Philosophical Scepticism in England in the Mid-Fourteenth Century

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It is well known that, in the second quarter of the fourteenth century, there was great distrust of the ability of philosophy to arrive at certainty on the most important matters. For example, many writers claimed that philosophy can not prove that God exists; or that He is omnipotent, omniscient, free, or unique; or that the human soul is immortal. These are difficult points to establish, of course, and it may not be considered strange for philosophers to doubt reason's ability to establish them. But the philosophers we are writing of went much further. Some weakened confidence in the rightness of the natural moral order by saying that it could be different than it is; that God, for example, could have established a moral order in which we would be required to hate Him, or that He could establish such an order now. Others weakened confidence in our natural knowledge of the world about us by saying that we cannot be certain of the substantiality of the physical world, or the reality of what appears to be efficient causality.

It is this last type of distrust of philosophy with which this article will deal: concerning the substantiality of the physical world, and the reality of what appears to be efficient causality. And consideration will be limited to English writers of the decade or two before 1350 A.D. Other writings have dealt with this subject in a more general way, but none have shown in sufficient detail the extent of this type of thinking in England, though much attention has been given to its existence in Paris, no doubt because it was censured there.

We might begin by studying the teaching of one of the Parisian teachers who incurred censure, Nicholas of Autrecourt (c. 1300 - c. 1350). In his second letter to Bernard of Arezzo, Nicholas reduced all certitude, except that of faith, to the certitude of the principle of

non-contradiction (which he called the first principle) or what can be resolved into it:

Tertium corollarium ... est quod, excepta certitudine fidei, nulla est alia certitudo nisi certitudo primum principii vel que in primum principium potest resolvi.²

And he saw clearly that it cannot be deduced from the first principle that accidents exist in substances or that events require causes. As Nicholas put it, from the known existence of one thing it cannot be inferred, with evidence reducible to the certitude of the first principle, that another thing exists:

Ex eo quod aliqua res est cognita esse, non potest evidenter, evidentia reducta in primum principium vel in certitudinem primum principii, inferri quod alia res sit.³

Nicholas applied this fundamental principle to our knowledge of efficient causes and our knowledge of substances. As concerns causes, he said in his letter to Giles of Medonta that the first principle does not entail accepting that natural causes will produce their effects even if the causes are unimpeded:

Nam, demonstratis omnibus que sunt requisita ad effectus, potero sustinere, sine aliqua contradiczione que posset inferri contra me, quod effectus huiusmodi non erit.⁴

He admitted in his Universal Treatise that a certain expectation of these effects is built up by experience, but refused to call this certitude:

Tertia decima conclusio est quod de scitis per experientiam illo modo quo dicitur sciri ... adamas attrahit ferrum, habetur solum habitus conjecturativus, non certitudo. ... Esto quod aliquid sit productum ut in pluribus; non est tamen certum an sic debat esse in futurum.⁵

Nicholas applied this same doctrine to our knowledge of substances. He saw that it could not be deduced from the first principle that, because appearances exist, substances exist; that is, that the existence of one thing known (appearances) implies the existence of another thing (substances). According to him, we do not see substances directly (intuitive). Nor can we reason to their existence with certainty, since the existence of one thing cannot be proven with certainty from the existence of another.

² J. Lappe, Nicolaus von Autrecourt ..., Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, Band VI, Heft 2, Münster, 1908, 8*.
³ Ibid., 9*.
⁴ Ibid., 29*.