



“ “NOMINA QUIDEM FINITA SUNT, RES VERO INFINITAE”. Mediaeval Variations on an Aristotelian Authority ”

Leone Gazziero

► To cite this version:

Leone Gazziero. “ “NOMINA QUIDEM FINITA SUNT, RES VERO INFINITAE”. Mediaeval Variations on an Aristotelian Authority ”. L. Cesalli, A. Grondeux, F. Goubier, A. Robert et L. Valente (éd.), *Ad placitum. Pour Irène Rosier*, Roma, Aracne, 2021, p. 309-318, , 2021, 978-88-255-4025-3. 10.4399/978882554025339 . hal-03230757

HAL Id: hal-03230757

<https://hal.science/hal-03230757>

Submitted on 20 May 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

(L. Cesalli, A. Grondeux, F. Goubier, A. Robert et L. Valente (éd.), *Ad placitum. Pour Irène Rosier*, Roma, Aracne, 2021, p. 309-318)

LITTERA

[1] *ARISTOTELIS de sophisticis elenchis translatio Boethii*, 5.17 - 6.9 Dod: « nam syllogismus quidem ex quibusdam positus est ut dicatur diversum quid ex necessitate ab his quae posita sunt, elenchus [6] autem syllogismus cum contradictione conclusionis. Illi vero hoc quidem non faciunt, videntur autem ob multas causas, quorum unus locus aptissimus est et publicissimus per nomina. Nam quoniam non est ipsas res ferentes disputare, sed nominibus pro rebus utimur notis, quod accidit in nominibus in rebus quoque arbitramur accidere, velut in compotis ratiocinantibus. Hoc autem non est simile. NAM NOMINA QUIDEM FINITA SUNT ET ORATIONUM MULTITUDO, RES AUTEM NUMERO INFINITAE. NECESSE EST ERGO PLURA EANDEM ORATIONEM ET NOMEN UNUM SIGNIFICARE ».

[2] *ALEXANDRI APHRODISIENSIS quod fertur (MICHAELIS EPHEsii) in Aristotelis sophisticos elenchos commentarium*, 13.5-11 Wallies: « τὰ μὲν γὰρ ὀνόματα πεπεράνται καὶ τὸ τῶν λόγων πλῆθος" ἐπεὶ γὰρ οἱ λόγοι ἐξ ὀνομάτων σύγκεινται (λεγέσθω γὰρ νῦν καὶ τὰ ῥήματα ὀνόματα), τὰ δὲ ὀνόματα ἐκ συλλαβῶν, αἱ δὲ συλλαβαὶ ἐκ στοιχείων, τὰ δὲ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἐγγραμμάτου φωνῆς πεπερασμένα (εἰκοσιτέσσαρα γάρ), τὸ ἐκ πεπερασμένων ἄρα, ὡς ἐν τῷ ἔκτῳ τῆς Φυσικῆς ἀκροάσεως δέδεικται, ἀνάγκη συμπεπεράνθαι. ἀλλ' οὕτω μὲν πεπερασμένα εἰσὶ τὰ ὀνόματα ».

[3] *Anonymi glosae in Aristotelis sophisticos elenchos*, 198-199 de Rijk: « demonstrat etiam originem equivocationis; quia nomina sunt finita et res sunt infinitae et omnis res significatur nomine, ideo contingit [199] aequivocatio ».

[4] *Anonymi cantabrigiensis commentarium in Aristotelis sophisticos elenchos*, f. 81vb Ebbesen (forthcoming) : « quaeritur quare potius nomina dicantur esse [[in]]finita quam res, <et res> potius infinitae quam nomina. Si infinita dicantur hoc loco aliqua quorum numerus facile sciri non potest, habebis quod nec nomina erunt finita nec res. Si infinita dicantur aliqua quorum nullus est numerus, nec nomina nec res erunt infinitae, quoniam quorumlibet aliquis est numerus »

[5] *Roberti Grosseteste quod fertur commentarium in Sophisticos elenchos*, Oxford, Merton College 280, f. 4rb: « "HOC AUTEM NON SIMILE" <165a 10> et causam quare non est simile subiungit et est ratio talis: tam nomina quam orationes sunt [[in]]finita, res vero numero infinitae, plures igitur sunt res quam nomina. Si ergo significantur omnes res per nomina necesse est idem nomen et eandem orationem plura significare. [...]. Videntur autem haec tria quae dicit esse falsa scilicet nomina esse finita multitudinem orationum esse finitam et res numero esse infinitas. Nam si res sunt eadem apud omnes, nomina vero langagia diversificantur; tunc plura sunt nomina quam res quare si res infinitae multo fortius nomina infinita, non igitur finita ».

[6] *Anonymi Monacensis Commentarium in Sophisticos elenchos*, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm. 14246, f. 4ra-b and Admont Stiftsbibliothek 241, f. 6vb: « quaeritur de eo quod ipse dicit in tertia parte multitudinem nominum et orationum finitam, res vero infinitas. Videtur quod dicat falsum [M: 4rb] quia [...] multo plura sunt elementa vocum vel orationum quam rerum. Si ergo a multitudine principiorum vel elementorum sequitur multitudo principiorum vel compositorum et multo plura sunt principia orationum quam rerum quia quatuor sunt principia rerum scilicet quatuor elementa et multo plura sunt elementa vocum quia plures sunt litterae quam quatuor videtur ergo quod nomina et orationes magis infinita quam res cuius oppositum ponit auctor. Item de suo modo arguendi quaeritur. Non enim sequitur si multo plurae sunt res quam nomina vel dictiones quod propter hoc nomen unum vel oratio una significet plura, quia plures erant res quam nomina non tamen plures res significatae non enim omnes res significamus vel significantur. Ad hoc ultimum dicunt quidam quod debet ita suppleri infinitae sunt res et nomina et orationes sunt finitae et omnes res significantur ».

[7] *Roberti Kilwardby commentarium in Sophisticos Elenchos*, Cambridge, Peterhouse 205, f. 279ra and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Codex latinum 16619, f. 3va: « adhuc dubitatur de hoc quod dicit quod nomina sunt finita. Hoc enim videtur falsum. Cum enim res sint infinitae ut ipse dicit et multo plura sunt nomina quam res, quia quaelibet res una diversis nominibus nuncupatur in diversis idiomatibus, videtur quod nomina magis sint infinita quam res; male ergo dicit quod sunt finita. Et dicendum quod ipse intendit quod nomina unius idiomatis sunt finita et contra hoc non facit oppositio ».

[8] *Nicholai Parisiensis Notulae super librum elenchorum*, Praha, Knihovna Metropolitni Kapituli L.76 (1322), ff. 56vb - 57ra: « item ipse dicit quod res sunt infinitae nomina autem finita sunt. Contra: aut intelligit quoad nos aut quoad rem. Si intelligat quoad nos sic adeo bene sunt nomina infinita sicut res, quia sicut nescimus numerum rerum ita nescimus numerum nominum et ita quoad nos sua oratio est falsa. Si intelligat quoad rem similiter falsa est, quia omnia quae fecit Deus sub certo numero stabilivit, unde quoad naturam nihil actu est infinitum. Et ita omnimode dicit falsum. Item dicit quod plures sunt res quam nomina, contra et res et nomina habent ortum a suis principiis sed ad multiplicationem principiorum sequitur multiplicatio principiatorum. Ergo illa plura erunt quae habebunt plura principia. Sed nomina habent plura principia quam res, quia principia nominum sunt litterae quae sunt viginti quatuor. Principia rerum sunt elementa quae sunt quattuor. Ergo plura sunt nomina quam res. Item videtur quod sua illatio peccat. Non enim sequitur si plures sunt res quam nomina quod, propter hoc, unum nomen significat plura. Multae enim sunt res innominae, ut multa individua rerum innominatarum. Sed ad hoc quod sua illatio <teneret> oporteret hanc addere: “et omnes res nominatae sunt”, quae falsa est. [...]. [57ra] Ad aliud dicendum est quod cum dicit Auctor quod res sunt infinitae nomina autem finita, hoc posset sustineri et a parte rei et a parte nostra. A parte nostra sic: omnes res apud nos cognosci non possunt cum elementa infinitis modis possunt combinari ad constituendum rem. Sed nos non possumus cognoscere modos infinitos combinationis elementorum; ergo neque omnes res, cum quod est infinitum apud nos non cognoscitur. Sed possibile est humanum intellectum cognoscere omnia nomina, eo quod finitae sunt et non infinitae combinationes litterarum in syllaba et syllabarum in dictione. Et possibile est scire quot modis contigat quamlibet litteram praeponi et postponi et interponi. Et ita nomina sunt quoad nos finita, res autem non. Cum elementa rerum infinitis modis possunt componi ad constitutionem mixti et illas infinitas combinationes elementorum ab intellectu humano cognosci non possunt, sic ergo propositio auctoris vera est quoad nos. Similiter est vera quoad rem. Nam quoad rem nomina sunt finita sicut visum: cum finitae sint combinationes litterarum et non infinitae, nomina erunt finita et non infinita. [...]. Similiter res sunt infinitae non quantum ad entitatem numeri, quia res semper sunt sub aliquo finito, sed quantum ad stabilitatem numeri, quia numerus rerum instabilis est sed qualibet hora variatur ».

[9] *Roberti codicis veneti commentarium in sophisticos elenchos*, Venezia, Biblioteca marciana lat. VI.66 (2528), f. 32v: « Quaeritur de hoc quod dicit quod nomina sunt finita, res autem infinitae. [...]. Contra voces non sunt eadem apud [[hominis]] omnes res autem eadem quare plures erunt voces quam res et nomina per consequens. Nisi quod nomen addit super vocem. Vox autem solum \dicit/ signum, nomen autem signum et significatum unde ad diversitatem vocum non sequitur quod sit diversitas nominum sed oportet accipere nomina secundum unum et idem idioma cum dicitur nomina finita et pro diversis idiomatibus dicunt quod voces non sunt eadem ».

[10] *Roberti de Aucumpno commentarium in Sophisticos Elenchos*, Cambridge, Peterhouse 206, f. 136ra and Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine 3489, f. 2va: « Deinde dubitatur super hoc quod dicit nomina esse finita res autem infinitas et ideo unum nomen plura significat. Primo videtur dicere falsum in praemissis, secundo peccare in illatione. Cum enim dicit <res esse infinitas>, aut sumit infinitatem quoad nos aut quoad naturam in numero rerum. Si quoad nos, sic nomina sunt infinita; si quoad naturam, tunc, cum dicit res esse infinitas, falsum dicit. Item peccat in illatione, quia non sequitur si nomina sunt finita, et res infinitae, ergo dicendum unum nomen plura significat, quia praemissae possunt esse verae et conclusio falsa, si sint multae res et tamen tria nomina tres res significantia, si autem supponit quod omnes res sint nominatae, falsum videtur supponere, quia multae res sunt quae non sunt nec nunquam fuerunt cognitae ab homine. Et si dicatur quod illae nominantur nomine communi, non propter hoc sequitur nomen esse aequivocum quamvis unum nomen commune plures res comprehendat. Item videtur quod plura debeant esse nomina quam res, quia plura sunt elementa nominum ut litterae quam rerum, quia tantum sunt quatuor elementa rerum et plura nominum ut viginti tres. [...]. Ad quod dicendum quod etsi elementa rerum sint pauciora quam elementa nominum, quia tamen diversimode possunt intendi et remitti qualitates earum, pluribus modis possunt componi quam elementa nominum et ideo plures sunt res quam nomina ».

[11] *Alberti magni Expositio Sophisticorum elenchorum*, 529a-b Borgnet: « nam nomina quidem in eodem idiomate [529b] finita sunt; et per consequens orationum multitudo finita est quoad nos, cum sint posita a nostra constitutione; nostra enim institutio quoad nos infinita esse non potest; quia quod a nobis in quodam numero finito institutum est, quoad nos infinitum esse non potest; res autem cum sint non a nobis, sunt infinitae quoad nos »

[12] *Aegidii romani Expositio super libros Elenchorum*, Venetiis per Bonetum Locatellum, 1496, 6ra: « deinde, cum dicit “HOC AUTEM NON EST SIMILE etc.”, ostendit quod hoc credendo decipimur dicendo quod hoc non est simile, id est ita se habetur in rebus sicut in nominibus, nam nomina et multitudo orationum est finita, res autem sunt numero infinitae. Sunt enim res multo plures quam nomina. Necesse est ergo eandem orationem quantum ad amphiboliam et unum nomen quantum ad aequivocationem significare plura. Nunquam enim pauca possunt aequari multis nisi aliquae eorum adaptent pluribus. Nunquam ergo nomina repraesentabunt omnes res, nisi unum et idem nomen

significet plura. Decipimur ergo si credimus nomina adaequari rebus et credimus accidere in rebus quod accidit in nominibus ».

[13] *Augustini Niphi expositiones in libros De sophisticis elenchis*, Venezia, Ottaviano Scoto, 1534, 5vb: « aliter etiam dicit Aegidius afferens Aristotelem locutum esse per comparationem, quia videlicet res sint infinitae, quoniam plures quam nomina, nomina vero finita, quia pauciora rebus. Sed responsio videtur derisibilis quia nemo nomina, nemo res enumeravit. Ergo nemo scire potest esse res plures vel pauciores nominibus ».

COMMENTUM

PROLEGOMENA. The question whether things are infinite in number, whilst linguistic items are not, has elicited little interest amongst post-medieval commentators on Aristotle's *Sophistici elenchi*. Indeed, prominent scholars such as Agostino Nifo and Giulio Pace – to name but two of the most influential – disregarded it completely. The former dismissed the subject with a joke ([13]): for no one ever bothered to count either things or words, no one really knows whether there are more of these and less of those (or vice versa, for that matter). As for the latter, it is safe to assume that he did not think much of the alternative either, considering he did not mention it at all in his well-known companion to Aristotle's *Organon*.

Mediaeval interpreters, on the other hand, paid a great deal of attention to the issue, and rightly so. As a matter of fact, it makes excellent (exegetical) sense to investigate the problem. To begin with, Aristotle himself states – or so strongly suggests as to make no difference – that the most natural way deductive arguments get us into trouble has to do with the fact that every so often words and things do not add up (equivocation being, needless to say, the most common mismatch Aristotle refers to in [1]). Hence, it is definitely worthwhile to look further into the matter and ascertain why and to what extent this is the case.

IN UTRAMQUE PARTEM. Latin commentators never grew tired of asking the same questions all over again and enjoyed very much picking each other's arguments apart. It comes as no surprise then that they contributed some interesting variations on the theme. By the same token, they mustered more than a few excellent reasons why Aristotle should have or – alternatively – should not have deemed it necessary that the same name (and the same sentence) mean more than one thing. For the sake of brevity, we'll stick mainly to the names vs things issue and only highlight the most peculiar features of the arguments involved on each side along with one distinct merit of theirs.

RATIONES PRO. As early as the anonymous Parisian glosses Lambertus Maria de Rijk convincingly dated around the mid-twelfth century, this much had been worked out in favour of Aristotle's thesis ([1]): since we cannot dispense with linguistic expressions, which we use as symbols for the things we talk about, we are lured into thinking that what happens with words also happens with things. What of it? As it happens, trust in words is easily misplaced and the reason why we should know better than assume that what follows in the case of names also follows in the case of the things the names stand for is, precisely, that words and word-compounds (statements and the like) are equivocal out of necessity: « Aristotle shows by way of demonstration what the origin of equivocity is: since names are finite in number, whereas things are infinite, insofar as we signify everything through a name, equivocity will occur » ([3]). The Anonymous' explanation was as good as any and several Latin commentators found it natural to argue along the same sound lines. Robert Grosseteste, for instance, adopted it in [5], effectively spelling out where the necessity lies: inasmuch as, on one hand, all things we talk about get a name and, on the other hand, there are fewer names than things, the same name will necessarily apply to more than one thing or rather more than one set of things (a point Mediaeval commentators like Robert of Auncupno [10], as opposed to contemporary linguists or philosophers – Pierre Aubenque, for one, or Walter Belardi, for another –, understood all too well). Giles of Rome did pretty much the same with particular attention to the one over many relation in which names and things stand: « there's no way the few can equate the many unless some of former stand for more than one of the latter. Accordingly, there's no way names can represent things unless the same name signifies more than one thing » ([12]). Robert Kilwardby had no qualms about Aristotle's contention either, but he thought its scope should be narrowed down to cover one language at a time in order to avoid the kind of objections the traditional crosslinguistic version of the argument left – to some degree at least – unanswered: things, be they ever so numerous, are the same for everyone (this sure has a nice Aristotelian ring to it), whereas names are different according to different people. As a result, there are more names than things rather than the other way around. In Kilwardby's words: « since things are infinite in number, as Aristotle himself says, and there are many more names than things (insofar as different languages have different names for each thing), it appears that names deserve more than things to be considered infinite in number. Hence, Aristotle is wrong when he says that names are finite in number. Rather, one should say that Aristotle meant to say that there is a limited number of names as far as each language is concerned. And this claim meets with no opposition » ([7]). Another Englishman, by the same name, made a similar point (« one should understand here names within the same language »), even if the distinction he introduced between vocal sounds and actual words suggests that the possibility of bypassing altogether the difference among languages was not lost to him: true enough, different people utter

different vocal sounds when they signify the same thing, but this does not mean that different names are actually involved in the process of signification ([9]). Albert the Great did pretty much the same, albeit on slightly different grounds: names that belong to the same language are established by men and, like anything man-made, they come in a number of varieties, a finite number that is ([10]).

RATIONES CONTRA. Taking a stance in what was clearly an ongoing debate, Anonymus Monacensis and Nicholas of Paris – in two strikingly similar passages: [6] and [8] respectively –, as well as Robert of Hautecombe ([10]), shrewdly pointed out that this line of argument only works if we add a proviso, in fact two. First of all, as an older Anonymous had clearly stated a few years earlier ([4]), the argument seems to prove either too much or too little. On one hand, it leads to the conclusion that, by themselves, both things and names are finite in number: absolutely speaking, however great the number of things may be, it is as definite as the number of linguistic items. On the other hand, it leads to the conclusion that, with respect to ourselves, both things and names are infinite in number: as far as we know, there are countless names just as there are countless things. Be that as it may, Anonymus Monacensis, Nicholas of Paris and Robert of Hautecombe went further still arguing that even if we allow that there are many more things than names to call them by, it does not necessarily follow that these are equivocal, lest we make the additional – and rather implausible – stipulation that everything is to be assigned a name to start with: « in fact, even if things are in much greater number than names or sentences, this does not entail that the same name or the same sentence signify more than one thing. There may well be more things than names, but this does not mean that there are more things we actually signify insofar as we do not signify all things. Accordingly, some say that we have to supply here: “things are infinite in number, while names and sentences are not and all things are signified » ([6] ~ [8], cf. [10]). Neither the Anonymous nor Nicholas of Paris (or Robert of Hautecombe for that matter) did like the assumption in the least; not without a reason: after all, it is more than likely that a number of things go unnamed and, at any rate, it is a fact that we don’t get to talk about everything.

LITTERAE PLURES SUNT QUAM ELEMENTA. Besides the usual willingness to borrow whatever bit of foreign lore they could lay their hands on, Latin commentators demonstrated an uncanny ability to turn borrowed materials into something new, sometimes at cross-purposes with the original intent of their Greek predecessors. As far as the issue at hand goes, a case in point is the mereological considerations Late Ancient and Byzantine sources called upon in order to answer the question why equivocation exists at all. As early as Elias (in fact, earlier, considering it is very unlikely that this peculiar view originated with him), Eastern commentators like Arethas and Michael of Ephesos dealt with Aristotle’s claim that there are only so many names (and sentences) through a combinatorial analysis of sorts: because there are only so many letters, there will only be so many combinations thereof. Long story short: insofar as words result from the combination of syllables and syllables are but the combination of letters, the number of words will be finite because the number of syllables to combine is itself finite and, in turn, the number of syllables is finite because the number of letters to combine is finite to start with ([2]). As Sten Ebbesen has convincingly shown, Latin commentators got the gist of the argument from a Byzantine source – a scholion or a borrowing from one version or another of Michael’s commentary on Aristotle *Sophistici elenchi*. Once they got this particular piece of argumentation running, however, they turned it against the very purpose it was meant to serve in the first place: since names come from letters just as things come from elements, on account of there being twenty something of those and only four of these, there will be many more names than things. Simple as that: « the multiplication of principles brings about the multiplication of what comes from the principles » ([8], cf. [6] and [10]). It definitely took some ingenuity to get the argument back on its tracks, but Latin commentators had it in abundance and the way they showed how to do more with less is a thing of beauty: there are only so many ways letters can be combined and it is not inconceivable for a human mind – a brilliant one for sure, like Irène Rosier’s – to figure them all out, but no human mind – not even Irène Rosier’s – will ever be able to tell in how many ways water, earth, wind and fire come together in God’s works: « for there’s an infinite number of ways elements can be combined to form whichever thing, we cannot know them all. As a result, neither can we know all things, because knowledge of what is infinite is beyond us. On the other hand, a human mind can get to know all names, insofar as the ways letters can be combined to form syllables and syllables can be combined to form utterances are finite in number and not infinite. It is possible after all to get to know in how many ways a given letter can be placed before, after or between other letters » ([8], cf. [10]).