecheia*) of all of the body’s potentialities (also: faculties, *dunameis*) with a view to an end, according to his teleological metaphysics. In other words, the soul is the first principle and the cause of the living body, that which makes it be what it actually is.²⁵ Now, if the soul makes of a living body what it is, the reverse is not false, since the former is not wholly separable from the body it ‘moves’: it is the soul and the body that makes a living being (*kakei hê psuchê kai to sôma to zôon*).²⁶ Even if the cogitative faculty in man is somehow separable from the other faculties, sensation itself already contributes to knowledge:

In creatures endowed with sensation, the first change is caused by that which produces it, sensing having at engendering already a kind of knowledge (*epistêmê*). Its actuality [of the sensing] corresponds to intellecting (*theôrein*), with this difference: that which produces this actuality comes from the outside, like the visible and the audible, and

similarly for the other senses. This is so because actual sensation is of particulars, while knowledge is of universals.²⁷

It is thus through the senses that man begins to know reality, since sensation is already an act of knowledge. Two things have been proved: Aristotle is an empiricist, and he is a realist; the sense organs capture data from really existing objects. But he is extremely clear regarding a crucial aspect: sensation is only of particulars, while knowledge is of universals. Man must then be endowed with something else besides sensation in order to acquire real knowledge, and we have already learned what that thing is and where it is, and he says it again: “These [the universals] are in a certain way in the soul itself.”²⁸ For this reason, one can think whenever one wants to, but the same does not apply to sensation, which cannot do without the outer objects.

Direct realism rejects any form of idealism, since it claims that what one perceives are physical qualities present in the objects; on the contrary, representative realism sooner or later invites a reflexion on the constituting role of the subject, since it postulates intermediaries (ideas, usually) between the objects and the mind. The question is: how much representative realism can we find in Aristotle? He considers representation (*phantasia*) to be one of the faculties of the soul, together with nourishment, appetite, sensation, local movement, and thought (*to dianoêtikon*).²⁹ But he next goes on to distinguish it from sensation and thought: it is not possible without the former, and opinion (*hupolêpsis*) is not possible without it.³⁰ So far, so good: representation is a mental image of what appears (*phainetai*), an appearance (*phantasma*), very much close to the sense Kant would give it many centuries later.

But Aristotle is not done with representation yet, and he goes on to elaborate on its cause and nature: for him, representation is a change (*kinêsis*) caused by sensation in actuality;³¹ as for its cause, it is not the object, but—and here is the turning point—the object *and* the subject! And it is not merely a subject in the sense of the one who has the senses which capture data from the material world and transform them into mental representations; in *De an.* III, 3, we are facing a psychological subject, an individual who perceives reality in an entirely individualized way, more often than not taking things for what they are not, ‘seeing’ them differently from what they are, or when they are nowhere to be seen. It is obvious that Aristotle’s subject does not merely represent an object, but an object which has gone through an operation carried out by the senses *and* by the intellectual apparatus of an individual with a unique history. He does not put it in black and white, but in view of our contemporary knowledge regarding psychology, Aristotle undoubtedly sketched the first lines of what would become a theory of the constituting subject with the later medieval philosophers.

In spite of the persistence of the dogma of realism in Aristotle, not enough emphasis has been laid on the fact that his realism is of a representative kind. In fact, there seems to be an indecision concerning his status as a realist and much of this indecision can be traced

to the mistranslation of *phantasia* as meaning “imagination.” It is very true that in some passages the Stagirite seems to mean what we today understand by “imagination,” i.e., the spontaneous production of images by the mind without the presence of a real object, or even the misrepresentation of objects;³² in a particular passage,³³ he is so ambiguous that one cannot really decide whether he means “imagination” or “representation,” but this ambiguity might be due to the fact that Aristotle actually made no distinction between the two. In truth, “representation” is the faculty of ‘picturing’ in the mind both what is perceived *and* what is solely intelligible, such as the mathematical objects.³⁴ But more often than not the translation of the Greek *phantasia* by “imagination” makes no sense at all. The following passage is a good example:

There is a difficulty concerning the affections of the soul: are they all shared by that which contains the soul, or is any of them peculiar to it? We must face this difficulty, though it is not easy. It seems that in most cases there can be, without the body, no passion or action, such as becoming angry, being courageous, desiring, and sensing in general. Maybe it is different with thinking. But if this is also a kind of *representation*, or is dependent on *representation*, it is not possible that it [thinking] can exist without the body.³⁵ (my italics)

Aristotle’s conclusion is decisive: without representation, the soul does not think.³⁶ Again, translating *phantasia* as “imagination” not only originates nonsense, but leads to severe misinterpretations of the whole of Aristotle’s psychology and theory of cognition. The persistent habit of mistranslating it while overly focusing on the ‘impressionist’ character of his theory of sensation has distracted attention from his representative realism and thus helped maintain D1 alive and kicking.

When Avicenna directly borrowed the Greek word *phantasia*, he meant by it a faculty receptive of the data impressed in the senses,³⁷ very likely influenced by Plotinus’s conception of *phantasia* as the faculty uniting all the sense data, making them accessible to the soul.³⁸ Just as *phantasia* was an intermediary between sensation and intellection for the Stagirite, *bantâsiâ*, or “common sense,” its usual translation, was for Avicenna the intermediary between the senses and the soul: its sense of “representation” is maintained. Aquinas redirected its meaning in the sense of imagination,³⁹ following a more literary and rhetoric usage of the term, and his future authority has undoubtedly contributed much to this mistranslation.

Thus, I think we get rid of the encumbering ghost of direct realism regarding Aristotle; the representative realism which replaces it allows of idealism inasmuch as it eventually causes the focus of discussion to turn to the subject of representation. Establishing the psychological bases of representative realism in Aristotle, however, is just the first step: representative realism requires intermediaries, and we now move on to them, i.e., to the ideas.

2. *The All-Making Intellect*

Above, we saw that for Aristotle sensation is of particulars, while knowledge is of universals. With this, he managed to conciliate a strong empiricism with a latent idealism. The universals are none other than the Platonic Ideas or Forms, or, in other words, the genera and species. As already seen, in spite of the fact that the Stagirite does not spare the rod concerning the Platonic Ideas, he does not get rid of them, actually revolutionizing—vs. eliminating—the doctrine of his master: by placing the ideas in the soul (while Plato placed them beyond the heavens), Aristotle humanized them! In the *De anima*, the ideas of everything material and immaterial are in the soul; this is, in a certain way, everything,⁴⁰ and the intellect is the “form of forms” (*eidos eidôn*).⁴¹ Cognition of the material things is achieved via a process of abstraction, in which the forms of sensible things are abstracted from their matter. But this is the case of sensible things; in the case of the intelligible things, the intellect produces (stores?) them spontaneously. Now, because the ideas or forms of everything are a priori in the soul, one does not know but what is at the start in the soul itself or, more precisely, in the intellect (*nous*). This is none other but the Kantian claim that “we can know a priori of things only what we ourselves put into them.”⁴² And we know that, in spite of his best efforts to keep ‘genuine’ idealism at bay, Kant was a full-fledged idealist—even if truly believing in outer things.

Were this not enough to convince us that we can extract a subjective idealism from Aristotle’s psychology, his conceiving of the process of cognition as an identity between knower and thing known must do the trick. It is true that, by saying that in the act of knowledge or thought the mind of the subject does no more than actualize an identity that was there since always in potency, Aristotle says that there is no subject without an object: the mind of the subject is merely a blank slate, where nothing is written in actuality.⁴³ But again, the parallel between the Stagirite and Kant is striking: he states that in a certain way the subject is all things since without objects it does not exist: it is merely the transcendental subject of the thoughts = X, a bare consciousness, an act of thought that cannot think itself without thinking something else;⁴⁴ however, this was the way by which Kant thought he had shown that the outer object really is but that, as an object of knowledge, it is not without a subject.⁴⁵ It was precisely this interdependence between subject and object that Kant called transcendental idealism.

Kant had already a very elaborate notion of constituting subject, no doubt due to the intense reflexion focusing on subjective consciousness that anteceded his own philosophy throughout modern thought. Aristotle had nowhere to turn but to the former philosophers, and a subjective consciousness in possession of all knowledge concerning itself and the world was unimaginable for them. Thus, he could not attribute the source of knowledge to the subject, reason why the categories were supposed to be of the object, and that was also why he had to ‘break’ the human intellect into two: one, the agent intellect (*nous poiêtikos*), in possession of all forms in actuality, and another, the passive intellect (*nous pathêticos*),

mere potentiality awaiting the contribution of the agent intellect in order to think.

If this is at first sight a simple dichotomy, two operations or functions of the same faculty, the fact is that it was a major source of dispute since it was first laconically expressed in *De anima* III, 5, for the simple reason that the adjective “separated” (*chôristos*) could be understood in two ways: when Aristotle wrote that the agent intellect, characterized as “without mixture, impassive, essentially activity,” was separated,⁴⁶ did he mean to say that it was separated from the passive intellect but still a part of the human soul, or did he want to say that it was wholly separated, autonomous and independent from it?

The Neo-Platonists, following their main inspirational source, Plotinus’s *Enneads*, would not stress the separability of the agent intellect, since their emanating metaphysics did not cope well with strict divisions; the *Nous*, or second hypostasis, contained in itself the intelligible forms of all that had been, was, and would be, thus being in actuality all forms.⁴⁷ One has to bear in mind that much of the Neo-Platonic thought was an effort against Aristotelianism; therefore, they would not lightly identify their *Nous* with the agent intellect of the Stagirite. Nevertheless, the identity is inevitable, and that is how the Arab philosophers got it.⁴⁸ From Alfarabi to Averroes, the agent intellect will be conceived as not only separate, as Aristotle might have hinted, but also as unique, like the Neo-Platonic *Nous*: according to them, there was but one agent intellect which all human individuals would share.

They explained the interaction between the agent intellect and the human forms or stages of intellect as a conjunction that was still influenced by the Aristotelian analogy of the light: just as light renders things visible, the agent intellect allows things to be known.⁴⁹ But it is clear that the Arab reception of Aristotle did not entail any strong form of idealism, since the human stages of the intellect could do nothing without the agent intellect, a supernatural entity.

Ironically, it was the Latin reception of this doctrine that immediately entailed a strong idealism: when Albert the Great first gets in touch with the thought of the *falâsifa*, the one thing he will immediately reject is precisely the separate character of the agent intellect; Thomas Aquinas will follow him, and so will the German Dominicans. But they did not change the contents of the agent intellect: in other words, they *re-humanized* this all too powerful, omniscient ‘thing’ by endowing each and every human being with her/his very own agent intellect!

This, as Aristotle first put it, was capable of producing (*poiein*) everything; the Intelligence of the *Liber de causis*, for a long time also attributed to Aristotle and extremely influential among the late medieval philosophers, also had this productive faculty emphasized.⁵⁰ Eckhart’s sermon no. 9 in Middle High German is truly the climax of this idealist trend when he boldly comes forward with the statement that, like God himself, the human soul acts in the non-being;⁵¹ the reason for this is that, as he sees it, God is intellect, and man has his quota of it, just a spark (*ein vünkelîn*), but a powerful one. And Eckhart’s intellect is none other than Aristotle’s *Nous*.⁵²

Dietrich of Freiberg was the first to take Aristotle’s philosophy further than its own author by developing its idealist seeds. Taking the categories for what they really were, a priori principles of thought, he realized that the human intellect gives itself not only its own object, but its own essence.⁵³ It is self-constituting, as well as reality-making.⁵⁴ Of all this abrupt idealism—and a strong one, for that matter—the Stagirite was, one way or the other, the source.

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1. Both dogmas are too widespread and generalized to allow of a precise tracing of their roots; however, among important twentieth-century scholars who helped establish them, Étienne Gilson unquestionably had a significant role: regarding D2 in particular, statements like “toutes les grandes épistémologies médiévales [ont] été ce que nous appellerions aujourd’hui des réalismes” (*L’esprit de la philosophie médiévale* [Paris; Vrin, 1989], 234) represent powerful maxims.
 2. Although he did not exclude Aristotle as a source of idealism in the Middle Ages, Kurt Flasch, undoubtedly the leading figure in the brief attempt in the 1970s to establish something like a medieval idealism, attributed almost all of the weight for it to Plato; cf. his article “Kennt die mittelalterliche Philosophie die konstitutive Funktion des menschlichen Denkens?” *Kant Studien* 63 (1972): 182–206; see p. 184 in particular.
 3. The term “idealist” appears to have been used for the first time in philosophy by Leibniz: in his *Réplique aux réflexions de Bayle*, he opposed the Epicureans, materialists, to the Platonists, or idealists, as he called them. As for the term “realist,” it was probably first used as a philosophical technical term to designate those who defended that universals were real things (the *reales*) in the problem of universals in the Middle Ages; by analogy, it later labeled those who defended that objects exist independently from the human mind and that the properties one perceives in them are the ones they actually possess.
 4. Dietrich of Freiberg, *De intellectu et intelligibili* III, 25, 13; *Opera Omnia* I (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1977), 199. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
 5. Dietrich of Freiberg, *De intellectu*, 34, 1; *Opera Omnia* I, 205.
 6. Of which he gives us a list of twelve: being (*ens*), the true (*verum*), first principles (*prima vel ex primis*), immediate propositions, intelligibility, causality, invariability and necessity (listed as different but said to be one and the same), eternity (or unchangeability), universal predicability (connected with the next two), essentiality (*per se*), and universality.
 7. A comparison between Dietrich’s list and Kant’s tables of judgments and categories is revelatory of the fact that the latter was not the first—as he claimed—to attribute the categories to the subject, and not to the object, what he saw as the persistent mistake of Western metaphysics.
 8. In the *Categories*, there are 178 occurrences of the Greek verb form *legetai* plus nine occurrences of the medio-passive infinitive *legesthai* (to be said, to be called), among other forms of the verb “to say.”
 9. Alexander of Aphrodisias and Simplicius took them for parts of speech: cf. Simplicius, *In Praedicamenta* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1971), 13 (particularly).
 10. Cf. *De origine rerum praedicamentalium*, 3, 12; *Opera Omnia* III (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983), 161: “And the Philosopher indicated this in the *Categories*, where he said he had enumerated the modes of quality ‘usually spoken of’ (*qui consueverunt dici*).” For a detailed study of Dietrich’s reception of the Aristotelian *Categories* in his *De origine* see Kurt Flasch’s already mentioned article.
 11. *Categories* II, 1a20–1b9.
 12. Cf. *ibid.*, IV, 2a5–10.
 13. The source of this ‘linguistic’ feature is not Aristotle himself, but Plato: in *Sophistes* 262a–d, he distinguished between mere naming (or listing: nouns, verbs) and utterance; mere naming captures nothing (says nothing) of the things named, but complete sentences of the form noun + verb

(utterances) actually refer to what is. Thus Plato at the same time transmitted the idea that language can capture the being of a thing and that, for it to do so, it has to be a complex system (rather than a mere collection of isolated words). But more importantly, he implicitly sustained that a thing only is if and only if it actually *is being!* (*ousia*—from the feminine present participle of the verb “to be,” *ousa*, literally: [she] being), i.e., a man walks (is walking). In other words: for us, at least in the sensible world, a thing is its ‘action’ (its movement or change), and that corresponds to what can be said of it.

14. E.g.: man (species) is a rational (difference) animal (genus).

15. *Science of Logic, The Doctrine of Essence*, section one, chapter two: The Determinations of Reflexion, Remark, §864: “The category is, according to its etymology and the definition of Aristotle, what is said or affirmed of a being.”

16. Even if the problem of universals concerned more directly the Forms, or genus-species-difference list, rather than the categories proper, the question is still the same: does the definition/categorization of a thing originate in the real things or in the mind of the observer?

17. Cf. *In Isagogen Porphyrii Commenta*, editio 2a, I, 11.

18. This just shows how a strict dichotomy between Platonism and Aristotelianism is erroneous at the root.

19. And by “universals” he meant simply “meanings”; cf. *Summa logicae* I, 12–4.

20. Mainly, he claimed he could not understand how ‘things’ separated from the objects contributed to their being known. Aristotle’s criticism of the Platonic ideas is concentrated in *Met.* A, 9; Z, 13–14; and M, 4.

21. Cf. *Posterior Analytics* II, 19.

22. *Phaedo* 80b.

23. *Phaedrus* 247c.

24. *De anima* II, 1, 412b5–6.

25. Cf. *ibid.*, 4, 415b7 ff.

26. *Ibid.*, 1, 413a3.

27. *Ibid.*, 5, 417b17–23.

28. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

29. *Ibid.*, II, 3.

30. Cf. *ibid.*, III, 3, 427b14–16.

31. Cf. *ibid.*, 429a1–2.

32. Cf. *ibid.*, 427b17–24.

33. *Ibid.*, 429a1–8.

34. He himself elaborates on this distinction in *ibid.*, 4–7.

35. *Ibid.*, I, 1, 403a5–10.

36. *Ibid.*, III, 7, 431a16–17.

37. Cf. *Liber de anima* I, 5 (vol. I, Louvain: E. Peeters, 1972), 87.

38. Cf. *Enneads* IV, 3. 29–30.

39. Cf. *Summa theologiae* I, q. 78, art. 4: “for *phantasia* or imagination is as it were a storehouse of forms received through the senses.”

40. *Ibid.*, III, 8, 431b21.

41. *Ibid.*, 432a2.

42. *Critique of Pure Reason*, Preface to the Second Edition, B xviii.

43. Cf. *De an.* III, 4, 429b31–430a1.

44. Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 404. When the Stagirite concludes, in *De an.* III, 4, 429b9–10, that the intellect can think itself, he once again is speaking of representation: the intellect, having acquired the forms of the objects, can now proceed to the act of himself (*dunêtai energein di’ hautou*; *ibid.*, 7–8), i.e., it can think without resorting to the sensible things because it now has science, or knowledge (*epistêmê*), of them.

45. “If we treat outer objects as things in themselves, it is quite impossible to understand how we could arrive at a knowledge of their reality outside us, since we have to rely merely on the representation which is in us. For we cannot be sentient [of what is] outside ourselves, but only [of what is] in us, and the whole of our self-consciousness therefore yields nothing save merely our own

determinations”: *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 378, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003 [1781]), p. 351.

46. *De an.* III, 5, 430a17–18.

47. Cf. *Enneads* V, 9.

48. Besides having access in Arabic to the works of Aristotle himself, the *falāsifa*, also called Hellenizing Arab philosophers, also had access to two Neo-Platonic texts they mistakenly attributed to the Stagirite: the *Liber de causis*, and *Aristotle’s Theology*. The former is the compilation of Proclus’s *Elements of Theology*, and the latter was none other but a paraphrase of *Enneads* IV–VI, precisely the parts in which Plotinus exposed his noetics and theory of cognition.

49. *De an.* III, 5, 430a15.

50. “That is why the things that are in the intelligence are not the impressions themselves, but the causes of the impressions. And the meaning of this is that the intelligence is itself cause of the things that are under it for the single reason that it is intelligence. If thus the intelligence is the cause of the things for the reason that it is intelligence, then one cannot doubt that the causes of things in the intelligence are also intelligible.”—*Liber de causis* VII, p. 77; cf. also propositions 72, 77, and 78.

51. Cf. *Predigten, Deutsche Werke* I (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1958), 151.

52. In the sermon no. 69, Eckhart lists five characteristics of the *vernünfficheit*, or intellect: (1) it abstracts from space and time (cf. Aristotle’s theory of abstraction exposed mainly in *De an.* III, 6), (2) it resembles nothing (cf. *ibid.*, 4 and 8), (3) it is pure and without mixture (cf. *ibid.*, III, 4, 429a18–20), (4) it searches always inside itself (cf. Aristotle’s *noēsis noēseōs noēsis*, literally the thought that is thought of thought, in *Met.* Lambda, 9), and (5) it is an image (for Aristotle, too, the intellect is not the objects in actuality but it has their forms—cf. *De an.* III, 4; note that Eckhart’s *bilde*, image, is his ‘adaptation’ of the Aristotelian form or idea). Cf. Eckhart, *Predigten, Deutsche Werke* III (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1976), pp. 170–180.

53. Remarkably, the essence is identified with the object (see quotation above), and this directs us again towards the Kantian transcendental subject of the thoughts already discussed above.

54. *De int.* III, 25, 13 (*op. cit.*, 199): “However, the intellect acquires its essence through its conversion since, by the operation of its essential cause, it at the same time becomes and goes back to it, inasmuch as it is the reason of its essence.”