THE ANTI-SKEPTICISM OF JOHN BURIDAN AND THOMAS AQUINAS: PUTTING SKEPTICS IN THEIR PLACE VERSUS STOPPING THEM IN THEIR TRACKS

Gyula Klima

INTRODUCTION: PUTTING SKEPTICS IN THEIR PLACE VERSUS STOPPING THEM IN THEIR TRACKS

For reasons that I hope will soon become clear, I would like to begin this paper with somewhat irresponsibly entertaining the idea that my esteemed friend and colleague, John Greco, is a philosophical descendant of John Buridan, via the Scottish common sense philosopher Thomas Reid and his Cambridge-descendant, G.E. Moore. In these musings, I will confine myself to establishing a sufficiently intriguing family resemblance, without exploring the historically more intriguing actual genealogical ties (although John Greco himself quite conveniently pointed out the important connections between Moore’s, Reid’s and his own epistemology). But in this paper I will rather be after certain philosophically intriguing connections, for which showing the family resemblance of their characteristic principles, methods, and conclusions will suffice. As I will try to show, given their common, typical approach, these philosophers are all committed to handling skeptics, as John Greco put it, by “putting them in their place”. I believe that the philosophical importance of this approach is that it is justified, and works in its own way, only after already significant concessions have been made to the skeptics. After all, you need to put them in their place, only if they are already cavorting all over the place. But, as I will also try show, this approach of “putting skeptics in their place”, could in principle be replaced by a much more effective policy of “stopping them in their tracks” in the first place. In fact, I will argue that the “putting-them-in-their-place” policy, represented in this paper by Buridan, historically became necessitated only after the (mostly implicit) “stopping-them-in-their-tracks” policy came to be discarded, on account of the allegedly unacceptable ontological commitments it carried.

Therefore, the plan for this paper is as follows. In the first section I will try to identify those common epistemological and methodological
principles at work in Buridan, Reid, Moore and Greco which, so I shall argue, these authors all rely on in their efforts to “put skeptics in their place”. In the second section I will elaborate on the issue of exactly how Buridan uses these principles in meeting contemporary skeptical challenges. In the third section I will compare Buridan’s anti-skeptical strategy with what I take to be the earlier (mostly implicit) strategy, embedded, as it were, in a broader metaphysical framework that “automatically stopped skeptics in their tracks”. This comparison will then enable us in the concluding section to draw some general conclusions concerning the relationships between epistemology and metaphysics (or rather semantics).

**The Principles Needed for “Putting Skeptics in their Place”**

In my earlier investigations into Buridan’s anti-skepticism, I identified four principles that Buridan regularly relies on when he addresses skeptical challenges. Of these four, the first two principles, which I dubbed “the principle of the activity of the intellect” and “the principle of substantial content of sensory information”, respectively, serve as the underpinnings of Buridan’s essentialism in his epistemology, which, in turn, is the foundation of his theory of induction or valid scientific generalization.

The systematic significance of these principles in Buridan’s philosophy is that they enable him to endorse a credible empiricist account of valid scientific generalizations, consistent with his nominalist ontology and semantics. For, in the first place, on the basis of the principle of the activity of the intellect, he can claim that the intellect is capable of extracting content from sensory information carried by the senses that the senses are unable to extract from this information (just like a spectrometer is capable of extracting content from the optical information carried by a telescope that is not extractible from this information.

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2. Although, as I have also argued in “The Essentialist Nominalism of John Buridan”, the abstractionism required by this account in Buridan’s cognitive psychology is committed to attributing a representative function to substantial concepts that he denies to them in his semantics.