Field A Philosophy seminar at Catholic Theological College

The epistemology in Monachus Niger's Sentences commentary Q. 1

Cal Ledsham (CTC, UD)

CTC/UD Field A Philosophy seminar series

March 11, 2016, 11:00am EST - 12:30pm
Department of Philosophy, Catholic Theological College, University of Divinity
Treacy Boardroom
278 Victoria pde
Melbourne 3002 Australia

Details

The Sentences commentary of Monachus Niger (the "Black Monk", probably a Benedictine; lect. ~1336?-1341? Oxford) has received scholarly attention by Damascus Trapp in his 1956 seminal article on 14th Century Augustinian scholastics. He identified Monachus with extreme scepticism, a certain sort of theological "modernism", and a "subtle" obsession with logical puzzle-games as an Ersatz for producing a respectable theology. These negative appraisals of his work were also reiterated in the only significant edition of his epistemology, Kennedy's 1983 edition of Monachus Niger's Sent. Q. 1, art. 1.

This paper reports on attempts to produce a critical edition of Q. 1 art. 2 and 3. After quickly reporting on the status of the manuscripts, I deal mostly with the philosophy. Rather than reading Monachus Niger in these works as a sceptic, I read him rather as trying to rethink aspects of Aristotelian-Augustinianism from an internalist, 'representationist' perspective that focuses on a self-from-the-inside-outwards account of how we err, rather than the naturalised and comfortably reliable epistemology of Aristotelianism. That is, Monachus Niger's thought here is more akin to that of a Port-Royalist than of a De-Anima-reading Aristotelian. (He is actually quite the rationalist, open to a sort of intellective innatism, and there are scattered bits of divine inspiration/illumination/Deus primus cognitus that have a Henry of Ghent resonance; but there is no precursor to a genuine Cartesian scepticism).

His concern is with how and why the intellect can err, and the implications for at least an internalist account of habit-forming, if not a full 'virtual virtue ethics': that is, where a potency can operate on matter which the agent mistakenly thinks is appropriate, but actually is not. This virtualisation has a remarkable application to the doctrine of 'natural signs' in cognition: it turns out that they do not necessarily convey their object as an externalist or naive account purports. I also spend some time examining his third article, which asks whether either side of a contradiction can be licitly believed. I intend here to characterise what he is doing (the material is rather bizarre), and also to assess what degree of hardness or softness his strategy for presenting and dealing with contradictions amounts to.