

A NEW EDITION OF CONTARINI'S
*DE IMMORTALITATE ANIMAE**

LUCA BURZELLI
ISTITUTO 'ENRICO FERMI', PONTEDERA (PISA)



The edition of Gasparo Contarini's *De immortalitate animae* provides a fundamental contribution to our knowledge of the so-called 'Pomponazzi affair', namely an intellectual controversy concerning the immortality of the soul, which engaged university masters, friars and members of the clergy around 1516 and 1519.¹ The controversy started with the publication of one of the most explosive works of the Italian Renaissance, i.e. Pomponazzi's *Tractatus de immortalitate animae* (1516).² The master's purpose was to challenge and refute those attempts to prove the immortality of the soul on the basis of Aristotelian arguments – a purpose which had already been pursued by cardinal Caetano some years before.³ In doing so, he consciously ignored the provisions of the bull *Apostolici regiminis* (December 1513), which required university professors to support the doctrine of

* Review of GASPARO CONTARINI, *De immortalitate animae / On the Immortality of the Soul*, edited by PAUL RICHARD BLUM in cooperation with ELISABETH BLUM, JAN ČÍŽEK, MARTIN HOLAN, JAN JANOUŠEK, JOZEF MATULA, JIŘÍ MICHALÍK, TOMÁŠ NEJESCHLEBA, LLOYD A. NEWTON, JANA SLEZÁKOVÁ, MARTIN ŽEMLA, Verlag Traugott Bautz, Nordhausen 2020 (*Studia Classica et Mediaevalia* 26), 271 pp.

¹ With 'Pomponazzi affair' I refer to the expression used by ETIENNE GILSON, *L'Affaire de l'immortalité de l'âme à Venise au début du XVIe siècle*, Sansoni, Firenze 1963; later, by LEEN SPRUIT, *The Pomponazzi Affair: The Controversy over the Immortality of the Soul*, in HENRIK LAGERLUND, BENJAMIN HILL (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Sixteenth Century Philosophy*, Routledge, London 2017, p. 225-246.

² According to Giovanni Gentile, Pomponazzi's *Tractatus* and Machiavelli's *The Prince* were « among the most scandalous and irreligious books of the Renaissance » (in PIETRO POMPONAZZI, *De immortalitate animae*, ed. GIOVANNI GENTILE, Principato, Messina 1925, p. III).

³ On the role of Caetano see VITTORIA PERRONE COMPAGNI, « Introduzione », in PIETRO POMPONAZZI, *Trattato sull'immortalità dell'anima*, Olschki, Firenze 1999 (Immagini della Ragione, 1), p. XXVI-XXVIII; ANNALISA CAPPIELLO, « Tommaso de Vio Gaetano, Pietro Pomponazzi e la polemica sull'immortalità dell'anima. *Status quaestionis* e nuove scoperte », *Noctua*, 5/1 (2018), p. 32-71.

immortality from a philosophical point of view.⁴ On the contrary, Pomponazzi was capable of proving that, due to the role of phantasy into the process of human understanding, the human soul can never be separated from a material body in order to operate: on the contrary, the human soul, when deprived of phantasy, cannot have any kind of activity at all. In addition, Pomponazzi concluded the treatise with a thorny discussion about the function of the religious doctrine: the idea of the immortality of the soul is not philosophically true, being merely a useful tool; and the authorities (both civic and religious) use to keep poor people under ethical control, thanks to the promise of future rewards and punishments.

This radical interpretation of the functions of the human mind and soul had the effect of starting a widespread polemical discussion, inside and outside the universities, whose protagonists came from different intellectual backgrounds. The first who argued against Pomponazzi was Gasparo Contarini, a venetian nobleman which had been his pupil in Padua from 1500 to 1509, and at that moment was applying for his first public offices.⁵ Contarini's answer – which is the treatise edited by Blum – is a philosophical inquiry about the fundamentals of Pomponazzi's argumentation as well as an attempt of defending the immortality of the soul. Unfortunately for Pomponazzi, Contarini was not the only one who developed a criticism, and surely the most indulgent: indeed, at the same time the friars in Venice started burning Pomponazzi's treatise in the square, while the bishop of Mantua, Ambrogio Fiandino, harshly condemned the master during the Lent season 1517. The last criticism came from Agostino Nifo, a professor of philosophy who defended the immortality of the soul under request of Fiandino by employing Averroistic arguments. Pomponazzi devoted the first and the third books of his *Apologia* (1518) to answer Contarini's and Fiandino's objections;⁶ soon later, he wrote a *Defensorium* (1519) against Nifo.⁷ Nevertheless, only the

⁴ About the bull *Apostolici regiminis* see ANNALISA CAPPIELLO, MARCO LAMANNA, « Il principio dell'unicità del vero dalla bolla *Apostolici regiminis* alla Rivoluzione scientifica », *Quaestio*, 14 (2014), p. 229–256.

⁵ For a biographical note on Contarini see GIGLIOLA FRAGNITO, « Contarini Gasparo », in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (= DBI), 28 (1983), *sub voce*, reprinted in EAD., *Gasparo Contarini. Un magistrato veneziano al servizio della Cristianità*, Olschki, Firenze 1988 (Biblioteca della Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa. Testi e Documenti, 9), p. 1–78.

⁶ VITTORIA PERRONE COMPAGNI, « L'*Apologia*: bilanci, anticipazioni, polemiche », in PIETRO POMPONAZZI, *Apologia*, ed. VITTORIA PERRONE COMPAGNI, Olschki, Firenze 2011 (Immagini della Ragione, 14), p. 1–LVIII, esp. XLII–LVIII.

⁷ FRANCESCO PAOLO RAIMONDI, JOSÈ MANUEL GARCIA VALVERDE, « Monografia introduttiva », in PIETRO POMPONAZZI, *Tutti i trattati peripatetici*, ed. FRANCESCO PAOLO RAIMONDI, JOSÈ MANUEL GARCIA VALVERDE, Bompiani, Milano 2013, p. 94, p. 127. The collection of Pomponazzi's Aristotelian treatises was reprinted one year after Pietro's death, PETRI POMPONAZII *Tractatus acutissimi, utilissimi ac mere peripatetici*, Venetiis, apud haeredes Octaviani Scoti, 1525.

influential intervention of Piero Bembo permitted him to avoid unharmed an official condemnation from Rome.⁸

It is useful to introduce Contarini's answer through a genetic reconstruction of the text. The treatise that we call *De immortalitate animae* – which is here edited and translated by Blum and his associates – is actually the result of a posthumous conjunction of multiple texts and was probably not realised before the Parisian printed edition of 1571, after Gasparo's death. Thanks to few details in the premises, we know that Pomponazzi had sent a copy of his treatise to Contarini, asking for an evaluation: as Gasparo recalls in the preface, « ... your [i.e. Pomponazzi's] wonderful and splendid disputatio on the immortality of the soul, which you send to me out of your kindness a few days ago... » (we will call it **text A**).⁹ Moreover, in the beginning of his *Apologia*, Pomponazzi confesses that Contarini sent him not one, but at least two different answers: « The argument supported by the thesis of the contradictor, both in his paper [*in suo scripto*] and in a letter [*in quadam epistula*] which he sent to me... ».¹⁰ For nine times, in the first book of *Apologia*, Pomponazzi mentions this further letter;¹¹ this allows us to establish that Contarini had sent a well-structured work (which we call **text B**) and an additional, more confidential text, like a letter (**text β**). **Text B** corresponds to the treatise that Pomponazzi published anonymously in the appendix of his *Apologia* and confuted in the first book. **Text β**, on the contrary, is nowadays unknown: we can only suppose that, within this letter Contarini suggested that the master should not publish the *Tractatus* because it was against the faith.¹²

Contarini was faithful to his ancient master and this feeling was reciprocated. Therefore, Pomponazzi kept Contarini's position into serious consideration, as the most reliable of the critiques against his *Tractatus*:¹³ Contarini's treatise

⁸ On this topic see VITTORIA PERRONE COMPAGNI, *Pomponazzi Pietro*, in DBI, 84 (2015), *sub voce*.

⁹ GASPARO CONTARINI, *De immortalitate animae*, ed. BLUM *et alii*, p. 37.

¹⁰ PIETRO POMPONAZZI, *Apologia*, in ID., *Tutti i trattati peripatetici*, ed. RAIMONDI, VALVERDE, p. 1222: « Quod autem a positione dicitur et in suo scripto et in quadam epistula ad me scripta [...] ». However, Raimondi translates the latin « et ... et » with a disjunctive proposition. A more reliable translation can be found in the edition of PERRONE COMPAGNI, p. 80.

¹¹ PIETRO POMPONAZZI, *Apologia*, ed. RAIMONDI, VALVERDE, p. 1212, 1222, 1228, 1230, 1282, 1286, 1292, 1310, 1344.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1292: « cum dictus Contradictor intellexisset me hunc Tractatum composuisse, per amicabiles litteras, caritatisque plenas me admonuit ne hunc Tractatum ederem, praecipue quoniam erat contra fidem ».

¹³ So in PIETRO POMPONAZZI, *Apologia*, prologue, p. 1110: « Verum post aliquot dies Reverendus Dominus meus D. Petrus Lipomannus [...] libellum quemdam sine nominis auctore attulit, qui non minus acutissimus et gravissimus est, quam verborum nominumque elegantia refertus; et quamquam hic noster Contradictor prae caeteris mihi acutior et rationabilior videatur, tamen quoniam plene nostris argumentationibus satisfacere mihi non videtur [...] ». A similar opinion stands in the introduction of the appendix to Pomponazzi's *Apologia*, where the professor edited anonymously Contarini's treatise (this introduction is usefully published by BLUM, p. 30).

appears to be « rich, learned, serious and most perspicacious », even though Contarini himself said he wrote it pretty quickly and without revision.¹⁴ What is certain is that Gasparo discovered his work published anonymously in the appendix of the master's *Apologia*, was not happy at all of this discovery, because he thought **text B** was unfit for a publication;¹⁵ thus, he decided to reply once more with a new answer (which we call **text M**). This reply (which is now preserved in Venice, Biblioteca Marciana) remained unpublished – and probably, almost unknown – until the Parisian Edition in 1571. In that circumstance Alvise, one of Gasparo's nephews who was working as ambassador in Paris, decided to collect the philosophical and theological works of his uncle and publish them. He had draft material of two sorts: on the one hand, he used printed editions of some works, which had been circulating since the beginning of the 1540s (*De magistratibus*, 1543 and 1544; *De elementis*, 1548; *Compendium*, 1556); on the other hand, he had some manuscripts which laid in familiar archives. It was then that Alvise – or an editor on behalf of him – merged the two works concerning the immortality of the soul: the first one, **text B**, was well known since the printed edition of 1518;¹⁶ the second one, **text M**, was new. The treatise we now read, thanks to Blum's edition and translation, is the result of a posthumous assembly, and the two sources became respectively 'book 1' and 'book 2'.

These few genetic remarks allow us to say something about the philological aspects of Blum's edition. The editor provides a table of witnesses (p. 24-26) and a list of variants for every part of the treatise:

- B** Contarini's treatise, appendix to Pomponazzi, *Apologia*, Bononiae, Leonardi 1518.
- M** Contarini's second answer, Venezia, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, ms. VI CCXXIX (= 2855).
- P** Contarini's *Opera*, Parisiis, apud Niuellium 1571.
- V** reprint of Pomponazzi's treatises, Venetiis, Scotus 1525 (*descriptus* of B).
- V**¹⁵⁷⁸ reprint of Contarini's *Opera*, Venetiis, Aldus 1578 (*descriptus* of P).

The most reliable witness for 'book 1' (**text B**) is Pomponazzi's edition of 1518, whose text is the closest to Contarini's original draft. The case of 'book 2' (**text M**) is more complicated. At first, Blum selects the Parisian edition as 'edition of reference' (p. 25). However, he does not declare why the Parisian edition (1571)

¹⁴ So confesses Gasparo in *De immortalitate animae*, ed. BLUM *et alii*, p. 178.

¹⁵ See the BLUM's *introduction* to Contarini's *De immortalitate animae*, p. 24.

¹⁶ See, for example, the eulogy of Marcantonio Flaminio for Contarini's death in 1542, when the humanist celebrates Gasparo's doctrine of the immortality of the soul: « Contarene, tuo docuisti, magne, libello / extinctis animas vivere corpus. / Ergo iure tui vivunt monumenta libelli / Et vivent saeculis innumerabilibus » (MARCI ANTONII FLAMINI *Carminum libri VIII*, Patavii, Excudebat Josephus Cominus 1727, p. 75).

should be more reliable than the manuscript of **text M**, preserved in Venice. In addition, almost every time the Parisian edition and the manuscript diverge from one another, Blum establishes the text preferring the manuscript over the printed edition. For these reasons, the manuscript of Venice *de facto* seems to be the most reliable witness.

Regarding the Latin text, the editor amended punctuation with respect to the current linguistic rules, as well as to the clarity of meaning. Only in a few places, punctuation still appears a bit imprecise since it faithfully reproduces the sixteenth-century printed edition. Two examples show this clearly: at p. 50, the propositions

[...] dixerunt nullo pacto formam operari aut agere sive moveri aut corrumpi aut generari. Sed composito deberi haec omnia et compositum esse illud quod ageret, moveretur ac corrumperetur.

should not be separated by a point, because the proposition « sed composito... » is the second term of a subordinate, infinitive clause, depending from « dixerunt... ». The same happens for the argument at p. 74:

Nam forma et materia, ut diximus superius, non sunt partes integrantes; ita quod una possit esse extra aliam. Sed sicuti forma actuans materiam est in quacunque parte materiae et totam materiam penetrat, ut ita dixerim, ita quod nihil est materiae, quin illud actuetur a forma.

The proposition « Sed sicuti... » is the second term of a distinction « non sunt... ita... sed sicuti » (thus, the semicolon after *integrantes* could be removed). One further, controversial point is located at p. 62, talking about Aquinas' opinion on subsistent forms (book 1). Blum lists two variants of the same sentence:

Quamobrem perficere et, ut crassius loquar in re difficili, actuare potest. Apud Thomam vero, qui aliter sentit, hoc non negatur, quia repugnet actui per se subsistenti actuare. Sed quia materia ordinatur ad formam et ad utilitatem formae referri debet, quod non est in intelligentiis apud ipsum.

Witness P contains the *lectio*: « Quamobrem perficere et, ut crassius loquar in re difficili, actuare potest. Ad Thoma vero... ». Witnesses B and V, instead, contain the *lectio*: « quare actuare paratam materiam potest: actuare namque non est perfici: sed perficere. Apud vero divinum Thomam... ». For the composition of the text, the editor employs the *lectio* P and he corrects it with respect of *lectio* BV, without justifying this preference. In addition, the sentence « sed quia... » should not be separated from the previous proposition since it is the second term of the verb « hoc non negatur quia... sed quia ».

Regarding the translation (firstly made by Blum, then revised by the group and especially by Loyd A. Newton), the editor succeeds in making the text as clear as possible, even though the Latin syntax is sometimes complicated. The result is a smooth text, mostly easy to read, which often reminds of a letter more than a scientific treatise (especially at the beginning and at the end of the two books). Blum usefully inserts some textual sections (p. 37, *introduction*; p. 67, *Investigation*; p. 139, *Aristotle's opinion*; p. 181, *Contarini's premises*; p. 199, *Pomponazzi's arguments*; p. 245, *Some passages from Aristotle*) which concretely help the reader by highlighting the division of the argumentation. In addition, some linguistic choices are justified in footnote with a description of the semantic ambiguities. This is the case of the Latin word *simpliciter*, which Blum describes at p. 41, fn. 2: the English translation *simply* does not express precisely the meaning of this scholastic technicism, which has to do with the lack of conditions for the existence of a property; therefore, Blum prefers the translation *unqualifiedly* when he refers to the immortality of human soul with respect to its proper nature – moreover, the scholastic meaning of *simpliciter* is « taken according to its full denotation ». The same care is reserved to the term *organum*: at p. 79 Blum points out that it can refer both to the bodily organ and to the function of ‘instrument’ of something. On the other hand, the translation of few other expressions does not seem fully convincing. The first case is the translation of the Latin *subiectum* with the gerundive form *underlying* (a cast of the Greek ὑποκείμενον) without any other term: but this use is almost unusual, as one can see from Ross’ translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, where the ὑποκείμενον is always translated with « underlying body », « underlying nature », « underlying substance ».

In their conciseness, the introduction and the commentary provide a fulfilling insight of the argumentation and the philosophical background of Contarini’s treatise. Blum focuses on all the most meaningful aspects of the text: the epistemological relation between philosophy and faith; the theory of intellect as *actus* and *forma*; the theory of the soul as principle of movement.¹⁷ Finally, he briefly describes Gasparo’s life and career. The translation is always accompanied by a commentary in footnotes, where Blum and his associates provide the philosophical sources. Some of them are explicitly mentioned by Gasparo, whereas some other must be reconstructed. The most interesting of these

¹⁷ The role of the movement for the nature of the soul was well highlighted by ENRICO PERUZZI, *Gli allievi di Pomponazzi: Girolamo Fracastoro e Gasparo Contarini*, in MARCO SGARBI (ed.), *Pietro Pomponazzi. Tradizione e dissenso*. Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi su Pietro Pomponazzi. Mantova, 23–24 ottobre 2008, Olshki, Firenze 2010, p. 349–364; ID., « Natura e destino dell’anima umana: le critiche di Gasparo Contarini al *De immortalitate animae* di Pietro Pomponazzi », in FERDINANDO L. MARCOLUNGO (ed.), *Fenomeno, trascendenza, verità. Scritti in onore di Gianfranco Bosio*, Il Poligrafo, Padova 2012, p. 169–183.

sources is Avicenna, whose argument of the so-called 'flying man' is anonymously quoted.¹⁸ Blum is very careful not to generally level Gasparo onto the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas – a care which has often been overlooked by the historical research on Contarini.¹⁹ As a matter of fact, the name of the *doctor angelicus* appears very few times in the treatise and, when it appears, it is often joined with a criticism. Perhaps, more attention could have been reserved to Gasparo's disagreement with Thomas Aquinas, starting from the argument about the form as the act of matter. Gasparo quotes the *doctor angelicus* twice and points out that they diverge on the properties of the substantial form: for Aquinas, it must subsist separated from matter without giving being, while for Contarini there is « no impediment to being the act of that matter ».²⁰

This divergence with Aquinas enables us to introduce a final, interesting aspect of the text, i.e. the reference to Antonio Fracanzian. In book 2, Gasparo says he was surprised by Pomponazzi's denial of substantial forms which give being to the bodies: indeed, when they were at the university, ten years before, Pomponazzi himself had supported the opposite position and had admitted the existence of such forms against the denial of professor Fracanzian. As Blum noticed, we have no information about this academic controversy and even less about Fracanzian's teaching activity.²¹ Concrete information is still lacking on this professor; nevertheless, we can find some useful elements around Pomponazzi's academic courses. The assumption that the substantial forms give being to the celestial bodies is placed in the first part of Pomponazzi's *Expositio libelli de substantia orbis* (1507), where he discusses the role of the intelligence as form of the sky.²² But even more meaningful is the *Expositio duodecimi metaphysices* (1511/12). In this new circumstance, Pomponazzi proposes the very same

¹⁸ GASPARO CONTARINI, *De immortalitate animae*, ed. BLUM *et alii*, p. 17, 57, 99–101. Concerning the *Flying man*, see TOMMASO ALPINA, « The 'Soul of', the Soul 'in Itself', and the 'Flying Man' Experiment », *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy. A Historical Journal*, 28 (2018), p. 187–224; ID., « Intellectual Knowledge, Active Intellect and Intellectual Memory in Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Nafs* and its Aristotelian Background », *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale*, 25 (2014), p. 131–183. I focused on the role of Avicenna for Contarini in LUCA BURZELLI, « Aspetti della tradizione aristotelica nel *De immortalitate animae*: Gasparo Contarini lettore di Avicenna », *Rinascimento*, ser. 2, 59 (2019), p. 365–390.

¹⁹ See for example GIOVANNI DI NAPOLI, *L'immortalità dell'anima nel Rinascimento*, Società Editrice Italiana, Torino 1963, p. 180, 291; and EUGENIO GARIN, *Storia della filosofia italiana*, 3 vols., Einaudi, Torino 1959 (Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 80), vol. II, p. 30.

²⁰ GASPARO CONTARINI, *De immortalitate animae*, ed. BLUM *et alii*, p. 63, 196.

²¹ The few information are provided by MARIA MUCCILLO, *Fracanziani Antonio*, in DBI, 49 (1997) *sub voce*.

²² PIETRO POMPONAZZI, *Expositio libelli de substantia orbis*, in ID., *Corsi inediti dell'insegnamento padovano*, 2 vols., ed. ANTONINO POPPI, vol. I, Antenore, Padova 1966, p. 81–97; DI NAPOLI, *L'immortalità dell'anima nel Rinascimento*, p. 197; BRUNO NARDI, *Saggi sull'aristotelismo padovano dal secolo XIV al XVI*, Sansoni, Firenze 1958 (Studi sulla Tradizione Aristotelica nel Veneto, 1), p. 164–165.

interpretation of the intelligence that Contarini will propose against him, six years later: «we agree with Theophrastus since we want, like he does, that the agent intellect gives being and understands; and our form is ingenerable and unperishable».²³ The reference to Theophrastus is problematic, since the Greek philosopher did well saying that the soul is ingenerable and unperishable; at the same time, Theophrastus believed in a real composition of external intellects (*intellectus adsistens*) into the human being, which Pomponazzi never admitted and defined «una *menchionaria*», a ‘nonsense’.²⁴ These critical statements endorse the hypothesis of an ontological bound between substantial forms and bodies: around 1511/12 Pomponazzi still believed in the immortality of the soul and in the inherence of the intellect into the material body. Therefore, it is easy to understand Contarini’s surprise, reading the *Tractatus* in 1516: within four years, Pomponazzi had radically changed his mind.

In conclusion, it is often accepted that the history of philosophy – and particularly the history of Renaissance philosophy – proceeds through famous philosophers and paradigmatic concepts; thus, we see important analysis comparing the development of an idea in some relevant philosophers, normally acclaimed as ‘major personalities’. Blum and his research team teach us that we do not need only the ‘major figures’, but rather the debates; we need to reconstruct the questions by exploring all the possible solutions and the nuances of the arguments which were produced. With the edition of Contarini’s *De immortalitate animae*, we appreciate the debate on the immortality of the soul not only from the usual perspective of Pomponazzi, but from a choral point of view, which gives us back the vitality of a daily-practiced philosophy.

²³ The *Expositio duodecimi metaphysices* is preserved in several manuscripts (for which see BRUNO NARDI, *Studi su Pietro Pomponazzi*, Le Monnier, Firenze 1965, p. 68–69). I am quoting from MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 6537, fols. 131r–176v, esp. fol. 158r: «convenimus cum Theophrasto volentes, sicut ipse, intellectum agentem, dantem esse et intelligere, formam nostram esse ingenerabilem et incorruptibilem».

²⁴ MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 6537, fol. 157r: «De prima dicit commentator primum quod anima intellectiva est ut dicit [ms. dicunt] Theophrastus, composita. Dices: ‘Videtur una *menchionaria* dicere quod anima sit composita; et mi idem videtur». Some other arguments against Theophrastus can be found in the course on *De anima* (1503/4). For these arguments see PIETRO POMPONAZZI, *Corsi inediti dell’insegnamento Padovano*, vol. II, p. 47.