

Review of Jonathan Barnes (ed.), "Porphyry: Introduction"

Gregorić, Pavel

Source / Izvornik: **Rhizai: A Journal of Ancient Philosophy and Science, 2004, 1, 125 - 130**

Journal article, Published version

Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:261:040226>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-01-07**



Repository / Repozitorij:

[Repository of the Institute of Philosophy](#)

PORPHYRY: INTRODUCTION, TRANSLATED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY
BY JONATHAN BARNES, CLARENDON PRESS,
OXFORD, 2003, 415 PP., ISBN 0-19-924614-9

When I first read Porphyry's *Introduction* as an undergraduate, I was looking for an illumination on Aristotle's *Categories*. This was the work Porphyry's *Introduction* was supposed to be an introduction to, according to the traditional title of the treatise and surveys in textbooks of philosophy and logic. Of course, I was sorely disappointed. A few terms and principles taken or derived from Aristotle's *Categories* 1-5, several recognisable references to the ten Aristotelian categories, and one celebrated example making use of the category of substance – surely that cannot qualify for an introduction to Aristotle's *Categories*, I thought. But instead of pursuing this hunch and figuring out what Porphyry's text really is, I was impressed by tradition, as one tends to be as an undergraduate in continental universities. So I tried to find a way to interpret Porphyry's work as an introduction to Aristotle's *Categories*. After all, Porphyry himself seems to say in the opening sentence that the subject of his work is necessary, among other things, for a study of Aristotle's κατηγορίαί.

The best conclusion I could come up with is that Porphyry's *Introduction* is a propaedeutic work which explains some important and frequently used terms in Aristotle's *Categories*. While that may be true for genus, species, and difference, this could not work for specific property and accident. Besides, why should a discussion specifically of these five terms, rather than some other pertinent ones, serve as a preparation for Aristotle's *Categories*? Interpreters are quick and correct to point out that Porphyry's decision to pick these five terms was inspired by Aristotle's *Topics*, where he distinguished four things indicated by every dialectical proposition: genus, definition, specific property and accident. But how could a modification of Aristotle's classification for the specific purposes of the *Topics* be helpful as a preparation for the *Categories*? I could not find a satisfactory answer, and

no modern commentary could provide one. Until Jonathan Barnes' book appeared.

The catch, as he explains in his introduction, is that this text of Porphyry is not really an introduction to Aristotle's *Categories*. Rather, it is an introduction to logic by way of discussing five terms which are necessary for a study of predication, definition, division and deductive proof. In late antiquity, students of philosophy started with logic, and since Aristotle's *Categories* was the first book to be studied under that heading, Porphyry's introduction to logic was, in this roundabout way, an introduction to the *Categories*. But it is not written as an *Introduction to Aristotle's Categories*, as Barnes emphasises. So, when Porphyry says that it is necessary to know the five terms for a study of κατηγορίαί in Aristotle, he does not refer to Aristotle's work called *Categories*, but to *predications* in Aristotle, which is one of the most frequent meanings of the word κατηγορίαί in Aristotle.

We know that Aristotle, like Plato before him, has thought long and hard about predications. One way he thought about them was by analysing the kinds of things that can be predicated, as he seems to have done in *Topics* I.9. This analysis could be easily expanded into a classification of all kinds of things – including those that cannot be predicated, but can only be subjects of predication, i.e. individual substances – which is what we find in the *Categories*. Another way Aristotle thought about predication was by analysing the kinds of relation in which a predicate can stand to its subject. This enabled Aristotle in the *Topics* to arrive at his four items around which the bulk of that work is organised. Porphyry used the same approach to predications, but since he was not constrained by a discussion of specifically dialectical propositions and the need to provide a neat principle of their organisation, he arrived to a slightly different classification. Porphyry thought that the predicate can be either a genus of its subject, or its species, or its difference, or its specific property, or its accident. To put it differently, one thing can be predicated of another either generically, specifically, differentially, properly, or accidentally. What exactly this means and implies can be learnt from Porphyry's *Introduction*, and often more fully and incisively from Barnes' commentary.

In more than 400 pages, this volume contains an introduction with a note to the reader, English translation of the text, section-by-section commentary, additional notes concerning miscellaneous issues, textual notes with Barnes' departures from Busse's (semi-)critical text, a list of Porphyry's works and their modern editions, an extensive bibliography, Greek-English and English-Greek glossaries, and two indices.

The introduction to Barnes' volume provides some facts about Porphyry's life, gives an account of the aim, character and reception of Porphyry's text in later antiquity, and offers a justification for writing a commentary on what is, after all, a primer and should, by definition, require no further commentary. This relatively short introduction is a good example of Barnes' style: penetrating, cautious, and witty.

For all his caution, however, Barnes intimates that our philosopher received the name Porphyry because it was common in Tyre, the city of purple. I am not sure what the basis is for Barnes' claim that the name was common in Tyre, but there is a traditional and, to my mind, more credible explanation for how Porphyry received his name. Eunapius relates the story that Porphyry's first teacher, Longinus, gave him this name, alluding to the colour of regal robes. What makes me susceptible to this particular part of Eunapius' story is that the name, which deftly alludes at once to Porphyry's original name ('Malcus' was the Syriac word for 'king') and to his native city (Tyre was renowned for purple dyed textiles), strikes me as worthy of Longinus' notorious erudition.

As promised in the note to the reader, the translation is faithful to the original, often at the expense of style. Renderings which are not straightforward, and departures from Busse's edition, tend to be discussed in the commentary. However, some departures from Busse are not listed (e.g., 4.9: omit καί), or credited (e.g., 3.15: omit αὐτό should be credited to Boethius). After the preface, Porphyry's text is traditionally divided into 26 sections, each carrying a subtitle. In his translation Barnes divides the text into 16 larger sections, and gives them different subtitles. He justifies this by expressing his belief that the traditional division and subtitles do not come from Porphyry (p. xvii-xviii). This rather harmless departure proves quite helpful for structuring the commentary.

The commentary is predominantly philosophical, engaging in philological issues mainly where they make a difference for the argument. The commentary achieves much more than mere elucidation of Porphyry's words. It analyses his arguments, tracks down their (mostly Aristotelian) origins, and vigorously pursues their logical and metaphysical implications. Barnes' mastery of the field is breathtaking. He moves with facility from Porphyry's other surviving texts to ancient commentaries on Porphyry, from Aristotle to Alexander and other ancient commentators, from Plato and early Stoics to Dionysius Thrax, Cicero, Galen, Sextus Empiricus, and Martianus Capella. An extensive secondary literature, listed on twelve pages of bibliography, is also used.

Wider digressions are reserved for Additional Notes, so they seldom occur in the commentary. But when they do occur, the reader will find them useful. For instance, Barnes' treatment of the standard Aristotelian account of genus as something predicated in response to the question 'What is it?', leads him to consider how it differs from the other four items. Having established that the five items are different modes of predication, i.e. different manners in which a predicate holds of its subject, he asks a more general question, namely what are predicates: objects, concepts, or expressions? Barnes argues that predicates, in Porphyry's treatment, are expressions. It is true that in some places (e.g. 2.18, 7.20) predicates are naturally understood as expressions, but it seems that Porphyry tries hard to remain neutral on that question, as he indicates in that inadvertently momentous sentence of the preface (1.10-14) which became the starting point of all mediaeval discussions of the problem of universals. Barnes' discussion of that sentence (pp. 37-49), though excellent in itself, is confined to the context of antiquity. Readers interested in the mediaeval debate and various positions concerning the status of universals will have to look elsewhere. Alain de Libera's and Paul Vincent Spade's commentaries on Porphyry's *Isagoge* might serve as useful complements in that respect.

Barnes' commentary also has a good discussion of Porphyry's example of an ordered series consisting of the highest genus, intermediate predicates, the lowest species, and individuals: Substance–Body–Animate body–Animal–Rational animal–Man–Socrates, Plato and the rest. This example came to be known in tradition as 'Porphyry's tree'. Barnes points out, quite correctly, that there is nothing in the text which suggests a diagram, let alone a tree-shaped one. It is only if Porphyry's ordered series is suitably expanded (e.g. if Body is complemented by Incorporeal to divide Substance, if Animate body is complemented by Inanimate body to divide Body, and so on) that one can come to construct a tree-shaped diagram. Barnes points out two worries with Porphyry's example. One is that in the *De Abstergentia* Porphyry seems to take the view that all animals are rational. If all animals are rational, then Porphyry could not say that 'Rational animal falls under Animal', since the two are co-extensive. The other worry is that Body refers only to the material part of corporeal substance, the other part being the form. Hence, Porphyry should not have subsumed Body under Substance. Of course, Barnes does not imply that these are the only problems with Porphyry's example, but his choice of problems is somewhat surprising. There are much more pressing and interesting problems. Consider the following. If Man falls under Rational animal, these two terms cannot be co-extensive. Indeed,

Rational animal is divided with reference to mortality into Man (mortal rational animal) and God (immortal rational animal). But then it follows that God is corporeal: it is a species of Rational animal, which is a species of Animal, which is a species of Animate body, which is a species of Body. An alarming result, especially for late ancient or mediaeval sensibility! It would seem, then, that Man and Rational animal are co-extensive after all, and that the 'tree' should have been drawn differently.

Additional notes are particularly valuable. There are 15 mutually independent, several-page-long notes devoted to particular expressions or questions related to Porphyry's text. In the first note, for instance, Barnes investigates the Stoic influence on Porphyry, alleged by a number of authors (such as Prantl, Rieth, Hadot, Warren, and de Libera). He takes up their evidence one by one, and shows there to be no significant traces of Stoicism in the *Introduction*. Barnes' usual strategy is to show that expressions with a Stoic ring in the *Introduction* had been detached from their Stoic background by the time Porphyry wrote, and had become part of a general technical vocabulary, regardless of one's philosophical creed.

In the third note, Barnes discusses the use of the definite article in ancient Greek as a means of signalling that one is talking about expression rather than its reference – a device which corresponds to our inverted commas. He finds several uses of this device in the *Introduction*, and warns that autonomy is always an available construal in the *Introduction*. There are also notes on singular predicates, explaining the passages in which Porphyry claims that individuals are predicated; on Porphyry's perplexing remark in 7.22 that an individual is constituted of a plurality of features, the assemblage of which is not found elsewhere; on Porphyry's notions of diversity and otherness; on Platonist reception of Aristotle's doctrine of categories, etc.

One issue that would perhaps deserve a separate note is the substantive use of the article in Greek which plagues much of ancient philosophy and logic. For one thing, it prevents a clear distinction between properties and classes. For example, in 9.12 a difference such as τὸ λογικόν is said to belong to man, where it seems to refer to the property of rationality; in 14.1 differences are said to contain species, much like genera. It follows that τὸ λογικόν contains man along with other rational species, thus clearly referring to the class of rational items. But these are two different kinds of entity governed by different logic! Obviously, terms such as τὸ λογικόν are ambiguous and require special attention.

Barnes' glossaries are helpful, although they omit some important terms used in Porphyry's text (such as ποιότης, πρὸς τι, and πρὸς τί πως ἔχειν).

There is a pardonable number of typographic errors in the book, given its length and character. Most of them are innocuous, but one is rather amusing. In a diagram of the Porphyrian tree on page 110, 'mortal' and 'immortal' are given as species, not of 'rational animal', but of '*rotational* animal'. Sir Richard Steele would have relished it: 'How dizzy a place is this world you live in! All human life's a mere vertigo!' Such omissions seem to betray some haste in the final stages of preparing the book for publication.

Despite its minor shortcomings, however, the last volume in the Clarendon Later Ancient Philosophers Series is a success. A full-scale English commentary has been long overdue on this text of immense historical importance. What Barnes provided us with is more than that – it is the most complete and authoritative modern work on Porphyry's *Introduction* to date.

Pavel Gregoric