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CHAPTER ONE

About this text

The text to be edited below is an intriguing, fourteenth century example of the long tradition of commentaries on a third century AD text, the *Isagoge* by Porphyry – or, as it is spelled here, Porphirius. The *Isagoge* itself was meant to be an introduction to another, still older and in the course of time even more vastly commented-upon text, the *Categories* by Aristotle.

We have to accept a fair amount of uncertainty as to the authorship and the exact date and place of origin of this text. As is the case with many fourteenth century texts, and fourteenth century philosophy and philosophers in general, hard data on this text are scarce.

That there is only one manuscript available of our text does not make things easier. There are assumptions to be made about its authorship, and about its place and date of origin, but none of these things can be said with absolute certainty.

With some reservations however, which will become clear in the course of my introduction, I feel safe to assume that this text, a commentary on the *Isagoge* in the form of *questiones*, was composed by Thomas Manlevelt in the late 1330s or thereabouts in pre-University Louvain. But who is Thomas Manlevelt?

1.1. *Thomas Manlevelt: on first acquaintance*

The one manuscript available of these *Questiones libri Porphirii* has the text ascribed to Thomas Manlevelt. A line of text at the top of the first folio, supposedly put there by the end of the fourteenth century, states that these *questiones* were compiled by the able doctor Thomas Manlevelt the Englishman: ‘Hec questiones fuerunt compilate per Thom. Manlevel Anglicum doctorem solempnem.’¹ Moreover, the author of these ‘excellent questions on the Old Logic’ is identified on the cover

1 Schum 1887, 528f.

of the manuscript itself as Thomas Manlevelt: ‘Item questiones optime Thome Manlevelt super veteri arte.’²

In the handbooks of philosophical history, the name of Thomas Manlevelt is linked to a set of widely-used logical treatises, presumably composed in Paris around 1330, and spread all over the European continent in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³ Only recently has this logician gained some wider attention. In his 2008 paper ‘Thomas Maulevelt’s Denial of Substance’,⁴ Robert Andrews sets out to appraise our author’s ontology, which is described by him as one ‘more radical than any other of the Middle Ages, and unparalleled until the time of Hume.’⁵ This would bridge a gap of more than four centuries, as David Hume lived from 1711 until 1776.⁶

The text with which Andrews is concerned, is a commentary (*questiones*) on Aristotle’s *Categories*, also ascribed to Thomas Manlevelt. It is one of the lengthiest of the later Middle Ages, surviving in a single, densely-written manuscript of over a hundred folios. The commentary on Porphyry’s *Isagoge* ascribed to Manlevelt is the twin text to the commentary on the *Categories*, covering the first forty-odd folios of this very same single, densely-written manuscript.

Andrews has no doubts about the intellectual background of Thomas Manlevelt. To him it is clear that this logician ‘was following in the footsteps of William of Ockham, another Englishman, writing a bit earlier in the beginning of the 1300s.’⁷

2 Schum 1887, *ibid.* More about this ascription in the manuscript itself, and on how this compiling should be understood, see below, section 3.1. Chapter 3, of which this section is the first part, is devoted to the textual and circumstantial evidence that seems to warrant the ascription of this text to Thomas Manlevelt. Chapter 6 will give a detailed description of the manuscript.

3 See, for example, Spade 1998, 403 f.

4 Andrews, 2008. This paper was presented at a conference, *Skepticism in Medieval and Renaissance Thought*, in Uppsala, Sweden, on May 8, 2005. Andrews has a slightly different spelling of our author’s name: ‘Maulevelt’ instead of ‘Manlevelt’. More about the diverse ways in which Thomas’s name is spelled, below, subsection 2.2.5.

5 Andrews 2008, p. 347.

6 On Hume, see e.g. D.F. Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge, 1993), or any present day reference work. No handbook will be amiss on Hume’s ideas about substance, or the related issue of causation.

7 Andrews 2008, 348. Another early Ockhamist text, the *Defensorium Ockham*, is discussed in Andrews, 1997 and edited in Andrews, 2000. I will come back to this text in connection with a minor geographical point concerning our own text. See below, section 3.3.

We will accept this intellectual dependency of Manlevelt on William of Ockham (c. 1288–c. 1348) as a working hypothesis, keeping to it as long as our own textual evidence warrants it.⁸ As will become clear, this working hypothesis happens to be fully warranted by the text edited below.⁹

1.2. *Denial of substance*

The next chapter in this Introduction, dealing with Manlevelt's life and works, will be hampered by a lack of available data. Assuming, however, that Manlevelt is the author of the present text as well as the accompanying commentary on the *Categories* partly edited by Andrews, something like a portrait of Manlevelt can be sketched.

Andrews explains how Ockham had applied his reductive principle to Aristotle's ten categories, on the occasion of writing – like Manlevelt – a commentary on the *Categories* of Aristotle.¹⁰ The categories in medieval

8 One point on which I will find occasion to deviate from Andrews's presentation of facts is his taking Thomas Manlevelt to be an Englishman. True, he is also called Thomas Anglicus, but as will be pointed out below, subsection 2.2.4, there is at least as much reason to think he was German or from the low countries. This would mean that at the university in Paris, where some vague footsteps of his can be traced, he would have belonged to the English-German nation anyway.

9 Andrews refrains from substantiating his Ockhamist claim about Manlevelt with factual evidence. But had he chosen to do so, evidence could have been brought forward in sufficient abundance. Manlevelt holds that everything in reality is strictly individual in nature and that generality is only to be found in concepts in so far as these refer to the things in reality. If this should sound nominalistic in a too general manner, Manlevelt's tenet that each concept or conceptual act in the mind is as individual in nature as well, should already be linked to a more strictly Ockhamist background. But there is more, on a general level and in the details: the acceptance of only two categories of things existing in reality, namely substance and quality; the way in which God is freely discussed about in logical matters; the main division of supposition in personal, simple and material; the individual character of all linguistic items; the absence of any hierarchy among the three main levels of language, spoken, written and thought; the indivisibility of a continuum; the way in which all terms, that is to say, all universals as well, are in the end 'degraded' to the level of mere accidents (of the human mind, that is), etc. Even Manlevelt's half-hearted denial of substance, about which we will have more to say in the pages to follow, must be looked upon as something 'naturally' taking place in an Ockhamist environment, seeing that another one to deny substance, John of Mirecourt, was an avowed partisan of Ockhamism as well. (But about 'Ockhamism', and any philosopher's 'avowed partisanship' of it, see below, section 4.2 of this Introduction.)

10 Andrews 2008, 348.

ontology comprised all those vindicated by Aristotle, to wit: substance, plus nine accidents (quality, quantity, relation, action, undergoing, space, time, situation, having). Eight of the categories fell victim to Ockham's razor; in his ontology, only substance and quality remain as distinct entities.¹¹ All of the other categories are merely aspects of substances or qualities, or ways of talking about these substances or qualities. But on the other hand they are nothing less either.¹²

The interesting thing is what Andrews tells us about Manlevelt's way of finishing off this Ockhamist enterprise. Like Ockham, he was engaged in a radical reduction in the number of the categories as realities of whatever kind. One by one all of the lesser categories are deleted. Manlevelt, however, is willing to go a step further than Ockham. He entertains a radical hypothesis: substance does not exist.¹³ The only category which describes the things of the world is that of quality.¹⁴

For a first glimpse of the originality to be found with Thomas Manlevelt, the audacity of his thinking and the subsequent prudence with which he tends to tone down the impact of his findings – elements abundant in his commentary on the *Isagoge* as well – we will follow the general line of his dismantling the categorical framework. It is a specimen of originality that for reasons that I will go into in the next chapter would stay unnoticed for centuries.¹⁵

11 Substance and the third species of quality, to be precise, is all that is left of reality. See Maurer 1994, 388.

12 For a much more detailed discussion of Ockham's ontology, see McCord Adams, 1987.

13 *Questiones super Predicamenta*, Q. 16 CONCL. 1, 56^{rab}, 'probabiliter posset sustineri physice loquendo, nullam penitus substantiam esse in istis inferioribus, accipiendo substantiam pro composito ex materia et forma, vel pro aliqua parte talis compositi,' Q. 16 CONCL. 2, 56^{va}, 'probabiliter posset sustineri, nullam substantiam esse in rerum natura.' Edited by Andrews, as an appendix to Andrews 2008.

14 Ironically, reducing the number of categories to only one, namely quality, is precisely what Ockham himself would be accused of by his realist opponent Walter Burley, in the latter's second commentary on the *Physics* (after 1324). On this, see Dutilh Novaes, in her forthcoming article on the Ockham-Burley dispute. According to Dutilh Novaes, however, Burley's understanding of Ockham's position with respect to the categories seems slightly off the mark. One may speculate, she adds in a footnote, that Ockham's reasons for not going this far might have been essentially theological, just as he accepted entities falling in the category of relation in particular theological contexts.

15 For a thorough investigation of how this remarkable reduction of the number of categories came about, the reader is to consult Andrews 2008. In what follows I am heavily indebted to Andrews' article.

The first thing to notice, says Andrews,¹⁶ is that the very title of Manlevelt's *questio* on the reduction in the number of categories is unusual: *Utrum aliqua substantia sit* ('whether there is any substance').¹⁷ He goes on to explain that titles of commentary questions in the Middle Ages are significant, for they indicate that a specific problem was thought worthy of discussion. Some titles are indeed routine exercises which everyone was expected to ask and answer, while others reflect the particular interests of an author or philosophical school. Non-routine titles that seem to reflect the particular interest of our author in commenting on the *Isagoge*, for example, are those of the tenth and of the last *questio*: whether a genus differs from an individual,¹⁸ and whether some accident is a substantial genus,¹⁹ respectively. The individuality of even the first of the universals is investigated, as well as the substantiality of the accident. These two very titles present us with our author's logico-semantic program in a nutshell.

But let us return to his commentary on the *Categories*. Among all the traditions and debates of *Categories* commentaries, no one ever posed the question Manlevelt does: 'Does substance exist?'²⁰ Neither would anyone other than Manlevelt answer this question in the negative. The reason for this, one suspects, is that it was held as obvious and self-evident that, of course, substance exists.

In two conclusions of his *determinatio* Manlevelt claims that physically speaking, it can be argued that there is no substance anywhere in the world, whether terrestrial²¹ or celestial,²² that is to say, as long as the

16 Andrews 2008, p. 349.

17 *Questiones super Praedicamenta*, Q. 16, 55^{va}–57^{rb}, 'Utrum aliqua substantia sit'.

18 Q. 10, 8^{rb}–9^{rb}, 'Utrum genus differt ab individuo'.

19 Q. 45, 43^{rb}–43^{va}, 'Utrum aliquod accidens sit genus substantiale'.

20 John of Mirecourt, who did deny substance, never raised the question so explicitly. He certainly did not embed it in a commentary on the *Categories*. In fact, Mirecourt's opinion on this matter is not too clear, anyway. See also below, section 4.4. On Mirecourt: Courtenay 1995.

21 *Quaestiones super Praedicamenta* Q. 16 CONCL. 1, 56^{rab}: 'Prima conclusio est ista, quod probabiliter posset sustineri physice loquendo, nullam penitus substantiam esse in istis inferioribus, accipiendo substantiam pro composito ex materia et forma; vel pro aliqua parte talis compositae.' (ed. Andrews).

22 *Quaestiones super Praedicamenta* Q. 16 CONCL. 2, 56^{va}: 'nullum inconveniens, ut videtur, sequitur si ponatur corpora supracaelestia esse composita ex diversis existentibus perpetue (perpetuum *ms.*) sibi invicem adhaerentibus; et si ponatur cuiuslibet orbis motorem esse unum accidens adhaerens orbi, et ipsum movens – sicut gravitas adhaeret lapidi, faciens ipsum descendere. Nec ad hoc requiritur aliqua substantia.' (ed. Andrews).

opposite is not demonstrable – which it indeed is not.²³ He not only argues that substance is unnecessary for explanatory purposes, but – taking the consecrated host as evidence – also explains how natural phenomena may be understood in the absence of substance: ‘accidents (...) support and adhere to each other.’²⁴ The picture is of a world in which physical objects are aggregates of their properties. These properties adhere to one another, and form each other’s substrate, without the need for an intangible and inaccessible substance.

This radical reformulation of nature, Andrews says, is otherwise completely unknown in the Middle Ages.²⁵ According to him it does, however, sound surprisingly similar to the deductions of the British Empiricists four hundred years later, especially those of David Hume.²⁶

However, Manlevelt’s third conclusion of his *determinatio* all too abruptly (to Andrews’s liking) recants all he has speculated about sub-

- 23 *Quaestiones super Praedicamenta* Q. 16 CONCL. 1, 56^{tb}: ‘omne illud potest probabiliter teneri cuius oppositum non potest evidenter probari; sed illud est huiusmodi; igitur etc. Maior videtur evidens. Et minor declaratur, quia omnes apparentiae possunt evidenter salvari, non posita aliqua tali substantia; igitur non potest evidenter probari aliquam talem substantiam esse in istis inferioribus. Consequentia est satis evidens.’ (ed. Andrews).
- 24 *Quaestiones super Praedicamenta* Q. 16 CONCL. 1, 56^{tb}: ‘positis tantummodo accidentibus sibi invicem subsistentibus et adhaerentibus, salvatur generatio et corruptio, augmentatio et diminutio, alteratio et loci mutatio, sicut patet in hostia consecrata.’ (ed. Andrews). William of Ockham never seems to get near to even a hint of such a substance-less picture of the world. In section 4.4 below, Manlevelt’s suggestions are summarily compared to similar passages in Buridan, Autrecourt, Mirecourt and Crathorn. It would be interesting to devote a more thorough comparative study to these authors on precisely this matter.
- 25 Below, however, we will pay due attention to some contemporaries of Thomas Manlevelt who at first sight seem to be not too far off our author’s mark.
- 26 Andrews 2008, 352 draws special attention to an indeed remarkably Manlevelt-like passage from David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Ch. I, Sect. VI, ‘Of Modes and Substances’. It runs: ‘I would fain ask those philosophers, who found so much of their reasonings on the distinction of substance and accident, and imagine we have clear ideas of each, whether the idea of substance be derived from the impressions of sensation or of reflection? If it be conveyed to us by our senses, I ask, which of them; and after what manner? If it be perceived by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by the palate, a taste; and so of the other senses. But I believe none will assert, that substance is either a colour, or sound, or a taste. The idea, of substance must therefore be derived from an impression of reflection, if it really exist. But the impressions of reflection resolve themselves into our passions and emotions: none of which can possibly represent a substance. We have therefore no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it.’

stance. Andrews says²⁷ that it flatly asserts the existence of substance, in accordance with all of the traditional doctrines, and that Manlevelt provides no arguments for his reversal of position. He simply states at the beginning of the conclusion that – presumably also on the non-demonstrability of its opposite – ‘it can be held as probable what everyone commonly holds’,²⁸ and, at the end, that ‘Since everyone holds this position, it need not be explained further.’²⁹ In fact, however, Manlevelt’s claiming that no substance exists may be less blunt than Andrews seems to suppose. For one thing, he holds that both the existence and the non-existence can be held *probabiliter*. This does not mean that both hypotheses are equally probable, but that both of these can be argued for. ‘Reasonably’, taken literally, might be a better translation for ‘probabiliter’ than ‘probable.’ The non-existence, then, of substance is argued for on physical grounds, the existence of substance on authoritative grounds. Moreover, Manlevelt’s recanting of his speculation is not unmotivated. After all, he does no more (but no less either) than claim that it is possible to bring forward as a hypothesis that no substance exists, as long as its opposite (that substance does exist) is not proven to be evidently true. Of course, this hypothesis alone is revolutionary enough. But as long as his own hypothesis is not proven to be evidently true either, there is room to allow for the existence of substance. On the other hand, according to Ockham’s razor ‘entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity’, so why not do away with substance after all, as there is no *necessity* to cling to substance. From that point of view, Manlevelt, who explicitly adheres to this principle,³⁰ was indeed under some obligation to maintain his anti-substance hypothesis.

27 Andrews 2008, 355.

28 *Questiones super Predicamenta*, Q. 16 CONCL. 3, 56^{vb}, ‘probabiliter posset sustineri tamquam illud quod ab omnibus communiter ponitur, quod est una prima substantia quae a nullo dependet; quae scilicet est ipsemet deus. Et quod sunt aliae substantiae separatae individuales et incorruptibiles. (...) Et quod sunt aliae, scilicet partes istarum substantiarum corruptibilium, utpote materia et forma, quae vocantur partes essentielles, quarum quidem partium quaedam sunt incorruptibiles, sicut materia (...) et anima intellectiva; et quaedam vero ponuntur corruptibiles, sicut aliae formae substantiales.’ (ed. Andrews).

29 *Questiones super Predicamenta*, Q. 16 CONCL. 3, 56^{vb}, ‘Et ista conclusio, quia ab omnibus ponitur, amplius ad praesens non declaratur.’ (ed. Andrews).

30 See the edited below, Q. 14 AD ARG. CONTRA CONCL. 10, I, 13^{va}: ‘utendo radice Aristotelis primo *Physicorum*, ubi elicitur quod pluralitas sive diversitas non est ponenda sine ratione cogente.’

However this may be, Andrews holds that his own sense of caution made Thomas Manlevelt abandon his radical experiment.³¹ But it was an experiment which was to recur, says Andrews, with a vengeance, in the era of Early Modern Philosophy and the Scientific Revolution.³²

Andrews concludes his evaluation of Manlevelt's denial of substance by admitting that Manlevelt's speculation remains a footnote to the history of philosophy, since his work was uninfluential in his lifetime, and remained unread until our own.³³ But an interesting footnote it is.

1.3. *Primacy of individuality*

The present study will stick with the first part of the manuscript that has just been proven by Andrews to contain such a gem. In fact, Manlevelt's commentary on the *Isagoge*, which immediately precedes the commentary on the *Categories*, forms an intrinsic unity with it, as the traditional double-headed commentary on the Old Logic. Traversing the commentary on the *Isagoge* we will find out that Thomas Manlevelt applies the very same tactics of extending Ockhamist tenures and insights to any logical, and if need be metaphysical or theological subject matter. We are confronted with a radical variety of nominalism, outdoing Ockham in a number of ways. The individualizing tendency is stretched to its limits on the subject's as well as on the object's side, in an untiring effort to work out the primacy of the individual over the universal in any kind of detail. Manlevelt not only stresses the capacity of each individual instance (or 'token'³⁴) of a term to stand for individual things in the outside world,

31 Andrews 2008, 355 f.

32 Andrews 2008, 357.

33 Andrews 2008, 357.

34 For a clear exposition of the narrowed particular meaning of an utterance-token in a particular context in juxtaposition to the general meaning of an utterance-type, see Nuchelmans 1973, 4. It should be kept in mind, however, that this is a modern distinction, which is not used as such by ancient and medieval thinkers. Throughout his study on the ancient and medieval conceptions of the bearers of truth and falsity, Nuchelmans nevertheless makes ample use of the distinction to identify the propositions that do bear truth and falsity. Thus, Nuchelmans 1973, 202 holds that with Ockham it is as a rule particular acts of thinking, speaking or writing that fulfill this role. The borderline between a *propositio* in the token-sense and a *propositio* in the type-sense with Ockham was rather vague, as he seemed to attribute a certain duration to these acts, allowing the same *oratio* (e.g. 'Sortes is seated') to be first true and then false (in the case of Sortes first sitting and then standing up). It remains to be seen if this borderline was sharper with Manlevelt.

he also stresses the token character of each instance of rational activity in itself.³⁵ As each instance of a term – be it a genus, a species, or any of the remaining five universals – is an accident of the individual human mind doing the thinking, our author’s ‘singularising’ of the domain of the universals is coupled with an ‘accidentalising’ of this same domain.

The link between terms and reality may look disturbingly thin, if the linking takes place on an accidental level only. But our author is not one to do away altogether with logic’s intrinsic capacity for dealing with things outside the mind – a capacity that to the medieval mind stems from the significative character of terms. Uninhibited as he may be in his Ockhamist fervency, we are also frequently confronted with Manlevelt’s inability – or is it unwillingness? – to ultimately liberate himself from convention. Just before things really get out of hand, Thomas Manlevelt is always prepared to weaken his findings, by calling them nothing more than a kind of thought experiments or explicitly keeping open the possibility that things might be otherwise,³⁶ just like in the case of the rejected category of substance.

Has this sense of caution prevented Manlevelt from getting into serious trouble with the authorities, as Andrews suggested? This is hard to tell. But circumstances must have been favourable in one sense or another. For otherwise this provocative Ockhamist text with its daring thought experiments may not have been handed down to us in even this one single manuscript.

35 On this, see especially Q. 4, *Utrum universale sit in intellectu*, 3^{vb}–4^{ra}.

36 E.g. Q. 21 *CONCL.* 1, 20^{rb}: ‘Prima conclusio est quod ens non est universale, quia non est genus nec species etcetera, et alia numquam ponebantur universalialia ab aliquo. Circa istam conclusionem tamen nota quod ponitur tamquam probabilis et non tamquam necessaria, precise cum argumentum ab auctoritate negative non tenet. Quamvis inducat evidentiam, non tamen necessario concludit.’ Or Q. 42 *CONCL.* 9, 40^{va}: ‘Et multa istorum dicta sunt gratia exercitii et probabiliter potius quam exercitive determinationis.’

