ON THE TRAIL OF A PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE: DURANDUS OF ST.-POURÇAIN VS. THOMAS WYLTON ON SIMULTANEOUS ACTS IN THE INTELLECT

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In 1962, Prospero T. Stella published editions of a series of three questions collectively entitled “Quaestiones de libero arbitrio” and composed by Durandus of St.-Pourçain probably while he was regent master in theology at Paris holding the French Dominican chair in 1312 or 1313. Of the three questions in the treatise only one will concern us here: the third, in English translation “whether there can be at once in the same free power several acts of understanding or of willing, of which one is the effective source of the other”. Durandus’s short answer to this question is: no, there can in fact be one and only one intellectual or voluntary act at a time. Not everyone agreed with Durandus’s point of view on this issue, and one of the great services that Stella provided in his 1962 article was to edit a direct response to Durandus’s question composed by the English secular theologian Thomas Wylton. With the exception of Stephen D. Dumont’s article from 1998 “New Questions

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NB: I do not necessarily respect the orthography of any text I use. Throughout the article (including appendix) I use the following conventions: <x> = I add x; [x] = I delete x; \x/ = x in mg.; * = lectio incerta; CCSL = Corpus Christianorum, series latina.


2 “Tertio quaeritur utrum in eadem potentia libera possint simul esse plures actus intelligendi vel volendi, quorum unus sit principium effectivum alterius”. The other two questions in the treatise are: “Quaeritur utrum liberum arbitrium sit potentia, habitus, vel actus” (vs. Hervaeus Natalis, Quodlibet 1, q. 1); ”Quaeritur utrum potentia pure passiva possit esse libera libertate arbitrii”.

by Thomas Wylton”, the debate between Durandus and Wylton and its aftermath has, to my knowledge, remained unstudied in the forty years since it was uncovered by Stella. In the first part of this paper I’ll briefly present main arguments of these two scholars on this issue. In the second, longer part of the paper I want to sketch some contexts in which this debate between Durandus and Wylton surfaces, focusing most on the issue of our enjoyment (fruitio) of God, in which there was considerable and varied reaction to Durandus’s view in particular. Thus, this article is an exercise in map-making: I’m following the trail of this philosophical debate, connecting some as yet unconnected dots, although by no means in an exhaustive fashion. With that caveat, we can turn first briefly to Durandus, then to Thomas Wylton.

Durandus’s argumentation for the view that there cannot be more than one act in the intellect at any one time is complex and lengthy. I cannot do it justice in the space available. But I won’t be doing it an injustice to say that the major principle behind Durandus’s view is that each and every intellectual act is totally incompossible with each and every other intellectual act, and so two cannot be in the same intellect at the same time. Just as it is plainly absurd to say that two contrary accidents, hot and cold, white and black, can be in precisely the same subject at precisely the same time in precisely the same way, so it is with intellectual acts. In some cases, according to Durandus, this is easy to see: we cannot think contradictories, x and ~x, at the same time; Durandus merely generalizes the principle: every intellectual act

4 Durandus de Sancto Porciano, Quaestiones de libero arbitrio, q. 3, ed. Stella, p. 491,37–41: “Sub quocumque genere est invenire differentias et incompossibiles species; species sub eodem genere disparatae sunt incompossibiles, quia inter omnes est aliquã contrarietas, licet adeo non perfecta, ut patet de albo et nigro et coloribus mediis. Sed inter intellectiones est dare contrarias et incompossibiles. Ergo pari ratione omnes aliae intellectiones sunt incompossibles”. For literature on Durandus, see below, note 17.
5 Durandus de Sancto Porciano, Quaestiones de libero arbitrio, q. 3, ed. Stella, p. 495,4–8: “…qui ponit quod plures species possunt simul esse, potest hoc dicere aequaliter de omnibus speciebus. Sed nullus potest hoc dicere de actibus intelligendi, quia actus plures, quibus opinamus contradictoria, non possunt simul esse; et pari ratione idem videtur de omnibus aliis actibus”. Durandus makes a connection between this view and his view of (sensible) species more generally: “Patet ergo quod plures species non possunt simul esse in eadem parte mediæ” (ed. Stella, p. 494,48).