Three Medieval accounts of the subject matter of logic

# Abstract

This paper examines three different Medieval approaches to the subject matter of logic along with the interrelations between them. The first approach associates the subject matter of logic with acts of understanding; the second identifies the subject matter of logic with the syllogism; the third, with the argument. Versions of the first approach are championed by Thomas Aquinas, who takes the subject matter of logic to be beings of reason, and Avicenna, who identifies the subject matter of logic with second intentions. The second answer is endorsed by Duns Scotus as well as Walter Burley. An early version of the third thesis is posited by Albertus Magnus (who finds support for it in Alfarabi and Algazel), and later defended by John Buridan.

Generally speaking, the first answer was dominant among commentators in the period from the beginning of the systematic study of Aristotle’s logical works to the final quarter of the thirteenth century. The second period was dominant from the last quarter of the thirteenth to the beginning of the fourteenth century. The third answer was the most common among authors from the middle to later fourteenth century.

This paper achieves two aims. First, it explicates the reasons given by different authors for taking the subject matter of logic to be what they take it to be. Second it identifies the underlying logic whereby these larger shifts from the dominance of one answer to another occurred. In the first part of the paper, I present records gathered from over fifty thirteenth and fourteenth century manuscripts determining the standard order of reading of Aristotle’s logical works in and around Paris, along with the different changes that one finds over time. Next, I present the arguments given by Aquinas, Scotus, Burley and others for their respective positions on the subject matter of logic. Lastly, I show that the shifts from one answer to another can be accounted for by larger shifts regarding the notion of a subject matter itself. In the earliest phrase, ‘subject’ is taken to refer to that which is directly addressed in all of the different branches of logic. In the middle period, however, the subject matter of a science is taken to be that which it is *principally* concerned with. The final period, however, seems to (perhaps intentionally) conflate these two approaches to the meaning of a subject matter: for instance, on the one hand, Buridan takes argumentation to be that which all the books of standard logical study are ordered toward; on the other, part of his rationale for rejecting the account of Scotus is to broaden this principle subject matter of logic to include non-syllogistic arguments, and he also speaks of this same subject matter as being studied *in* the study of the integral parts (e.g. statements) that make up the subject matter of the other books in the logical curriculum (e.g. the *De Interpretatione*).