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John Buridan (review)

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1470 on the subject of the truth-value of statements about future contingents. This debate involved a master of arts from Louvain, Pierre de Rivo, who considered it essential to distinguish between the truth of philosophers and the “popular” truth upheld by the churchmen, and a Parisian theologian whom we have already encountered, Guillaume Baudin, who invoked the “principle of the oneness of truth” to denounce the “double truth” that his adversary was promoting.

From Bianchi’s multifaceted response to the third question (chs. 3–4), I can only present the groundswell. From the statutes promulgated by the Parisian Arts Faculty in 1272 up to the condemnation of Galileo in 1633, including the constitution *Apostolici regiminis* issued by the Fifth Lateran Council (1513), a significant evolution may be observed in the requirements academic and religious authorities imposed on professors of philosophy (as well as on scientists) in the western Christian world. Indeed, we may observe that these requirements correspond, first, to the obligation to counter, as far as possible, arguments that contradict faith, and then transform into the duty to commit to a strong defense of Catholic dogma. That such prescriptions did not always have the anticipated effect is one thing, which Bianchi duly notes; that they prevented the spread of the epistemological ideal of the masters of arts condemned by Tempier in 1277—which favored a relativization of the truths of philosophy to render them axiologically neutral and autonomous with respect to religious faith—is another matter, clearly revealed in these chapters.

This work is in every respect remarkable and captivating. This is Bianchi at his best: fine intuitions solidly supported by a precise examination of historical documents; a critical spirit sensitive to the subtleties and paradoxes of intellectual history; and clear and effective prose, ensuring that reading this scholarly book will be as enjoyable as it is enriching.

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Gyula Klima. *John Buridan*. Great Medieval Thinkers. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp.iv + 352. Paper, \$29.95.

This is a marvelous book, a “must read” for anyone interested in understanding the philosophical debates of the later Middle Ages and a useful book for contemporary philosophers who will find in it a sophisticated articulation of a philosophical position well able to provide perspective on a number of contemporary debates. It is exceptionally well-written, clear, and insightful.

We are now in a fairly good position to understand Buridan’s role in later medieval philosophy, his general philosophical orientation, and the milieu in which he worked. What we have lacked is a detailed study of the core of his philosophy, and it is this gap that Gyula Klima’s book splendidly fills—just as our picture of Buridan’s thought is coming into focus. Much of Buridan’s work is either unedited or exists only in *incunabula*, and there are underway editing projects of central texts that will shed considerable new light on the man and his work. We are fortunate, however, to have already a splendid English translation of and commentary on Buridan’s massive and rich *Summulae de dialectica* by Klima himself, and this, together with *incunabula* and with recent editions of some of his other logical works, forms a sufficient basis of text for reasonable confidence that Klima’s study will stand the test of time.

John Buridan focuses on the philosophy of thought and language, metaphysics, and parts of the epistemology of science. Buridan has much to say about action theory, economics, ethics, politics, natural philosophy, and psychology—to mention only a few areas not covered in this book that have been the subjects of recent particular studies—but because in all of these areas his thought is shaped by his thinking about language, thought, and what there is, Klima’s focus is appropriate. Klima sees Buridan as central to the late medieval nominalist tradition, but nonetheless as located in a conceptual space between Ockham and Aquinas. From Ockham derive the central features of his metaphysics and philosophy

of language, while Aquinas is important for his epistemology. Buridan is, withal, a strikingly independent thinker.

Chapters 3–5 of the book (making up some forty percent of the total) are devoted to the issues raised by Buridan's development of his mental language hypothesis and the account of concept formation it involves. Concept formation begins when objects are as if "in our prospect" (*in prospectu nostro*). Klima understands this as a matter of objects being as if located in a particular fully determinate spatio-temporal context and so being presented as singular. He argues that, for Buridan, our sensory contact with the world is information rich. We do not (typically) sense mere whiteness or heat, but white or hot things, and while our senses can respond only to the whiteness or the heat, our intellects respond also to the things themselves. Thus, Klima argues, Buridan is able to account for substantial concepts and avoid the line of thought that led some British empiricists to identify things with congeries of features. Klima reads Ockham as holding that general concepts signify what they do in virtue of a *sui generis* similarity between the concept and its significata, and that singular concepts add to this an *actual causal link* whereby the singular object signified gives rise to the concept, whereas Buridan locates singularity in *the way* in which the object is presented—as in *prospectu*.

Klima argues that, while Buridan permits singular concepts only of what is *in prospectu*, he allows spoken and written proper names for things which are not; when, for example, we intend to use a spoken word as others use it—and so to signify *their* concept. This already suggests the complexity of the relations between spoken and mental language, and Klima's discussion of these relations is one highlight of the book.

The possibility that God might deceive us was a live one in Buridan's milieu. Klima argues (chs. 11 and 12) that within what he calls the *pre-modern* epistemology of Aquinas and others, radical skepticism about the reality of the external world is impossible because the identity conditions for concepts require that the *same* form be present in the concept and in what is conceived. Thus, the concepts we have we could have only if there were the objects they are about. This contrasts with the *modern* epistemology Klima finds in Ockham and Buridan where, although it is naturally impossible that a concept be produced without that which it is about, it is supernaturally possible because the concept and what is conceived are distinct things, and of any two distinct things, God can make one without the other. Although Ockhamists will not be convinced, Klima's discussion elegantly sharpens a number of issues about both medieval and contemporary skepticism, and I heartily recommend these chapters.

There is much more in this book. There is a very helpful discussion of Buridan's and other medieval views about the existential import of sentences (ch. 6) and the ways in which sentences express ontological commitment (ch. 7). There is a lovely account of Buridan's views on truth, his account of validity (an account that does not involve truth), and his discussion of the Liar Paradox (chs. 9 and 10). Klima elegantly summarizes what is agreed about Buridan's semantics and epistemology and has interesting and well-argued suggestions about what is controversial. *Tolle et lege!*

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Stanislav Sousedík. *Philosophie der frühen Neuzeit in den böhmischen Ländern*. Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2009. Pp. 227. Cloth, €158.00.

Philosophy in the historical Kingdom of Bohemia has never received much attention in the Anglophone world. Yet in the early modern period, Bohemia and especially Prague were an extraordinarily fertile ground for philosophical thought. Stanislav Sousedík of Charles University in Prague is now the foremost expert on this region and period. His *Philosophy in the Bohemian Lands between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment* appeared in Czech in 1997 and is now available in a nearly identical German translation.