



AN INTELLECTUAL REVOLUTION:

Thirteenth-Century Translations of Aristotle
and Counteraction of the Catholic Church

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An intellectual uproar erupted between the University of Paris and the Pope's ecclesiastical councils over the course of the thirteenth century. Radical theologians at the University of Paris, led by Siger de Brabant, translated the classical teachings of Aristotle. Their discourse and these writings instigated an academic revolution against the Catholic Church and the established Christian doctrine. Between 1210 and 1277, the Bishops of Paris ordered three official condemnations of the University of Paris. They declared notable scholars heretics and besmirched the university's newfound thoughts on the nature, form, and existence of God. Considering this discourse, this paper shall make known that the years between the fifth and fifteenth centuries, the so-called "Dark Ages", were not devoid of philosophical conversation. These condemnations were, in fact, a response to a larger intellectual revival in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Twelfth Century Renaissance.

In the Condemnation of 1210, the first intellectual censure placed on the University of Paris, the Bishops of Sens prohibited the works of Aristotle concerning natural philosophy, the Arabic commentators writing upon them, and the writings of David of Dinant. To maintain this prohibition, the bishops

decreed that these books were to be brought before ecclesiastical authorities and burned, and that the readers of these works should be excommunicated and considered heretics.¹

This condemnation included David of Dinant because of his commentaries on Aristotelian physics. Dividing the forms of being into three categories, God, mind, and matter, David argued that the former two can be equated because of their immaterial nature and imperceptibility. Addressing this third theoretical formation, David asserted that matter also evades any discernible category as it exists as a propertyless entity before one classifies it.² His conception of matter subsequently led to his equation between God, mind, and matter, an assertion that certainly reflected Aristotle's account of "prime matter", which he detailed in his *Metaphysics* as substance from which all form has been expunged.³ The Arab commentators on these subjects lent further credence to David's argument, as Islamic scholars, such as Averroes, asserted that the mind and body are ultimately connected and cannot have a separate identity; in essence, the body and the mind are one and the same.⁴

The ecclesiastical council that issued the condemnation was reacting to David's theological influence; the bishops of Paris viewed this contradicting path of reason as threatening to Christian doctrine. William of Breton, a contemporary French chronicler, establishes the threat of this heretical dissemination: "[David of Dinant's] writing provided an opportunity not only for the subtle doctrines of the Amalrician heresy but also for other doctrines, which had not yet been invented, and it

¹ Lynn Thorndike, *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 26–27.

² Enzo Maccagnolo, "David of Dinant and the Beginnings of Aristotelianism in Paris", in Peter Droke, ed., *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 429.

³ W.D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics: a revised text with introduction and commentary*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 23.

⁴ Jacques Jolivet, "The Arabic Inheritance", in Peter Dronke, ed., *A History of Twelfth Century Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 113.

was therefore decreed that they should all be burnt. Moreover it was laid down in the same council that no one should henceforth dare to transcribe or read those books”.⁵

The body of Master Amalric, whose teachings were linked to the writings of David of Dinant and who was the source of what William named “the Amalrician heresy”, was ordered removed from a sanctioned Christian cemetery and into “unconsecrated ground” and subsequently excommunicated from the church.⁶ His teachings, which the bishops’ decree condemned in 1210, mirrored the conception of God that contemporary scholars derived from Aristotelian physics; Amalric advocated a conception of God that presents Him as ubiquitous and immanent in the world. Amalric argued that God is omnipresent, that God exists in the Eucharist and the Holy Spirit dwells in all human souls. David of Dinant’s writings and opposing religious doctrine clearly permeated to fellow scholars and therefore posed an initial theological threat to the contemporary ecclesiastical powers.⁷

Despite this censure, Latin translations of Averroes’ work appeared and circulated at the University of Paris in the 1230’s; this condemnation was effectively ignored. William of Avergne first discussed them in his works *De universo* and *De anima* and Roger Bacon began to hold lectures on Averroes’ commentaries at the University of Paris in the 1240’s.⁸ The bishops of Sens associated Averroes, a prominent Arab commentator on Aristotelianism, with heretical beliefs; and because the works originated from scholarship of another faith,

⁵ Maccagnolo, “David of Dinant and the Beginnings of Aristotelianism in Paris”, 430.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Stephen Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity 1210–1685*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 72.

⁸ Gordon Leff, *Paris and Oxford Universities in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: An Intellectual and Intellectual History*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968), 210.

this new commentary on natural philosophy hindered the acceptance of western ecclesiastical powers.⁹

Accompanying this reemergence of Aristotelian philosophy and prominent commentaries concerning it were three major philosophical movements; each developed between the emergence of these texts in the 1230's and their intellectual climax in the 1270's. Among these three movements were Thomism, the rationalization of philosophy and theology of Thomas Aquinas; the second was Latin Averroism, which Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Davia, both Parisian scholars, best advocated and supported, and thirdly was Neo-Augustinianism, which was the traditional, orthodox response to the new philosophical movements.¹⁰

A brief summary of these movements is as follows: Thomism attempted to reconcile both theology and Aristotelian natural philosophy into rationalizations that were harmonious and compatible. Thomas Aquinas claimed that philosophy could never contradict faith, as long as Aristotelian writings were interpreted correctly. Contemporary ecclesiastics were most accepting of his theories. Siger, an advocate of Averroism, made a clear separation between the enterprise of philosophy and Christian doctrine. He made little effort to reconcile his philosophical conclusions with his Christian faith. Developed decades later after the previous two movements, the Neo-Augustinian movement, led by John Pecham, advocated for the original conception of God, dictated by the contemporary Christian doctrine.¹¹

The second of the three movements, Latin Averroism, later known as Radical Aristotelianism, was the most controversial of the three interpretations of Aristotle, as Siger and his fellow intellectuals did not attempt to reconcile their rational-

⁹Fernand van Steenberghen, *Aristotle in the West* (Louvain: E. Nauwelaerts, 1955), 219.

¹⁰John F. Wippel, "The Condemnations of 1270 and 1277 at Paris", *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 (1977), 174.

¹¹Ibid., 175.

izations with the contemporary Christian doctrine. Among his articles in his *Quaestiones in librum tertiu, de anima*, Siger maintains that our intellect is not to be identified with God, but is, according to Aristotle, eternally caused by God. This intellect is united to the bodies of individual men in an accidental way, by its power. It is “diversified” in individual men through different *intentiones* present in the imaginations of different men. The agent intellect and the possible intellect are two powers of this single and separate intellect. These powers are required for intellection to take place in individual men, and they themselves depend for the matter on which they operate upon phantasms provided by individual men’s imaginations.¹² The theories Siger presented included refutation of individual spiritual power and personal immortality, and subsequently necessitated a strong ecclesiastical response.

Responding to the treatises of the Aristotelian philosophers, Stephen of Tempier, the contemporary bishop of Paris, issued an additional condemnation of the University of Paris in 1270. In his written declaration, Tempier announced the thirteen errors taught at the university, which were punishable by excommunication; he seemingly directed several of these statements toward Siger, the intellectual leader of the Averroism movement. Among these errors, which Siger expressly discussed in his *Questiones de anima*, were: (1) that the intellect of all men is numerically one and the same; (5) that the world is eternal; (6) that there never was a first man; and (8) that after death the separated soul does not suffer from corporeal fire.¹³

Tempier’s other articles give the reader an idea of which views he found objectionable: (2) that this statement is false or improper: “Man understands”; (3) that the will of man wills or chooses of necessity; (4) that all that happens here below is subject to the necessity of the heavenly bodies; (7) that the

¹² L. Hödl, “Averroismus”, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter, I (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 1971), 734–735.

¹³ Lynn Thorndike, *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 80–81

soul, which is the form of man insofar as he is man, is corrupted; (9) that free will is a passive power, not an active one, and that it is necessarily moved by a desirable object; (10) that God does not know singulars; (11) that God does not know things other than himself; (12) that human acts are not governed by divine providence; (13) that God cannot grant immortality or incorruption to a corruptible and mortal thing.¹⁴

The majority of these propositions originated from Aristotle's own doctrine. Tempier not only lists Aristotle's principles from his natural philosophies, such as his conception of the first cause and unmoved mover as a self-contemplating being, but frames his arguments to directly oppose those of the Christian doctrine. While Aristotle's original argument stated that there were a hierarchy of intelligences which dictate the world, an argument that never mentions the presence of an omniscient creator, Tempier and supporters of the Neo-Augustinian philosophy set Aristotelian physics directly against the conception of God and his providence. Neither Siger nor any other Latin thinker of the period, wrote of a relationship between God and his people when discussing Aristotelian physics. Creating this stark duality between opposing rationalizations, Tempier attempted to further demonize the intellectual competition at the University of Paris. In addition, Siger's conclusions were condemned by Tempier as not only theologically controversial, but also philosophically unsound. Thomas Aquinas, philosophical leader of Thomism, claimed that several of Siger's statements resulted from poor reasoning and incorrect understanding of Aristotle.¹⁵

Between the condemnations of 1270 and 1277, Thomas Aquinas and major Neo-Augustinian thinkers, such as Bonaventure, had departed Paris in 1272; these notable absences in the city may have encouraged more dissident Aris-

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Gordon Leff, *Paris and Oxford Universities in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: An Intellectual and Intellectual History*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968), 210.

totalians led by Siger. With a freer intellectual atmosphere, the radical Aristotelians gained intellectual footing and began instructing in secret or private places; a university decree on September 2nd, 1276 forbade this.¹⁶ Noting this circulation of radical, secular, and potentially invalidating Aristotelian thought, Pope John XXI instructed Stephen Tempier to conduct additional investigations at the University of Paris, in order to determine the origin and dissemination of such natural philosophy. Although Pope John XXI did not explicitly instruct Stephen to order condemnations, but rather to observe and conduct investigations at the university, Stephen was a dutiful bishop and certainly not known for moderation. Upon discovering the teachings of this university, Stephen Tempier assembled a council of theologians to determine the philosophical and theological errors that the Aristotelian scholars committed.¹⁷

Forming what would be the strictest censure on the University of Paris in the thirteenth century, Stephen and his colleagues created and issued the Condemnation of 1277, a proclamation of errors containing 219 propositions. Censuring the philosophical and theological practices of this university, the Condemnation of 1277 denounced the teaching of the knowability and nature of God, the eternity of the world, multiple, separate intelligences, the relationship between free will and act of choice, among several other Aristotelian principles.¹⁸

The following propositions in this condemnation concern the recognition of God, an issue Tempier often addresses: Proposition 8, as Mandonnet numbered and ordered in his biographical work *Siger*, censured any natural-philosophical means of identifying with the Lord; Proposition 16 asserts that

¹⁶ John F. Wippel, “The Condemnations of 1270 and 1277 at Paris”, *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 (1977), 185.

¹⁷ Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Random House, 1955), 405–406.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

God is the most distant from human understanding, that he is an isolated cause, rather than a direct manipulator of events.¹⁹ Proposition 22 refutes the ability of God to spontaneously generate matter; this assertion would negate that God created the universe at a distinct point in time.²⁰

Oddly, Tempier also censures some of Thomas' theories, such as the individuation of the soul in terms of matter. Not only did Tempier include Thomistic theories in his condemnation, principles that clergy generally accepted, there are also several contradictions of Thomas' conclusions. There are two accepted explanations for this: first, as Leff writes, Thomas and Siger, deemed a Radical Aristotelian, were "tarred with the same Aristotelian brush"; they were both deemed opponents of theology by the Neo-Augustinians.²¹ Second, the writing of the condemnation was rather haphazard; the original propositions were extracted from separate sources and placed in no particular order. Proposition 110, which Tempier seemingly directed at Thomas, denies that the forms, i.e. mind, body, and soul, are not divided.²² Wippel attributes these contradictions to the "hurried nature" of Tempier's commission and the "tendentiousness" of Tempier himself.²³ Creating his theological commission and writing the condemnation without papal permission, Tempier overstepped the limits of his ecclesiastical authority; these actions certainly displayed an impulsive nature.²⁴

While censuring the academic activities at this university, Stephen of Tempier received staunch support for his condemnation; in a letter from John Pecham, leader of the Neo-Augustinian movement, to the Bishop of Lincoln in 1285,

¹⁹ Pierre Mandonnet, *Siger de Brabant et l'averroïsme latin au XIII^e siècle*, (Fribourg: Librairie de l'Université, 1899), 212.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

²¹ Leff, 228.

²² Mandonnet, *Siger I*, 224.

²³ Wippel, 195.

²⁴ For the original papal letter to Tempier, see *Chartularium Universitatis parisiensis*, I, 541.

Pecham asserted that the philosophical conclusions reached by the Aristotelian scholars at the University of Paris were “irreverent innocations of language introduced into the depths of theology against philosophical truth, and to the detriment of the fathers whose positions are disdained and openly in contempt”.²⁵

Siger, the intellectual leader of Averroism, and Thomas, the founder of Thomism, each attempted to present a unified system that included both the natural philosophy produced at the University of Paris and the theology dictated by the bishops of Paris and Pope John XXI. With the introduction of Aristotelian works into the intellectual atmosphere, Siger and Thomas attempted to reconcile the perceived pantheistic considerations of Aristotle’s metaphysics and the contemporary Christian doctrine of God. Tempier, observing these debates regarding the presence and nature of God, refused any reconciliation. To Tempier, philosophy was subservient to theology.²⁶

Strictly separating Aristotle’s natural philosophy and Christian theology, Siger, deriving his theories from the commentaries of Averroes, presented each rationalization of God as equally legitimate, albeit different, intellectual pursuits. The conflict that emerged from this commentary were the two separate, yet completely rationalized answers to natural-philosophical or theological questions; the answers, originating from two different paths of thought, overlapped. Despite Siger’s effort to use Aristotelian physics as an autonomous philosophical practice, these two rational efforts produced different and incompatible answers to theological questions.²⁷

Because of the radical philosophy that Siger led and advocated, he ultimately met with the theological authorities who

²⁵ James A. Weisheipl, “Albertus Magnus and Universal Hylomorphism: Avicbron”, in Francis J. Kovan and Robert W. Shahan, eds *Albert the Great: Commemorative Essays* (Norman, 1980), 239.

²⁶ Gaukroger, 73

²⁷ Ibid.

censured him. He was first cited to appear before the French Inquisitor on 10 November 1276, although Siger had already departed Paris. Appealing instead to the Papal Curia, the central governing body of the Holy See, Siger effectively ended his academic career. Although he was absolved of his heresy, he was sentenced to reside at the Curia to be accompanied by a secretary. Apparently unstable and exhibiting mental issues, the secretary murdered him sometime before November 1284. Although indirectly, his opposition to Christian doctrine ultimately led to his demise.²⁸

Supporters of Tempier and advocates of the traditional Christian doctrine associated all of Aristotelian innovation, even the contemporarily accepted doctrines of Thomism, with the controversial theories of the late Siger and Averroes' commentaries. Because of this association, the philosophical pursuits at the University of Paris appeared to contemporary theologians as an advocacy for a "double truth". The threat of Averroism that ecclesiastics perceived, particularly Stephen Tempier and Pope John XXI, was the possibility of intellectual competition: Aristotelian natural philosophy contained doctrines that clearly and indisputably conflicted with Christian thinking, some of which included the aforementioned principles of the eternity of the world and the possibility of creation.²⁹

The condemnations during the thirteenth century, as we observed in the above pages, were reactions to non-Christian philosophy that Tempier, the Bishops of Paris, Pope John XXI, and contemporary ecclesiastics were not prepared to understand. Viewing the philosophical conclusions these scholars derived from Aristotelian texts as abhorrent and contrary to the foundations of Christian belief, Tempier and thirteenth-century theologians sought the means to quell the intellectual competition. The condemnations and theological censures

²⁸ Fernand van Steenberghen, *Histoire de la Philosophie*, (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1964), 483–88.

²⁹ Gaukroger, 73.

that the prominent Aristotelian philosophers faced denotes and foreshadows the temporary nature of the Twelfth Century Renaissance. These writers were manipulating Aristotle for their own theological ends, but ecclesiastical authorities ultimately dictated the extent of their philosophical processes.

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