

BREAKING THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING.  
A NOTE ON THE PARIS CONDEMNATIONS OF 1277,  
THOMAS AQUINAS AND THE PROPER SUBJECT OF  
METAPHYSICS\*

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In the late 13th century Latin west, the problem of the proper subject of metaphysics (a legacy of the *Avicenna Latinus*) became relevant. Two candidates were open at the time: that of the ‘ens in quantum ens’ as the proper subject of metaphysics, and that of the separate and “most noble substances.” This transition allows for a deeper reading of the Condemnation of 1277. The structure of the Condemnation reveals an intriguing commitment on the part of the condemned articles concerning the separate substances (or angels) and the peculiar neoplatonic “chain of being” that was the underpinning of their accounts. Peter Olivi argued against the neoplatonic chain of being soon after 1277. Even if this polemic is still neglected in the secondary literature on 1277, Olivi’s interpretation of the state of the debate reinforces the reading of the Paris Condemnation with regard to neoplatonistic chains of being, and the options available for characterizing the proper subject of metaphysics.

“Deus est sphaera infinita cuius  
centrum est ubique,  
circumferentia nusquam”  
(*Liber XXIV philosophorum*)

There is a strand in medieval thought that we might call the *Neoplatonic fascination*. The most clear example of this fascination is the unexpected fortune of the *Liber de causis* during the second half of the 13th Century.

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Comparing the 1277 Parisian Condemnations<sup>1</sup> with the other contemporary disciplinary actions (e.g., Paris 1270, Oxford 1277 or London 1286)<sup>2</sup> we can appreciate the distinctive character of 1277: it evoked a certain hostile reaction to the Neoplatonic fascination in medieval theology.<sup>3</sup> The 1277 condemnation as such is not a philosophical document, but it nevertheless reveals an intellectual atmosphere in a state of change.

One would expect many articles to be condemned since they were obviously inconsistent with the Christian *Weltanschauung* and the common conception of the *creatio ex nihilo* (the eternity of the world is an obvious example). The censoring mechanisms used to oppose certain answers to the problem of divine power, the mind-body problem (this issue is particularly stressed in the English condemnations), the nature of the intellect and the necessity of acts of the will. Other articles were often censured due to their moral consequences; propositions that were a potential cause of scandal, depravity or damaging to the pastoral agenda of the Church were also corrected.

This noted, a conspicuous number of articles censored in 1277 by Etienne Tempier cover very metaphysical topics, such as the nature and cosmological role of separate substances. At first sight, such articles could seem far-fetched, since they are not self-evidently inconsistent with the Christian doctrine. What was original in the 1277 Parisian condemnation was this larger and deeper metaphysical commitment, with its corresponding effort to link the other above mentioned issues with the core of an articulated philosophical conception of the world.

The logic of this condemnation is unfortunately occluded by the reorganisations of the articles by 20th Century editors.<sup>4</sup> The plan of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *La condamnation parisienne de 1277*, Nouvelle édition du texte latin, traduction, introduction et commentaire par D. Piché avec la collaboration de C. Lafleur, Vrin, Paris, 1999. Cf. L. Bianchi, 'New perspectives on the condemnation of 1277 and its aftermath', *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 70, 2003, pp. 206–229.

<sup>2</sup> See, *inter alia*, A. Boureau, *Théologie, science et censure au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Le cas de Jean Peckham*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Ruedi Imbach acknowledged this aspect of Tempier's articles. Cf. R. Imbach, 'Notule sur le commentaire du "Liber de causis" de Siger de Brabant et ses rapports avec Thomas d'Aquin', *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 43, 1996, pp. 304–323.

<sup>4</sup> P. Mandonnet re-edited the Tempier's articles but did not follow the seeming lack of order of the *Cartularium*. He tidied them up according to twenty philosophical (often anachronistic) items, giving a neoscholastic order then followed by other scholars. See P. Mandonnet, *Siger de Brabant et l'Averroïsme latin au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, t. II, Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, Louvain, 1911<sup>2</sup>, pp. 175 ff. Cf. Piché (1999 : 21, n. 2).

Tempier and his advisers emerges from the order of the 219 articles. The first articles could be viewed as a sort of general introduction. They deal with the wide range of items: the nature of God, the eternity of the separate substances and of the human species, the necessity of the created cosmos and human beatitude<sup>5</sup> etc.

Starting with article 22 there is a probing of more specific issues. The articles from 22 to 68 deal with the relation between the philosophical *episteme* and the capacity of the divine power. On one hand, philosophy is held to be the only form of necessary knowledge (art. 24)<sup>6</sup> and, on the other hand, the action of the first substance has to be bound by the mediations of its power as established within philosophy. Among the consequences: “*Felicitas non potest a deo inmitti immediate*”; “*deus non potest immediate cognoscere contingentia*”; “*primum principium non potest immediate producere generabilia*”; “*deus potest agere contraria, hoc est, mediante corpore celesti...*”; “*deus non potest in effectum cause secundarie sine ipsa causa secundaria*”; “*effectus immediatus a primo debet esse unus tantum*” and so on.<sup>7</sup>

The problem of ontological *mediation* reveals the general frame of what I called “Neoplatonic fascination.” The christianisation of this neoplatonic necessitarianism and mediationism meant that an adequate response to the neoplatonic fascination required Tempier to consider angelology. In particular, the immateriality and eternity of the separated substances needed to be covered in as much as these attributes (could) imply metaphysical necessity.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Let me give some examples: God is not Trinity, “*quoniam trinitas non stat cum summa simplicitate*” (art. 1); everything endless is also without beginnings (art. 2); every separate soul must be co-eternal with God (art. 5); the resurrection of the body is philosophical nonsense (art. 18); nothing happens by chance, “*sed omnia de necessitate eveniunt*” (art. 21).

<sup>6</sup> “*Quod omnes scientie sunt preternecessarie, preter philosophicas disciplinas, et quod non sunt necessarie, nisi propter consuetudinem hominum.*” But see also the articles 31 and 32 (on the eternity and the unity of the human intellect), 36 (“*quod deum in hac vita mortali possumus intelligere per essentiam*”), 37 (“*quod nichil est credendum, nisi per se notum vel ex per se notis possit declarari*”), 40 (“*quod non est excellentior status quam vacare philosophic*”), 41 and also (at some length) art. 42 (on the knowledge of future contingents).

<sup>7</sup> There are numerous articles on the limitation of divine power: 22–23, 25–29, 33–35, 39, 42–68.

<sup>8</sup> Articles: 69 (“*substantie separate, eo quod habent unum appetitum, non mutantur in opere*”), 70 (“*quod intelligentie, sive substantie separate, quas dicunt eternas, non habent proprie causam efficientem [...]*”), 71–83, 84 (“*intelligentia recipit esse a deo per intelligentias medias*”), 85–86. Cf. Bianchi (2003 : 223, n. 40; 224, n. 41).

A next group of articles handle the eternity of the universe: “Nihil est novum, nisi celum variatum respectu materie generabilium” (art. 88). This covers Aristotle (“impossibile — we read at art. 89 — solvere rationes philosophi de eternitate mundi”), but it would be hard to ignore the connection with the former group of articles. For many philosophers and *artistae* the theme of the eternity of the world and that of the separate substances were liable to be connected. Boethius of Dacia would be a paradigmatic example.

These angelological and cosmological articles are followed by articles on the nature of the human soul and its faculties. After these anthropological matters, a last group of articles (concerning the moral consequences of the philosophical errors) precedes a set of more heterogeneous and thematically-mixed propositions (from art. 184 to the end) on creation, causation again, the nature of time, the intellect and the will. These seem to be a sort of addition *ad abundantiam*: to strengthen the voice of the condemnation, and to give clues to the connecting themes among the previous blocks of articles.

Contemporaries were probably sensitive to the intimate connection between the metaphysical issue on one side, and the cosmological, psychological and moral ones on the other. For example, Peter Olivi deals with the problem of creation in his *Quaestiones* on the II Book of Sentences.<sup>9</sup> He discusses the question “an mundus ab eterno fieri potuerit” (q. 5). This text is roughly contemporaneous with Tempier’s condemnation. Olivi considers the eternity of the universe as an anti-christian doctrine<sup>10</sup> that stands on three grounds:

- (1) the modal univocity of divine action (“Deus quicquid agit necessario agit”);
- (2) the structure of the world according to which there must be reasons (*cause*) for each creature’s action;<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Cf. P. Olivi *Quaestiones in II Sent.*, ed. by B. Jansen, vol. I, Quaracchi 1921. Sylvain Piron drew my attention to the impressive interpretation given here by Olivi. Piron considers it an articulation and philosophical “enforcement” of Tempier’s censorship. According to Carlos Bazán, also Scotus’ whole system might be considered expression of the cultural project embodied in the 1277 Condemnation. Cf. Bianchi (2003 : 217).

<sup>10</sup> “Error de eternitate mundi, prout a philosophis mundi est positus, habet fundamentum impium” (Olivi 1921 : 96 [q. 5]).

<sup>11</sup> “Omnium que aliquando agunt, aliquando non agunt aut que aliquando sic agunt, aliquando vero non sic oportet reddere causam quare aliquando sic aliquando vero non sic” (*ibid.* : 96).

- (3) the *metaphysical mediationism* that closes the first two points together, making their consequence necessary.

This third aspect, drawn from the *Liber de causis*, is introduced by Olivi to show how the order of the reality is seen as the necessary emanation from the first cause, in such a way that each communication from and to God cannot be direct: “Nullum inferiorum potuit esse a prima causa nisi per intermedias substantias superiores.”<sup>12</sup>

The first two points are rejected because of their moral consequences: the so-called Carneades antifatalistic argument. If every event and action in this world has a (necessary) cause, there would be no room neither for the freedom of the will (human or divine), nor for civic and religious morality: “Timor et reverentia, amicitia et gratia, spes ac deprecatio seu imploratio frustra habetur ad eum nihilque veri dominii habet in rebus.”

Nevertheless for Olivi, it is the third point above that constitutes the true *consummatio impietatis*. It limits the divine absolute power, the divine causation as well as our access to God. “Nobis — Olivi explains — attribuit essentialiter sumus in extremo *catene* quam fingunt.”

The picture that emerges from reading Olivi and Tempier is that their opponents posit a chain of necessary being, that encloses itself in a circle of godlessness, from where the true God is driven out by a myriad of idolatrous created-but-also-creating substances (namely, the separate mediating substances). Philosophical errors derive from this mistaken cosmology of an enclosed, necessary chain.<sup>13</sup>

Olivi spoke of a “chain” (*catena quam fingunt*). Arthur O. Lovejoy considered cognate matters in his impressive Harvard William James lectures entitled *The great chain of Being*. According to Lovejoy, this

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* : 97.

<sup>13</sup> “Sicut habet impium fundamentum, sic habet et processum, quia omnes aut fere omnes articulos fidei catholice uno flatu abnegat et de medio tollit; tollit enim peccatum originale, quia nullum primum hominem ponit ac per consequens tollit totum opus redemptionis [cf. Tempier’s articles, e.g., 9, 15–19]; ponit autem aut unitatem intellectus [cf. artt. 117–126] aut revolutionem earundem animarum per diversa corpora aut infinitas animas et plures earum in eternum manere separatas a corpore [cf. e.g., art. 10]; et cum cursus istius seculi et humane generationis ponat in eternum manere: patet quod nullam felicitatem statuit homini nisi in vita ista [cf. art. 176]” (*ibid.* : 98). Further, since the number six symbolizes the circle, the circular chain also evoked the Antichrist! “Senarius enim est numerus circularis, quia per reflexionem sui in se multiplicatus reddit numerum terminatum in se ipsum, ut sexies sex faciunt triginta sex, habebit numerum terminatum in sex et sic in infinitum [. . .]” (*ibid.* : 98f).

“chain of being” is a general scheme of things, an articulated conception “of the constitutive pattern of the universe.”<sup>14</sup> Like other chains, also this one could suggest different representations and provoke opposite feelings. It is a general heuristic metaphor that holds things together and makes communication through different *niveaux* of the reality possible. This said, it could constrain and fasten the freedom of man (both in thought and action). Lovejoy’s picture of a great chain of being captures the Neoplatonic fascination in a useful motif.

Aside from offering a definitive account of the relevance and historical significance of Tempier’s condemnations, a few conclusions can be reached by putting together the 1277 condemnation’s original “muddled” structure, Olivi’s picture of the enclosed chain of his neoplatonically-besotted opponents, and Aquinas’ own conception of that chain of being. First, the condemnation reveals itself only if considered as a whole, since it was a particular reaction to an establishing *état d’esprit*. The idea of Neoplatonic fascination and the problem of the “*subjectum Metaphysice*” help us better to understand Tempier’s plan in its unity and as part of a larger intellectual struggle around 1300.<sup>15</sup>

We can look at Tempier’s condemnation as an attempt to break the great chain of being. It involved its rejection, but also its definition. In some respect the definition was a falsification of the positions of Aquinas and of the *artista*, who were probably Tempier’s targets.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, we can sketch the manner in which this episode can be considered, a kind of road map which, like Tempier’s own condemnation, provides a model for thinking about the issue.

Avicenna first introduced to the West the problem of the proper subject of metaphysics. He opened two paths to western thinkers. First, accepting the idea that the *philosophia prima* deals with the *substantie separate* and with the different degrees of ontological perfection. Particularly at the Faculty of the Arts this path was commonly trodden. But it sets philosophy in a direct competition with theology, because God is also one (the first) of the separate substances.

<sup>14</sup> A.O. Lovejoy, *The great chain of Being. A study of the history of an idea*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. & London, 1964, p. vii. The lecture was given at Harvard University in the second half of the academic year 1932–1933.

<sup>15</sup> Naturally, articles touching on different theological items and their analysis do not lose their own interest. Nevertheless, secondary literature has underestimated the need for a global interpretation like that suggested here.

<sup>16</sup> The intriguing thesis once proposed by Alain De Libera could be appreciated in this sense. According to De Libera, Tempier’s intervention built up not-yet-thought philosophical “doctrines.” See Bianchi (2003 : 219).

The second path turned away from the risk of an immediate conflict between reason and Authority, choosing instead the *ens in quantum ens* as the subject of supreme philosophical knowledge. Taking such a path, philosophy could now move toward a metaphysics of the transcendental (as it was to do with Duns Scotus).

The division of the issue into two competing paths has one unfortunate consequence: in both cases, the “chain of being” half-shaped by Thomas Aquinas was to be rendered unavailble. Whatever we may think about the results and the general consistency of his metaphysics, it should be clear that Thomas tried to follow another, third, itinerary. Being was conceived by him, under different aspects, as the *ens generalissimum* (*in quod omnes conceptiones resolvuntur*) and as the *esse perfectissimum*: the hollow and the full, the poorer and the richer at the same time.<sup>17</sup> Refusing any sort of *immediationism* (like that of the later nominalistic “empirists”), Thomas paid nevertheless attention to both demands of divine and human freedom. Thus, in the Thomistic scheme, both the first and the second paths could be followed, under certain conditions, without demanding an exclusive choice between them.

The development of this metaphysics which represents a third way reconciling metaphysics as first philosophy (which deals with the *ens in quantum ens* but also the separed substances) was more and more coherently expressed as Thomas’ career progressed. Indeed, his unfinished commentary on the *Peryhermenias* of Aristotle, the commentary on the *Liber de causis* and, best of all, the treatise *De substantiis separatis* reveal this third way most coherently.

Thomas left incomplete his picture of the universe, as he did with the treatise on the separate substances. Both were neglected, even by the early thomists. The metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas, in the context of the late Middle Ages, was that of an isolated thinker. It was by far the least “common” of the scholastic doctrines.

For younger generation of scholars around 1277 there was one logic in philosophy (either accepted or refused as a package). According to this logic there were difficulties distinguishing the principle of non contradiction from that of bivalence,<sup>18</sup> so that the question concern-

<sup>17</sup> Cf., *inter alia*, C. Fabro, ‘The overcoming of the Neoplatonic Triad of Being, Life and Intellect by Thomas Aquinas’, in D.J. O’Meara (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought* (*Studies in Neoplatonism Ancient and Modern* 3), International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, State University of New York, Norfolk & Albany, 1982, pp. 97–108; 250–255; in particular p. 101 and p. 252, n. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Covering this question in more detail is not possible here. As is well-known, the principle of non contradiction can be stated: “ $\neg(\neg p \text{ et } p)$ ”. According to its classic

ing the necessity or contingency of things could only have two answers. The first substance, for instance, is either necessary or it is contingent (that is to say “not necessary”): *tertium neque cogitatur*.

By contrast, for Aquinas, to deny the “necessity” of God did not mean affirming his contingency: *tertium datur*. The human reason disposes of different logics. One of Thomas’ logical strategies consists in clarifying the modalities of the created beings (necessity and contingency) and to exclude them from God himself and from his action. Further, the different degrees of ontological perfection, at least in the sense of the Schoolman, seem to be less the links of a close-meshed net than a dynamic structure of multiple communicating worlds, where a determining history and free action are at some extent allowed to interact.

Within this clarified conception of reason, Aristotle stood as guide to know created beings, but *not* the uncreated one. This third path was neglected and became quite inconceivable to the younger generations of scholars, who had grown up in a differently shaped scholastic tradition. Aquinas’ balance between the scientific investigation of creation as promoted by Aristotle with the wider investigation of the nature of the uncreated Being became unavailable. A powerful natural reasoning for created things could be received by Aquinas because Aristotle was authoritative, without being an Authority who jostled on the same level either as religious authorities or as an absolute *ratio*.

It would be quite different to read Aristotle as a new authoritative scientist from a position of the security of a received theology, than to read Aristotle as the pagan philosopher whose thought needed to be corrected to accord with a Christian theology, cosmology and anthropology, before scientific investigation of the world can proceed. The ways to forge the chain of being must be as different as the different links.

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interpretation, the principle of bivalence can be formulated: “ $p \vee \neg p$ ”. To transform the former into the latter, the negation must be introduced into the expression between brackets, so that: “ $\neg \neg p \neg (et) \neg p$ ”. Since “ $\neg (et)$ ” means “ $\vee$ ”, we have: “ $\neg \neg p \vee \neg p$ ”. The equivalence “ $\neg \neg p = p$ ”, affirmed by the rule of double negation, actually hides the problematic point. According to Aquinas, without a positive knowledge of what is negated we never reach the real position regarding it because the negation is not univocal. In other words, “ $\neg \neg p$ ” can be resolved as “ $p$ ” only within particular regions or links of the chain of being, not *universaliter*. Cf. J. Gasser, *Die Erkenntnisweise der Negation. Untersuchung bei Thomas von Aquin*, Universität Freiburg in der Schweiz, Lungern, 1969, pp. 55–117; 218–226; A.A. Robiglio, ‘La logica dell’ateismo’, *Divus Thomas* CII, 1999, pp. 120–143.



It was clear to Thomas that to live without chains is but illusory. Even when we refuse some or other kind of chain, if the faith in reason lasts, the need persists for another chain, that is to say for another *Weltanschauung* to comfort minds and to explain ontological communication. The Schoolman tried to think of such a new chain, made with strong links and, nevertheless, so great that (as Thomas More wrote): “From all places it is the same distance to heaven.”