

The Oral Teaching of Plotinus¹

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This paper is concerned with the transmission by the Neoplatonists, Porphyry, Dexippos, and Simplikios of Plotinus' oral criticism of Aristotle's *Categories*.

The first three treatises of the sixth *Ennead* of Plotinus concern the doctrine of the *Categories* according to Aristotle, here sharply criticized (*Enn.* VI 1,1-24), and the doctrine of the Stoics (VI 1, 25-30), even more sharply criticized.

These three treatises, *Enn.* VI, 1-3² are so taxing and difficult for translators and commentators that Stephen MacKenna, "the admirable" after years of familiarity with Plotinus' thought and style, felt unable to cope with them and asked B. S. Page, the Librarian of Leeds University, to relieve him of this part of his task which Page very ably did, keeping as close as possible to MacKenna's style. Except for G. Nebel's *Plotinus Kategorien der intelligiblen Welt*, Tubingen, Mohr, 1929, and the more recent essay of Rutten, *Les Catégories du monde Sensible* (VI 3), I know of no scholar who made it his job to write a monograph on these three treatises, however useful, even necessary they are to the general interpretation of the metaphysics of Plotinus.

The problems relevant to these texts may be grasped under three headings. *Fontes, Testimonia, Doctrina*, i.e., the *sources* of Plotinus, the *witnessing texts* of Dexippos and of Simplikios to the criticism of Aristotle by Plotinus and the *doctrine* contained in the texts. The first two may be considered as mainly of a literary character. But to a great extent they determine the last and most important problem, that of the *doctrine* of Plotinus under its two aspects: how and why he rejects the Aristotelian categories and what he proposes instead.³ As one might expect, following in the footsteps of Plato, for the intelligible world (*Enn.* VI 2) he proposes five categories,

1. This is a brief preview of my major work on *L'enseignement oral de Plotin*, to be published by E. J. Brill, Leiden, Netherlands in 1983.

2. Dean William R. Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, Vol. I, p. 194, wrote: "One of the most obscure [I agree] and least attractive parts of the *Enneads*." On this I disagree. Plotinus is not only a mystic, perhaps the greatest in the "pagan" West, but a highly technical philosopher, a metaphysician. I shall treat this question in my forthcoming essay, "Trois thèmes majeurs de la philosophie de Plotin." The first theme is: "Plotin, Mystique ou Métaphysique?" The answer, I think, is: both.

3. A preview of this problem is to be found in my "Trois apories orales de Plotin sur les Catégories d'Aristote" in *Zêlêsis* (Mélanges offerts à É. deStrycker, S.J., pour son 65^{ème} anniversaire), Nederlandse Boekhandel, Antwerpen & Utrecht, 1973, pp. 234-267.

being, identity, alterity, movement and repose, the “greatest classes” (τὰ μέγιστα γένη) of the *Sophist*; for the world of sense or becoming (γένεσις) he must rely on his own insights, and presents us with an emended and simplified system of five Aristotelian categories, *substance, quantity, quality, relation*, and a fifth, his own, *movement* (κίνησις), eventually ἐνέργεια and other synonyms.

In this brief paper I shall deal mainly with the sources and witnesses to the comprehensive, sometimes finicky, criticism of Aristotle by Plotinus in order to illustrate the nature of these taxing and exacting texts. I shall only outline the two methods used in refuting Aristotle: a) arguments *ad hominem*, i.e. opposing Aristotle to Aristotle, rather cleverly, I think, although Dexippos and Simplicios do not think so; b) adducing Plato’s view, as he sees it, to bear down heavily against Aristotle.

I shall confine myself to an analysis of the texts relating to *quantity*, the second category following immediately upon *substance*. I shall first analyze it according to Aristotle, and then according to Plotinus himself (VI 3, 11-15, 23).

Before beginning the discussion of definitely parallel texts, I wish to note that there are three stages to be considered, each of them difficult when individually considered: 1) What does Aristotle mean? 2) How does Plotinus understand and refute him? 3) How do Dexippos and Simplicios understand both Aristotle and Plotinus, and defend Aristotle by refuting Plotinus? For that indeed is the prevailing pattern of this four-cornered disputation. A last, but not the least, interesting question is: who is right? But this is invading the philosopher’s field, and here I write only as an editor and interpreter of the *Enneads*, possibly as an historian of ideas, certainly not as an Aristotelian Thomist or a Maréchalien Thomist, that is a Thomist not uninfluenced by Kant’s *Problematick*. Let me nonetheless confess that at the age of 20 as a young “scholastic philosophy” student, I was never very much impressed by the Aristotelian analysis of categories (I considered *situs* and *habitus* to be ridiculous), of thought or language or being⁴ even before I knew of Plotinus and of his treatises VI 1 and VI 3 in which I discovered a kindred spirit at work.⁵ I always found Aristotle’s *Categories* extremely artificial and unsubstantiated, whereas, in

4. This “or” is quite a problem in itself, one which Plotinus clearly perceived as shown by the opening lines of *Enn.* VI, 1. Discussed at length by Simplicios, in *Categ.*, Prooemium, p. 6 sgg., ed. Kalbfleisch, CAG, Berlin, 1907.

5. This fact should neither identify me with the “gloomy Dean”, William Ralph Inge of St. Paul’s Cathedral who despised, quite wrongly *Enn.* VI 1-3, nor with Stephen MacKenna, the overly enthusiastic Plotinus disciple.

contrast, his act-potency theory, (ἐνέργεια-δύναμις) is the core of my strict Thomism, and his “transcendentals”, *ens, unum, bonum, verum*, to which I would gladly add *actiuum* and possibly *pulchrum* — a moot question — seem to me to be unsurpassed and still valuable.

The witnesses to the “difficulties” (ἀπορίαι) or rather to the “objections” proposed against Aristotle are the following:

Both Adolf Busse in 1888 and, nearly thirty years later, Karl Kalbfleisch in 1907, in their respective editions of Dexippos (c. 350 A.D.) and Simplicios (c. 550 A.D.) were unable to find in the *Enneads*, the written work, some of the ἀπορίαι, explicitly attributed to Plotinus by one or both of these authors, and yet they have all the internal marks of authenticity in addition to the explicit testimony of Dexippos and Simplicios.

An easy explanation is available. Like most professors, Plotinus, before committing anything to writing, had treated various subjects in his oral lectures or conferences (συνουσίαι)⁶. We even know that his first assistant Amelius, an Etrurian who attended his lectures for 24 years had 100 copy-books of Notes (σχόλια ἐκ τῶν συνουσιῶν) when he left Rome in 268, two years before the death of Plotinus, and took these Notes with him to Apamea on the Orontes in Syria.⁷ They are dedicated to Hostilianus Hesyichius of Apamea, his adopted son⁸ whom he presumably rejoined there.⁹

As samples of these *oral* “difficulties” and “objections” I shall quote and briefly analyze five of these texts, first quoting the relevant or nearly relevant corresponding text of the *Enneads*, the *written* text. They all refer to the second category of Aristotle and, strangely enough, of Plotinus himself: *quantity*.

First Question: On the exact nature and status of *quantity* in the Categories. *Enn.* VI 1, 4, 29-36:

“If, however, their existence is independent, and they do not inhere in the objects, but are simply called in for the purpose of measurement, the objects will be quantities only to the extent of participation in *quantity*.”

6. I personally remember hearing Etienne Gilson in 1930, then Professor at the Sorbonne, lecturing on St. Bernard, to the applause of his auditors, before publishing his book on St. Bernard two or three years later.

7. Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 7.2.

8. *Ibid.* 3, 47-48.

9. I once thought (1937, Acad. Royale de Belgique) that we had the remains of the notes of Amelius, therefore of the *Oral Conferences* of Plotinus as contrasted with his written works, the *Enneads*, in the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*; but there is a decisive argument against this view.

So with the numbers themselves: how can they (in these circumstances) constitute the category of Quantity? They are measures; but how do measures come to be quantities or Quantity? Doubtless in that, existing as they do among the Existents and not being adapted to any of the other categories, they find their place under the influence of verbal suggestion and so are referred to the so-called category of Quantity."

This is the solution found in the written text, a solution Plotinus does not really believe in.

What do we find in the commentaries of Dexippos and Simplicios? *Dex.* III 6, p. 10, 26: "He says that a quantitative thing is not quantity."¹⁰ *Simpl.* 6, p. 130, 12: "Quantity as such [or: in itself] cannot absolutely be quantitative." (ἡ γὰρ αὐτοποσότης οὐ πάντως ἐστὶ ποσόν) a much sharper formulation than the one attested to by Dexippos. In VI 1, ποσότης appears fourteen times, in VI 6, four times; αὐτοποσότης appears nowhere, which means nothing since it is as thoroughly Plotinian as IV 3,2, 2B: αὐτοποσόν or, even better, as III 6, 17, 17: αὐτόμεγα, not to speak of III 2, 16, 14: and V 9, 13, 3: αὐτονοῦς or of VI 8, 12, 8 and 14: αὐτοουσία which both belong to another kind of discussion.

Which of the two formulations reproduces more faithfully Porphyry's and ultimately, Plotinus' vocabulary is impossible to decide with any certainty. Personally I would favour the testimony of Simplicius. Whatever the decision, on exact vocabulary, the doctrine is thoroughly Plotinian: things are quantitative by participating in Quantity, whereas Quantity itself being an Idea and spiritual is therefore not quantitative or in any way material.

A second version of the same question, but from another angle: *Dex* III, 5, p. 69, 6-10:

"Plotinus tackles the same problem and again enquires whether number is internal (ἐνυπάρχει) to things numbered or whether standing apart (χωρίς) from them, it measures them as a canon (κανόν). If number by itself subsists by itself, it will be a measure, but not a quantity [or: a quantitative thing] (μέτρον μὲν ἔσται, οὐκετι δὲ ποσόν). If internal to the measured objects, it also, in its turn, will be measured by another."

Simpl. p. 130,7-14:

"About the abstract number (μοναδικοῦ ἀριθμοί — as translated by Liddell-Scott) again Plotinus pursues his inquiry. According

10. Ἄλλὰ τὸ ποσόν φησιν οὐκ ἂν εἴη ποσότης, mentioned by H. R. Schwyzer, art. "Plotinos", *Real encyclop.*, col. 511.47; similar formulation in *Summ.* p. 62, 14.

to him, five horses are considered (θεωροῦνται) and likewise other objects are numbered according to a synthesis [or: putting together] of unities; he asks whether this number is internal or whether it measures while remaining apart (χωρίς), as a canon, for if it measures remaining apart the subjects in question (τὰ ὑποκείμενα) will be quantitative, as they do not participate in Quantity. Moreover, let us accept the things separate (τὰ κεχωρισμένα) as measuring, why should they be quantitative? For quantity in-itself [or: essential or ideal quantity] is absolutely not quantitative. (ἡ γὰρ αὐτοποσότης οὐ πάντως ἐστὶ ποσόν)."¹¹

He solves that himself "if the numbers which are in the beings says he, are not referred to another category, they should be quantitative."

As Kalbfleisch points out, this complicated passage that I tried to translate literally, if not elegantly, clearly refers to the doctrine set forth in *Enn.* VI 1, 4, 29-36. But it is far from being a literal quotation as most of the Enneadic excerpts by Simplikios generally are. Moreover, it contains one clearly non-Enneadic word, the key word of "absolute Quantity"; note the abstract form. It is as Plotinian as can be. (See above.) The milder, normal ποσότης appears thirteen times in VI 1 and 3. But never in the *Enneads* do we find, as in both Dexippos and Simplicius, the concrete ποσόν, sharply contrasted with the abstract and absolute ποσότης or αὐτοποσότης.

I confidently conclude that at least this central sentence, contrasting the concrete term which denotes a quantitative reality and the abstract term, presumably in its acutest form, αὐτοποσότης derives from the oral teaching of Plotinus. How far this is true of the whole portion, in view of the fact that there are, both in the shorter version of Dexippos and the longer one of Simplikios quite a few variations from the *Enneads*, is difficult to decide. But I do not easily see Simplikios managing to merge in a single quotation sentences from two distinct sources, the *oral* and the *written* Plotinus. On the other hand, from the αὐτος λόγος one could argue that Simplikios had before him both the *Enneads* and some non-Enneadic version of the doctrine of Plotinus. Iamblichus (p. 130, 19-24) seems to have accepted the paradox that Simplicius refuses, *viz.*, identifying Quantity and the quantitative (τὴν ποσότητα δὲ ποσόν εἶναι οὐκ ἄτοπον ὁ Ἰαμβλικὸς φησιν), a view contrary to the view of Plotinus and one which may not ever have been the orthodox Aristotelian doctrine.

11. In his Index Kalbfleisch notes: "desiratur in lexicis." It is not to be found in Liddell-Scott-Jones.

On Speech

Let us note first that according to Aristotle the genus *Quantity* is subdivided into two main species, the continuous *Quantity*, such as magnitude, place and time, and the discontinuous *Quantity*, such as number and speech /or discourse/. This distinction was not directly contradicted by Plotinus but it raised questions for him.¹²

First Question: Is speech (λόγος) a quantity, as Aristotle says, *Categ.* 6, 4b32-34?

Enn. VI 1, 5, 2-14:

“Speech is subject to measurement, but only as far as it is sound; it is not a quantity in its essential nature, which nature is that it be significant,¹³ as noun and verb are significant. The air is (not its essence but) its matter, as it is the matter to verb and noun, the components of speech. Rather is speech an impact (made upon the air by the breath), though it is not so much simply the impact as the impression¹⁴ which the impact produces and, as it were, imposes Form upon the air. Speech, thus, is rather an action, an action with a significance (ποίησις σημαντική). It would perhaps be truer to say that while this motion, this impact, is an action, the counter-motion is an experience [or: passion] (πάθος) or each may be from different points of view, action of the one, passion of the other; or we may think of speech as action upon a substrate (εἰς τὸ ὑποκείμενον) [air] and experience [or: passion] within that substrate.”¹⁵

The First Problem re-Speech: *Dex* III 7, p. 70, 1-8: Dexippos excellently sums up the doctrine of Plotinus VI 1, 5, 2-14 but not with his words. He (Plotinus) assuredly says: a) that speech has its own existence /or subsistence, ὑπόστασις; b) that speech is only quantitative by accident; c) and thus speech is significant, having as subject matter the air, subsisting as being an impact on air; d) therefore speech, the speech in the voice, is either an *impact* or not a bare (φιλή) impact, but an *impression* (τύπωσις) on the air, as it were, modeling [or: forming] it; e) on both accounts it is a significant action in the category of either *action* or *being acted upon* [or: passion, πάσχειν) or in both; f) but definitely not quantitative (οὐ δὴ ποσόν).

12. Cf. *Enn.* VI 1, 4 and 5; also VI 3, 11; see especially *Enn.* VI 3, 13-14.

13. Instead of σωματικόν (codd. *omnes*), with Ac (possibly Ficinus) and all editors, confirmed by Dexippos and Simplikios, we read σημαντικόν. A further correction seems to be required. See Henry-Schwyzler edition.

14. What others call “the bare impact.”

15. Translation by MacKenna, slightly altered.

A curious “quasi-quotation”! To sum up this fairly accurate synthesis of the doctrine of the *Enneads*: *qua* speech, speech is not quantitative, but rather, significant action (ποίησις σημαντική). Note the non-exact correspondence of ποιήσις a noun, relayed, it is true, by ποιεῖν and of πάσχειν, a verb. If, continue the *Enneads*, “voice”, a subdivision of speech, concerns (κατὰ) not only the impact but also the air, two categories will be involved (one, *action*, the other, *substance*), and not only one category.

Whence comes the Dexippos short dissertation? Scarcely from the *Enneads*: too many details differ. I cannot tell whence it comes. Perhaps from Iamblichus.

A second problem concerning speech is again explicitly attributed to Plotinus.

Dex. III 8, p. 70, 15-18 (Schwyzer, *Real encyclop.* col. 500, 47):

“But since Plotinus says that speech is said to be in time, according to Aristotle, and time being quantitative, speech itself will be quantitative. Thus, what is quantitative¹⁶ will be in time and because of time.”

This ultimately means that the real category, the high category will not be quantity, but time. This is not in Plotinus who never links time and speech; and this conclusion, *ad absurdum*, but also *ad mentem Aristotelis*, is not to be found in the *Enneads*.

The inference is inescapable: it comes from the oral teaching.

We find a similar approach in Simplikios 6, p. 131, 18-132, 6, but with a strange comparison to *taste* and *olfaction*, both being quantitative sensible properties. Plotinus is not mentioned. What Simplikios says is this, p. 131, 22:

“Nor is speech *qua* speech, measured, no more than the short syllable, *qua* syllable, but because it occurs in a longer or shorter time, so that finally time measures time, the shorter time measuring the longer, the time of the syllable measuring that of the speech; conclusion: the syllable measures speech by accident.”

What all this amounts to is that time would be found to measure time. And this is patently absurd.

But again, nothing of this kind is to be found in the *Enneads*, except, along a different approach, in VI 3, 12, 25:

“Syllable and speech are only by accident quantities or

16. This seems rather strange; instead of “what is quantitative” as subject of the sentence, I would have expected “speech” to be the continued subject.

substrates of Quantity; it is voice that is quantitative; but voice is a kind of motion; it must accordingly in any case (quantity or no quantity) be referred to motion, as much activity also."

We note here a predominant trend of Plotinus' thought: to reduce many Aristotelian notions or categories to the single supreme Plotinian category of *Motion*.

The *third objection* against speech being essentially quantitative is an easier one, but again absent from the *Enneads*. It is perfectly summed up in the Summary, *Dex.* III 9, p. 62, 18-19: "Plotinus' objection is that the fact of being measured is not enough to constitute a quantitative reality." This is developed in the text itself, p. 70, 22-71, 4:

"Again, what shall we answer to the man [in view of "again" and of the explicit summary the man is Plotinus] who refuses to say that the fact of being measured is not enough for a reality to be called quantitative. For, assuredly, wood is measured by a cubit [in the meaning of any yard-stick] and one would not say that it is quantitative because it is measured but because it is a magnitude; and, on the one hand, accordingly being quantitative is accidental to the wood's being measured by a quantity accidental to the cubit made of wood; on the other hand, wood is not [essentially] measured by wood. And so is it therefore also with speech: *qua* speech it is not measured, but only inasmuch as it is in time, so that ultimately time is the measure of time, the shorter time measuring the longer time."

A cubit or yardstick is a piece of wood. And wood is not measured by wood. Likewise, speech; if it were, the consequence would be that syllables would measure speech, insofar as they are short or long, and hence time would measure time, which is absurd.

Except for the comparison with wood and its wooden measure, the cubit, this is practically the same argument we encountered previously: neither wood nor speech, *qua* wood or *qua* speech is essentially quantitative, but only accidentally, insofar as they are measured by time.

This Plotinian objection, *Dex.* III 9, p. 71, 5-9, solves, he says, with the same arguments as previously, namely: "if the voice in itself has an inborn magnitude which musicians use to establish its intervals [*διαστήματα*, the various notes of the instruments], voice will be quantitative essentially, not accidentally; for every reality measured or measuring will be naturally quantitative; and therefore speech also, inasmuch as it is measured by time, will be quantitative."

To *Dexippos* III 9 we have a parallel passage, at least partly, in *Simplikios* 6, p. 131, 15-17, where it is not difficult to detect, under the anonymous plural "they say", the very same Plotinian doctrine, clearly identified as such by *Dexippos* III 9, yet totally absent from the *Enneads*:

"Neither is speech *qua* speech measured, nor the short syllable, *qua* syllable, but because it develops in a longer or shorter time, so that time would be measuring time, the smaller [or: shorter] time, the greater [or: longer], the time of the syllable measuring that of the speech; conclusion: the syllable measures speech accidentally."

This anonymous piece is essentially the same as that attributed by *Dexippos* to Plotinus. It is absent from the *Enneads* and therefore belongs to the oral *corpus* or whatever we choose to call it.

Which of the two versions, that of *Dexippos* who names Plotinus, or that of the anonymous statement referred to by *Simplikios* is the more accurate is difficult to say. I favour *Simplikios* because the refutation is Porphyry's, whereas the refutation by *Dexippos* is probably due to his own Master, Iamblichus, one step further removed from the Conferences (συνουσίαι), the source of all our oral material.

The fourth and last objection to Aristotle's doctrine of speech being a kind or *species* of the class or *genus*, Quantity, is taken from a comparison of speech with practical action. To this I find no parallel at all in *Simplikios*.

Very clearly in the *Summary, Dex.* III 10, it is stated: "Another of Plotinus' objections is that, just as action is quantitative [only] by accident, so also is speech." This is asserted in greater detail in the *corpus* of the text, *Dex.* III 10:

"Again the same man objects, saying: just as action, according to its reference to time, is said to be big or small, so also speech measured by the [relevant] interval would be quantitative accidentally."

To this objection *Dexippos*, p. 71, 13-15, retorts with a rather monotonous answer but no doubt Aristotelian in spirit: "Of the elements of speech, some are naturally large [or: long], the others naturally short; it is thus natural that magnitude and smallness are inherent to the voice."

Conclusion

We have thus examined:

a) the same question in two slightly different versions: the nature and status of the genus, *quantity*, considered in its discontinuous *species*, i.e. number. This was examined according to three (or four, if we include the *Summary* of Dexippos) different witnesses: The *Enneads*, Dexippos, and Simplikios, these last two depending on, and deriving from the lost *ad Gedalium* of Porphyry. Simplikios depended directly on it, Dexippos through Iamblichus.

b) four objections to Aristotle's doctrine of speech as being essentially quantitative, a *sub-species* among the discontinuous quantities of the *genus*, quantity. Plotinus insists that λόγος is only quantitative by accident, inasmuch as it is measured by time, time thus becoming a superior species of Quantity.

Since none of these ἀπορίαι is to be found in the *Enneads*, we must conclude that they all come from the oral teaching of Plotinus.