Knowing naturaliter: Auriol’s Propositional Foundations

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Descartes had his cogito and Moore had his hands. Scholastics had propositions per se notae. Across times and traditions, foundationalist epistemologies demand the most concentrated attention at their beginnings. Though it is unclear whether Auriol is a foundationalist in any straightforward way, it is certain that he too shares this infatuation with starting points.

Auriol gives a sustained treatment of the problem of propositions known through themselves (per se notae) in his Commentary on Lombard’s Sentences, I, d. 2, q. 10. Here, he asks whether a wayfarer can have knowledge of God’s existence without the help of scriptural testimony: that is, Auriol is asking whether natural theology is possible. In the course of his discussion, it becomes apparent that these per se known propositions are important to Auriol, but the extent of their importance is a bit of a surprise.

The simplest way to begin is to look at Auriol’s examples of propositions known through themselves. While it was natural for those of his period broadly construed (e.g., Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham) to think of these sorts of propositions as self-evident, analytic truths—e.g., that the whole is greater than its proper part—Auriol extends this characterization considerably. For him, the following are all examples of per se known propositions:

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1 A draft version of this paper was presented at the 10th International Congress of Medieval Philosophy in Erfurt, Germany (1997). Special thanks also go out to Paul Vincent Spade and Russell Friedman, who graciously provided both helpful suggestions and bothersome objections. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

2 The main study of this topic is R. Schmücker, Propositio per se nota: Gottesbeweis, und ihr Verhältnis nach Petrus Aureoli, Werl in Westfalen 1941. Though undoubtedly the single most important work on Auriol’s notion of propositions known through themselves, Schmücker’s approach is that of an intellectual historian rather than a philosopher. Additionally, he is mainly concerned with propositions per se notae insofar as they inform discussions of God’s existence, while my concern is the converse.

3 Peter Auriol, Scriptum super Primum Sententiarum, d. 2, q. 10, edited by E. Buytaert, St. Bonaventure, NY 1956, vol. II, 524, 22-3: “... ideo inquirendum est: Utrum Dei esse egeat testimonio, vel sit aliquid per se notum.”
(1) Nothing both exists and does not exist
(2) The sky and the earth exist
(3) Snow is white
(4) God exists

So how are we to explain this grouping? It might be suggested that these are the axioms of his knowledge system, propositions upon which he bases the knowledge of the truth of all other propositions. Though plausible, the last proposition—that God exists—fails to meet this characterization. For Auriol, the proposition that God exists is a syllogistically derived conclusion. In order to understand the novelty of this suggestion, it is best to begin with a look at earlier views.

After examining Auriol’s most important Greek, Islamic, and Scholastic influences in the first section, Auriol’s own view will be considered, along with a few potential weaknesses in his position. It will be shown how Auriol’s reliance upon psychological certainty, rather than epistemic certainty, is crucial for gaining a full understanding of his conception of propositions per se notae.

**Intellectual Background**

When it came to propositions known through themselves, Auriol’s predecessors gave him much to work with. As usually happened in the scholastic period, such hotly contested issues were ultimately to be traced back to Aristotle. These views were taken as a starting point, and they underwent significant revision as time passed.

One of Aristotle’s most relevant discussions is found in the first 10 chapters of Book I of his *Posterior Analytics*. In this work, Aristotle presents his view of what the medievals come to call *scientia*, or scientific knowledge. For Aristotle, scientific knowledge is not of particular things. Science deals only with universal, necessary propositions—e.g., that man is a rational animal. Furthermore, the only propositions that are truly known, (that is, those that are known scientifically) are syllogistically derived con-

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4 Since the main purpose of this paper is not exegesis of Aristotle’s views, translations of Aristotle will be taken from J. Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Princeton 1984 (*Posterior Analytics*: 114-66; *Nicomachean Ethics*: 1729-1867). In the discussion that follows, ‘scientific’ will be used in the sense of Aristotle’s strongest notion of ‘epistemic’ knowledge. Though propositions in non-syllogistic contexts are sometimes termed ‘scientific’ as well, this usage is less paradigmatic, and it does not indicate full, ‘true’ knowledge for Aristotle.

5 Aristotle, *Post. Anal.*, I,8, 75b24-25: “There is therefore no demonstration of perishable things . . .”