

**Remarks on Gyula Klima's Inaugural Lecture "Putting Skeptics in Their Place vs. Stopping Them in Their Tracks: Two Anti-skeptical Strategies"**

In his extremely interesting and provocative lecture, Gyula Klima makes two main points. First, he argues for the similarity between John Buridan's approach to skepticism in the fourteenth century and the modern anti-skeptical strategy carried out by Thomas Reid in the seventeenth century and more recently by John Greco. Second, Klima holds that Buridan's treatment of skepticism is radically different from Thomas Aquinas's approach. The difference between Thomas Aquinas and Buridan is to be traced back to their different descriptions of the mechanism of knowledge. Some things are logically possible for Buridan (and Reid and Greco) which are not for St. Thomas. So, the provocative moral of Klima's paper seems to be that, as far as anti-skeptical strategies are concerned, the turning point must be put between the thirteenth and fourteenth century, not between the fourteenth century and the modern age.

This is of course an extremely clever and stimulating reconstruction. Here I will accept the provocation and just hint at a possible reaction to each of its two main points.

Concerning the relationship between Buridan on the one hand and Reid and Greco on the other hand, there is of course a fourth man lurking around: what about Descartes? So the old problem arises whether ancient and medieval skepticism is radically different from the Cartesian and post-Cartesian one.<sup>1</sup> I think that some argument can be made that the two kinds of skepticism are radically different, and that consequently ancient and medieval anti-skeptical strategies are different from modern ones in an essential respect.

By contrast, concerning the second relationship, namely the difference between Thomas Aquinas's and Buridan's approaches to skepticism, I wonder to what extent they are so different from one other. Both of them seem to be firmly rooted in the Aristotelian tradition. If the existence of the external world is not a problem for Thomas, this is not due to the fact that, because of serious theoretical reasons, he could not even conceive of the possibility of its not existing. The existence of the external world was not a problem for Thomas just because it was not a big problem for Buridan either, namely because both of them subscribed to the Aristotelian tenet that our cognitive faculties are

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<sup>1</sup> M. Burnyeat, "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed," *Philosophical Review* 91 (1982), 3-40.

naturally geared to the external world. Only, Buridan had to deal with the issue of God's omnipotence, which in the fourteenth century had become the big issue on which everybody had to take a stance.

## I

So let me consider the first point. Skeptics, we are told, have no doubt about the certainty of self-awareness, but they maintain that it is impossible to draw a valid inference from known facts of self-awareness to the existence of the corresponding external object. So what is critical is the inference from internal acts (our impressions) to external objects.

This seems indeed to be a correct rendering of the skeptical position from a Cartesian perspective. Now my question is: is it also a correct description of the skepticism endorsed by Nicholas of Autrecourt and attacked by Buridan?

At first sight, it seems it is. After all, Autrecourt holds that the inference from our acts to the existence of external objects is contingent. But I think that here there is a crucial difference. Cognitive acts, in a medieval perspective, are not impressions of which we are certain and immediately self-aware. They are entities naturally directed towards the external world. The only way we can describe and identify them is as cognitive acts *of something external*. So, it is true that God can annihilate the objects of those acts, and that consequently there can be the acts but not the objects, and so the relationship between acts and objects is contingent. But this does not depend on the fact that the acts are internal and "windowless" impressions, so to speak, of which we are immediately aware but from which we must bridge a gap in order to arrive at the external object. By their own nature, the acts are turned towards the external world and so there is no gap to be bridged between them and the world. True, God can annihilate the object of the act and not the act. The mere logical possibility of this state of things means that the relationship between acts and objects is contingent. But this is the contingent condition typical of the natural world, as Buridan maintains. In Aristotelian terms, the relationship between act and object is not necessary but is what happens in most cases; it is not contingent as what happens by mere chance or luck.

So the key fact is that there is no theoretical problem in bridging the gap between an inner world of which we are certain and an external world of which we are not certain. Our cognitive faculties are naturally turned towards the external world. First we know the external world, then, by an act of reflection, we get to know our own acts. There are exceptions to the normal situation, which are due to God's omnipotence. But they are

exceptions and not the normal course of events. It is for this reason that Buridan's strategy against the skeptic is successful. The situation with the Cartesian skeptic is quite the opposite. First we know our inner impressions, then we try to reach the external world.

~~[The difference between these two skeptical attitudes is nicely captured by the way in which Nicholas of Autrecourt describes the impressions to which there correspond no external object. He says that they are false impressions. Now, I doubt whether the Cartesian skeptic would describe them as false: the problem, for Descartes, is that an impression, by itself, can be real and true — for example my hearing the sound of my voice in this moment — while the world might not exist. I think that this difference points to the major difference between the two kinds of skepticism. For the medieval skeptic, there is no gap between our inner states and the external world. An impression is true if and only if there is an external object corresponding to it. Of course, there is the possibility for there being no object corresponding to our impressions, but this possibility must be explained as an exception to the natural order. So, the medieval skeptic needs to refer to God's omnipotence in order to account for the non-existence of the external world. By contrast, Descartes needs God in order to posit the existence of the external world.]~~

Buridan's confutation of skepticism looks very Aristotelian. Each science has its own principles and its corresponding degree of certainty. As Aristotle says, "we should not seek the same degree of exactness in all sorts of arguments"<sup>2</sup>. If the skeptics fail to be persuaded, let them burn their own hand and let us see whether they still doubt if the world exists. This appeal to everyday experience is part of the common stock of arguments against classical skepticism. The fact is that Cartesian skeptics would not be persuaded by it. Actually, this is the whole point about their skepticism. They would retort that the problem is exactly that I get really burnt, in the sense that I really have the impression of being burnt; but that does not imply that there is an external world. The predicament of post-Cartesian philosophy is that we can have true impressions of which we are certain without being certain of the external world. By contrast, both Nicholas of Autrecourt and John Buridan maintain that, if I get burnt and there is no external burning object, my impression of getting burnt is not true but false, and as such it is something that must be explained by referring to a divine intervention.

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<sup>2</sup> Nic. Eth. I, 1109a13-14.

## II

So now let me briefly turn to the second point of Klima's paper. Klima maintains that in Thomas Aquinas the problem of skepticism concerning the existence of the world does not arise because it cannot arise. For, according to Klima, Aquinas holds that the cognitive act by which the intellect gets to know its object is the form of the known object itself. Because it would be contradictory for an object to exist without its form, it follows that the relationship between cognitive act and object is a necessary one. Now, I definitely agree that skepticism is not an issue for St. Thomas. But I think that the reason for this lack of interest in skepticism is not that it is logically impossible for it to arise in Thomas Aquinas's account of cognition. Let me briefly explain how I think that things work in St. Thomas. There is an external object, for example a dog; there is the act of cognition by which our intellect knows the dog; and there is an intellectual likeness of the dog, what Thomas calls 'intelligible species', which is the means by which our intellect is directed to that specific object, in my example a dog. Now, I maintain that neither the act of the intellect nor the intellectual likeness of the object are the form of the object that our intellect knows. True, St. Thomas calls the intelligible species 'a form', but it is the form not of the object but of our intellect, because the intelligible species is what actualizes our intellect when it understands its object. Nothing in our intellect plays the role of the form of the object. So, Thomas's argument is that nothing fails to be what it is by its very form (for example, a man does not fail to be a man); therefore, our cognitive power does not fail to know the external object, because the likeness of the external object is the very form by which the intellect is actualized. But notice that this leaves open the possibility for a likeness of an external object to act as the form of our intellect while at the same time the corresponding object does not exist because God has annihilated it. So, even in Thomas's account of cognition there could be the possibility of an act of cognition of an object without there being such an external object. Theoretically, God could destroy all dogs without destroying their likenesses in our intellect. The reason why Thomas does not deal with this possibility is not that it is precluded to him because of his philosophical assumptions. Simply, the problem did not arise for Thomas because he was much more interested in the current course of events and in the normal functioning of nature than in exceptions. The issue of God's omnipotence will start having a bearing on epistemological problems only after Thomas, for a variety of reasons. Only then will philosophers start being obsessed with the metaphysical and epistemological consequences of God's power to suspend the normal

course of events. But we must recognize that this is not a problem that Thomas had, not because such a problem was theoretically impossible to formulate in his system but probably because it was not a philosophically and theologically significant issue for him. The problem of the existence of the external world will arise only when later medieval thinkers start considering God's omnipotence as the capricious will of a despot rather than as the wise government of a king.