Is Buridan a sceptic about free will?

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This study has three points of departure: methodological, textual, and philosophical. It is directed to the conclusions of Michalski, echoed by De Wulf, as well as those of Monahan, concerning Buridan’s scepticism about human freedom of the will. These conclusions are presented in the following remarks:

MICHALSKI:

Dans son Ethique, il énonce l'idée qu'on n'a trouvé aucun argument philosophique décisif à opposer à la thèse déterministe si bien que la seule arme qui reste aux mains des indéterministes est l'autorité de la foi catholique et les suites funestes pour la vie morale qui découlent du déterminisme... Tout de suite après apparaît l'idée sceptique: aliqui supponunt sibi opinionem, quod ita in nobis proveniunt ex determinationibus sicut et in brutis... Et ad huiusmodi opinionis reprobationem... nullas rationes habemus nisi ex fide nostra catholica et quia sic essemus in omnibus nostris actibus necessarie praedeterminati. (Quaest. in Ethic. 1. x, qu. 2. Ms. Bibl. Jag. 648, fol. 320-vo) Buridan affirme à son tour que la conviction du libre arbitre de l'homme tire toute sa force de la foi catholique et non des preuves philosophiques.

Le scepticisme du philosophe de Béthune passa dans les écrits de son élève Marsilius ab Inghen¹.

DE WULF:

C'est au problème de la liberté que Buridan consacre ses meilleures recherches, et il est partisan du déterminisme psychologique... Le déterminisme est irréfutable. Tout ce qu'on peut lui objecter, c'est qu'il se concilie mal avec la foi catholique. Et ad huiusmodi opinionis... reprobationem... nullas rationes habemus nisi ex fide nostra catholica et quia sic essemus in omnibus nostris actibus necessarie predeterminati (Quaest. in Ethic., x, q. 2)².


The fact of Buridan's philosophical scepticism or fideism is, however, plain; and it is the most important single element in his doctrine. Although convinced that the human will possesses liberty of choice, Buridan is equally convinced that human reason cannot demonstrate this fact. Therefore, he bases the certitude of his conviction in this matter upon the rock of faith... Rational arguments in favor of such conclusions are considered not to be apodictic, but to yield only probability.¹

Because Monahan has presented what is by far the most thorough consideration of this subject, this study will be for the most part focused upon it. I must say in advance that there is one passage which fully supports these conclusions; what I wish to suggest is that they are inexact in the light of other passages, several of which have already been presented by Monahan.

The methodological point of departure for this study is the reflection that the battery of terms, 'scepticism', 'fideism', and 'probabilism' is not as precise as it might be for the characterization of doctrines of considerable epistemological sophistication such as we find in fourteenth-century philosophy. Scepticism, for example, can be many things. As often considered, it is the view that would reject any positive belief at all. Thus we would not exactly say of one who had a firm religious faith that he was sceptical about the existence of God. By a less stringent usage, one might be considered sceptical who rejected rational demonstration, and thus a sophisticated believer might be sceptical about alleged proofs for the existence of God. But this leaves open the possibility of direct experience as well as rational justification of an order less than demonstrative; and I think it would be an unusual understanding of the term if one should hold that the mere rejection of demonstration were a sufficient criterion for scepticism. I suppose some recognition of this lies behind the qualification of Buridan's scepticism as "philosophical" by Monahan above. One may well believe what he sees or accept inconclusive arguments of some weight while rejecting alleged demonstrations. By calling such a position "sceptical," emphasis is placed on the latter at the expense of the former. When this is elucidated by a charge of fideism, this shift of emphasis becomes total.

¹ E. J. Monahan, Human Liberty and Free Will according to John Buridan, in: Mediaeval Studies, xvi (1954), pp. 72-86. Citations from pp. 84-85. I wish to thank the Library of the University of Toronto for unusual cooperation for enabling me to consult the unpublished but very helpful dissertation by Monahan on this same subject: The Doctrine of Human Liberty and Free Will in John Buridan's Questiones super decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum, 1953.