

# 17

## Nicholas of Autrecourt on Skepticism about Substance and Causality

### I The First Letter to Bernard

**1** With all the reverence which, considering the worthiness of the Friars, I feel obligated to show to you, most amiable father Bernard, I wish in the present letter to unfold some points of doubt – or rather as it seems to some people, some obviously inconvenient sequels that appear to follow from what you are claiming – so that, by their resolution, the truth may be more clearly revealed to me and to others. For in a certain report of the lectures that you have delivered in the school of the Friars Minor and released as authentic to whomever wished to have it, I read the following propositions.

**2** The first (which is set forth by you in your commentary on the first Book of the *Sentences*, dist. 3, q. 4) is this:

Clear intuitive cognition is that by which we judge a thing to be, whether it is or is not.

Your second proposition (which is laid down in the place mentioned above) runs as follows:

The inference 'The object is not; therefore it is not seen' is not valid, nor does this hold 'This is seen; therefore it is'.

What is more, there is a fallacy in either of them, just as in these inferences 'Caesar is thought of; therefore Caesar is', 'Caesar is not; therefore Caesar is not thought of'. The third proposition (put forward in the same place) is this:

Intuitive cognition does not necessarily require something existent.

**3** From these propositions I infer a fourth one <saying> that

Every impression we have of the existence of objects outside our minds can be false,

since, according to you, it can exist, whether or not the object is. And still another proposition, which is the fifth one and runs as follows:

In the natural light we cannot be certain *when* our awareness of the existence of external objects is true or false,

because, as you say, no matter whether a thing is or is not, it represents it as being in one and the same manner.

4 And, thus, since anyone who posits the antecedent must also posit the consequent that, by formal implication, is inferred from that antecedent, it follows that because you do not have evidential certitude as to the existence of external objects, you must also concede anything that follows therefrom. *That* you do not have evident certitude of the existence of sensorial objects, is clear, because no one has certitude of any consequent through an inference in which manifestly a fallacy is committed. Now, such is the case here, for, according to you, there is a fallacy here: 'Whiteness is seen; therefore there is whiteness.'

5 But perhaps you want to say, as it seems to me you wished to suggest in a certain disputation at the Black Friars', that although from the act of seeing it cannot be inferred, when the seeing has been produced or is conserved by a supernatural cause, that the object seen exists, even so when it has been produced by causes that are purely natural, with <only> the general influence of the First Agent concurring, – then it can be inferred.

6 But to the contrary: When from some antecedent, if produced by some agent, a certain consequent could not be inferred by a formal and evident implication, then from that antecedent, no matter by what other <agent> it be produced, that consequent could not be inferred either. This proposition is obvious by example and by reason. By an example: In the same way as, if whiteness had been produced by some agent A and it could not be formally inferred then 'There is whiteness; therefore there is colour' – likewise this inference could not be made even if it had been produced by another, no matter which, agent. It is also clear by reason, because the antecedent as such does not vary according as the respective agents vary, nor does the state of affairs signified by the antecedent.

7 Furthermore. Since from that antecedent it cannot be inferred evidently by way of intuitive cognition 'therefore there is whiteness', one must add, then, something to the antecedent, namely what you suggested above, viz. that the whiteness has not been produced or conserved supernaturally. But from this it is clear that I have proved my point. For: When somebody is certain of some consequent only in virtue of some antecedent of which he is not evidently certain whether or not the case is such as <the antecedent> states <it to be>, because that antecedent is not known by the meaning of its terms, nor by experience, nor deduced from such knowledge, but is only believed, – such a person is not evidently certain of the consequent. <Now>, this is the case, if that antecedent is considered together with its modification, as is clear to everybody. Therefore *etc.*

8 Furthermore. In line with your reply <it can be remarked>: Whoever makes an inference from that antecedent taken without that modification added, makes an invalid inference. But the philosophers, such as Aristotle and others, did not add this to the antecedent, because they did not believe that God could impede the effects of natural causes. It follows, therefore, that they were not certain of the existence of sensible things.

9 Furthermore. I ask you if you know all natural causes that are and those that are possible and how much they can do; and how you know evidently, by evidentness reducible to the certitude of the first principle, that there is anything such that its coming into being does not involve a contradiction and which, all the same, can only come into being by God. On these questions I would gladly be given certitude of the kind indicated.

10 Furthermore. You say that, as long as the natural order is intact, there can be an incomplete intuitive cognition of a non-existent thing. I now ask you about your intuitive

knowledge, how you are certain, with an evidentness as described before, *when* your intuitive knowledge is perfect to such a degree that, the natural order being intact, it cannot be of a non-existent thing. I would also be gladly taught about this.

11 Thus, it is clear, it seems to me, that from your claims it follows that you have to admit that you are not certain of the existence of the objects of the five senses. But what might be even harder to stomach: you must say that you are not certain of your own acts, for example, that you are seeing, or hearing; and what is worse, that you are not certain that anything is, or has been, perceived by you. For, in the passage cited above, the first book of the *Sentences*, dist. 3, you say that our intellect does not have intuitive cognition of our actions. And you adduce this argument as a proof: "Every intuitive cognition is clear; but the cognition our intellect has of our own acts, is not a clear one; therefore *etc.*" Now, in keeping with this reasoning, I argue thus: The intellect that is not certain of the existence of things of whose existence it has a clear cognition, will also not be certain about those things of which it has a less clear cognition. But (as was said) you are not certain of the existence of objects of which you have a clearer cognition than you have of your own acts. Therefore.

12 And if you, should say that sometimes some abstractive cognition is as clear as an intuitive cognition (e.g. 'Every whole is greater than its part'), this will not do you any good, because you expressly say that the cognition we have of our own acts is not as clear as an intuitive cognition, and yet intuitive cognition, at least that which is incomplete, does not, within the natural order, yield evident certitude (this is clear from what you say). And thus it follows evidently that you are not certain of the evidentness of your impression. And, consequently, you are not certain whether anything appears to you at all.

13 And it also follows that you are not certain whether a proposition is true or false, because you are not evidently certain whether there is, or has been, any proposition. And what is worse, it follows that if you were asked about the articles of faith whether you believe them, you would have to say 'I am in doubt', because, according to your position, you could not be certain of your act of believing. And I corroborate this as follows: If you were certain of your act of believing, this would be either by means of the act itself and, in that case, the direct and the reflexive act would be identical, which you do not wish to concede, – or else by another act, and in that case, according to your position, you would not be absolutely certain, because, then, there would be no more contradiction involved than when there is vision of whiteness without there being whiteness.

14 And thus, reviewing and summing up your position, it appears that you have to admit that you are not certain of those things which are outside of you. And so you do not know if you are in the sky or on earth, in fire or in water. And, consequently, you do not know whether today's sky is the same one as yesterday's, because you do not know whether or not there was any sky. Just as you do not know if the Chancellor or the Pope exists and, if they exist, whether they are not, perchance, different persons in any given moment of time. Similarly, you do not know what things are in your direct surroundings, as whether you have a head, a beard, hair and the like. Hence it follows *a fortiori* that you are not certain of things which now belong to the past, as whether you have been reading, or seeing, or hearing. Furthermore, your position seems to lead to the destruction of civilian and political life, because if witnesses testify of what they have seen, it does not follow 'We have seen it; therefore it has happened'. Likewise, reasoning along these lines, I ask you how the Apostles were sure that Christ suffered on the cross, that He has risen from the dead, and so on.

15 I wish that your mind would declare itself on all these questions. Indeed, I wonder very much how you can say to be evidently certain even of some theses that are still more

obscure, such as the one concerning the existence of the Prime Mover, and the like, and yet you art not certain of these things and the other ones I have discussed. Furthermore, considering in the light of your position, it is a mystery to me how you propose to show that a cognition is distinct from what is cognised, because you are not certain either, if reasoning along your lines, that there is any cognition or that there are any propositions, and, consequently, nor that there are propositions that are contradictory, since (as I have shown) you do not have certitude as to the existence of your own acts, still according to your position. Moreover, you will not have certitude about your own mind either and, thus, you do not know whether it exists. And, as it seems to me, from your position there follow things that are more absurd than follow from the position of the Academics. And, therefore, in order to avoid such absurdities, I have upheld in disputations in the Aula of the Sorbonne that I am evidently certain of the objects of the five senses and of my own acts.

16 I state these objections against your claims, and many others, so many, indeed, that there is, so to speak, no end to them. I pray you, Father, to instruct me, who, however ignorant, am nevertheless yearning when it comes to acquiring knowledge of the truth. May you abide in Him, who is the Light, and in whom there is no darkness.

## II The Second Letter to Bernard

1 Reverend father, brother Bernard, the admirable depth of your subtlety would be duly recognised by me, if I knew you to possess evident cognition of the immaterial substances; and not only if I were really certain, but even if I could convince myself without too strong an effort of belief. And not only if I believed that you have true cognition of the immaterial substances but also if I deemed you to have cognition of those conjoined to matter. And therefore to you, Father, who claim that you have evident cognition of such sublime objects of knowledge, I wish to lay bare my doubtful and anxious mind, so that you may have the opportunity to lead the way and make me and others partners in your knowledge of such magic things.

2 The first thing that presents itself for discussion is this principle: 'Contradictories cannot be simultaneously true'. Concerning which, two things suggest themselves. The first is that this is the first principle, expounding 'first' negatively as 'than which nothing is prior'. The second is that this principle is first in the affirmative or positive sense as 'that which is prior to any other'.

3 These two statements are proved by means of one argument, as follows: Every certitude we possess is resolved into this principle. And it is itself not resolved into any other in the way a conclusion would into its premise(s). It therefore follows that the principle in question is first by a twofold primacy. This implication is well-known as following from the meaning of the term 'first' according to either of the expositions given. The antecedent is proved with respect to both of its parts. First, as to its first part (to wit, that all our certitude falling short of this certitude is resolved into this principle): Regarding anything proven whatsoever, which falls short of <the evidentness of> this principle, and which you assert you are certain of, I propose this inference: 'It is possible, without any contradiction following therefrom, that it will appear to you to be the case, and yet will not be so. Therefore, you will not be evidently certain that it is the case.' It is clear to me that if I admitted the antecedent to be true, I would <thereby> admit the consequent to be true. And, consequently, I would not in the uncualified sense be evidently certain of that of which I said I was certain. From this it is clear that it is into our said principle that our certitude is resolved. And that it is not

itself resolved into another one in the way a conclusion would into its principle is clear from the fact that all <arguments> are resolved into this one, as has been said. And so it follows 'this one is prior to any other than itself; therefore nothing is prior to it'. And thus it is first with the aforesaid twofold primacy.

4 The third point that presents itself is that a contradiction is the affirmation and negation of one and the same <attribute> . . . *etc.*, as the common formula runs.

5 From this I infer a corollary, namely 'The certitude of evidentness that one has in the natural light, is certitude in the unqualified sense', since it is the certitude that is held in virtue of the first principle, which neither is nor can be contradicted by any true law. Therefore, what is proved in the natural light, is proved unqualifiedly. And, thus, just as there is no power which can make contradictories simultaneously true, so there is no power by which it can happen that the opposite of the consequent simultaneously obtains with the antecedent.

6 The second corollary I infer on this score is: 'The certitude of evidentness has no degrees'. For example, if there are two conclusions of each of which we are 'evidently certain, we are not more certain of one than of the other. For (as has been said) all certitude is resolved into the same first principle. Either, indeed, those conclusions are resolved into the same first principle with equal immediacy – in which case we have no reason for being more certain of one than of the other –, or else one is resolved mediately and the other immediately, and, then, this still is no objection <to my thesis>, because, once the reduction to the first principle has been made, we are equally certain of the one as of the other; just as the geometrician claims that he is as certain of a second conclusion as of the first, and similarly of a third one, and so on, – although, because of the plurality of the deductions, he cannot be, on first consideration, as certain of the fourth or third as of the first.

7 The third corollary I infer, on the basis of what has been said, is: 'With the exception of the certitude of faith, there is no other certitude but the certitude of the first principle, or the one that can be resolved to the first principle.' For there is no certitude but that which is not founded on falsity, because: If there were any certitude that could be based on falsity, let us suppose that it is actually based on falsity. Then, since (according to you) that certitude remains, it follows that somebody will be certain of something whose contradictory opposite is true.

8 The fourth corollary is this: 'Every syllogistic scheme is immediately reduced to the first principle', because the conclusion which has been proved by means of it, either is immediately reduced (and, then, I have made my point), or else mediately; and, then, either there will be an infinite regress, or one must arrive at some conclusion that is immediately reduced to the first principle.

9 The fifth corollary is: 'In every inference that is reduced immediately to the first principle, the consequent, and the antecedent either as a whole or in part, are factually identical', because, if this were not so, then it would not be immediately evident that the antecedent and the opposite of the consequent cannot simultaneously be true, without contradiction.

10 The sixth corollary is this: 'In every evident inference, reducible to the first principle by as many steps as you please, the consequent is factually identical with the antecedent, or with part of what is signified by the antecedent.' This is shown as follows: Suppose that some conclusion is reduced to the certitude of the first principle by three steps, then in the first consequence, which is evident with the evidentness reduced to the certitude of the first principle, the consequent will be factually identical with the antecedent, or with part of

what is signified by the antecedent (in virtue of the fifth corollary); and similarly in the second inference (by the same corollary), and in the third one as well (by the same corollary). And, thus, since in the first inference the consequent is factually identical with the antecedent, or with part of what is signified by the antecedent, and likewise in the second, and similarly in the third, – so it follows, from the first to the last, that in this series of inferences, the last consequent will be factually identical with the first antecedent, or with part of what is signified by the first antecedent.

11 In accordance with these statements, I have laid down elsewhere, among others, this thesis: 'From the fact that some thing is known to be, it cannot be inferred evidently, by evidentness reduced to the first principle, or to the certitude of the first principle, that there is some other thing.' Among other arguments (which were quite numerous) I brought forward this argument: "In such an inference in which from one thing another thing would be inferred, the consequent would not be factually identical with the antecedent, nor with part of what is signified by the antecedent. It therefore follows that such an inference would not be evidently known with the aforesaid evidentness of the first principle. The antecedent is conceded and posited by the opponent. The implication is plain from the definition of 'contradiction', which runs 'an affirmation and a negation of one and the same <attribute> . . . etc.' Since, then, in this case the consequent is not factually identical with the antecedent, or with part of the antecedent, it is manifest that, assuming the opposite of the consequent, and the antecedent to be simultaneously true, there still would not be an 'affirmation and negation of one and the same <attribute> . . . etc.'"

12 But Bernard replies, saying that although in this case there is no formal contradiction, for the reason given, yet there is a virtual contradiction; he calls that contradiction virtual from which a formal one can be evidently inferred.

13 But against this you can argue manifestly, on the basis of the fifth and the sixth of the above corollaries. For in these it has been shown that in every inference either mediately or immediately reducible to the certitude of the first principle, it is necessary that the consequent, – whether the first one given or the last – be factually identical with the antecedent first given, or with part of it.

14 It can also manifestly be refuted on the basis of another argument, namely as follows: He says that, although in an inference in which from one thing another thing is inferred, there is not a formal contradiction, yet there is a virtual one from which a formal one can be evidently inferred. Well, let us propose, for example, the following inference: 'A is; therefore B is'. If, then, from the propositions 'A is' and 'B is not', a formal contradiction could be evidently inferred, this either would be the case by assuming one or more consequents of one of these propositions, or else of each of these propositions. But whichever way it is, the point is not made. For these consequents would either be in fact identical with their antecedents, or they would not. If identical, then: just as there will not be a formal contradiction between those consequents, because there would not be an affirmation and a negation of one and the same <attribute>, – likewise this would not be the case between the antecedents either. Just as, if there is no formal contradiction in saying that a man is and a horse is not, so there would not be a formal contradiction either in asserting a rational animal to be and a neighing animal not to be; and this for the same reason.

15 If it be said, however, that these consequents differ from their antecedents, then (just as before) the implication is not evidently known, with the evidentness reduced to the certitude of the first principle, because the opposite of the consequent would be compatible with whatever is signified by the antecedent, without contradiction. And if one should say



that there is a virtual contradiction from which a formal can be inferred, we will go on as before. And, thus, it <either> would be an infinite process, or else it will be necessary to say that in an inference that is evident in an unqualified sense, the consequent is identical in its meaning with the antecedent or part of what is signified by the antecedent.

16 What this father has said with regard to this matter, is true, <viz.> that it would not be correct to say that, in an inference which is evident in an unqualified sense, it is required that the opposite of the consequent, and the antecedent contradict. For he says that here is a plain counter-instance: 'Every animal is running; therefore every man is running'; indeed, the contradictory of the consequent, and the antecedent can simultaneously be false, and are, therefore, not opposed as contradictories.

17 In actual fact, however, this by no means impedes <what I am maintaining>. For I do not mean to say that the opposite of the consequent must be the contradictory of the antecedent, for in many inferences the antecedent can signify more than does the consequent, albeit that the consequent signifies part of what is signified by the antecedent, as is the case in the inference that has been put forward: 'There is a house; therefore there is a wall'. And on this account the opposite of the consequent, and the antecedent can be both false. But what I mean to say is that in an evident inference, the opposite of the consequent, and the antecedent, or part of what it signifies, are opposed as contradictories.

18 It is obvious that this is the case in every valid syllogism. For since no term occurs in the conclusion without occurring in the premisses, therefore the opposite of the conclusion, and something of what is signified by the premisses, are opposed as contradictories. So it must also be in every valid enthymeme, because an enthymeme is only conclusive in virtue of some withheld proposition; and thus it is a sort of mental syllogism.

19 Furthermore. As to my main thesis I presented the following argument: "Never, in virtue of any implication, can there be inferred a greater mutual identity between the extreme terms than that which existed between the extremes and the middle term, because the former is only inferred in virtue of the latter. But the opposite of this would happen, if from the fact that one thing is a being, it could evidently be inferred that something else is a being, because the predicate and the subject of the conclusion signify what is in fact identical, whereas they are not in fact identical with the middle term, by which some other thing is posited."

20 But Bernard counter-instances against the proposed rule: "It follows evidently, with the evidentness reduced to the certitude of the first principle, 'There is whiteness; therefore there is something else', because there can only be whiteness if some substrate sustains it in being. Likewise it follows 'A is now for the first time; therefore there was something else <before>'; similarly, 'Fire is brought into contact with the hemp; and there is no impediment; therefore there will be heat.'"

21 To these counter-instances I have elsewhere given many answers. But for the present I claim that if he came up with a thousand such counter-instances, either he would have to admit that they are not to the point, or else, if relevant, yet they argue nothing conclusively against me, since in such inferences as he states, the consequent is in fact identical in its meaning either with the antecedent as a whole, or with part of the antecedent, and, therefore, the argument is not to the point, because in that case I would admit the inferences to be evident, and this would not be inconsistent with my position. But if it should be said that the consequent is not identical with the antecedent, or with part of it, then, too, if I admit the opposite of the consequent, and the antecedent to be simultaneously true, it is patently clear that I am not admitting contradictories, because a contradiction concerns one and the

same <attribute> . . . *etc.*, even so such an inference is not evident either with the evidentness of the first principle, since, it was said, one speaks of 'evidentness of the first principle' when, if to admit that the opposite of the consequent is compatible with the antecedent would amount to admitting that contradictories are simultaneously true. For although someone who, with regard to this inference 'There is a house; therefore there is a wall', admits that there is a house and there is not a wall, does not <thereby> admit that contradictories are simultaneously true (because the propositions 'There is a house' and 'There is not a wall' are not contradictories, for they can be simultaneously false), – yet he does admit contradictories for another reason, <*viz.*> because someone who indicates that there is a house indicates that there is a wall; and then the contradiction occurs that there is a wall and that there is not a wall.

22 From this rule, thus made plain to whoever is gifted with intellect, I infer that Aristotle never possessed evident knowledge about any substance other than his own soul – taking 'substance' as a thing other than the objects of the five senses, and other than our formal experiences. And this is so, because he would have possessed knowledge of such a thing prior to all discursive thought – which is not true, since they are not perceived intuitively, and <if they were> also rustics would know that there are such things. Nor are they known by discursive thought, namely as inferred from what, prior to any discursive thought, is perceived to be – for from one thing it cannot be inferred that there is another thing, as the above thesis states. And if he did not possess evident knowledge of conjoined substances, *a fortiori* he had no such knowledge of abstract ones.

23 From this it follows – whether you like it or not, and let them not impute it to me, but to the force of argument! – that Aristotle in his entire natural philosophy and metaphysics possessed such certitude of scarcely two conclusions, and perhaps not even of one. And father Bernard, who would not put himself above Aristotle, possesses an equal amount of certitude, or much less.

24 And not only did Aristotle possess no evident knowledge, but, worse than that, – although I do not hold this as a tenet, I have an argument that I am unable to refute, to prove that he did not even possess probable knowledge. For nobody possesses probable knowledge of a consequent in virtue of an antecedent of which he is not absolutely certain whether the consequent has once obtained simultaneously with the antecedent. For, if one considers it properly, it is in this way that probable knowledge is acquired, For example, because it was once evident to me that when I put my hand toward the fire, I was hot, therefore it seems probable to me that if I should do it now, I would be hot. But from the rule stated above it follows that it was never evident to anyone that, if these things which are apparent before any discursive thought existed, there should be some other things, that is, which are called substances. From this it follows that we do not possess probable knowledge of their existence. I am not committed to this conclusion. Let anyone who can think up a solution refute this argument.

25 And that we do not possess certitude concerning any substance conjoined to matter other than our own soul is clear: When a log or a stone has been pointed out, it will be most clearly deduced that a substance is there, from a belief accepted simultaneously. But this cannot be inferred from a simultaneous belief evidently. For, even if all kinds of things are perceived prior to such discursive thought, it can happen, by some power, namely the divine, that no substance is there. Therefore in the natural light it is not evidently inferred from these appearances that a substance is there. This inference is apparent from what has been explained above. For it was said that an inference which is evident in the natural light



is evident in an unqualified manner, so that it is a contradiction that by some power it could occur that the opposite of the consequent would be compatible with the antecedent. And if he says that the inference *is* evident when it is added to the antecedent that 'God is not performing a miracle', this is disproved along the same line of argument as is found in a similar case in the first letter to Bernard.

**26** Please, Father, take notice of these doubts and give counsel to my lack of wisdom, I believe that I will not be obdurate in evading the truth for which I am gasping with all my strength.