

JACK ZUPKO

BURIDAN AND AUTRÉCOURT:
A REAPPRAISAL

A little over a decade ago, I published a paper that tried to unravel the puzzling relationship between John Buridan, the most famous Parisian arts master of the fourteenth century, and Nicholas of Autrecourt, the Paris-based *bête noir* of late-medieval Aristotelianism, who achieved his own measure of fame for having had some of his views condemned and his writings publicly burnt in 1347, just seven years after Buridan's second term as rector of the University¹. The problem is that, without ever mentioning him by name, Buridan in several places criticizes views that look very much like the condemned teachings of Nicholas. Was he tacitly providing intellectual grounds for the condemnation, the official articles of which mention only Nicholas' erroneous teachings? This question is of great interest to historians of medieval philosophy since it would show that there was more than just the heavy hand of authority behind the silencing of the master from Lorraine. Modern minds are primed to read such incidents as exercises of political power, of course, in which the freedoms of individual thinkers are trampled in order to preserve some authoritarian regime – in this case the Church and to a lesser extent the University of Paris. But scholars of the period know that the story is much more complicated than this.

I immediately ran into the problem, however, on which efforts to answer this question have always foundered: we do not have enough of Nicholas' work to reconstruct his philosophical or theological system with any certainty. Especially troubling is the fact that his surviving works make it difficult to understand the precise

¹ J. ZUPKO, «Buridan and Skepticism», *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 31.2 (1993), pp. 191-221. In what follows, however, I will be referring to the revised and updated version of this essay, published as chapter 12 of my *John Buridan: Portrait of a Fourteenth-Century Arts Master* (Publications in Medieval Studies). Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, pp. 183-202.

sense in which he subscribed to the condemned doctrines, if he indeed subscribed to them at all (perhaps we should take him at his word when he says that he advanced these doctrines not obstinately, but «for discussion and the sake of argument²»). My solution to this was a *distinguo*-strategy; that is, I distinguished between the views of Nicholas of Autrecourt (whatever they were) and views that I called ‘Ultricurian’ (after the Latin form of his name, *Nicholas de Ultricuria*), which are what Buridan took himself to be criticizing³. Thus, I could safely make ‘Ultricurian skepticism’ the target of Buridan’s critique without raising the thorny question of whether Nicholas was himself a skeptic. There is no doubt that whatever Nicholas’ views actually were, Buridan took the condemned articles to have knowledge-destroying consequences, and his response to them remains one of the most compelling defenses of the possibility of empirical knowledge in pre-Cartesian philosophy. This strategy made sense in a discussion of Buridan because it provided a good reading of his arguments.

Nevertheless, the *distinguo*-strategy had the downside of bracketing the question of how Nicholas and Buridan were actually related, a question made even more tantalizing by the fact that they were near contemporaries at Paris who might well have known each other and passed each other daily in the *vico Straminum* or ‘rue de Fouarre’, the street outside the buildings where arts lectures were held. If Nicholas was not himself a skeptic, as I believe he was not⁴, then one must wonder how the public persona of Nicholas-as-skeptic could have become so easily separated from his actual writings and teachings. This is an even more difficult question, raising as it does further questions about academic procedures, teaching practices, and everyday life at the University of Paris in the fourteenth century. But they are questions that must be

² «Hec omnia dixi disputative et causa collationis, nich[il asserendo perti]naciter» from the official record of Autrecourt’s Avignon trial: *Propositions from the Letter ‘Ve michi’ Sent to Pope Clement VI*: (ed. L.M. DE RIJK, *Nicholas of Autrecourt. His Correspondence with Master Giles and Bernard of Arezzo. A critical edition from the two Parisian manuscripts with an Introduction, English Translation, explanatory notes and indexes* (Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters, XLII). Leiden-New York-Köln, Brill, 1994, p. 150).

³ ZUPKO, *John Buridan: Portrait of a Fourteenth-Century Arts Master*, p. 189.

⁴ See ZUPKO, *John Buridan: Portrait of a Fourteenth-Century Arts Master*, p. 186.

raised if we hope to understand Nicholas' place in the history of medieval philosophy.

Thanks in large part to the work of Zénon Kaluza, Christophe Grellard⁵, and others, we now know a good deal more about Nicholas' substantive views, the general character of which is not skeptical, but critical. As a philosopher, he has more in common with modern figures such as Kant, Dewey, and Wittgenstein, who were interested in methodically or systematically attacking the dominant philosophical paradigm, rather than with the ancient skeptics, for whom doubt was primarily a means of achieving the ethical goal of *ataraxia* or freedom from disturbance. The dominant paradigm in fourteenth-century Paris was Aristotelian, of course, and Nicholas makes no bones about his dislike for what he saw as the rampant Aristotelianism among masters and students at the University, ridiculing «the mob (*vulgus*)» for following «the conclusions and words of Aristotle and his commentator Averroes in their inquiries» rather than thinking for themselves⁶. Still, he writes with the zeal of a reformer, not a revolutionary⁷:

Among other things, I proposed to show against those who have been deceived in this way (*sic deceptos*) that there are some conclusions that can certainly be found in the teachings of Aristotle, which they do not call into doubt and yet which they could in no way know. Along the way, there were many conclusions to be examined, not by determining them but by doubting them (*non determinando sed dubitando*)⁸.

⁵ See especially Z. KALUZA, «Nicolas d'Autrécourt, ami de la vérité», *Histoire Littéraire de la France*, XLII, 1, Paris, 1995 and C. GRELLARD, *Croire et savoir. Les principes de la connaissance selon Nicolas d'Autrécourt* (Études de philosophie médiévale, 88). Paris, Vrin, 2005.

⁶ NICHOLAS OF AUTRE COURT, *Exigit ordo executionis*, Secundus Prologus (ed. J. R. O'DONNELL, «Nicholas of Autrecourt», *Mediaeval Studies*, I (1939), p. 197, ll. 6-7).

⁷ Dallas Denery suggests that Nicholas had even bigger game in his sights: «Nicholas' language of opposition and his effort to redefine the source of intellectual authority mark a conscious attempt to subvert the intellectual hegemony of the medieval university system» (D.G. DENERY, *Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World: Optics, Theology and Religious Life* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, 63). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 141). If this is true, then he was more of a revolutionary than has hitherto been appreciated. For present purposes, however, I will concern myself with the doctrinal aspects of Nicholas' criticisms, leaving open the question of their institutional implications.

⁸ *Exigit ordo executionis*, Secundus Prologus (ed. O'DONNELL, p. 198, ll. 14-17).

In addition to doubting Aristotle, Nicholas provides at least the beginnings of an alternative account driven by an innovative atomistic metaphysics and probabilistic epistemology. Unfortunately, the work in which this is developed, the *Exigit ordo executionis*, is notoriously incomplete⁹, making it difficult to specify Nicholas' views in a way that would allow us to connect them easily with other debates we know were happening at the time. Christophe Grellard has given the most plausible reconstruction to date of what Nicholas' philosophical system might have looked like, as well sorting through some of the shadowy influences on his thought¹⁰. I will not attempt to improve upon his remarks here. As far as Buridan is concerned, it is clear that when he criticizes views associated with Nicholas, he is already in the grip of the public persona of Nicholas-as-skeptic, and has no interest in trying to find out why Nicholas held those views by reading or re-reading his work. Buridan would have regarded such charity as out of place given that such views come from certain «exceedingly wicked individuals ... who wish to destroy the natural and moral sciences (*aliqui valde mali ... volentes interimere scientias naturales et morales*)», as he puts it in his *Questions on Aristotle's Metaphysics*¹¹.

How could it have come to this? Hardly an easy question to answer at the best of times, let alone for a figure who lived over six centuries ago in an institutional culture for which only a handful of historical records survive. The temptation to think anachronistically is almost irresistible because finding some kind of disconnect between what a person actually believes and his or her public persona has become standard operating procedure in our own culture – just look at the way the public regards athletes, politicians and televangelists. But we have no idea whether such modern typologies

⁹ As Zénon Kaluza very nicely describes it: «L'*Exigit ordo* est un brouillon, dans lequel en vue d'une rédaction définitive, l'auteur avait esquissé des idées et des projets philosophiques, noté des arguments, des propos polémiques et des fragments de disputes, tracé sa recherche assidue d'une solution des problèmes. Le procès d'Avignon rendit caduc le travail, la rédaction définitive, ne s'est jamais faite, et l'oeuvre est restée ce qu'elle était» (KALUZA, «Nicolas d'Autrécourt, ami de la vérité», p. 170).

¹⁰ See GRELLARD, *Croire et savoir*.

¹¹ JOHANNES BURIDANUS, *In Metaphysicen Aristotelis Questiones argutissimae*, Paris, Badius Ascensius, 1518 (Photomechanically reprinted Frankfurt a. M., Minerva, 1964, hereafter *QM*), II, 1, f. 9ra.

could apply to the various protagonists in the Autrecourt debate, at least as it has come down to us. The best we can do, it seems, is to note the disconnect, and document what happened to the persona.

As it turns out, Buridan's reaction to the persona can be fairly easily documented. He appears to have known the arguments Nicholas advanced in the correspondence with Bernard of Arezzo and Master Giles, whether through direct acquaintance with the articles of his condemnation or from having examined the correspondence itself, perhaps during the preliminary investigation of his teachings at Paris. What is less clear is whether he knew of Nicholas' substantive views in the *Exigit ordo executionis*, a work dating from Nicholas' time as a theology student when he supported himself by teaching in the arts faculty. I say this because with one exception, its arguments do not come up in places where Buridan is criticizing Nicholas. And the one exception, which concerns the validity of inductive inferences¹², was an established topic in commentaries on Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, where it was customary to ask in connection with chapter 19 of Book II whether scientific knowledge can be obtained from sense impressions.

But most interesting historically are two places where Buridan mentions an actual article from Nicholas' condemnation (it is the same article each time). In what follows, I will look at these in more detail to see what, if anything, they tell us about Buridan's understanding of his views. Then, working backwards, I will try to connect these discussions with what we do know about Nicholas' teachings, and conclude with some general remarks about accuracy, and relevance, of Buridan's critique.

¹² See *Exigit ordo executionis* (O'DONNELL, p. 237, ll. 39-47). Buridan's criticism can be found in his *QM*, II, 1, f. 8va and *Quaestiones in duos libros Aristotelis Posteriorum* (ed. H. HUBIEN, unpublished typescript; hereafter *An. Post.*), II, 11. For discussion, see ZUPKO, *John Buridan: Portrait of a Fourteenth-Century Arts Master*, pp. 188-189.

Is 'Man is an Animal' Necessary?

Buridan never mentions Nicholas of Autrecourt by name¹³, although he refers on two occasions to a proposition condemned by William Curti (Guillelmus Curti), the Cistercian cardinal delegated by Pope Clement VI to preside over Nicholas' Avignon trial. The first is in Book I, Question 25 of Buridan's commentary on the *Prior Analytics*, where the first argument for treating 'Man is an animal' as a necessary proposition is that Aristotle «commonly regards it as necessary», something he tells us has also been «the determination of the White Cardinal»¹⁴. In his resolution of the question, Buridan states that he will distinguish between three kinds of necessity that can be ascribed to a proposition, «in order to save Aristotle and the determination of the White Cardinal (*ad salvandum Aristotilem et determinationem cardinalis albi*)»¹⁵.

The second reference is in Book IV, Question 8 of his commentary on the *Metaphysics*, which asks about the distinction between being and essence (*esse et essentia*). After presenting the view of «St. Thomas (*beatus Thomas*)» that being and essence are distinct in every creature such that only God is «absolutely simple (*simpli-citer simplex*)», Buridan mentions certain nameless others who have held that «being and non-being are certain diverse accidental modes accruing to the essence <of a thing> (*esse et non esse sunt quidam modi diversi accidentales accidentes essentiae*)». In this way,

¹³ Cf. PETER OF AILLY (c. 1351-1420): «... suppose someone should object to these conclusions that, among the articles condemned at Paris against Master Nicholas of Autrecourt, one is "To say [that] the sentences 'God exists' [and] 'God does not exist' signify the same thing, although in different ways, is an error". I reply that many of his theses were condemned (*multa fuerunt condemnata contra eum*) out of jealousy, and yet later on were publicly conceded in the schools» (PAUL V. SPADE, (tr.), PETER OF AILLY, *Concepts and Insolubles: An Annotated Translation* (Synthese Historical Library, 19). Dordrecht, Reidel, 1980, p. 58).

¹⁴ BURIDAN, *Quaestiones in An. Pr.* I.25 (ed. H. HUBIEN, unpublished typescript): «arguitur primo quod sic, per Aristotilem, qui communiter reputat illam esse necessariam, et etiam per determinationem Cardinalis Albi».

¹⁵ For the definitive identification of William Curti as the '*cardinalis albus*', see W. J. COURTENAY, «Erfurt CA 2 127 and the Censured Articles of Mirecourt and Autrecourt», in *Die Bibliotheca Amploniana: ihre Bedeutung im Spannungsfeld von Aristotelismus, Nominalismus und Humanismus*, hrsg. v. A. SPEER (Miscellanea Mediaevalia, 23). Berlin-New York, de Gruyter, 1995, pp. 341-52, 350-52.

they were able to treat essences as everlasting (*perpetuas*), with being and non-being attributed to them successively, just as we speak of roses blooming in the summer but not in the winter. He then offers, almost as an aside, that «perhaps that Cardinal was of this same opinion who sent the Bull stating that the proposition, ‘Man is an animal,’ or even the proposition, ‘A horse is an animal,’ is necessary on account of the inclusion of terms, and would be true even if God were to annihilate all horses»¹⁶. Here the cardinal no longer carries the ‘white’ moniker, but he certainly looks to be the same person¹⁷. What, precisely, is the issue here, and what does it have to do with Nicholas of Autrecourt?

This is a reference to the first of the condemned articles from the letter, “Ve Michi,” which Nicholas duly recanted at the palace of Cardinal Curti in 1346, and then recanted again, just as he was sentenced to do, at Paris the following year¹⁸:

I have said and written that the proposition, ‘Man is an animal,’ is not a necessary one according to the Faith, not noting at the time the necessary connection of the terms involved – I recant this as false. (*Dixi et scripsi quod hec propositio ‘homo est animal’ non est necessaria secundum fidem, non attendens protunc necessariam connexionem predictorum terminorum – Revoco tanquam falsum*)¹⁹

¹⁶ BURIDAN, *QM*, IV, 8, f. 18vb: «Et forte ille cardinalis erat illius opinionis qui misit bullam quod ista propositio, homo est animal, vel etiam ista propositio, equus est animal, est necessaria propter inclusionem terminorum, et esset vera quamvis deus annihilaret omnes equos».

¹⁷ The identification of ‘*ille cardinalis*’ in this passage with the ‘*cardinalis albi*’ of Autrecourt’s condemnation was first suggested by Bernd Michael (B. MICHAEL, *Johannes Buridan: Studien zu seinem Leben, seinen Werken und zur Rezeption seiner Theorien im Europa des späten Mittelalters*. Vols. 1-2. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Berlin, 1985, p. 810).

¹⁸ For discussion, see J. M. M. H. THIJSSSEN, «The ‘Semantic’ Articles of Autrecourt’s Condemnation. New Proposals for an Interpretation of Articles 1, 30, 31, 35, 57, and 58», *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, 58 (1991), pp. 155-175, 157-163, KALUZA, «Nicolas d’Autrécourt, ami de la vérité»; D. PERLER, «Nicholas of Autrecourt», in E. CRAIG (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London, Routledge, 1998, and J. M. M. H. THIJSSSEN, *Censure and Heresy at the University of Paris, 1200-1400* (The Middle Ages Series). Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998 pp. 81-82, which, following COURTENAY, «Erfurt CA 2 127 and the Censured Articles of Mirecourt and Autrecourt», corrects his earlier misidentification of the ‘*cardinalis*’ in question with Robert Kilwardby.

¹⁹ DE RIJK, *Nicholas of Autrecourt*, pp. 170-171; *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, ed. H. DENIFLE and É. CHÂTELAINE, vol. II, Paris, Delalain, 1891, p. 576, # 1124.

Unfortunately we have not been able to connect this particular article with anything in Nicholas' surviving work²⁰. The other articles in the "Ve Michi" part of the condemnation derive mostly from his correspondence with Bernard of Arezzo, so it is possible that it comes from something he said in his lost *principium* debate with Bernard. Be that as it may, Hans Thijssen has shown that it probably originated as a sophism sentence in thirteenth-century theological debates on the metaphysical status of the person of Christ during the *triduum*, i.e. the three-day period after his death and before his resurrection when his soul was among the dead and his body was in the tomb: How can Christ be said to be a man during this time, when his divine essence no longer inheres in the body that makes it human? Since the position that Christ was not a man during the *triduum* was condemned at Oxford in 1277, the orthodox position here would have been to affirm the sophism sentence and then find some way of explaining how it could be true. The article suggests that Nicholas was seen as heterodox on this point.

Buridan sidesteps the theological part of the debate, citing his obligation as an arts master not to determine questions proper to the faculty of theology²¹. Thus, when he asks whether the human

²⁰ Christophe Grellard (NICOLAS D'AUTRÉCOURT, *Correspondance. Articles condamnés*, texte latin établi par L. M. DE RIJK, introduction, traduction et notes par C. GRELLARD (Sic et non). Paris, Vrin, 2001, pp. 172-73, n. 101) argues that Nicholas did in fact hold something very much like this proposition in the *Exigit ordo executionis*, in a passage from the section 'On Movement' where he is discussing how concepts are mutually related as signs of things outside the mind. After noting that sometimes our concepts are related as container and thing contained, he gives several examples, one of which is: «If we posit that some being is a man, we posit implicitly that it is an animal (*Si etiam ponimus aliquod ens esse hominem, ponimus implicite ipsum esse animal*)» (ed. O'DONNELL, p. 226, ll. 35-38; the reference is erroneously given as p. 235 in Grellard's text). But this example does not comment on the modal status of that proposition, which was the issue in the *triduum*-debate. And if Nicholas were pronouncing on the latter, he surely would have mentioned the theological issue involved to indicate that he was taking a position in this debate. So I am not convinced that this passage, all by itself, is related to the condemned article.

²¹ Buridan invokes curricular boundaries on a variety of occasions, but never when he thinks there is a genuine philosophical question that can be resolved using natural reason and the evidence of sense, memory, and experience. Thus, he is happy to delegate the question of the value of secular vs. religious life in Book VII, question 21 of his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. As Christophe Grellard nicely puts it, «Buridan reste prudent en soulignant qu'il revient à la Faculté de théologie de décider de la valeur de ce mode de vie pour notre condition 'post mortem'» (C. GRELLARD,

intellect is everlasting (*perpetuus*) in the third and final version of his question commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*, he presents several competing views on the substantial forms of composite substances, but does not choose among them because

... the determination of this doubt pertains more to metaphysics or to the faculty of sacred theology, in connection with which several theologians have raised the following quodlibetal question: whether Christ was a man during the *triduum*, i.e., the three days during which his body was in the sepulchre without a soul and his soul was among the dead without a body²².

But although Buridan correctly identifies this article from Nicholas' condemnation and recognizes its theological nature, its role in his *Metaphysics* commentary again looks to be no more than an aside, a reminder to his student audience that there is an important theological question here in addition to the one that should interest them as philosophers.

When the modal status of 'Man is an animal' comes up in the *Prior Analytics* commentary, however, Buridan sees a golden opportunity to give his students a lesson on the different kinds of necessity²³. And in doing so, he provides the logical tools needed to

«Amour de soi, amour du prochain. Nicolas d'Autrécourt, Jean Buridan et l'idée d'une morale laïque. (autour de l'article condamné n° 66)», *Chemins de la pensée médiévale. Études offertes à Zénon Kaluza*, éd. P. J. J. M. BAKKER, avec la collaboration de E. FAYE et C. GRELLARD (Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales. Textes et Études du Moyen Age, 20). Turnhout, Brepols, 2002, p. 237).

²² BURIDAN, *Quaestiones De anima (de tertia lectura)*, «... determinatio huius dubitationis pertinet ad metaphysicam vel ad facultatem theologiae sacrae, unde plures theologi moverunt illud quodlibetum: utrum Christus in triduo erat homo, scilicet quando corpus sine anima erat in sepulchro, et eius anima sine corpore in inferno» (J. ZUPKO, *John Buridan's Philosophy of Mind: An Edition and Translation of his 'Questions on Aristotle's De anima (Third Redaction), with Commentary and Critical and Interpretative Essays*, Doct. Diss., Cornell University, 1989, pp. 53-54). The '*pertinet ad metaphysicam*' is not redeemed anywhere in Buridan's *Metaphysics* commentary, and that, as I have argued elsewhere, is for the good reason that Aristotle did not raise it there. Buridan's task was commenting on Aristotle; he is not about to take his students in a direction that has no basis in the text. See also J. ZUPKO, «On Buridan's Alleged Alexandrianism: Heterodoxy and Natural Philosophy in Fourteenth-Century Paris», *Vivarium*, 42,1 (2004), pp. 42-57.

²³ The quotations that follow are all from BURIDAN, *An.Pr.* I, 25 (ed. HUBIEN).

solve the sophism sentence along orthodox lines, though without actually pronouncing on it himself because, as arts master, he was not licensed to do that.

First, he says, there is conditional necessity, where a proposition such as ‘Man is an animal’ is necessary such that «if the subject and predicate supposit for something, they supposit for the same thing (*oportet si subjectum et praedicatum pro aliquo supponant quod supponant pro eodem*)». This proposition is necessary so long as there are men to serve as supposit for the term ‘man’, but otherwise not because it would then in fact be false. On this interpretation, the proposition ‘A vacuum is a place’, which looks to express part of what a vacuum is essentially, would not be necessary because the condition has not been met, there being no vacua in nature. Second, there is «temporal necessity (*necessitas ex quando*)», which has the weaker requirement that the subject and predicate terms of a proposition supposit for the same thing *at some time or other*, of which the present occasion of its utterance or inscription would be one. Thus, to say ‘A horse is an animal’ is necessary is to say «A horse, whenever it is, was, or will be, is, was, or will be an animal (*necesse est equum, quandocumque est, fuit vel erit, esse, fuisse vel fore animal*)». Buridan reminds his students that this is the sense we use when the terms of a proposition are said to supposit naturally in demonstrative syllogisms; it is the form of necessity proper to «the demonstrative and natural sciences, and mathematics (*scientiae demonstrativae, naturales et mathematicae*)». Finally, there is absolute necessity (*necessitas simpliciter*), which corresponds to our modern notion of *de re* necessity: a proposition is necessary if «it is *impossible* for the subject and predicate *not* to supposit for the same thing whenever it is formed (*impossibile est quod aliquando subjectum et praedicatum non supponant pro eodem in propositione formata*)». The strength of this third kind of necessity is clear in Buridan’s own words:

And so I would say that this is not <absolutely> necessary, ‘An ass is an animal’, nor this, ‘Man is an animal’, because there are possible cases, as was argued above, where it can be false. But this proposition is absolutely necessary: ‘God exists’²⁴.

²⁴ BURIDAN, *AnPr*, I, 25 (ed. HUBIEN): «Ideo etiam dicerem quod ista non est necessaria, ‘asinus est animal’, vel ‘homo est animal’, quia per casum possibilem, ut arguebatur, potest esse falsa. Sed ista est simpliciter necessaria, ‘deus est’».

Returning to the “Ve Michi” article from Nicholas’ condemnation, it appears that on Buridan’s scheme, he must have rejected the necessity of ‘Man is an animal’ in either the conditional or temporal senses, since it can be false in the absolute sense. But why would Nicholas do that? I can think of two reasons, though we cannot be certain which is correct without knowing precisely what occasioned his condemnation on this point.

First, it could be that ‘Man is an animal’ is *absolutely* necessary according to the faith, and that Buridan is denying its absolute necessity from the perspective of the philosopher, not the theologian. A good theologian, however, should *assert* the absolutely necessary connection of humanity and animality on grounds of faith. The idea would be that divine providence somehow assures us of its necessity even though we cannot see how it is so (indeed, it is easy to see how it might *not* be so if we imagine possible cases beyond the limits of nature; but for God, at least, the concepts include each other)²⁵. But reprobate Nicholas has denied this by insisting that the philosophical perspective apply to the faith as well. He has thus failed to respect the curricular boundaries Buridan seems so anxious to preserve. Buridan, on the other hand, readily concedes that even though the volitional act by which we assent to articles of faith is certain and «without fear of error (*sine formidine*)», it is based on «the authority of sacred scripture alone (*propter auctoritatem sacrae scripturae solum*)», rather than «on the evidence (*per evidentiam*)», i.e., of sense, memory, and experience²⁶. For this reason, it does not count as knowledge (*scientia*). Nicholas’ problem is that he has treated the faith as a source of knowledge. He does not know where philosophy stops and theology takes over.

While initially appealing because it might explain why Nicholas got into trouble with the theologians, this interpretation threatens to make nonsense of the entire notion of necessity, rendering it unusable not only for philosophers but for theologians as well. If, as the article of condemnation has it, Nicholas was wrong for failing to note «the necessary connection of the terms involved», then one wonders how he could manage to do this except through his own natural capacity to understand the meaning of the terms ‘man’

²⁵ If there are biblical passages that support this, I am not aware of them.

²⁶ BURIDAN, *AnPost*, I, 2 (ed. HUBIEN); cf. ID., *QM*, II, 1, f. 8rb.

and ‘animal’. But that is precisely what is *not* evident if we are talking about absolute necessity, since God is presumably free to create nothing at all, in which case ‘Man is an animal’ would not be absolutely necessary – as Buridan points out. Even theologians must use terms with a sense, and the sense in which they use them more often than not comes from the philosophers. That is why Buridan thinks he can save Aristotle and the White Cardinal in the same breath.

Second, we might imagine that Nicholas got into trouble for denying the necessity of ‘Man is an animal’ because he denies that this proposition is necessary in *any* sense, conditional, temporal, or absolute. To pull this off, he would have to subscribe to a very radical kind of modal metaphysics, one in which there is no real distinction between the essential and accidental properties of a thing and where attributes simply wax and wane as modes of their permanently underlying subjects. On this view, no proposition that is not a statement of identity will be necessary since there are no essences built into the structure of the world. In fact, the only nomic Aristotelian necessity that would survive in such a system would be the principle of non-contradiction. ‘Man is an animal’ might be true, but it cannot be necessarily true unless it is absolutely necessary – and Buridan has already shown it is not.

In my judgment, the second explanation makes better sense of what little we know about Nicholas’ teachings. If we are interested in fitting together the condemnation with the doctrinal evidence of the *Exigit ordo*, then Nicholas’ anti-Aristotelianism and especially his anti-Aristotelian atomism would explain his rejection of natural and metaphysical necessity as well as his conviction that the only necessity worthy of the name is logical. It would further explain his insistence that the *evidentia* on which our knowledge is based cannot come in degrees because all *evidentia* is self-*evidentia*, valid because it is based on the principle of non-contradiction. If he is serious about the metaphysical system he sketches in the *Exigit ordo*, rather than, say, advancing it against Aristotle «for the sake of argument», then the world will consist of unchanging atoms that do not come in natural kinds and do not move in keeping with any natural law – at least none that is evident to us²⁷. There is no local

²⁷ See *Exigit ordo executionis* (ed. O’DONNELL, pp. 203–205; 237).

motion, no generation and corruption, no continuum of space and time. As for our own cognitive acquaintance with the world, «every act of affirmation formed in full light, insofar as man can have full light, is true (*omnis actus dicendi formatus in pleno lumine, quantum lumen potest esse plenum apud hominem, est verus*)» but the range of such truths is limited because «of things known through experience, we have only the tendency to conjecture them, not certitude <about their nature or existence> (*de scitis per experientiam ... habetur solum habitus conjecturativus, non certitudo*)»²⁸. Still, the ‘insofar as’ proviso is important here. We are forced to accept the truthfulness of appearances, though on the weaker, internal grounds of their ineluctability – ‘we can’t help but assent to them’ – rather than as the conclusion of an argument²⁹. Things can look pretty grim for the empirical knowledge on such a system, especially if one is an Aristotelian. It would demand the erasure of all nomic Aristotelian necessities, except those reducible to the principle of non-contradiction.

If we look at Buridan’s other responses to Nicholas’ arguments, it seems that what really galls him is not their atomism or even their anti-Aristotelianism, but their system-destroying consequences. Recall again the passage where he obliquely refers to Nicholas as one of those «exceedingly malevolent individuals (*aliqui valde mali*)» who, because of their insistence that principles and conclusions «can be falsified through cases supernaturally possible (*possunt falsificari per casus supernaturaliter possibiles*)», are bent upon destroying the natural and moral sciences³⁰. Note that the problem here is not that Nicholas has dared criticize Aristotle or take up a position contrary to the majority of arts masters; it is that the force of his critique does not allow for a successor theory, leaving the state of *scientia* in complete disarray. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, both Buridan and his younger contemporary Nicole Oresme accept Nicholas’ argument that empirical knowledge cannot be demonstrated by means of the principle of non-contradiction, and they accept it where it counts: in practice. Thus, when faced with the question in their *De anima* commentaries of whe-

²⁸ *Exigit ordo executionis* (ed. O’DONNELL, pp. 231, ll. 3-5; 237, ll. 39-41).

²⁹ *Exigit ordo executionis* (ed. O’DONNELL, p. 232).

³⁰ BURIDAN, *QM*, II, 1, f. 9ra. See n. 11 above.

ther the natural science of the soul can tell us anything about its real nature, they both deny it, saying that we cannot conclude anything about the essence of the soul from its operations³¹. But they add a proviso intended to take the wind out of Nicholas' sails: it is unreasonable to expect our judgments in psychology – or in any other empirical science, for that matter – to conform to the same epistemic standards we find in logic or mathematics. As Aristotle suggests, we should demand deductive certainty only where it can be obtained³², i.e., in logic and mathematics. Both Buridan and Oresme adopt what is (to them) the much more sensible view that, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, our perceptual and judgmental capacities are reliable detectors of what the world is really like, and that this is all that is required to ground the natural and moral sciences.

Whether Buridan did not know the *Exigit ordo*, or whether he thought that its arguments were simply too sketchy to offer a successor theory to Aristotelian natural science, is hard to say. What is clear is that he thinks Nicholas has made a grammatical mistake – i.e., a violation of the discourse rules of natural philosophy – in reducing the principles of natural science to one. The ultimate effect of insisting on the principle of non-contradiction to the exclusion of every other well-founded principle is to silence human inquiry. And, regardless of how Nicholas intended us to take it, that is what Buridan thinks he has done.

Un sceptique malgré lui?

We have long since put to rest the caricature of Nicholas of Autrecourt as some kind of skeptic, “the medieval Hume”, in the words of Hastings Rashdall³³. Nicholas' substantive teachings bear

³¹ BURIDAN, *Quaestiones De anima (de tertia lectura)*, I, 6; ORESME, *Quaestiones in De anima* I, 4 (B. PATAR, *Nicolai Oresme Expositio et Quaestiones in Aristotelis «De anima»*, éd., étude crit. Études doctrinales en collaboration avec C. GAGNON (Philosophes médiévaux, 32). Louvain-La-Neuve, Louvain-Paris, Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, Peeters, 1995, p. 115). For discussion, see ZUPKO, *John Buridan: Portrait of a Fourteenth-Century Arts Master*, chapter 13.

³² ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 3.

³³ H. RASHDALL, «Nicholas de Ulricuria: A Medieval Hume», *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, N.S. 8 (1907), pp. 1-27.

little resemblance to either the ancient or modern tokens of that type: he does not think that taking his arguments to heart will induce feelings of *ataraxia* (even if they will break the habit of mindlessly following Aristotle), nor does he intend to establish a new philosophical regime based on custom and guided by common sense (even if he is interested in regime-change in some other sense)³⁴. He does offer arguments in his surviving correspondence that can be read as having skeptical implications, but only if they are lifted out of context – as unfortunately they were in the articles of condemnation and by most (though not all) of his later interpreters. But a genuine skeptic would surely have the courage of his convictions in claiming that we have no knowledge or at least a lot less knowledge than we think we have, and would offer us a method, such as the ten tropes of Aenesidemus, to disabuse us of our uncritical beliefs. Nicholas, it seems, was only interested in disabusing us of *Aristotelian* claims to certitude: «in his entire natural philosophy and metaphysics, Aristotle possessed such [evident] certitude of scarcely two conclusions, and perhaps not even of one³⁵». The rhetorical force of his argument is that there is something not right in Aristotle's explanation of human knowledge³⁶, and the fix is to come up with a different explanation rather than to abandon the concept of knowledge altogether.

Ah, but there, as they say, is the rub. The different explanation Nicholas offers in the *Exigit ordo* is not rigorously developed something that surely would have happened had his ideas been subjected to dialectical consideration – by which I mean their examination by other masters in lectures, quodlibetal debates, and other official occasions which together constituted the fourteenth-century equivalent of peer review – rather than being condemned

³⁴ I am not inclined to count the sort of skepticism we find in Cicero and John of Salisbury, for example, as the genuine article, because it merely enjoins us to be rational and prudent when we inquire as opposed to 'believing easily'. There is no hint of a larger ethical or 'alethical' goal to be achieved by adopting the skeptical attitude.

³⁵ DE RIJK, *Nicholas of Autrecourt*, pp. 72-73.

³⁶ See H. THIJSSSEN, «Nicholas of Autrecourt», in E. N. ZALTA (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2001, (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2001/entries/autrecourt>): «his philosophical stance challenges the prevailing Aristotelian tradition», by rejecting substance/accident metaphysics and the principle of causality.

outright³⁷. The condemnation is what enabled the persona of Nicholas-as-skeptic to emerge, for it relieved others of the need to take his arguments seriously. From that point on, his ideas could be caricatured and dismissed without further thought. This is unfortunate in view of some of the interesting things he has to say in the *Exigit ordo*: his insistence that every cognition is the cognition of an existing thing; his rejection of causal theories of perception in favor of asserting the simple co-presence of object and appearance; his claim that every act of cognition is identical with its object, which blocks a whole range of skeptical argumentation based on the distinction between knowledge and its object; his fallibilism with regard to virtually all empirical knowledge claims, forcing us to rely on probable argument rather than apodictic demonstration for their justification; and so on³⁸.

But think about what Nicholas is claiming from the perspective of a latter-day Aristotelian. I could say that my blue jacket is on the coat rack in my office, but this is neither certain nor evident to me because it is neither analytically true, unlike 'My blue jacket is blue', nor immediately evident, as it would be if I were sitting in my office right now (though even in that case I would be entitled to claim only that it *appears* blue to me, or that it is more likely to be blue than any other color). The reason I cannot know now that my blue jacket is on the coat rack in my office is that, unbeknownst to me, a colleague might have borrowed it some moments ago, and he is now wearing it. So the proposition that is the object of my assent turns out to be false. Now add Nicholas' assumption that «all kinds of things» may be perceived in a log or a stone without there being any substance underlying them, since God can bring this about «without contradiction»³⁹. Nicholas' God would be like the colleague who has taken my jacket, but infinitely more

³⁷ The surviving correspondence with Bernard of Arezzo and Master Giles is of course evidence that there was, at least initially, some unofficial engagement with Nicholas' views.

³⁸ *Exigit ordo executionis* (ed. O'DONNELL 1939; pp. 242, ll. 23-29; 190. ll. 3-6; 237, ll. 39-47). For discussion, see GRELLARD dans NICOLAS D'AUTRÉCOURT, *Correspondance*, pp. 7-72; GRELLARD, *Croire et savoir*.

³⁹ Letter to Master Giles (ed. DE RIJK, *Nicholas of Autrecourt*, pp. 110-111).

powerful. For the same reason, we cannot infer the existence of a log-substance or a stone-substance even when a log or a stone appears directly in front of us: «even if all things are perceived prior to such discursive thought, it can happen by some power, namely divine, that no substance is there. Therefore, in the natural light it is not evidently inferred from these appearances that a substance is there»⁴⁰.

But what *is* there, if not a real log or a real stone? A concatenation of atoms? It would seem that the same criticism could be leveled against any attempt to characterize the metaphysical structure of the universe, whether in terms of substances or atomic particles. Accordingly, Nicholas is only willing to characterize his atomistic alternative as «sufficiently probable (*satis probabiliter*)»⁴¹. Likewise for the principle that enables him to redeem knowledge via the senses: whatever appears «clear and evident in a full light (*clarum et evidens in pleno lumine*)» is true⁴². But the thrust of his argument remains critical, almost as if he does not believe he can make a credible case for his own metaphysics unless the Aristotelian predilections of his audience are swept away first. He has in common with ancient atomists the belief that once we penetrate beneath surface appearances, other metaphysical systems will lose their credibility and the truth of his own system will be (self?) evident: «things which are said to belong to the imagination agree with my mind less well than things belonging to the intellect, which are said to be more abstract»⁴³. This is a philosopher's conceit, of course, but it is one with a long and distinguished history in western thought.

Even so, I doubt whether Nicholas' atomism would agree with our minds any better if we did try to penetrate beneath its surface,

⁴⁰ Second Letter to Bernard (ed. DE RIJK, *Nicholas of Autrecourt*, pp. 74-75). The Latin text is worth quoting in full: «Cum omnibus apparentibus ante huiusmodi discursum potest esse per aliquam potentiam, utputa divinam, quod ibi substantia non sit. Igitur in lumine naturali non infertur evidenter ex istis apparentibus quod substantia sit ibi».

⁴¹ *Exigit ordo executionis* (ed. O'DONNELL, p. 206, l. 31).

⁴² *Exigit ordo executionis* (ed. O'DONNELL, p. 230, l. 18).

⁴³ *Exigit ordo executionis* (ed. O'Donnell, p. 212, ll. 15-17): «res quae dicuntur imaginationis minus bene veniunt ad spiritum meum quam res intellectus quae dicuntur majoris abstractionis». The remark has Augustinian echoes: cf. AUGUSTINE, *Letters* LV, VII, 13; *De Doctrina Christiana* I, VII, 7.

and our lack of Ultricurian sources here is only part of the problem. Nicholas has given us a model for a new metaphysics that promises radically different accounts of motion, causality, induction, free will, and so on, along with the beginnings of a program for realizing it. I say ‘beginnings’ because so much of what he says in the correspondence with Bernard and Giles and in the *Exigit ordo* is about shaking our confidence in the rival system of Aristotle. But it is not as if we can see in his literary remains how the Ultricurian alternative *could* be developed, at least if it is anything like its Greek and Roman precursors. The sketchiness of ancient atomism on these very points – motion, causality, induction, free will, and so on – undermines our confidence that it could present a genuine alternative to Aristotle, for the explanatory shortcomings of materialism are only magnified when the *explanans* is atomic, given that atoms themselves possess only minimal characteristics. How, for example, can secondary qualities such as color, sound, and taste be generated in macro-objects if their micro-constituents completely lack them? It seems *ad hoc*, to say the least, to argue (following Lucretius) that honey tastes sweet because it is composed of smooth, round atoms, whereas hooked atoms explain wormwood’s bitter flavor⁴⁴. If this is right, then ironically, Nicholas wants to persuade us of the truth of a metaphysical system that, whatever its surface appeal, becomes more and more implausible the deeper we go into it, searching for explanations of ordinary natural phenomena.

Conclusion

In the end, it is hard to see what is achieved epistemically by Nicholas’ strategy of limiting certitude and evidentness to the first principle and what can be deduced from it, because saying that one appearance is more probable than another seems to come to the same thing as saying that it is more certain or evident. And it is the justification of empirical knowledge that matters here. The justification of self-evident truths is interesting only as a limiting case in that it allows us to see the logical relationship that must hold

⁴⁴ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, II, 398-407.

between a proposition and the evidence warranting it. Ultimately, epistemologies must either redeem ordinary perceptual beliefs or else reject them for the sake of some greater good, like *ataraxia* (though even that is a dubious tradeoff, I think). Nicholas redeems them, but only partially, by means of a fallibilist account of non-immediate appearances as ‘probable’. What is harder to see is what this gets us. It certainly isn’t a reply to the skeptic, since a system based on probability cannot answer the kind of doubt-inducing arguments Nicholas himself runs against Aristotle, though it might gainsay them if it accepts beliefs based on probable grounds as justified.

As for Buridan, my hunch is that he had only a surface familiarity with what Nicholas actually said. But even if he had studied the *Exigit ordo* in detail, he still would have had grounds for concluding that it threatens to destroy the natural and moral sciences, and that is because Nicholas’ successor theory doesn’t work well enough to justify our continuing to investigate nature as an orderly place, filled with signs pointing to its creator. Actually, it is not quite fair to call it a ‘theory’. It is more of a stance. But even if the stance is firm, «Nicholas’ valorization of the self-assertive, logically-minded individual with his personal grasp of concepts is», as Dallas Denery remarks, «merely a moment of stability in a broader program of dislocations and displacements»⁴⁵. Accordingly, Buridan’s response should be seen not so much as a defense of Aristotle, but of the ordinary practice of science⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ D.G. DENERY, *Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World*, p. 162.

⁴⁶ For comments on earlier versions of the paper, I would like to thank audiences at the Colloque Autrécourt and the Philosophy Department of St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan, especially Bill Courtenay, Dallas Denery, Phil Dwyer, Christophe Grellard, Anthony Jenkins, Dominik Perler, and Carl Still.

