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Interventions

On Nicholas of Autrecourt and the Law of Non-Contradiction

LEO GROARKE *Wilfrid Laurier University*

When one looks for philosophical scepticism in later mediaeval times, it is natural to turn to the views of Nicholas of Autrecourt. His philosophy represents the clearest expression of sceptical currents in fourteenth-century thought and his critique of cause and substance provides a classic account of some of philosophy's most fundamental problems. Despite the sceptical tendencies in his thought, however, it is often said that his scepticism is more reserved than that of other sceptics. Hence the standard account (adopted by Weinberg,¹ Lappe,² Left,³ Hyman and Walsh⁴ and others) maintains that his scepticism is constrained by his commitment to the law of non-contradiction as a basis for certain truth. It is in view of this commitment that he allegedly exempts logical principles and immediate perceptions from his sceptical attack. As

1 Julius Weinberg, *Nicholas of Autrecourt: A Study in Fourteenth Century Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948).

2 Joseph Lappe, *Nicholas von Autrecourt: Sein Leben, seine Philosophie, seine Schriften*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, Bd. 6, Heft 2 (Münster i. W.: Aschendorff, 1908).

3 Gordon Left, *Medieval Thought: St. Augustine to Ockham* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1959).

4 Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

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Eileen Serene puts it in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, the standard view holds that "Nicholas of Autrecourt thought that ... immediate experience and the law of non-contradiction are truly evident and certain".⁵ As far as scepticism is concerned, the various commentators have, like Copleston, concluded that "Nicholas of Autrecourt was not a sceptic, if by this term we mean a philosopher who denies or questions the possibility of attaining any certain knowledge. He maintained that certainty is obtainable in logic and in mathematics and in immediate perception."⁶ I shall argue that this view of Nicholas' philosophy conflates his early and later views. For though it accurately describes his earlier philosophy, it ignores important changes that characterize his later work. I shall in particular argue that the most mature expression of his thought (the *Exigit Ordo* or *The Universal Treatise*?) denies the certainty of the law of non-contradiction and all that follows from it.

The extant parts of Nicholas' works which discuss the law of non-contradiction are his letters to Bernard (and Egidius) and the relevant sections of the *Exigit*. For reasons enumerated by Weinberg, it is generally accepted that the latter is a later work. The letters to Bernard are, in essence, a *reductio ad absurdum* of Bernard's views, and derive sceptical conclusions from the Aristotelian view that the law of non-contradiction is the basis of all necessary truth. It is in view of Nicholas' commitment to the law of non-contradiction, and his apparent view that our knowledge of mental states is reducible to "the first principle", that he exempts them from his sceptical attack. There can be little doubt that Nicholas' early scepticism is delimited in this way. The view that he retains these limits ignores important changes in his later thought however.

As soon as one moves from Nicholas' letters to the *Exigit*, one no longer finds the same attitude to the law of non-contradiction. The most conspicuous aspect of the *Exigit* in this regard is its failure to focus on the principle as a basis for philosophical analysis. This is in sharp contrast to Nicholas' early work (in particular, the second letter to Bernard) where it serves as the vehicle for positive and negative conclusions. If Nicholas' only extant work was the *Exigit*, its scattered and

oblique references to the law of non-contradiction would not allow the conclusion that it plays a central role in Nicholas' views. It is, in particular, notable that it is not the law of non-contradiction (but the fourteenth-century notion of probability) which the *Exigit* uses as a basis for its response to sceptical conclusions.

In order to understand the *Exigit*'s remarks on scepticism, we must note some general features of the work. Like his earlier writings, it aims to discredit Aristotelian philosophy, though it does so in a somewhat different way. It proceeds by defending a series of propositions which contradict Aristotelian views and which are said to be more probable. In order to understand Nicholas' remarks, it is important to understand the notion of the probable (*probabile*) which he employs. Without going into details (amply supplied by Weinberg), we may note that the notion of probability which he uses functions as a measure of plausibility or persuasiveness and is used when an objective standard of truth is not available. A proposition which is probable may be false or even necessarily false, though it appears true and is subjectively convincing. It is in view of the limitations on probability that it is not a proof of truth or knowledge, though it provides a way of resolving intellectual disputes when knowledge is not to be had. It is for this reason that probability provides a basis for Nicholas' response to scepticism. In dealing with the notion, it must always be remembered that it cannot achieve the certainty his scepticism denies. His ambivalent attitude towards it is shown by his claim that some of his probable conclusions are false, given that they contradict Catholic dogma. A similar view of probability is characteristic of fourteenth-century thought.

The section of the *Exigit* which deals most directly with scepticism ("Whether Everything Which Appears Is") is an attempt to provide an account of truth, knowledge and certainty which is more probable than Aristotelian views. Nicholas is, in particular, concerned to defend the anti-Aristotelian claims that everything which appears exists, that everything which appears true is true, and that everything which is clear and evident is known to be true. It is these claims, and not the law of non-contradiction, which provide the basis for Nicholas' response to scepticism. A careless reading of the *Exigit* might suggest that they contradict its claim that certainty is impossible, but such a reading overlooks the probable nature of Nicholas' conclusions. Hence his view is "that it is *probable* that everything that appears to be is, and that everything that appears to be true is true."⁸ As he puts it at one point, he defends his analysis as "more probable than its opposite, not as truer."⁹

A second aspect of Nicholas' discussion which indicates his scepticism is the hypothetical nature of his remarks. Hence he begins his discussion by *hypothesizing* that some certainty is attainable and it is

5 Eileen Serene, "Demonstrative Science", in N. Kretzmann, A. Kenny and J. Pinborg, eds., *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 515.

6 Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, part 1 (Garden City: Doubleday "Image" Books, 1963), 160.

7 The Latin text of the *Exigit* has been published by J. R. O'Donnell in "Nicholas of Autrecourt: Incipit Tractatus Universalis Magistri Nicholai De Ultrunia Ad Videndum An Sermones Peripateticorum Fuerint Demonstrativi", *Medieval Studies* 1 (1939), 179-280. I have used the 1971 translation by Leonard A. Kennedy, Richard E. Arnold and Arthur E. Millward, *The Universal Treatise of Nicholas of Autrecourt* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1973). Despite the latter, Nicholas remains a largely neglected and generally underrated philosopher.

8 *Exigit*, 228, cf. 230, 231, and *passim*.

9 *Ibid.*, 229.

only in view of this hypothesis that he argues for his various conclusions. As he puts it when he reaches his main conclusion, that what is clear and evident is known to be true:

This conclusion is proven for, when something is known with clear and evident knowledge, if it were possible for its opposite to be true, it would follow that the intellect could be sure of nothing. [But] the opposite was maintained in our hypothesis. The reasoning is proven because we have no certitude concerning first principles or anything else knowable except because we know them clearly and evidently.¹⁰

As Weinberg puts it, the certitude which Nicholas here endorses is "at best a conditional certitude and so quite different from the certitude discussed in the controversy with Bernard".¹¹ It is because his analysis is hypothetical and only probable that it is in keeping with sceptical conclusions.

Given the probable and provisional nature of Nicholas' views, he argues that we should nonetheless accept them, for certainty is unattainable. Hence:

... that conclusion, which was proved hypothetically (on the supposition that something is true), ought to be *accepted* as a principle. For, if it (the principle that what is clear and evident is known to be true) were proven to be true, the premises would be assumed as either evident or true. If as evident only, then, though they would make the conclusion evident, they would not prove it to be true. If as true, I have a question: it would be in virtue of themselves as being evident (and this would be begging the question) or because they are true (and then it would be necessary that their truth be shown from other premises, and so on to infinity).¹²

An unconditional proof of Nicholas' main conclusion would require true premises, yet there seems no clear way to prove them true. It will not suffice to show them evident, for it begs the question to assume that what is evident is true and an appeal to further arguments ultimately leads to an infinite regress. It follows that Nicholas' conclusion cannot be demonstrated, but the same reasoning shows that "there is *no* principle serving as [a] foundation for another principle in such a way as to prove its truth".¹³ Given that every principle—including the law of non-contradiction—is incapable of proof, Nicholas rejects the Aristotelian basis for certainty and suggests that we accept his views as a probable basis for belief.

It is in light of Nicholas' view that his conclusions are only probable that he goes on to argue that "we do not seem to have full certainty concerning things because we must assume as an argument that what is evident is true".¹⁴ This again suggests that he takes the principle that the evident is true (and not the law of non-contradiction) as his fundamental principle and holds all to be uncertain because the stipulated principle cannot be proven true. Nicholas does believe that his principle can be

shown to be probable—by reference to his earlier conclusion that "the intellect does not naturally enjoy what is false"—but probability cannot establish certainty and no principle is fully certain.

Given its sceptical conclusions, the *Exigit* goes on to propound more specific views which confirm Nicholas' doubts about the law of non-contradiction. In particular, Nicholas holds that:

... someone could, because of custom or some other reason, refuse to assent unhesitatingly to the point that the first principle is true. An example of this would be a person so brought up as to be taught that there is an omnipotent agent who can bring about the contrary, and that evidence should not move him [to assent] since the opposite can coexist with it, as might be shown in many instances.¹⁵

Nicholas here suggests that one could refuse to accept the law of non-contradiction as true or certain by hypothesizing that there is an omnipotent agent who can contradict it. One must admit that the principle appears certain, but there are many instances where things which appear certain turn out to be mistaken.¹⁶

Having noted the *Exigit*'s remarks on certainty, it should be clear that Nicholas' later scepticism does deny the certainty of the law of non-contradiction and all that follows from it. It follows that he is a sceptic in the broad sense of the term and this further distinguishes him from late mediaeval thinkers (e.g., Scotus, Ockham, Biel and others) who steadfastly endorse "the first principle".¹⁷ In closing, we may note that a recognition of this aspect of Nicholas' views also eliminates a number of weaknesses and inconsistencies Weinberg finds when he discusses the *Exigit*. Most obviously, it shows that the radical conclusions adopted in the *Exigit* are not the result of mere confusion, but amount to an explicit adoption of a more radical scepticism.¹⁸ Secondly, the change in Nicholas' views shows that Nicholas can (when he discusses goodness) consistently deny that evidence can establish certainty, for he is not committed to his earlier claim that the evidence of the first principle establishes it as a certain truth.¹⁹ Thirdly, the realization that it is not the law of non-contradiction, but probability, which is the basis of the *Exigit*'s response to scepticism, eliminates alleged inconsistencies in Nicholas' argument for the conclusion that some things are means to others' ends. The strict criteria for evidence adopted in the letters to Bernard do not allow this conclusion, though it is compatible with the more encompass-

15 *Ibid.*

16 Nicholas does say that one who doubts the law of non-contradiction must admit that it is clear and evident, but this does not contradict his scepticism, for it concerns the question whether the clear and evident is true.

17 This lends further support for Moody's claim that Nicholas is not an Ockhamist philosopher.

18 See Weinberg, *Nicholas of Autrecourt*, 191-192. His reluctance to ascribe to Nicholas a full-fledged scepticism seems to stem primarily from his own rejection of such a view. It seems to me not only that Nicholas adopts a broader scepticism, but also that it cannot be dismissed as easily as Weinberg seems to think.

19 See *ibid.*, 127-128.

10 *Ibid.*, 235.

11 Weinberg, *Nicholas of Autrecourt*, 180.

12 *Exigit*, 237.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

ing (albeit weaker) principles of probability.²⁰ The elimination of such inconsistencies does not eradicate all the problems with Nicholas' views, though it does provide an indication of the significance of his thought.²¹

²⁰ See *ibid.*, 137-138.

²¹ For a more detailed discussion of Nicholas' views, and their relationship to those of other sceptics, see Leo Groarke, "Descartes First Meditation: Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed", forthcoming in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22/2 (1984).

Women in Bloom

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It is now more than a decade and a half since Allan Bloom's translation and interpretation of Plato's *Republic* became available.¹ The intervening years have also been marked by unprecedented attention to sexual egalitarianism, and it is no accident that Plato's arguments, in Book V of the *Republic*, for equal treatment of men and women in education and politics, and for communism in place of families for the guardian class, have received wide and very diverse comment among political philosophers. Bloom, however, takes such an exceptional view of Book V that his account of the text deserves to be challenged in some detail.

Bloom correctly identifies the context of Plato's argument. It is part of the central "digression" of the *Republic*, which includes all of Books V-VII.² This digression consists of the three "waves" of objections to the society which was sketched in Books II-IV. These objections (that women must be equal, that family life must be communal, and that philosophers must be kings) interrupt the exposition of the four forms of corruption which are identified as worthy of study at the end of Book IV, but which are not actually taken up until Book VIII.³ Like Gilbert Ryle, who made us re-read the digression by identifying it as Plato's "lost" *Lecture on the Good* (which Aristotle informs us was not widely appreciated because it had more to do with mathematics than with goodness),⁴ Bloom commands our renewed attention to Books V-VII by

¹ Allan Bloom, trans., *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968). Page numbers in my text will refer to the "Interpretive Essay" which Bloom includes with his translation.

² It is clearly wrong to treat the equality argument, as Cornford does, as an appendix to Book IV and radically separate from Books VI and VII. See, for instance, the table of contents in F. M. Cornford, *The Republic of Plato* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), xi.

³ See Bloom, trans., *Republic*, Book IV, 445c, and Book VIII, 544a. I shall, of course, use Bloom's translation when I quote from the *Republic*.

⁴ Gilbert Ryle, *Plato's Progress* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 247-250.