PROBABILIS AND PROVING

Probabile pluris modis dicitur, says the author of the *Summa Sophisticorum Elenchorum* [1] He has in mind the many degrees of probability, from what seems probable to everyone, to what seems probable only to the individual of exceptional perceptiveness. His notion of probability is, however, confined to the sense which is by far the most usual in twelfth century authors : what is probable is what 'seems likely. [2] But a second sense of *probabilis* was in use ; in certain key passages it is important that *probabilis* should be rendered as ' provable ' if we are to understand the author's intention.

Nicholas of Amiens speaks of : *probabiles ... fidei nostrae rationes* in his *De Arte Catholicae Fidei* [3] and Alan of Lille states in his *Contra Haereticos* that ' where there is neither authority nor reason, there is no provable opinion ' : *ubi autem nec adest auctoritas, nec ratio, non est probabilis opinio.* [4] Both these writers of the last decades of the twelfth century were addressing themselves to the problem of demonstrating the truth of the Christian faith to unbelievers. Nicholas concluded that only reason afforded a proof which everyone would accept, for the heretics deliberately distorted authorities, interpreting them to suit their own ends, or else they simply refused to accept them. [5] Alan thought it necessary to try to meet the heretics on their own ground by presenting them with authorities which would contradict their own. [6] But both were concerned with ' proving ', with the ' provability ' of Christian truths, and it is in this sense that they use *probabilis* in these passages.

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1. *Logica Modernorum* ed. L. M. de Rijk (Assen 1967) I p. 273.22. See *Introduction* on the dating of this treatise.

2. Ibid. p. 276.1-2.

3. *P.L.* 210.596, and see ALAIN DE LILLE, *Textes inédits,* ed. M. T. d'Alverny, Paris, 1965, p. 68-9, on the question of authorship.

4. *P.L.* 210.317, and see *Textes inédits* p. 156-62 on this work.

5. *P.L.* 210.596.

6. *P.L.* 210.307-8.

By far the greater part of twelfth century discussions of probability concentrate upon the distinction between what is probably true and what is necessarily true. Peter Abelard, for example, remembers that William of Champeaux, or some other master he has heard, believed that the truth of a hypothetical proposition might consist in necessity or only in probability. He reflects upon the idea that what is probable is that which has an appearance of truth, that which is easily conceded by anyone who hears it; he suggests that probability concerns what seems to be so, while truth refers to what really is so. He concludes that 'probable conclusions' cannot be treated in the same way as 'necessary' ones.[7] Adam of Balsam touches on probability, too, and he,too, takes *probabilis* to means 'probable' or 'likely'. *Probabilia falsi similia non sunt*, he comments, in a paraphrase of the ubiquitous notion that what is probable is *verisimilis*.[8] In a commentary on the *Perihermemias* of the School of Peter Abelard, in a discussion of proportion, it is said to be 'probable' that if four things are in proportion, and two of them bear the same relation to one another as the other two, then the second will be to the fourth as the first to the third.[9] In all these discussions, probability has a good deal of positive force; what is probable is certainly not *unlikely* to be true; but a probable conclusion is certainly not envisaged as a conclusion proved, finally and necessarily.

The root meaning of 'probable' is there, however: *argumentum est ratio probans aliquid*;[10] an argument is a reason which 'proves' something, insists the author of the *Excerpta Norimbergensia*. Adam of Balsam has a clear idea of the two senses of *probabilis*. 'Something probable' is that to which 'one may easily consent'; or it is that 'for which there is a sufficient argument' *(quia ei facile consentitur; quia ad id satis argumenti)*.[11] The difference is spelt out at length in a

7. PETRUS ABAELARDUS, *Dialectica*, ed. L. M. de Rijk (Assen 1956) p. 272.

8. ADAM BALSAMNIENSIS, *Twelfth Century Logic* I, ed. L. Minio-Paluello (Rome 1956) p. 14.5, cf. p. 78.16.

9. *Abelardiana Inedita*, ed. L. Minio-Paluello, *Twelfth Century Logic* II, Rome, 1958, paragraph 246.

10. *Logica Modernorum* II^{ii}, *Excerpta Norimbergensia*, p. 119.13.

11. *Twelfth Century Logic*, I, p. 39.7-8, cf. p. 39.16.

fragment of a *Perihermenias* commentary from the school of Alberic of Rheims, the *Frustula Logicalia* : the author draws a parallel between ' visible ' and ' probable '. Just as we say that what is ' visible ' is what can be seen *(visibile dicitur quod potest videri)*, so we say that what is ' provable ' is what can be proved *(esse probabile quod probari potest)*. Therefore we can say that both the statements :

> This argument is probable

and :

> This argument is not probable

are true. If we take *probabilis* to mean, on the one hand, ' That is probable which can be proved ', we can say that this argument is not probable, for many things are evident *(evidentia)* which cannot be proved ; if we take *probabilis* to mean likely, we can say that the same argument is probable. [12] The difference between the two meanings of *probabilis* could scarcely be made plainer.

When, then, Nicholas of Amiens says that we must look for ' probable reasons for our faith ' or Alan of Lille speaks of a ' probable ' opinion, there is no reason to suppose that they mean merely a ' likely ' reason or opinion. They have in mind something much stronger and more precise, a meaning of the word *probabilis* which is germane to the discussions of the late twelfth century on the ways in which the truth of the Christian faith may be proved to the unbeliever. The less common sense of *probabilis* is therefore of the first importance in such contexts, and if we are not alert to the usage we are in danger of misunderstanding at least two significant statements of principle in this area.

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12. *Logica Modernorum*, I, p. 61. The editor has had to supply gaps here, but there can be no doubt of the correctness of his emendations.