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Porphyry's Fateful Question

PORPHYRY (c. 234 – c. 305) was a neoplatonist, a student of the leading neoplatonist Plotinus. Porphyry's criticism of the Aristotelian categories raised the profound question of their existential status. The categories are the most general "predicables," the things (the "concepts?") that can be said or predicated of "objects." In some sense, this is the beginning of analytic language philosophy. Later thinkers divided over whether the categories are real things (the "Realists") or just words or names (the "Nominalists").

Like Plato and all the neoplatonists, Porphyry disliked the idea of material things (including the body), regarding them as subordinate to the Platonic ideas" (*ιδεα*), and merely poor copies (*mimesis*) of those ideas. For Porphyry, the Platonic realm of ideas is the source of eternal "Being," whereas the material world is ephemeral and mere "Becoming." And the ultimate "Being" for Porphyry is the idea of "The One," which included the Platonic ideals of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

Where these ideas are perfectly singular, all lesser ideas contain internal differences, describable (or predicable) as properties or attributes of their substance. Thus Socrates (a substance) is a Man (a property). Aristotle's five categories¹ are definition (*horos*), genus (*genos*), difference (*diaphora*), property (*idion*), and accident (*symbebekos*). Porphyry substituted Plato's idea (*eidos*) for Aristotle's *horos*. Later writers use *species*.

In his Introduction to the Aristotelian Categories (the *Isagoge*), Porphyry raised what became known as his "fateful question." Can these categories be said to exist (in the same sense of material existence)? As a neoplatonist, Porphyry might have been quite satisfied to have the categories simply exist in the "metaphysical" realm of the ideas? He clearly sees that they are concepts. Information philosophy identifies Platonic Ideas as *immaterial information*. Yet they are physical things, some with *causal power*.

1 Aristotle *Topics*, a iv. 101 b 17-25

