

NICHOLAS OF AUTRE COURT AND THE MASTERY OF REASON

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Where does Paris lie on a map whose cardinal points are provided by Athens and Jerusalem? And how might its coordinates relate to those of Rome? Both might claim to be found at the centre of this map, as evidenced by Benedict Caetani's outburst «You Paris masters at your desks seem to think the world should be ruled by your reasonings». The papal legate, and future Pope Boniface VIII, went on to claim «It is to us that the world is entrusted, not to you»¹. This map, which aspires to show where what is named by these cities lie, is one whose contours are provided by reason and mastery in the context of faith. This brief investigation concerns itself with the putative mastery of reason over both man and God, and with the somewhat paradoxical mastery of reasoning over reason. The enduring philosophical problem that forms the background to this investigation, and, I think, makes this map of some pressing contemporary import, is that of the attempt to use the human will alone to ground social norms in a time when reason seems unable to hold back the process of the dissolution of such norms.

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¹ Quoted at Barbara W. TUCHMAN, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, Ballantine, New York 1979, p. 22.

It will proceed by examining the arguments, not of a Roman or Parisian master, but of a Parisian anti-master - much as reasoning appears to undo reason, so Paris has the habit of undoing Paris. Indeed, a key question underlying what follows is whether reasoning undoing reason is best thought of as anti-rational, or irrational, in character, as it has usually been in the long history of philosophy, or is it better understood, as this investigation suspects, as a different and more faithful triumph of reason². If it is a triumph, then, for our purposes here, the embodiment of this triumph is Nicholas of Autrecourt (c. 1298-1369)³. Nicholas was one of those extravagant

² As *anti-rational* it can be viewed as either enemy or friend. If an enemy it is seen as destructive of reason and of those things that it is felt are sustained by reason. For example, it might be thought to erode the putatively rational legitimacy of social institutions. As a friend it can be seen as liberating one from the tyranny of reason, as in fideism where showing the limitations of reason is felt to create room for faith. As *rational* these earlier manifestations of reason have, in their undoing by further reasoning, been revealed to be inadequately rational, and should without mourning be replaced by better reasoning. And the better reasoning immediately to hand is the reasoning that has just undone the inadequate reasoning, so that is where to begin.

³ In addition to texts footnoted elsewhere the useful literature on Nicholas includes: C. GRELLARD, *Croire et savoir: Les principes de la connaissance selon Nicolas d'Autrecourt*, Vrin, Paris 2005; J. R. WEINBERG, *Nicolaus of Autrecourt: A Study in 14th Century Thought*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1948; H. RASHDALL, *Nicholas de Ultricuria, A Medieval Hume*, «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society N. S.» 7 (1907), pp. 1-27; T. K. SCOTT, *Nicholas of Autrecourt, Buridan, and Ockhamism*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy» 9 (1971), pp. 15-41; J. M. M. H. THIJSEN, *Censure and Heresy at the University of Paris, 1200-1400*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1998, pp. 73-82; ID., *The Quest for Certain Knowledge in the Fourteenth Century: Nicholas of Autrecourt against the Academics*, in J. SIHVOLA (ed.), *Ancient Scepticism and the Sceptical Tradition*, Societas Philosophica Fennica («Acta Philosophica Fennica» 66), Helsinki 2000, pp. 199-223; B. D. DUTTON, *Nicholas of Autrecourt and William of Ockham on Atomism, Nominalism, and the Ontology of Motion*, «Medieval Philosophy and Theology» 5 (1996), pp. 63-85; J. ZUPKO,

minds that are so troublesome for those who aspire to create or sustain mastery over others. In his case he was well-endowed with logical rigour and moral energy – a most dangerous combination, especially for him. The trouble he threatened led his writing to be condemned and burnt in 1347 when he was forced to recant before being cast out of Paris. But some of his arguments have endured with the shock they impart undiminished. His particular crime was to show that the arguments of Aristotelian scholasticism are no more justified than any other arguments, and he showed this very quickly. So quickly that he thought it was a scandal that the masters of Paris spent all their lives studying Aristotle such that «they all deserted moral matters and concern for the common good because of the logical discourses of Aristotle and Averroes»⁴. And they were most wanting in charity, «rather they seem subject to rivalries, jealousies, murmurings, the grasping for empty praise, and all the miseries in which men are involved»⁵. He believed abandoning Aristotle would lead to the transformation of these miserable men, and the purification of their hearts so that:

they would seem like divine men, so to speak, who would not consume the whole span of their life in logical discourse or in clarifying obscure statements of Aristotle or in quoting the comments of Averroes. Rather, they would explain the divine law to the people and, diffusing the rays of their goodness on every side, so live as to appear, in the sight of the most glorious Prince of all nature, as spotless mirrors, and images of His goodness⁶.

Buridan and Skepticism, «Journal of the History of Philosophy» 31/2 (1993), pp. 191-221; ID., *John Buridan: Portrait of a Fourteenth Century Arts Master*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (Ind.) 2003, pp. 183-249.

⁴ NICHOLAS OF AUTRECOURT, *The Universal Treatise*, transl. L. A. Kennedy, R. E. Arnold & A. E. Millward, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee 1971, p. 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Trenchant and ambitious stuff, and all this achieved simply by putting Aristotle to one side.

In what follows the focus will be on the parts of Nicholas's surviving works that, he claims, undo Aristotle: chiefly the two letters to Bernard of Arezzo⁷. In these letters Nicholas uses powerful negative arguments to show that Aristotelian arguments are no more probable, and provide no more certainty, than many other competent philosophical arguments. All these arguments are thus in a state of equipollence, meaning reason has called its own mastery into question. If any argument is only ever of equal force to any other argument then it cannot master that other argument with the force of reason. Using these style of arguments relates Nicholas to the long history of sceptical thought, and in particular raises the issue of his relationship, if any, with Pyrrhonian thought. Indeed, there are a number of vexed historiographical issues that appear here, such as whether there was ever such a phenomenon as mediaeval scepticism⁸. And if there was, whether it makes sense to think of Nicholas as a sceptic⁹. Here Nicholas will be considered in proximity to the question of reason and mastery by first contrasting two moments in the history of his reception in the 20th century, a century which from the first often seemed able to only read Nicholas through the lens of scepticism. These moments are provided by Étienne Gilson's *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* and Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*¹⁰. These books

⁷ This investigation makes no pretence to examining all aspects of Nicholas's thought, many of which were in conflict with the sceptical aspect.

⁸ See H. LAGERLUND, *A History of Skepticism in the Middle Ages*, in ID. (ed.), *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background* («Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters» 103), Brill, Leiden 2010, pp. 1-27.

⁹ See GRELLARD, *Nicholas of Autrecourt's Skepticism: The Ambivalence of Medieval Epistemology*, in LAGERLUND (ed.), *Rethinking the History of Skepticism*, pp. 119-143.

¹⁰ E. GILSON, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, Ignatius, San Francisco 1999; H. BLUMENBERG, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, transl. R. M. Wallace, MIT, Cambridge (Mass.) 1985.

construct narratives concerning the place of reason in relation to faith in the history of the West. And Nicholas can be as troublesome to these narratives as he was perceived to be for scholasticism. This will indicate what broader issues are raised by Nicholas's particular arguments. Having explored the claims made by Gilson and Blumenberg, as well as by Nicholas himself, for the place and significance of his thought, we will turn to examine whether Nicholas's arguments warrant these claims. This will be undertaken not only by examining the two letters to Bernard of Arezzo, but also by contrasting them with the most powerful forms of sceptical argumentation thus far elaborated, which can be found in Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. This will allow some concluding remarks to return to the opening question of **reason and mastery** in the context of faith.

1. FROM ÉTIENNE GILSON...

Étienne Gilson's 1937 *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* originated in his William James Lectures at Harvard the previous year. In it he seeks to identify a pattern to Western Philosophy of the last millennium. This pattern consists of a series of three dogmatic experiments: the Mediaeval experiment; the Cartesian experiment; the Modern experiment. In each experiment dogma emerge as a response to basic metaphysical problems, but the inadequacy of these dogma are then revealed by logic, and each experiment thus results in scepticism. In his concluding remarks Gilson suggests how this series might be broken with a rearticulation of the metaphysical task that owes much to Aristotle and Aquinas. While the historical details of each experiment are obviously different, Gilson believes their similar structure, from dogma to scepticism, and «the constant recurrence of definite philosophical attitudes should suggest to the mind of its observers the presence of an abstract philosophical necessity»¹¹. The series is not a matter of history, but of philosophy. And considered within philosophy it is

¹¹ GILSON, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, p. 245.

a matter of abstract necessity, so a matter of what is often called logic. Why is this the case?

Gilson's understanding of reasoning is broadly Aristotelian:

In the first, philosophers are free to lay down their own sets of principles, but once it is done, they no longer think as they wish – they think as they can... In the second place... any attempt on the part of a philosopher to shun the consequences of his position is doomed to failure¹².

The philosophers can start their reasoning wherever they want, but once they have started they are constrained by logic. First principles are not to be questioned, only what follows from first principles¹³. This is because it is thought that logic, understood as the science that investigates how reasoning works, cannot reach back beyond these principles. This point will be disputed by the Pyrrhonians who will reveal, through the set of arguments known as the Five Modes of Agrippa, that no successful reasoning can follow if one asserts first principles in such a manner¹⁴. These arguments remain unrefuted today. The search for a presuppositionless philosophy was embarked upon in order to outmanoeuvre the sceptic's aporetic undoing of reasoning from first principles. This search will culminate in Hegel's attempt to tame this aporetic logic by subsuming these sceptical arguments within an alternative logic, and much contemporary philosophy labours in the shadow of the failure of Hegel's undertaking. This is simply to note that while these philosophical problems have ancient origins, they remain, or should remain, a problem for philosophers today. And fortunately for my argument, nothing rides on the truth of Gilson's argument as I am concerned with how he situates Nicholas, not whether he is correct in so doing so.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 243.

¹³ This is a position in keeping with ARISTOTLE, *Posterior Analytics*, transl. & ed. J. Barnes, Clarendon, Oxford 1993², 72b 5-24, 76a 16-24, 99b 15-100a 14.

¹⁴ See SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *Outlines of Scepticism*, edited by J. Annas & J. Barnes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, I. 164-177; BARNES, *The Toils of Scepticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990.

Gilson feels that there are a number of perennial philosophical questions which philosophers begin to respond to by asserting first principles. From these first principles his three experiments are unfolded. But careful attention to logic reveals that the reasoning sustaining these experiments is dogmatic, and so the experiments fail as their framework is sceptically dissolved. How does sceptical dissolution pass to a new dogmatic experiment? Gilson claims that «philosophy always buries its undertakers»¹⁵. And this occurs because scepticism must, for him, engender one of two reactions: mysticism or moralism. These in turn create the ground for the restoration of philosophy that occurs, in his experiments, with Aquinas, Descartes and Kant. So this is his sketch of the history of Greek thought: «Plato's idealism comes first: Aristotle warns everybody that Platonism is heading for scepticism; then Greek scepticism arises, more or less redeemed by the moralism of the Stoics and Epicureans, or by the mysticism of Plotinus»¹⁶. This pattern is repeated, so that one might, bringing Gilson up to date, read Kant for Plato, Hegel for Aristotle, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud for Greek scepticism, the moralism of human rights for the Stoics, and the philosophical return of religion for Plotinus.

Gilson examines Nicholas of Autrecourt in a chapter unsurprisingly entitled "The Breakdown of Mediaeval Philosophy"¹⁷. So Nicholas takes his place in Gilson's reconstruction of the philosophical history of the last millennia in the position occupied in the previous experiment by Greek scepticism. In each experiment the sceptics are unimpressed by, and seek to undo, their experimenters. In the mediaeval experiment philosophy existed in tension with religion, usually on the ground of theology. Mediaeval sceptics were concerned that the flawed reasoning of the experimenters would do damage to religion. And they grasped that «the easiest way to show philosophy could not prove anything against religion was to show that it cannot prove anything at all»¹⁸. And this is

¹⁵ GILSON, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, p. 246.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-96.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

what, according to Gilson, Nicholas set out to do. Gilson is under the false impression that Nicholas was an Ockhamist, and furthermore, like William, fled to the court of Louis of Bavaria. But fortunately nothing rides on this for Gilson's argument, which relies on Nicholas's surviving arguments rather than biographical details and questions of influence or the lack of it.

Gilson acknowledges that Nicholas appears as a sceptic not «for lack of intellectual discipline» but because «his standard of truth is more exacting than our own»¹⁹. Therefore he was not a «mere revolutionist»²⁰. Gilson describes how Nicholas argues that nothing is certain except the principle of non-contradiction and what could be deduced from that principle. This condemned vast swathes of scholastic reasoning to incertitude. Or, more accurately, it showed that these elaborate reasonings were no more or less certain than other apparently more vulgar or coarse reasonings. Scholasticism is violently stripped of its formidable intellectual aura, and for Gilson this is not, as it was for Nicholas, a liberation, but a trauma. «What is left of metaphysics if we keep only what is immediately perceived by sense, external or internal, and deduced from it by the principle of contradiction only?»²¹. The answer to this question is, of course, nothing much of the good old philosophy.

This is traumatic for Gilson as he remains wedded to a broadly Aristotelian vision of the intertwining of life and reason:

We cannot live without ascribing some meaning to our existence, or act without ascribing some goal to our activity; when philosophy no longer provides men with satisfactory answers to these questions, the only means they still have to escape scepticism and despair are moralism, or mysticism, or some combination of both²².

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 80.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

As such Gilson sees Nicholas as a moralist as «obviously Nicholas of Autrecourt's plan was to turn pure formal logic against philosophy, to the greater benefit of ethics and of practical religious life»²³. In this Gilson acknowledges Nicholas is not alone. He groups him with John of Sailsbury, Petrarch and Erasmus as thinkers who perceived that logic dissolved scholasticism and therefore sought to save Christian faith by turning to practical ethics guided by «the Gospel, the Fathers of the Church, and... the pagan moralists to whom the Fathers themselves were so heavily indebted. Philosophy itself, conceived as a distinct discipline, should therefore be ruled out»²⁴. This then is Gilson's judgement regarding Nicholas, which is also a judgement regarding philosophy, logic and religion. Philosophy is of the highest value. Then, curiously apart from philosophy, there is nefarious logic. And finally there is religion as a cocktail of mysticism and ethics whose function is as a therapeutic response to the traumatic destruction of philosophy by logic.

How might a modern Nicholas respond? It seems that there are serious problems with Gilson's conceptions of life, philosophy, and religion. The Christian might say that Gilson has his conceptions of philosophy and religion the wrong way round. If one is a Christian then the foundation of life is God. If God exists then the meaning of life flows from God and is revealed through various media such as the Gospels and the sacraments. Philosophy can be one of those media and aid in that task, but if it doesn't or can't then there are other media. For the Christian, philosophy is not the source of the meaning of life so that the ruling out of philosophy does not mean the ruling out of the possibility of life having meaning. Only if God does not exist can life not have meaning in this way. Christianity without God would be senseless and therefore unable to provide sense to life. But if God does not exist then any Christian moralism or mysticism, or combination of the two, is hardly likely to be any sort of constructive therapy for the absence of meaning. This is because both presume the existence of the God that they are supposed to be a therapy for the non-existence of.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

This would render Christian moralism and mysticism practically indistinguishable from scepticism and despair, or death. For Gilson life without meaning is a life that cannot be lived. Life without life is death.

The relationship of philosophy and logic is also problematic. Gilson is clear that for him they are different enterprises such that «supposing that philosophy were effectually destroyed, logic would remain»²⁵. For him the function of philosophy appears to be to respond to various basic metaphysical questions and thus provide philosophical knowledge, including knowledge of the meaning of life. What then is logic? It is, as it has always been, the science of reason in terms both of the study of how reason works and of the practice of reasoning. Logic is both theoretical and practical. And the fruit of making reason work practically is what is called philosophical knowledge. Philosophical knowledge is philosophical in character precisely because it is the fruit of reasoning. As such it is a form of knowledge we can share with others, because we can through language share reasons with others in ways we cannot share, for example, raw experience or intuitions. What does it then mean to say that logic destroys philosophy and survives the destruction of philosophy? Philosophy is destroyed if it cannot provide philosophical knowledge. But philosophical knowledge is the fruit of logic which is itself the fruit of reason. The destruction of philosophical knowledge entails the destruction of logic because that logic is what necessarily creates and sustains philosophical knowledge. To kill philosophical knowledge one would have to kill logic. The destruction of philosophical knowledge by logic would then be a form of suicide. But Gilson asserts that logic survives philosophy, as if logic could survive its own extinction.

Both these concerns, the Christian and the logical, have a similar pattern: if x does function then y is unnecessary. If x doesn't function then y can't function, where x stands for God or logic/reason, and y for Gilson's conception of philosophy. Gilson's philosophy is unnecessary when it works, and can't work when it is needed. An alternative to this pattern is that Gilson's conception of philosophy is

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

inadequate. It fails as philosophy because it is undone by reason where successful philosophizing is what is not undone by reasoning. And the reasoning that does not seem to be undone is the reason that undoes and is not undone itself. Perhaps a rigorous scepticism is true philosophy? It needs to be rigorous in order to avoid sceptical self or auto-refutation, but Pyrrhonism provides an example of such a scepticism.

Gilson's philosophy is not the god but the therapy that failed. It is both nothing more than a therapy and fails because it is not as one with logic. However, he himself provides a way forward:

When one has repeatedly failed in a certain undertaking, one naturally concludes that it was an impossible undertaking. I say naturally, but not logically, for a repeated failure in dealing with a given problem may point to a repeated error in discussing the problem rather than to its intrinsic insolubility...²⁶.

And indeed Gilson's hope is that «the spectacle of so many blunders, ending invariably in the same scepticism, is more suggestive of hope than discouragement»²⁷. Perhaps the key is the invariability of the same scepticism whatever the particular dogma of the experiment? Might the repeated error be the misrecognition of scepticism as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution? Does scepticism even require the therapies of moralism or mysticism? Scepticism is despair that demands the therapies of moralism and mysticism. But scepticism appears to be the fruit of logic at its most forceful. It is the result of the more rigorous application of logic to our arguments and to our claims to knowledge. And another name for the fruit of logic is philosophical knowledge. Might not scepticism be the same as philosophical knowledge? Scepticism, and logic, does destroy the dogma of Gilson's experimenters, but it destroys them by showing that dogma is not philosophical knowledge. And with that very demonstration true philosophical knowledge is created. With that Gilson's cycle of failure might truly be escaped.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

2. ...THROUGH HANS BLUMENBERG...

In the second part of his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Hans Blumenberg unfolds the thesis that modern self-assertion, and the radical materialising of nature, emerge as a direct reaction to the late mediaeval assertion of divine absolute power. A minor scene in this unfolding is where he describes Nicholas's retreat «to a minimal theoretical position, that is, a position least affected by the thesis of divine omnipotence»²⁸. In a chapter whose title has resonances of Gilson's, "A Systematic Comparison of the Epochal Crisis of Antiquity to that of the Middle Ages", he argues that Nicholas had no option but to adopt a non-metaphysical atomism precisely because the Pyrrhonian path was denied to him. «For in regard to the question of what brings human existence to its fulfilment, the theological decision in favour of the transcendent status of such fulfilment remains binding, just as much as it excludes general human accessibility»²⁹. My question is, given the reading of Gilson above, does this mean the theological decision and scepticism are incompatible? I am assuming that Blumenberg is not just making a contingently biographical, and thus rather uninteresting observation: Nicholas didn't become a Pyrrhonian because he was already a Christian³⁰. I am taking him to mean something like: while particular theologies can be undone by the practice of logic, the theological decision remains binding because it cannot be undone by logic. As binding it means Nicholas could not become a pagan Pyrrhonian. But I wish to explore whether the bindingness of the theological decision meant Nicholas could not have become a Christian sceptic. As a matter of history I do not think he can be

²⁸ BLUMENBERG, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 173.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Christophe Grellard explores how Nicholas could not have been, and was not, a sceptic for more substantial historical reasons in his *Nicholas of Autrecourt's Skepticism: The Ambivalence of Medieval Epistemology*, in LAGERLUND (ed.), *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background*, pp. 118-143.

described as a Christian sceptic, but given the logic of his position as presented by Blumenberg, I want to ask whether it is possible for him to have become a Christian sceptic. And this begs the question as to whether the very idea of a Christian scepticism makes sense.

Blumenberg's hefty tome takes its place in a long and ever lengthening history of controversies over the nature of secularisation. Where once religion had mastery over the social, the secularisation thesis claims that it has now withdrawn. The crux of the controversy concerns whether this withdrawal amounts to a break or a transition. If it is a transition then secularised society develops out of religion and remains in some fundamental sense, a creature of religion. If there is a break then it has the opportunity to be something radically other **than the religion** that preceded it. Blumenberg wants to defend the legitimacy of the secular modern as the human will's assumption of the responsibility for its own fate. Modern human self-assertion as evidenced by scientific curiosity and progress sustained by reason, is not a product of Christianity as argued by Karl Löwith, but is a new phenomenon which stands on its own³¹. The modern wants to will itself, through the medium of reason, as a distinct epoch rather than simply be defined by «inherited and unexamined accepted truths»³².

Above we saw that religion and logic occupied the same place in the single logical description of the two weaknesses of Gilson's arguments regarding philosophy. What is the relation between our two Xs? Are they complementary or in competition? These days religion and logic are rarely seen together, but what they have in common is crucial to both and is described, in both, under the name of justification. Logical or epistemic justification describes a situation where a belief or claim is supported by reasons such that it successfully achieves the status of knowledge. Traditionally knowledge is used to describe those sort of beliefs that are both true and justified³³. When epistemic justification works it is judged

³¹ K. LÖWITH, *Meaning in History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1949.

³² BLUMENBERG, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 472.

³³ Other conceptions of justification, such as to be found in foundationalism, coherentism, and reliabilism, do not escape Pyrrhonian scepticism and so are not considered here.

that a belief or claim is sufficiently underpinned by reason. Theological justification describes a situation where a soul is judged by God to be sufficiently underpinned by faith or works, and thus is saved by being moved from a state of sin to a state of grace, justice or righteousness. Epistemically justification is achieved by the logically rigorous giving of reasons. Theologically it is an act of God. In both cases it is the mark of a success. In one it is the mark of successful reasoning, in the other it is the mark of the successful living of the Christian life. From one follows knowledge, from the other salvation. Epistemic justification can be conceived as operating on a horizontal axis, as it involves the giving and taking of reasons between, thus far, humans. By contrast, theological justification can be conceived as operating on a vertical axis between human souls and a transcendent God.

Secularisation, in the terms of these conceptions, can be understood as taking place where the ultimate public discursive orientation of societies moves in some sense from the vertical axis to the horizontal axis. So what happens when the problem of the mastery of reason is moved from the vertical (the giving of reasons from divine-to-human-to-divine in order to establish salvation) to the horizontal (the giving of reasons between us, or the likes of us, in order to establish knowledge)? Along the vertical all is a matter of divine decision. Justification will only work if god is God, i.e. has, in some sense, *potentia absoluta*, and can actually save a soul. And if god is God then philosophy is redundant in the sense of having nothing to contribute to the task of establishing vertical justification. If God exists theological justification works, if god doesn't then it doesn't and there is nothing philosophy can do about it. It is all a matter of God's will within a horizon of putatively absolute possibility. Of course, humans still find plenty to argue about, *viz* the Reformation. But such disputes always run the risk of implicit atheism.

Karl Barth famously wrote that – and it always worth returning to these words when embarking on a thinking of Christianity:

the atheism that is the real enemy is the “Christianity” that professes faith in God very much as a matter of course, perhaps with great emphasis, and perhaps with righteous

indignation at atheism wild or mild, while in its practical thinking and behaviour it carries on exactly as if there was no God³⁴.

In any thinking of philosophical problems that arise in Christianity one should assume that there is a God. And this holds even for the atheist, because if there is no god then any philosophical problems that arise from their existence evaporate, and thus exploring them becomes futile. If one investigates the reasons of God as an epistemological problem then one is from the outset implicitly assuming the non-existence of God, because if God exists then the reasons of God could not be an epistemological problem. The reasons of God could not be an epistemological problem because God will have the absolute power to transcend any logical constraints or epistemic difficulty. Regardless of the actual existence or non-existence of God, one's epistemic investigation is worthless. Of course when theological concepts, in the sense of ideas predicated on the existence of God, are secularised this ceases to hold. If one presumes the existence of God, then the absolute power of God can override anything that might amount to an epistemic or logical problem. But without God such epistemic or logical problems become fully operative. And this serves as an epistemological break in any attempt to trace the genealogy of, say, modern political concepts back into theology. While such a genealogy might be historically accurate, there are grave dangers for both theology and philosophico-political enterprises in being overly impressed by the philosophical force of any such genealogical connection between enterprises that must, of their epistemic essence, proceed in radically different ways if they are to be fruitful within their particular spheres of action. It should also be remembered that divine absolute power only works vertically. Even if the existence of God is presumed, their absolute power cannot be used by us to override any epistemic difficulties with horizontal reason-giving. For that to work we would have to have absolute power. And this creates something as

³⁴ K. BARTH, *Atheism, For and Against*, in his *Fragments Grave and Gay*, transl. Eric Mosbacher, Fontana, London 1971, pp. 46-47.

dangerous as the implicit atheism that Barth identified: the clumsy secularisation of will from god to man such that conceptions of the human will implicitly assume they are still sustained by the absolute power that sustained divine will. And this is a danger for both the theist and the atheist thinker.

The chief concern of this investigation is not the fate of genealogies that cross the secularization Rubicon, but with the relation of human-to-human reasoning and whether it can be bound by what Blumenberg called the theological decision or not. And indeed, as soon as a "theological decision" is appealed to in reasoning between humans it becomes a *reason* and thus is inevitably secularised as it ceases to operate *qua* theological decision. As soon as someone's faith is offered as a reason in a human-to-human argument it ceases to have the character of faith and acquires the character of a reason. When faith on the vertical axis is represented on the horizontal axis it has the status of reason and not faith, though it retains the status of faith on the vertical even when represented on the horizontal. Using faith as a reason does not destroy faith. Ideally it should enrich it if it is real on the vertical. Of course representing it on the horizontal may also reveal that what was thought to be faith on the vertical was inadequate or an illusion, and this holds even if God does exist on the vertical. The existence of God does not mean that one cannot be mistaken about what one perceives to be one's faith.

What exactly is the logical problem with human-to-human reasoning that aspires to bind others either through epistemic justification or through decision? To adapt the Five Modes of Agrippa presented by Sextus Empiricus, the problem could be posed thus: humans are different and they experience the world and each other relative to themselves. This is relativity, akin to Einstein, not relativism as in the postmodern. In relativism assertions are made such as "there is no such thing as truth", or "truth is purely subjective". Relativism tends towards philosophical banality because when, for example, the former assertion is examined more closely it can often be found to amount to the assertion "(It is true) that there is no truth" and so it collapses into auto-refutation. In relativity one finds assertions such as "my experience appears relative to myself". There may be truth but my experience of truth will remain my experience of truth and not your experience of truth.

Given difference and relativity, disagreement tends to flourish because things appear different to different people given their differences. To socially cope with difference, relativity and disagreement, and without violence and brute social coercion, we give and take reasons. Claims must be justified to others using reasons, and forms of social life legitimated, precisely because they are not self-evident. And even where there might be the suggestion of self-evidence or where claims are not immediately contested, philosophical, and political, investigation soon changes that. So socially we need to give reasons, but it appears that if we begin to give reasons then we can never finish giving reasons. This is because all reasoning appears to fall into infinite regress and circularity, and thus justification is forever deferred. There appears only one way out. This way of escaping infinite regress and circularity would be to assert the power of one's own will unencumbered by any reason and so indifferent to any potential reason-taker. One simply posits without reason. But from a Pyrrhonian perspective this reasoning also fails, because if we posit *A* without any reason (and we must avoid any reason to avoid the abysses of infinite regress and circularity) then there is equally no reason why we cannot also posit *not-A*. And if we posit both *A* and *not-A* then we find ourselves in a condition of rational equipollence, which is also where infinite regress and circularity deliver us. All reasons would be of equal value and thus judgement, and thus justification and legitimation, would be impossible. We would find ourselves where some think we are, in a state of nihilism. But a nihilism not of no reason, or of too few reasons, but one of always too many reasons which are normatively indistinct and indistinguishable.

The Pyrrhonian avoids auto-refutation by avoiding the dogmatic assertion that this is how reason works. Instead their aporetic logic is developed as a phenomenology of reason-giving. It is how reason appears to appear. And it appears to appear in this manner in every appearance of reasoning they examine. They inhabit the arguments of others, and show these arguments deconstruct themselves in an aporetic manner. They cannot establish the objective truth of this aporetic logic. But they can say it has always appeared to be true to them. If you want to try and find an argument where reason appears differently, they would wish you good luck as one should never think one has the answer and thus one should, as far

as possible, carry on questioning. And all this holds whether it appears to the questioner that God exists or not. If it appears that God exists, it will appear to them that this God will not be subject to aporetic logic if God does not desire to be, therefore what Blumenberg describes as the theological decision can bind the thinker to whom God appears to appear, whatever the manner of that appearance might be. It is thus possible to be a Christian sceptic, and Nicholas could have been if he had chosen to be. He chose otherwise. But others, most notably Pascal, have at the very least subsumed scepticism within their Christianity³⁵. However, for those who care to look with care, reason will appear to be aporetic regardless of whether one is bound by the theological decision or not.

3. ...TO NICHOLAS OF AUTRECOURT...

And so to Nicholas's texts themselves: little of Nicholas's work has survived: two (of an original nine) letters from an exchange with the Franciscan Bernard of Arezzo – this is a “contest” between students of theology. There are also remnants of a related exchange between Nicholas and a “Master Giles”, and an unfinished treatise that passes under the name of the *Exigit Ordo* or *Universal Treatise*, as well as one or two other little things. There has been debate over the dating and order of these pieces. The current consensus is that the treatise dates from the early to mid 1330s, and the correspondence from the mid to late 1330s. Nicholas was summoned to Avignon by Benedict XII on November 21st 1340, and there is some evidence of earlier disciplinary proceedings within the University of Paris. So the surviving writings come from the period immediately preceding the initiation of the process that will lead to Nicholas's recantation in Avignon on May 19th 1346, and the subsequent re-recantation and burning of his writings in Paris on November 25th 1347.

³⁵ See J. MAIA NETO, *The Christianization of Pyrrhonism: Scepticism and Faith in Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Shestov* («International Library of the History of Ideas» 144), Kluwer, Dordrecht 1995.

With respect to the first letter to Bernard, I only want to make two observations, one of style and one of content³⁶. Its style would be immediately recognisable to the ancient sceptics. It is an example of what is now called immanent critique, where to avoid sceptical auto-refutation one assumes, only for the sake of argument, the hypotheses proposed by the argument one is criticising. Sceptical auto-refutation can occur where one is implicitly relying on the efficacy of dogma when one claims to be anti-dogmatic, as in, for example, the “I know it is true that there is no truth” of vulgar relativism. In this case two of Bernard’s propositions regarding the efficacy of intuitive cognition are at stake. Nicholas carefully unpacks the logical implications of what Bernard proposes. And he shows that, if Bernard truly holds to these propositions, then he cannot know anything with certainty, even whether the Pope exists or not, let alone God. Nicholas points out that «your position seems to lead to the destruction of civilian and political life» as no one would be able to trust what anyone else has claimed to experience³⁷. And his final rhetorical blow is to write that «as it seems to me, from your position there follow things that are more absurd that follow from the position of the Academics»³⁸. In polemical scholarly horseplay, of the most intellectually depraved and thus most common sort, this could be turned into the accusation that Nicholas doubts the existence of the Pope. But of course it is not that Nicholas believes this. He is arguing that as a matter of logic Bernard must believe that if he believes the initial propositions that he says he believes. To avoid any confusion, in conclusion Nicholas reminds Bernard that «in order to avoid such absurdities, I have upheld in disputations in the Aula of the Sorbonne that I am evidently certain of the objects of the five senses and of my own acts»³⁹. As for the reference to the Academics: it makes clear that

³⁶ Christophe Grellard has considered Pyrrhonian elements in the Exigit Ordo in his *Scepticism, Demonstration and the Infinite Regress Argument (Nicholas of Autrecourt and John Buridan)*, «Vivarium» 45 (2007), pp. 328-342.

³⁷ NICHOLAS OF AUTRECOURT, *His Correspondence with Master Giles and Bernard of Arezzo*, transl. & ed. L. M. de Rijk, Brill, Leiden 1994, p. 55.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-57.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Nicholas at the very least knew of their ideas, and views them in a negative light, if only perhaps for rhetorical purposes. So he does not view himself as a sceptic even though in this letter he appears to argue in the same manner as an ancient sceptic, albeit with Christian intent.

To the second letter to Bernard, which is where Nicholas presents his argument regarding the principle of non-contradiction. The principle «Contradictories cannot be simultaneously true» is, he argues, first both negatively and positively⁴⁰. Nothing is prior to it, and it is prior to all other principles such that «every certitude we possess is resolved into this principle» and furthermore «it is itself not resolved into any other in the way a conclusion would into its premise(s)»⁴¹. What follows is one of those delightful short articles of such density that one could spend a whole paper on each page, if not each sentence. Indeed some scholars see in Nicholas's style a shift from the institutionalised orality of scholasticism to philosophy as an essentially written genre. Dallas Denery, following Issac Miller, observes that «Nicholas's emphasis on an almost hyper-logical analysis of terms practically requires an extended isolation with one's thoughts behind closed doors»⁴². This observation will be returned to below.

The pressing philosophical issue is whether Nicholas's asserting of the priority of the principle of non-contradiction falls prey to aporetic logic, in particular to the mode from hypothesis where the positing of *A* can be put into equipollence by the positing of *not-A*? One can see already that the mode from hypothesis is not so far from the principle of non-contradiction which asserts that *A* and *not-A* cannot be simultaneously true. The principle of non-contradiction (henceforward PNC) concerns truth whereas the Mode from hypothesis concerns justification. The Mode from hypothesis does not require *A* and *not-A* to be simultaneously true.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² D. G. DENERY II, *Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World: Optics, Theology and Religious Life*, Cambridge University Press («Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, Fourth Series» 63), Cambridge 2009, p. 143.

It merely requires that A and $not-A$ can be asserted equally where no reason is given to justify the assertion of either. And anybody can assert anything however wild or crazy. I can do it here: the sky is aquamarine; the sky is orange with purple splodges. That is sufficient to set the Mode from hypothesis in motion. The truth or falsity of my assertions is irrelevant to the operation of the Mode. The operation does not affect the truth of my assertions, if there is such a thing, it makes it impossible to justify my assertions whether they are true or not.

Is the disjunction between truth and logic so clear-cut? Isn't the PNC as much a logical as an ontological principle, and as such it is entangled in reason-giving as much as in truth? The denial of the PNC has traditionally held to be a "very bad thing" because it has been asserted that from a contradiction anything can be inferred. Contradiction, it is claimed, produces epistemic explosion, akin to the anything-goes mentality associated with post-modernism. Is epistemic explosion the same as the equipollence that results from the Mode from hypothesis? If anything can be true simultaneously then anything can be inferred from anything else. Inference will always succeed. But in the Five Modes from Agrippa, which includes the Mode from hypothesis, inference will always fail as any attempt to give reasons for a particular inference, or for inference as such, will end in equipollence. What follows from the Five Modes is epistemic implosion not epistemic explosion. Philosophical knowledge collapses upon itself such that it disappears apart from the one piece of logic that appears to survive the operation of the Five Modes, which are the Five Modes themselves. This is further complicated by the recent development of paraconsistent logic in the company of dialetheism. Dialetheism asserts that there are true contradictions. Paraconsistent logic claims to show that the denial of the PNC does not of necessity lead to epistemic explosion. As yet an encounter between paraconsistent logic and Pyrrhonian aporetic logic has not been staged⁴³.

⁴³ For an introduction to paraconsistency and contradiction see G. PRIEST, *Paraconsistent Logic*, in D. GABBAY & F. GUENTHNER (eds.), *Handbook of Philosophical Logic*, vol. 6, Kluwer, Dordrecht 2002², pp. 287-393.

In his second letter to Bernard, Nicholas adopts a position akin to the Pyrrhonian *epochē* or suspension of judgement. When faced with assertions in rational equipollence the Pyrrhonians felt that the sensible thing to do was to, as far as practically possible, suspend judgement. Once he has demolished Bernard's arguments, Nicholas writes «I am not committed to this conclusion. Let anyone who can think up a solution refute this argument»⁴⁴. Taking a step back, the strident conclusion which he does not commit himself to is:

From this it follows – whether you like it or not, and let them not impute it to me, but to the force of argument! – that Aristotle in his entire natural philosophy and metaphysics such certitude of scarcely two conclusions, and perhaps not even of one... And not only did Aristotle possess no evident knowledge, but worse than that – although I do not hold this as a tenet, I have an argument that I am unable to refute, to prove that he did not even possess probable knowledge⁴⁵.

No wonder the masters of Paris, and the Papacy, perceived the anti-master of reason as a threat. But this is not the threat of reason to faith, or of faith to reason. It is the threat of the logic of actually-existing reasoning to those who claim, falsely or without warrant, to speak in the name of reason.

Denery makes a hero of Nicholas, arguing that he was making a «plea for the individual's right to speak out against what is commonly accepted. Nicholas is not merely interested in undermining Aristotle's authority, but any purely human authority»⁴⁶. This would make Nicholas a Christian anarchist, which doesn't sit well with the fact that he accepted his condemnation and retired peaceably to Metz. He is not moved by rights or authority. He is moved by reasons, and it is only they who move him against Aristotle and his scholastic epigones, and particularly against his

⁴⁴ NICHOLAS OF AUTRECOURT, *His Correspondence*, p. 75.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁶ DENERY, *Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World*, p. 143.

organon as the settled contemporary paradigm of rational legitimacy, indeed of reason itself. Nicholas is a master of reasoning and as such he shows mastery over what passes for reason. And doing this he implicitly issues the demand to us, whether he was committed to it or not, to move beyond the limited conceptions of reason and logic by which we are told we are bound. This unbinding is not the romantic abandonment of reason, but is to move towards a fuller understanding of reasoning as what passes between us in our attempts to find sustainable forms of social life that might permit all of us to flourish in peace.

4. ...AND BEYOND

I wish to conclude by briefly drawing attention to two apparent paradoxes. The first emerges from the philosophical practice required to be a master of reasoning: aporetic logic is a careful phenomenology of reason that pays careful attention to the arguments of others. As such it can be described as a truly social logic. Yet the condition of the possibility of the emergence of this logic, at least in the context of Nicholas's work, appears to be a scholarly practice that is necessarily anti-social. It means abandoning the cut and thrust of the scholastic *lectio* and *quaestio* method and retiring to one's cell, or a mountaintop, to undertake the forensic hyper-logical examination of the subtle movement of reasons. And this change in philosophical style does not seem to be related to technological change. So, for example, the printing press is not a necessary condition of this hyper-logicism because it can be found in contexts where there was no printing press, such as in Nicholas, Hellenistic scepticism, and in early Buddhist thought⁴⁷. It would seem that for thought to be truly social, its thinking must be asocial, and this apparent paradox requires further investigation.

⁴⁷ T. MCEVILLEY, *Pyrrhonism and Mādhyamika*, in his *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies*, Allworth, New York 2002, pp. 450-490, is a useful entry to the research and speculation on the historical connections and philosophical affinities between Greek and Asian scepticisms.

The second paradox concerns what it might mean to be a master of reasoning in a Christian context. In short it is that to be a Christian master of reasoning might be to take the path of humility and unmasterly. This is something that Nicholas in his rhetoric singularly fails to do. As Christophe Grellard observes: «Autrecourt is closest to the ancient skeptics (though he did not appreciate this) when he uses the doctrinal assumptions of his opponents to deduce absurdities from them»⁴⁸. His deconstruction of Bernard seems deaf to the injunctions of St Paul in Ephesians:

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear... Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you⁴⁹.

Nicholas is out to smash Aristotle and force his epigones out of the schools of Paris. This is not to imply that aporetic logic is evil talk. It is simply how reason appears to appear. Rather, to be a master of reasoning is to realise that reason cannot deliver justification, which in turn means that the human cannot successfully judge. The reaction of the pagan Pyrrhonian to this was to suspend judgement. The Christian has another justification they can turn to because the efficacy of theological justification, if it is efficacious, is untouched by aporetic logic. For the pagan it appears that no one can judge. For the Christian it appears that God, through the means of absolute power, can judge.

A master of reasoning must always remember that aporetic logic applies as much to their own reasoning as it does to that of others. One way of remembering this is to practice self-accusation.

⁴⁸ GRELLARD, *Nicholas of Autrecourt's Skepticism: The Ambivalence of Medieval Epistemology*, in LAGERLUND (ed.), *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background*, p. 138.

⁴⁹ Ephesians 4, vv. 29 & 31-32. *The New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition: Anglicized Text*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2005.

If we are aware that aporetic logic applies to our own reasoning then we will be less hasty to denounce the reasoning of others. This will reinforce the social nature of aporetic logic «because an absence of self-accusation is what causes partisanship and divisions»⁵⁰. Ancient scepticism has a different character to modern scepticism which is concerned with doubt and suspicion. Ancient scepticism is, to use Pierre Hadot's resonant phrase, a spiritual exercise designed to enable one to live a particular way of life⁵¹. Its goal is *ataraxia*, tranquillity of mind⁵². Its practices are therapy for those anxious minds tormented by the fact that reason claims to deliver justification yet fails to do so. Its goal is thus not to deconstruct the work of others, but to learn to appreciate the aporetic movements of reason such that they no longer torment one, whether one's own tranquillity consists in the abandonment of reasoning or in perpetual questioning. Tranquillity of mind is not necessarily passivity. For some it may be the most ardent questioning untroubled by the fact that, given the nature of reason, answers will only beg further questions. For some peace may come through endeavouring to spread tranquillity throughout society. Tranquillity can even take the form of opting to fight. I, for one, am far more at peace struggling with a philosophical argument than if I were stretched out alone on a tropical beach without even a book for company. So someone who aspires to be a Christian "master" of reasoning might seek to hold fast to the words of St Dorotheus of Gaza: «Fight to find a way of accusing yourself in everything, and hold fast to detachment towards knowledge»⁵³.

⁵⁰ Jorge Cardinal BERGOGLIO, *The Way of Humility*, transl. H. Scott, Catholic Truth Society, London 2013, p. 5.

⁵¹ P. HADOT, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, transl. M. Chase, Blackwell, Oxford 1995, pp. 81-144.

⁵² SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I. 8, 25-32.

⁵³ Quoted at Jorge Cardinal BERGOGLIO, *The Way of Humility*, p. 26.

SUMMARY

The aim of this paper is to use an engagement with possible sceptical elements in the thought of Nicholas of Autrecourt, and with the reception of Nicholas's thought by Étienne Gilson and Hans Blumenberg, to explore the philosophical problem of the relationship of reason and mastery in the context of Christian thought. This engagement is Neo-Pyrrhonian in intent. First it seeks to reposition scepticism concerning epistemic justification so that it appears as not anti-rational or irrational, but as the most rigorous example of rationality, expressing the mastery of reasoning over reason. The next move is to address the question as to whether a scepticism figured as the mastery of reasoning can be expressed coherently in a Christian context. It concludes that it can such that the mastery of reasoning can be paradoxically figured as a path to humility. This path was not taken by Nicholas much as he did not take the path towards scepticism. However, this does not mean he was wrong about the epistemic failings of Aristotle's philosophy and the peril they pose to any form of Christian thought that does not seek to dispense with reason.

Il presente studio si propone di indagare i possibili elementi di scetticismo rinvenibili nel pensiero di Nicola d'Autrecourt e, attraverso la lente di Étienne Gilson e Hans Blumenberg, di esplorare la questione filosofica della relazione di ragione e magistero nel contesto del pensiero cristiano. Tale indagine è neo-pirroniana nelle intenzioni. Innanzitutto, essa cerca di riposizionare lo scetticismo in relazione alla giustificazione epistemica, in modo tale che esso appaia non anti-razionale o irrazionale, ma piuttosto quale il più rigoroso esempio di razionalità e insieme l'espressione della superiorità del ragionamento sulla ragione. La mossa successiva consiste nel valutare se un tale scetticismo, inteso in quanto superiorità del ragionamento, sia in linea con il pensiero cristiano. La conclusione è affermativa a tal punto che la superiorità del ragionamento potrà vedersi, quasi un paradosso, come un percorso verso l'umiltà. Questo percorso non fu intrapreso da Nicola nella misura in cui egli non intraprese il percorso verso lo scetticismo. Eppure, ciò non implica che egli fosse in errore sulle deficienze epistemiche della filosofia di Aristotele e sul pericolo che ne derivava per ogni forma di pensiero cristiano che non facesse a meno della ragione.