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“Oportet in Philosophia haereticum esse”: Pietro Pomponazzi’s Teaching against the Grain

Abstract: This paper aims to discuss the Aristotelian writings of Pietro Pomponazzi, who taught philosophy in the universities of Padua and Bologna at the beginning of the 16th century. Pomponazzi’s lectures have been traditionally studied from the standpoint of a history of ideas, whereas what follows shall assess this legacy from the perspective of a history of knowledge, doing so in order to show how the Mantuan philosopher considered the multiple and diverse orders of knowledge of his times. Indeed, as we shall see, from a methodological perspective his lectures represented a new way of teaching and thinking about philosophy.

1 Introduction: Pomponazzi and the History of Knowledge

The history of philosophy and the history of ideas are still today too often unrelated to the history of the contexts and institutions from which they emerged. In spite of the great turn of intellectual history when it comes to the framing of ideas in context, the history of institutions continues to play a marginal role in any reconstruction of the development of philosophical reflection. Indeed, it is almost as if the ideas of an author exist independently of the social, political, economic, and cultural backgrounds. These same ideas and thoughts, having been formed within the hyperuranum, are taken to have self-consistency, value, and dignity regardless of the place and time they are conceived; and it is assumed that they would interact with other ideas and thoughts conceived in other epochs and contexts. Consequently, the problem of “being” obtains for, say, Parmenides, Thomas Aquinas, and Heidegger; as if they were furthering the same philosophical questions and responding to the same intellectual demands.

Believing in this mystical relation between ideas in the 21st century means either to trust in the immutability of some human problems—the big questions remain the same—or to disdain decades of progress in the methodology of historiography, neglecting the contextualistic turn that had its more than 50 years

ago.¹ In the last decade, the methodological landscape has been enriched with the history of knowledge, which promotes the examination of how knowledge was gathered, analyzed, disseminated, and employed. This new approach, however, has been long neglected by historians of philosophy, who have chosen to frame approaches in accordance with intellectual history and the history of ideas.

Yet, for some time the historiography of the Aristotelian tradition has offered interesting cues for re-understanding old material. Against the centuries-old idea that Aristotle's philosophy was static and unable to adapt or evolve, recent historiographic research has shown that this image of Aristotelianism is false; especially if one looks at the history of the institutions in which the Aristotelian tradition flourished, coupled with the attendant dynamics of the history of knowledge.² In the period under consideration in this paper, the main institutions in which Aristotelianism was framed were formal and informal.³ Formal institutions are universities and schools of religious orders, while informal institutions are academies, intellectual circles, courts, and printing presses. Often, formal institutions are considered the strongholds of conservatism, in which original ideas were leveled to determinate standards. This image is true insofar as university statutes prescribed the teaching of specific doctrines, which, most of the time, were intended to respect the dictates of the Church. However, the most recent and sophisticated investigations have shown how these Aristotelian doctrines were not banal or normalized or lacking originality but were responsive to the living needs of the moment, providing constantly new and distinct pictures of Aristotle and of the meaning of engaging in philosophy activity.⁴ This period is crucial for the slow but inexorable detachment between doing philosophy and following Aristotle's thought.

This paper aims to highlight one of the most important chapters of the history of Aristotelianism, that of Pietro Pomponazzi (1462–1525), a leading philosopher of Renaissance Italy, who hailed from Mantua. The analysis is carried out beginning with the manuscripts of Pomponazzi's lectures, which have been studied for more than a hundred years. However, what follows considers this material through the approach of the methodology of the history of knowledge. Up to present times, as Bruno Nardi contends, the major value of studying this material has been that of helping "the reconstruction of the development of Pomponazzi's thought as interpreter of Renaissance Aristotelianism, that is that philosophy, which was dominant in the two major centers of the philosophical culture in Italy, such as Padua and

1 Mercer 2019.

2 Schmitt 1983; Bianchi and Randi 1990; Martin 2014.

3 Lines 2013.

4 Del Soldato 2020.

Bologna, at the end of the 16th century.”⁵ Therefore, it is an approach strictly related to the history of ideas. What follows, instead, shall assess Pomponazzi's legacy from the perspective of a history of knowledge, doing so in order to show how the philosopher considered the multiple and diverse orders of knowledge of his times. Indeed, as we shall see, from a methodological perspective, Pomponazzi's lectures represented a new way of teaching and thinking about philosophy. The three major orders of knowledge were that of faith, reason, and experience. In Pomponazzi's times, and thanks to Pomponazzi, too, these orders were questioned for their importance and effectiveness. Furthermore, the transcriptions of his university lectures reveal not only his interpretation of Aristotelian texts, but also his firm beliefs through his willingness to expose his own views to his students and inviting criticism. Thus, teaching Aristotle at the beginning of the 16th century was not a sterile and neutral transfer of doctrines, but a vivid conveyance of evolutionary culture.

2 Pomponazzi in the Classroom

Pomponazzi's lectures offer various insights into his teaching activity. The surviving manuscripts usually have the signatures of the students who took the notes. Among them there were scions of the Paduan and Venetian patriciate, future university professors, and citizens of Ragusa. Among them, we can enumerate Antonio Surian, Lazzaro Bonamico, Pietro Manna, Gian Pietro Bresciano, Girolamo del Bene, Giovanni Grillenzoni, Girolamo Natale from Ragusa, and Gregorio Frediani. His relationship with his students has remained conversational. He often addresses them directly using the second personal pronoun, inviting them to reflect on their arguments: “*tu applica. Sed considera diligenter tu, Antoni* [You think, but consider carefully Antonio],” we can find in the *Expositio super I de anima Aristotelis et commentatoris*.⁶ The student Girolamo Bettoni, perhaps not very much interested in philosophy, tells us that in Pomponazzi's meticulous approach, he was also very boring.⁷ Doubts, disagreements, and criticisms were the order of the day. Indeed, students could be said to have enjoyed a *libertas philosophandi*. The student Antonio Surian, for instance, in class, seems to defend Agostino Nifo against

⁵ Nardi 1965a, 170.

⁶ Pomponazzi 2018, 97r. All translations in this paper are mine, unless specified otherwise.

⁷ Arezzo, Biblioteca della Fraternita de' Laici, ms. 390, 183v: “praeceptor ... multum locutus est in tantum quod fere omnibus fuit tedio.”

Pomponazzi.⁸ Surian contrasts Pomponazzi's reading of Augustino Nifo (1473–1538) and insinuates that the Mantuan teacher purposely manipulated his interlocutor's ideas. From what Surian understood, according to Pomponazzi, Nifo would have maintained the idea that intellect could be knowledge without imagination, but this contention is not to be found in any of Nifo's works. Rather, Nifo would have defended the thesis according to which the passive intellect in relation to eternal intellection does not require the body as an object. Surian shows that he failed to understand the arguments of either Pomponazzi or Nifo, confusing the passive intellect with the possible intellect. Furthermore, Surian attempts to refute Pomponazzi's interpretation of *De anima* 403a 3 by asserting that Aristotle would have maintained that thinking is independent of the body. Surian himself reveals that he was not able to follow Pomponazzi's line of reasoning: "quae non intellexi scribo."⁹ No doubt, his teacher's interpretation was not easy to understand, an exegesis that went against the tide and which was sustained by direct comparisons and confrontations with the texts of Aristotle's commentators.

Manuscript lectures are also precious sources for understanding Pomponazzi's attitude towards his colleagues and mentors. With colleagues, he is mostly contemptuous. When he speaks of Nifo, the tone of his discourse becomes increasingly contemptuous. He had no respect for Nifo, and the feeling was probably mutual. For instance, after calling Nifo ironically "magnus philosophus," Pomponazzi contemptuously states "iste cachophilosophus [bad philosopher] nescit quod dicit": Nifo does not know what he says.¹⁰ Most of the time, Nifo is charged with engaging in meaningless discourse: "fatua dicit [he says vain things]."¹¹ The controversy, perhaps, was about Nifo's greater ability to understand the Greek commentators; and therefore in his interpretations of Aristotle's works.¹² Nifo flaunts his mastery of Greek, but Pomponazzi does not, thus representing a schism between *res* and *verba*, between philosophy and philology, between the superiority of the power of concept and the expression of the word. Thus, half in Latin, half in vernacular,

8 Pomponazzi 2018, 110r: "Sexa [=Nifo] vero aliter: videas ipsum; et est ingeniosa expositio: negat enim ipse intellectum possibilem habere cognitionem ullam sine phantasmate; et in hoc contradicit Praeceptor. Nam 36 III huius dicitur quod intellectus passivus quoad intellectionem aeternam non indiget corpore ut obiecto. Item ibidem, 36, dicitur quod, si intellectus in omni sua operatione indigeret corpore ut obiecto, tunc esset corruptibilis. Me remitto usque ad tertium, quia forte glosat illam litteram aliter quam Praeceptor. Quantum ad aliud quod dicebatur, quod expositio istius hominis non quadret, eo quia Philosophus loquatur dubitative, mihi videtur oppositum."

9 Pomponazzi 2018, 111r.

10 Napoli, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Ms. VIII E.42, 52v, 54r.

11 Pomponazzi 2018, 114r.

12 Napoli, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Ms. VIII E.42, 54v: "Credo quod iste bonus vir non intelligat qui sunt isti attici; et, domini, culus meus non dignaretur facere istum dubium."

Pomponazzi accuses Nifo of being ignorant of philosophy.¹³ And the insults do fly: “oh, castronazzo ignorante! [oh, great ignorant!]” would be Nifo’s interpretation of Aristotle’s demonstration *quia*.¹⁴

Pomponazzi may have felt during the course of his teaching career a measure of inadequacy due to his poor knowledge of Greek language, and his complex in this regard is discernible in the tenor his lectures; even if he was convinced of the superiority of his conceptual interpretation in opposition to a word-for-word exegesis. However, Pomponazzi was aware of the importance of correctly interpreting a text; and therefore of knowing Greek, not only for purposes of reading Aristotle, but also for reading the Greek commentators. On January 7, 1525, just prior to his death, Pomponazzi made fun of his difficulty with reading Greek texts, so stating¹⁵ “Ignoro literas grecas [I do not know Greek].” Pomponazzi confesses, but he does not ignore Aristotle’s philosophy, for which he believes he has a superior interpretation in comparison not only to his colleagues like Nifo, but also to his mentors.

Pomponazzi’s lectures are revealing of his feelings towards his mentors. For instance, of Francesco Securo da Nardò (1410/20 – ca. 1489), professor in *via Thomae* in Padua, Pomponazzi characterizes him as unable to sustain an argument, despite being “*multum verbosus* [very talkative].”¹⁶ In other words, he regarded his teacher as being someone of many words but with ideas of little substance. Indeed, Securo da Nardò often seemed to buckle under the pressure of Pomponazzi’s enquiries¹⁷; or, faced with difficult topics, he would get stuck and not know what to say or how to solve the problem.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, his mentor did not even enjoy great respect from his colleagues. Narrating a dispute with Nicoletto Vernia and Neritonensis,

13 Napoli, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Ms. VIII E.42, 54v: “Volo quod videatis si iste cachophilosophus, farmacopollo, ignorante sape *quello che dice*: facit se grecum et Themistianum, et tamen non intelligit Themistium neque grecos ... *No, diavoli, no questa regola non è de Aristotle ... ma è de questi furfanti ignorantuni piducchiusi che non sanno una lettera.*”

14 Pomponazzi 1966, vol. 2, 174.

15 Arezzo, Biblioteca della Fraternita de’ Laici, ms. 390, 296r: “in hoc textum grecum non vidi, quia ignoro literas grecas, et ideo quis textus sit conformior greco ignore.”

16 In many places Pomponazzi states “Mihi, inquit praeceptor, non placet haec responsio, sed aliter non impugnavit,” (Pomponazzi 2018, 105r) or “sed contra istam responsionem arguebat recolendus memoriae magister, praeceptor noster magister Franciscus de Nardò, nec habebat aliud argumentum” (Pomponazzi 1966, vol. 2, 155).

17 Pomponazzi 1966, vol. 2, 78: “Praeceptor non aliter dixit et quia non mihi manifesta fuit reflectio argumenti, non enim bene percipio quid velit, ideo imaginatum sum faciliorem argumentationem.”

18 Pomponazzi 1966, vol. 2, 86: “praeceptoris mei, volens solvere hoc argumentum nesciebam quid dicere, quia argumentum est difficillimum.”

Pomponazzi recalled Vernia scorning the Thomist teacher: “voltavali el culo et volebat quod argumentum concludere [he turned around with his back to him and wanted his argument to be conclusive].”¹⁹ The remaining traces of Pomponazzi’s lecture in Padua at the beginning of the 16th century outlines a lively, free, and open context, and it is not by chance that it was in classes like these that many ideas of the Scientific Revolution emerged.

Some lecture notes reflect on the condition of philosophy at that time and on the controversies and confrontations that philosophers had when it came to their dealings with religious groups. Pomponazzi characterizes philosophers as bohemian thinkers: heretics, scruffy, and penniless.²⁰ He certainly does not encourage the profession of the philosopher; on the contrary, Pomponazzi curses the little money he earns; and, always with his usual sarcasm, he points to monks, who, in order to earn more, prefer to take the vows rather than pursue a philosophical career.

Pomponazzi’s musings were both diverting and instructive for his students. For example, while explaining how animals, including men, react instinctively to stimuli, or rather “propter quid timentes mingunt et cachant [why they urinate and defecate]” Pomponazzi narrates an exhilarating episode taken from Giovanni Sabbadino degli Arienti’s *Le Porretane*, a reading that must have been rather pleasant for the Mantuan philosopher given the closing passage on the immortality of the soul.²¹

From Pomponazzi’s lecture manuscripts, we can learn about his personal relationships with his fellow teachers and mentors, his reading tastes; and we also may discern the evolution of his thought. We can also understand what he taught and how he conducted his classes, with the emphasis here being not so much on the content but his attitude towards various authorities, in particular (1) Averroes, who, despite all the teaching bans, was still considered Aristotle’s commentator par excellence, (2) Aristotle himself, and (3) the Church.

¹⁹ Pomponazzi 1966, vol. 2, 164–165.

²⁰ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6448, 199r: “Immo tenetur heretici ipsi philosophi et stulti; habent unguis longos, portant biretta torta. Item philosophi non tengano mai un quatrino; hinc est quod aliquando desperant dicentes: ‘maladicta sit ista philosophia, propter quam mendico’. Et propter hoc patres nostri monaci nolunt philosophari.”

²¹ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6537, 85r.

3 Teaching against Averroes and Aristotle

Teaching against Averroes (1126–1198) was by no means a matter of course. Although the Averroistic interpretation of the intellect had been condemned on several occasions and attacked by various authors, Aristotle's philosophy was still taught using Averroes, who was considered his most faithful interpreter. Pomponazzi lived in an era in which scholars were starting to become acquainted with Aristotle's Greek commentators; and the comprehensiveness of Averroes's commentaries as a teaching tool was still unmatched, hence the custom of university professors calling themselves Averroists. Indeed, Pomponazzi did not hesitate to call himself an Averroist²²; not because he was in agreement with Averroes' doctrines, such as that of the unicity of the intellect, but because he taught Aristotle's texts with illuminations proffered by Averroistic commentary. Thus, for instance, in 1513 Pomponazzi declared that his lectures would follow Averroes' interpretation.²³ It was not only common practice to teach Aristotle via Averroes, but it also pleased academics and the magnificent rector. At that time, the rector of the University of Bologna was Giovanni Stefano Struzzi from Parma, of whom nothing is known except precisely this brief note and his activity as rector.

Commenting upon Aristotelian philosophy based on the insights of Averroes did not mean sharing his interpretation. Pomponazzi is quite explicit on this point. More than once in his lectures did he express his dissent towards any doctrine contrary to Aristotle's mind and against faith; so much so that many times he was charged with heterodoxy by his colleagues.²⁴ Pomponazzi's frankness must have cost him more than one philosophical friendship, but for him, the love of truth must defeat any form of adoration, even if this means teaching against the grain. Defending Averroes means subverting the truth, and for Pomponazzi this perversion is not acceptable, even if that means developing a "heretical philosophy."²⁵ Pomponazzi was a heretic because he looked for the truth, because he

22 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6533, 373r: "multi averroistae, de quorum numero ego sum ..."

23 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6533, 373r: "secundum expositionem et mentem commentatoris, tum quia communis consuetudo hoc exoptulat, tum quia placuit magnifico rectori ceterisque scholaribus."

24 Arezzo, Biblioteca della Fraternita de' Laici, Ms. 390, 243v: "Ea quae dicit Averroes sunt nuge. Quod si quis dicat: – Tu ergo non defendis Averroem? – mihi continget quod Padue et Ferrarie; neminem habeo pro amico. Averroes in hoc mihi videtur delirare et defendere ipsum non possem nisi proterviendo."

25 Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Vaticana, Vat. Lat 733, 235r: "Ideo teneo quod opinio Averrois devitat maiores difficultates quam alia; nec me pudet amore veritatis me ipsum retractare. Unde qui

sought the truth and did not allow himself to be deceived by the *ipse dixit* of authority.²⁶ Averroes is not God, but a man, and hence he can be wrong. This is a principle that Pomponazzi applied to every author who came across his path, even to Aristotle.

The main target of Pomponazzi's criticism is Averroes' interpretation of Aristotelian philosophy.²⁷ Therefore, Averroes' ideas become heretical and make him a devil's friend.²⁸ No doubt, this distancing could have been useful to show a certain adherence to the dictates of the Church, but as we have seen, it led to his ostracization from the academic community. The most problematic point of Averroes' entire doctrine is his interpretation of the unity and unicity of the intellect, which he would have shared to varying degrees with Theophrastus and Themistius.²⁹ It is on the occasion of expositing the unity and unicity of the intellect that Pomponazzi explains the intellectual process, by making recourse to a simile featuring a stork³⁰: like a stork that flies above men and women and sometimes pecks some heads giving birth to them, the intellect hovering over men and women would sometimes join and inform the individuals. This simile pokes fun at the Averroistic interpretation of the intellect by associating a fable with what should provide existence and scientific knowledge. In his manuscript and printed texts, Pomponazzi emphasizes that Averroes' thesis is meaningless and that if the Averroistic interpretation of Aristotle was right, then the Stagirate himself must have made a terrible mistake.³¹

dicunt me aliis adversari ut contradicam, mentiuntur. Oportet enim in Philosophia haereticum esse, qui veritatem invenire cupit."

26 Thus "iste Averroes qui commentatoris nomem sibi vendicavit et est maxime auctoritatis apud omnes, non apud me" (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6448, 254v), and the reason is simple: "commentator erravit neque ipse est Deus" (Arezzo, Biblioteca della Fraternita de' Laici, Ms. 390, 47v).

27 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6537, 134v: "In hoc nolite criminari traductorem, sed ipsum commentatorem, qui fuit nunc barbarissimus. Facit autem commentator ut senes qui, habentes uxorem iuvinem, tantum quaerunt, quod inveniunt foramen: sic et ipse tantum volvit, donec aliquid dicat."

28 Napoli, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Ms. VIII. D. 91, 80r: "ego magis abhorreo opinionem Averrois quam diabolum."

29 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6448, 192r: "... de unitate autem multum dubito, et averrois et themistius et theophrastus fuerunt istius opinionis."

30 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6533, 330r: "Et sic ymaginatur Commentator quod anima intellectiva sit una ciconia, la quale sia sopra alla testa di tutti li homini, et mo dia de becho a questo, mo a quello, secundum quod hunc vel illum informat."

31 Pomponazzi 1966, vol. 2, 42: "De opinione Commentatoris dico vobis verum, ego credo quod opinio illa sit [in]imaginabilis, fatua ac chimerica. Oh, dixisti quod est opinio Aristotelis! Dico verum est, sed dico quod ipse Aristoteles fuit homo et potuit errare et ... opinio Aristotelis de anima in-

According to Pomponazzi, Averroes' opinion was a chimera, a fantastic dream without any real consistency. If this was Aristotle's thesis, then it was proof for Pomponazzi that even the greatest philosopher of all time could be prone to error. For a certain period of time, Pomponazzi supported the idea of some correspondence between Averroes' position and Aristotle's thought; but then he rejected it for the sake of the unity of the soul as the form of an organic body. Averroes' view is false, according to Pomponazzi, even if many erudite philosophers believe that it is the right interpretation of Aristotle.

For Pomponazzi, like any authority, Aristotle was not infallible, and this follows from the view according to which truth is not eternal, immutable, and discoverable once and for all, but something that may change over time, and be subject to continuous and constant additions. Criticisms of Aristotle or of some of his ideas had to have flooded into the classroom and also had to not always have been well received by his students. Bettoni would emphasize how "*in destruendo Aristotelem*," Pomponazzi had caused a certain boredom and annoyance.³² Indeed, tackling the Averroistic interpretation of Aristotle, Pomponazzi must have felt some discomfort. With respect to the age-old problem of the *copulatio*, specific to Averroes' exegesis, Pomponazzi candidly professed his own ignorance.³³ Some Aristotelian arguments were, in turn, insoluble. Like Averroes, for Pomponazzi "*Aristoteles non fuit deus et ipse non omnia novit*."³⁴ When diverging from Averroes, he agreed with Alexander of Aphrodisias (2nd C. AD.), at least when he understood the interpretation of the Greek commentator in its entirety.³⁵ However, when the interpretation of Alexander seemed to be at odds with Aristotle, Pomponazzi's agreement with the outlook of Duns Scotus (late 12th century-early 13th century) came to the fore, especially pertaining to the neutrality of the soul in the face of reason and philosophy. Scotus's hypothesis is without doubt a "Scotusization" of Aristotelian

tellectiva est multum chimerica et bestialis. Si tot audeo dicere contra Philosophum, vel est ignorantia mea... Sed tu dices: quid dicendum ergo? Dico quod opinio Commentatoris est in extremo fatuitatis. Quid dicendum? Dico, sicut dixit, quod est opinio falsa. Quid tandem dicendum? Dico, etsi ipsa est fatua et bestialis quod potest sustentari..."

32 Against Aristotle: "tot et tantis mediis argumenta ista prolixissime probavit (et monstravit) quibus modis ac viis potuit ita apud eum concludere, quod insolubilia a toto mundo forent. Quapropter multorum excitavit ingenia scholarium in volendo Aristotelem tueri ab istis argumentis" (Arezzo, Biblioteca della Fraternita de' Laici, Ms. 390, 181v).

33 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6537, 160r: "nescio quid teneam: unum scio, quod nihil scio. In his vero comes in dubitando, et dicam quae dicuntur ab Aristotele."

34 Arezzo, Biblioteca della Fraternita de' Laici, Ms. 390, 41v.

35 See Poppi 1970.

thought, but the scholastic thinker is closer to the truth in supporting this thesis.³⁶ Pomponazzi's love for the truth supersedes any form of authority, no matter whether it is that of Averroes, Alexander, or Aristotle himself (or the Church). It is precisely in terms of this aspect that we can find the most interesting insights in his lectures, not only in terms of content but also in terms of methodology, especially for a philosopher who teaches against the grain.

4 Teaching against the Christianization of Aristotle

According to Pomponazzi, the main problem of the enslavement of philosophy, and of Aristotelian philosophy *in primis*, to the dictates of religion, is not in the doctrines that it wishes to impose, but in the fact that it confuses two spheres, that of faith and that of reason. In other words, it would accommodate Aristotle's truth with respect to revealed religion. Since two truths in contradiction cannot exist, as there is always only one truth, the revealed truth would trump that of philosophy. However, such a position for Pomponazzi is methodologically wrong, because it proceeds from the presupposition that Aristotle could not err as an authority; and therefore his philosophy should be in agreement with revealed religion. Thus, Aristotelian philosophy must be Christian, as it is the true philosophy. In Pomponazzi, however, as we have seen, this clashes with the dogma of Aristotle's infallibility; therefore it was possible that two truths could come into conflict. And in such a case, revealed truth undoubtedly had the upper hand. At the same time, however, this contradiction emerges only when the two spheres, that of reason and that of faith, are methodologically confused, because in themselves they should be kept separate. When reason cannot reach a solid conclusion then faith can extend its dominion. If reason finds the solution, the intervention of faith is not necessary. By way of reason and philosophy, however, as we have seen, one should not mean Aristotelian reason or Aristotle's philosophy, but rather human reason and the philosophy that human beings elaborate and that may change in the course of time. Therefore, Thomas Aquinas may be philosophically true, but on shakier ground when it comes to Aristotelian thought. Theses that aim to Christianize Aristotle,

³⁶ Pomponazzi 1966, 90: "quando dicitur hoc esset scotizare etc., dico quod tu verum dicis, et dico quod non solum scotizo, immo dico veritatem, nec aliter dici potest. Et quando dicitur: oh, est contra Philosophum etc.! Dico quod tu dicis verum, quia secundum Philosophum non possunt esse plures formae eiusdem speciei cum non dicant necessariam aptitudinem ad subiecta, seu ad materiam quantam ..."

rather, are methodologically wrong: the critical aspect is mixing up the two different spheres of knowledge.

In his lectures, Pomponazzi disagrees with this confused methodological attitude, which is more than just indicative of a personal contempt of religion, as scholars have maintained.³⁷ One must not mix religion with philosophy, for that would mean to “fratizare, idest miscere diversa brodia [fraternize, i.e., mix different broths].”³⁸ “*Fratizare*” is an expression peculiar to Pomponazzi’s language, using lively tones and colloquial interlayers; in this case made use of to characterize, in a depreciative manner, a mode of undermining the position of philosophy.

The clash or comparison obviously arises when he has to talk about the problem of the immortality of the soul, because he sees an intrinsic contradiction between what Aristotle says, between what can be supported philosophically, and what must be defended in accordance with faith. Challenging the Papal bull *Apostolici regiminis*, Pomponazzi says that “ego vero teneo animam mortalem et multiplicatam secundum Aristotelem. Aliter conclusio videtur repugnare premissis [But I maintain the idea that according to Aristotle the soul is multiplied and mortal. Otherwise, the conclusion would be incompatible with the premises].”³⁹ In no way, having pondered the philosophical premises of the Aristotelian system, through Aristotle and the explanation of his writings, is it possible to reach the conclusion that the soul is immortal.

The result of his analysis should not be considered scandalous or shocking. Indeed, Pomponazzi states that this was the very opinion of Albert the Great, many times cited in Pomponazzi’s works to defend his position from the charge of heresy.⁴⁰ On the one hand, Franciscans and Dominicans, epitomized by Pompo-

37 Nardi 1965b, 122–142.

38 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6533, 567v–568r.

39 Arezzo, Biblioteca della Fraternita de’ Laici, 84r.

40 “Sciendum est quod secundum philosophiam virtus immaterialis non potest movere corpus generabile et corruptibile immediate.... Et Albertus hoc declaravit in libro de causis; et ibi isti fratres truffa[l]dini, dominichini, franceschini vel diabolini habent bene rationem comburendi Albertum, quia omnes questiones sunt contra fidem nostram, licet dicat in fine quod ita dixit quia ut philosophus loquitur, et philosophica non sunt miscenda cum theologicis; et dicit quod in theologia aliter sentit, et dicit quod est fatuum miscere credita cum phisicis. Me autem vellent comburere...” (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6533, 567v–568r). Or again, “Albertus Magnus ... omnes questiones determinavit contra fidem; sed post dixit: Ego dixi physice ... Tamen fratres sancti dominici non dicunt iullum esse hereticum, imo faciunt sanctum” (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6533, 384v). And finally “Notandum quod Albertus Magnus determinavit plura contra fidem; tamen, inquit, dixi sic, quia phisica non sunt commiscenda cum theologia, quia theologia aliter sentit quam philosophia. Ideo fratres diabulini sancti dominici deberent comburere Albertum ... Tamen faciunt Albertum Sanctum” (Arezzo, Biblioteca della Fraternita de’ Laici, 318v).

nazzi as “*diabolini*” and “*truffaldini*,” that is devils and crooks, hailed Albert the Great as a saint for his ideas that were sometimes contrary to religion, on the other, they condemned Pomponazzi as a heretic and wanted to publicly burn his works. The main thesis that Pomponazzi defends in his lectures on natural philosophy is that of the separation between what a natural philosopher and a theologian have to say on the same topic. Indeed, they adopt two very different approaches that must be kept separate.

The task of a university professor who teaches natural philosophy is not to argue philosophy through religion, but to follow the university statutes and the wishes of the rector, which is to interpret Aristotle by means of Averroes. On this methodological precept, Pomponazzi is very forthcoming with his students.⁴¹ Philosophy is based on something that can be known; the philosopher can know the truth because he can distinguish truth from falsehood and discover new things. Religion, instead, would be a congeries of “*pedochiarie* [lousy things],” the weak point of which is its inability to prove its own doctrine. The doctrines of religion are neither true nor false: they are unverifiable, and therefore they constitute an obstacle to truth because they are believed to always be true. Indeed, they are not truths, but only dogmas. Insofar as they are considered truths, however, they hinder the true way to the truth and therefore they are false. About this attitude and this methodological turn, Pomponazzi confesses to be “*stomacato* [nauseated].”

Considering the problem of resurrection, for instance, Aristotelian philosophy maintains the idea that what is decomposed cannot be regenerated; however, Pomponazzi declares that he believes in what the Church has established, even if it is rationally wrong.⁴² What is philosophically defended by religion is philosophically wrong. For instance, with respect to divine power, one should believe what the Church says; however, it is clear that, according to Aristotle, resurrection is not possible.⁴³

41 Arezzo, Biblioteca della Fraternita de' Laici, 192v–193r: “quod phylosophia habet oculum clarum, cognoscit verum et falsum, <que> aut sunt per se nota, aut reducit ad per se nota, et non credit nisi per se nota Nullus phylosophus potest studere legibus: sunt pedochiarie tot nuge ... Veritas sibi viam facit, <phylosophus> cognoscit veritatem; leges sunt false, quia non sunt per se note, nec reducuntur ad per se nota: ille <qui> non habet malam consuetudinem, non potest adiscere. Stomachus de legibus, dicit quod non sunt vere nec false; veritas nunquam impedit veritatem; sed leges impediende; ergo sunt false.”

42 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6533, 268r-v: “sed si ecclesia tenet hoc, ego credo esse verum; tamen haec opinio videtur esse erronea in pura philosophia et natura, quae tenet hoc esse possibile in permanentibus, et non in successivis.”

43 Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Vaticana, Regin. Lat. 1279, 298v–299v: “Et ideo ego aliter dico. Et primo dico, quod id quod ecclesia sacra tenet, etiam teneo. Nihil me intromittendo de potentia div-

Aristotelian philosophy in considering these phenomena is always a step behind. The natural philosopher argues according to the principles of natural philosophy, in relation to which, for instance, there is a correlation between the motions of the heavens and the existence of God. If the heavens or stars or the Sun were to stop, as happens in some stories of the Holy Scriptures, either God would not be or He would not be the cause. For example, the biblical passage in which Joshua stops the Sun must be believed by faith, but it cannot be accepted according to Aristotelian philosophy: it is more “a Jewish fable.”⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Pomponazzi is extremely aware of the importance of such “fables” and “stories”; and in his lectures he explicitly states, doubting the existence of miracles, that if everything happened according to what Aristotle and Averroes dictated, that is, that all knowledge came from external impressions, then all our religions die (*sic periret tota lex nostra*). Then, contemptuously, especially towards those who methodologically mixed the two perspectives and those who called him a heretic, he declares the uselessness of these “pious louts.”⁴⁵ The prescriptions of religion would be meaningless because much of faith is based on miracles. If these were retracted, it would no longer make sense, or at least it would make less sense, to believe in religion. Pomponazzi's criticism is against these “*miseri patres*” and “*zoculantes*” (“miserable fathers” who go around “flapping their hooves”), who are none other than Dominican and Franciscan friars, whom he often targets.

On another occasion, Pomponazzi suspends his judgment about the Church's truth, defending the methodological distinction between religion and reason, and mocking the “*fratres*.” Concerning the existence of the antipodes, denied by St. Augustine in *De civitate Dei*, and about their salvation, Pomponazzi points out that “*ad hoc respondeo dicendo quod hoc solvant fratres, quoniam ego credo ecclesiae sancta* [to which I reply: let the brothers find a solution, because I believe in the Holy Church].”⁴⁶ From the natural philosopher's standpoint, he sarcastically adds: “*quare nescio quid dicendum est, nisi forte quod Christus fecit se crucifigere etiam in alio polo* [Since I do not know what to answer; except maybe that Christ also got crucified in the other pole].”⁴⁷

ina, puto quod impossibile sit, quod corruptum reat idem numero. ... Tamen sciatis, quod apud Aristotelem illa resurrectio est impossibilis; ideo non ex appetitu naturali debet appetere illud, cum resurrectio non sit naturalis apud philosophum; nec apud catholicos etiam.”

44 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6534, 139v: “negant hoc philosophi ... hoc non dicunt nisi fabule iudaice.”

45 Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms. 1317, 222r: “si ita esset, quid facerent isti miseri patres, et maxime isti zoculantes qui tantam abstinenciam faciunt?”

46 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6535, 229v–230r.

47 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6535, 229v–230r.

5 Conclusion: The Value of Experience

What emerges from reading Pomponazzi's lectures is a profound anti-authoritarianism, one that is based on the conviction of truth. What, then, is the touchstone of truth? What is the means for distinguishing truth from falsehood? The answer from Pomponazzi's lectures is clear: experience. If there is a thing that Pomponazzi must have taught his disciples more than any other in his lectures, more than Averroes's commentaries, or Aristotle's philosophy, or the dogmas of religion, it was the importance of experience as a key tool for guiding truth. Several times and repeatedly, he emphasized to his students that if experience contradicts reason, then experience should come first.⁴⁸ Experience demolishes any rational argument, any authority, even Aristotle. Thus, Pomponazzi warns his students, many of whom had a keen interest in anatomical dissections, that the authority of the experiment is greater than that of Aristotle and that he loves philosophizing rather than glossing the Stagirite.⁴⁹ Defending Aristotle even when his theses are at odds with experience contradicts Pomponazzi's ethical approach. Students can justify Aristotle to the bitter end, but this attitude is not fair to the truth and is methodologically incorrect. Indeed, Aristotle—Pomponazzi says—did not see and know everything. On this point, he was not willing to compromise (*glosare*).

But what did Aristotle not see? What did he not know? Pomponazzi must have been particularly impressed by an event, one that in his eyes must have upset the entire Aristotelian epistemological system and destroyed all of his authority. At the end of a lesson, after the exposition of Aristotle's thought through Averroes' commentary, Pomponazzi reveals how experience destroys the Aristotelian theory.⁵⁰

48 For instance he says "cum sensus contradicit rationi, standum est sensui" (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6533, 461v) or "quod quando est sensus et est ratio que invicem contradicunt, quod tunc est standum sensui et non rationi, quia omnis ratio cui contradicit sensus est falsa" (Arezzo, Biblioteca della Fraternita de' Laici, ms. 390, 248v.)

49 Arezzo, Biblioteca della Fraternita de' Laici, ms. 390, 277r: "Si auctoritas Aristotelis est apud vos maior experimento, tenete vos ipsum; ego non teneo Aristotelem hic, quia ipse non vidit omnia; glosare autem mihi non placet, quia illa mihi videtur mens Aristotelis."

50 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6535, f. 228v: "Sed quid dicendum est de hoc? Dicendum: ubi sensus et ratio contradicuntur, oportet stare sensui. Unde dico vobis quod habui litteras a quodam meo amico qui scripserat mihi quod rex Hispaniae misit tres naves, et iverunt ad alium polum per 25 gradus et transiverunt terribilem zonam, deinde et invenerunt eam esse habitata, et invenerunt multas insulas et post columnas Herculis navigaverunt per tres menses, vento propitio. Unde omnia quae demonstrantur ab Aristotele sunt falsa ... *Lasso pensare a te quomodo illae rationes quas dixit commentator esse demonstrationes sunt demonstrationes. Quoniam contra veritatem non possunt fieri demonstrationes. Quare, pensate bene come stiamo. Si nescimus nescimus de istis rebus quae sunt in terra et possunt videri a nobis quomodo sciemus de coelo?*

The vernacular interlayers reveal the great enthusiasm with which Pomponazzi talked to his students about these issues. The tone is almost subversive.⁵¹ Pomponazzi tells his students that his friend Antonio Pigafetta sent him a letter proving that everything Aristotle wrote about the uninhabitability of the torrid zone is false. The alleged demonstrations of Averroes are therefore founded on false premises, and accordingly, false demonstrations; since experience is stronger than any demonstration and one truth cannot contradict another truth, what derives from experience is true and what Aristotle says is false. Pomponazzi's argument is very simple and plain, but it is undoubtedly radical and was bound to cause some confusion among his students. Pomponazzi also adds that if Aristotle produced nonsense about things that are on Earth and that can be experienced or seen with the senses, then we should be doubly suspicious of what we draw from him in regard to the heavens.

Pomponazzi's lectures clearly show how he approached teaching in an unconventional manner that broke with the rigidity of the university system. Of Aristotelianism itself, although it leaned towards a certain conformism, it was certainly not a static philosophical movement, but had within it numerous interpretations, great contrasts, and divergent approaches. Pomponazzi showed that he had a radical approach to knowledge, because he tended to dismantle any form of authority in favor of experience. Experience is what is lived first-hand or has been communicated by others with absolute certainty. This reliance on experience brings with it a corollary that is not exactly insignificant, namely that there is no longer a stable and fixed, certain, universal and necessary knowledge, but that everything is continuously questioned. Pomponazzi's lectures are not important merely because they help us to understand the development of his thought, but because they are symptomatic of a new approach to knowledge. That this approach was developed within a knowledge-making institution like a university, and not beyond the university walls, as many scholars in the past have suggested, is remarkable; because it shows once again how there is not a real distinction between the academic and extra-academic world, how knowledge circulates and is examined and criticized indiscriminately.

Unde stulti sunt qui credunt se demonstrare; et Aristoteles dixit multa; experimentum tamen est in oppositum."

51 In a different transcription of the same lecture we can read the following: "Notetis quod ego habeo epistolam missam a quodam veneto, qui iverat in legationem ad Regem Hispaniae, et venit versus polum antarcticum; oportuit ergo ad transiret torridam zonam, dixitque ibi esse plus quam trecentum insulas, tamen scribit illas esse discontinuas, et quod ibi sunt infinita loca habitata. Ideo ea quae hic dicuntur ab Aristotele, sunt fatuitates, ut videtis" (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, R. 96 sup., f. 69v).

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