



The Emancipation of Man in Latin Averroism and the Negation of Immortality

Pierre Hyacinth Conway, O. P.

Volume 2, Number 1, 1946

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019758ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019758ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Conway, P. H. (1946). The Emancipation of Man in Latin Averroism and the Negation of Immortality. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 2(1), 117–131. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019758ar>

The Emancipation of Man in Latin Averroism and the Negation of Immortality

One universal characteristic of the Greek gods was their immortality. Nor was this attribution a mere anthropomorphic projection, an «alienation» in the sense of Feuerbach. On the contrary, the greatest gods of Homer and Hesiod are impersonal. Thus a hero could not be the son of Moira or Ouranos, although he could be the son of Zeus¹. Immortality was posited in the heroes by establishing for them some kind of relationship with the gods. Immortality was recognized as a kind of possession of the divine. It was not the correction of an alienation whereby man eventually comes to attribute to himself what previously in his ignorance he attributed to the gods, but rather the recognition in man of some share in that transcendency and incorruptible power which were detected in the universe. Thus the gradual evolution of the notion of human immortality in Greek philosophy is not based upon anthropomorphic concepts but rather upon the recognition in man of something of the divine.

The anthropomorphic conception of the gods is constantly on the wane from the time of Homer and Hesiod, whereas the concept of human immortality grows ever clearer, to reach its fullest expression in Plato and Aristotle. The personal gods were to become more and more human until they merited no more than a casual lip service addressed to them on esthetic grounds or to justify otherwise reprehensible practices with a semblance of religion. The impersonal divine power on the other hand was to become more and more impersonal and assume its role, in the hands of the first philosophers, as the constituent stuff of the universe, endowed with divine qualities. This supreme causal power, ruling both the gods and the universe, was destined to receive an ever clearer and purified delineation. Human immortality appears in Greek philosophy simultaneously with a recognition of some participation of this divine power in man. Thus, far from being an appendage to a superstitious belief in the gods of Olympus, the gradual ascendancy of a belief in human immortality owes itself rather to the growth of the belief that every man, and not just the few beloved by the gods, shared in some way in the divine power originating from a supreme natural productive force, from a divine substance, the exact nature of which the first Greek philosophers set out to resolve.

1. Cf. R. K. HACK, *God in Greek Philosophy to the Time of Socrates*, Princeton 1931, p.16.

The mystery religions had already secured for man a participation in the divine immortality by initiation when Thales undertook the first fundamentally rational explanation of the universe. It is noteworthy that whereas Homer and Hesiod in their partially anthropomorphic cosmogonies did not postulate any innate immortality for man, Thales, on the other hand, in the first recorded rationalistic explanation, is also cited by Choerilus of Samos and Diogenes Laertius as being the first to call the souls of men immortal. For Thales, as quoted by Aristotle, «everything is full of gods». Not by attribution, nor by initiation, but by nature, man and every moving thing share in the divinity and consequently in immortality.

Anaximander, the pupil of Thales, while substituting the Indeterminate for the Water of Thales, nevertheless retains immortality as an essential part of this divine substance which pervades all things. Speaking of this Infinite and Indeterminate, Aristotle says: «Further, they identify it with the Divine, for it is 'deathless and imperishable', as Anaximander says, and governs and directs all things»¹. Pythagoras, a mathematician as well as a mystic, taught that the soul was immortal, imprisoned in the body for some previous unearthly fault, a doctrine common to the Orphic religions and mentioned by Plato in the *Phaedo*². Aristotle quotes Alcmaeon as saying that it is immortal «because it resembles the immortals, and that this immortality belongs to it in virtue of its ceaseless movement»³. Heraclitus likewise, by postulating the all-pervading presence of the ever-evolving divine Fire, also imparts a share of immortality to man. The same is implied in the notion of the all-embracing Being of Parmenides. «The opinions of mortals», of which Parmenides speaks, implies the distinction in man of the human and the divine by which he participates in Being.

The gradual epuration of the concept of the all-pervading divinity whereby its nature is progressively withdrawn from that which is material and corruptible and crystallized in the concept of something which is immaterial culminates in the *Nous* of Anaxagoras. The *Nous* penetrates all things but is not sullied by them⁴. While animated by the *Nous* man shares in the divine immortality.

It remained for Plato and Aristotle to identify a participation in the immaterial and immortal divine as a definite property of human nature. In delineating the attributes of the spiritual divinity progressively arrived at, Plato and Aristotle, whose achievements come as the crowning glory of centuries of philosophic spadework, were inevitably led to discern certain of the same indestructible divine characteristics in man, principally his power to reason, with its consequent capacity to order and perceive order. and to grasp things eternal. From this divinity in man to the immortality of the spiritual part of man is but a logical step, obscure and faltering though it may be.

1. *Physics*, III, chap.4, 203b12.

2. 62b.

3. *On the Soul*, I, chap.2, 405a29.

4. PLATO, *Cratylus*, 413c.

Thus Plato writes in the *Timaeus*:

We are a plant not of earthly but of heavenly growth. . . . He who has been earnest in the love of knowledge and of true wisdom, and has exercised his intellect more than any other part of him, must have thoughts immortal and divine, if he attain truth, and in so far as human nature is capable of sharing in immortality, he must altogether be immortal . . .¹

Aristotle, arriving at the immortality of the soul by the nature of the operation of the mind is even more explicit. « . . . While the faculty of sensation is dependent upon the body, mind is separable from it »². — « When mind is set free from its present conditions it appears as just what it is and nothing more: this alone is immortal and eternal . . . »³ What is Aristotle's conclusion from the knowledge of the immortality of the soul? It is a truly noble one.

If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything⁴.

Thus, arriving at the peak of Greek philosophy, whose love of truth and healthy reason have always been taken as a model by subsequent philosophers, one is confronted with a distinct and unequivocal assertion of immortality. Possibly the place of the individual concrete man in this immortality remains obscure, but the destiny of man is certainly linked in a special way with the divine, the immortal. That man is a mere creature of clay who sinks back into the earth that bore him, there to be dissolved into dust and oblivion, is a thought completely foreign to Plato and Aristotle.

It is only with the advent of modern philosophy that in the name of enlightenment and emancipation all that is above man, that supreme and divine Goodness and Truth for which his soul instinctively yearns, the idea of a life that can rise above pure material necessity, is violently and brutally torn from his thoughts. His search for supreme truth and goodness is blocked at every turn and he is forced by all possible means, both physical and intellectual, to turn his gaze downward and seek his happiness in grovelling in the earth.

Two thousand years after human reason had reached, in its effort to ascertain man's true nature, the heights of Plato and Aristotle, heights that the greatest Christian philosophers, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, in their exposition of the natural doctrine of immortality for man, needed only to develop and clarify, modern philosophers, such as Feuerbach, Engels, Dewey and Russell have reached depths in their estimate of the true nature of man which place them far below even the most primitive

1. *Timaeus*, 90.

2. *On the Soul*, III, chap.4, 429b. See the important study by MARCEL DE CORTE, *La doctrine de l'intelligence chez Aristote*, Paris, Vrin, 1934.

3. *Ibid.*, 430a.

4. *Ethics*, X, chap.7, 1177b30.

of the philosophers of ancient Greece, whom, nevertheless, they pretend to emulate.

Thus A. Levy can write of Feuerbach's *Rimes on Death*: «Il renonce au royaume des anges; il a des idées païennes, il ne veut pas aller chez les ombres: il préfère se disperser au sein de la nature et servir d'aliment aux vies nouvelles qui germent sans cesse. Tout le rythme du monde n'est qu'une danse avec la mort; entrons joyeusement dans le cortège»¹. Engels, who rejoiced that Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* had once more placed materialism on the throne, can say no more for the destiny of man. From the accent on life, which led the Greeks to the doctrine on immortality, now the accent is on death, on oblivion, on the inexorable extermination of man, body and soul.

Already no physiology is held to be scientific if it does not consider death as an essential factor of life, the *negation* of life as being essentially contained in life itself, so that life is always thought of in relation to its necessary result, death, which is always contained in it in germ. The dialectical conception of life is nothing more than this. But for anyone who has once understood this all talk of immortality of the soul is done away with. Here, therefore, by means of dialectics, simply becoming clear about the nature of life and death suffices to abolish an ancient superstition. Living means dying².—Matter ... with the same iron necessity ... will exterminate on the earth its highest creation, the thinking mind ...³

Thanks to such philosophers, John Dewey, who bears modestly upon his brow the laurels of the dean of American philosophers, can cheerfully announce, as though humanity had now reached the millenium and the fruition of centuries of thought: «The existence of God, immortality, disembodied spirits, cosmic purpose and design, as these have been customarily interpreted by the great institutional religions, are denied by naturalists for the same generic reasons that they deny the existence of fairies, elves and leprechauns»⁴. The results of this magnificent emancipation are succinctly summed up by Bertrand Russell in his essay *A Free Man's Worship*: We must build our soul's habitation «on the firm foundations of unyielding despair»⁵.

How to explain this enormous perversion of the dignity of man? The explanation is already contained in the doctrine of the fall of the angels and in the fall of our first parents through pride, that seeking of one's own excellence through oneself and for oneself, a sin which is based upon excellence and which perversely grows with the magnitude of that excellence. The fitting natural punishment is that if man wants excellency of himself, he should tend towards that which he is of himself,—nothing. This trend towards nothingness is clearly distinguishable in the evolution of modern philosophy: in order to be what he is of himself, man must eliminate all that bespeaks more expressly a dependence upon God, and in particular, immortality.

1. *La Philosophie de Feuerbach*, Paris 1904, p.51.

2. F. ENGELS, *Dialectics of Nature*, New York 1940, p.164.

3. *Ibid.*, p.25.

4. *Essay in Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, New York 1944, p.45.

5. *Mysticism and Logic*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1932, p.48.

One may scorn such a scriptural and theological prevision of man's revolt as a myth, or at best a divinized projection of man's own nature, but the historical fact remains that the independent seeking of man's excellence, the attempt to establish a homocentric universe, which began with Averroism and the Renaissance, has led step by step to the progressive denial of the very attributes upon which that excellence is founded. The striving of man to be his own God is leading him steadily to debase himself lower than animals, lower than plants, lower than matter, to absolute nothingness.

Thus, in the interests of holding his own excellence for himself, man in revolt is led to deny the most sublime even of his natural prerogatives, that which raises him above and beyond all the vast material universe, namely, his spirituality and consequent immortality. In seeking to be great by himself and through himself man necessarily abdicates from those very goods which constitute the greatness which is his goal.

It is often taken for granted that the emancipation of human reason coupled with the negation of immortality first took form during the period of the Renaissance. In the words of Engels the Renaissance «was the greatest revolution that the world has so far experienced». Burckhardt, the Renaissance scholar, writes in *Die Kultur der Renaissance*:

Im Mittelalter lagen die beiden Seiten des Bewusstseins—nach der Welt hin und nach dem Innern des Menschen selbst—wie unter einem gemeinsamen Schleier träumend oder halbwach. . . . In Italien zuerst verweht dieser Schleier in die Luft; es erwacht eine objektive Betrachtung und Behandlung des Staates und der sämtlichen Dinge dieser Welt, überhaupt daneben erhebt sich mit voller Macht das Subjektive; der Mensch wird geistiges Individuum und erkennt sich als solches¹.

The deeper principles of the Renaissance, however, are not of the Renaissance, which is characterized more by particular applications of these principles than by discovery. These principles are already fully articulate in the medieval world, and the full realization of their disastrous import was the occasion of St. Thomas' most vehement polemic writings: *De Aeternitate mundi contra murmurantes* and *De Unitate intellectus contra Averroistas parisienses*. Père Mandonnet, in his work *Siger de Brabant*², has gathered some of the essential data concerning St. Thomas' principal adversary in this most significant of controversies. Utilizing such data³ it becomes evident that it was Averroism and not the Renaissance which was the turning point in the modern revolt of man, a fact clearly recognized by St. Thomas who foresaw its disastrous consequences.

1. J. BURCKHARDT, *Die Kultur der Renaissance*, Wien 1860, p.76.

2. PIERRE MANDONNET, O.P., *Siger de Brabant et l'averroïsme latin au XIII^e siècle*, 2e éd., in the collection LES PHILOSOPHES BELGES, Louvain, 1ère partie, 1911; 2e, 1908.

3. Our aim in this article has been, not to present new material, but merely to stress the Averroistic doctrine of the One Intellect and of its corresponding negation of personal immortality, as one of the earlier and most striking phases in the movement toward the contemporary nihilist theory and practice of the emancipation of man from what is better than man and, consequently, from what is best in man himself.

These writings of St. Thomas¹ were directed against the Parisian Averroists and their leader, Siger de Brabant, and were followed by the condemnation of the doctrines of his school by the Bishop of Paris in 1270. That these doctrines were well entrenched is seen by the fact of an even more severe condemnation in 1277 resulting in the flight of Siger and his internment by Rome².

That St. Thomas' attack upon them was extremely foresighted is implicitly acknowledged in Ernst Cassirer's attribution of Averroism as a fundamental influence in the thought of Renaissance philosophers.

We know the strong influence that Averroism exerted on scholastic thought, and we know how it gradually conquered the entire scientific world. In 1270 Etienne Tempier, Bishop of Paris, summoned the faculty of masters of theology to condemn thirteen Averroistic theses. But not all the prohibitions following each other in quick succession were able to prevent the spread of Averroism in the universities. . . . Averroism ends by appearing, in the form expressed in the School of Padua, as «science» pure and simple. The reason for this lies less in its empirical content of knowledge than in its conceptual *form* and in the basic theoretical conviction it stood for. For only within the framework of Averroism could there be, under the conditions of medieval culture, anything like an «autonomous» physics, an interpretation of natural phenomena independent of theological presuppositions. It was this function that gave Averroism its meaning, even within the sphere of Christian culture, and secured its exceptional position — despite all the keen criticism directed against it from the side of the real defenders of the Christian faith like Thomas Aquinas. Within its own field Averroism was invincible, so long as it offered the only possibility and the only assurance of a scientific physics³.

In subsequent pages of his essay, Cassirer is at pains to show how Pico remained faithful to Averroism. Thus, according to Cassirer, while following the Mosaic story of creation in the Heptaplus, and elsewhere the neo-Platonic tradition and the category of emanation, «he always returned to the support of the Arabian philosophy, and considered it indispensable for the theoretical structure of knowledge»⁴. Elsewhere he emphasizes the Averroistic influence upon Renaissance Platonists such as Marsilio Ficino and their materialistic counterparts such as Pomponazzi⁵. A final confirmation of the pervading influence of Averroism upon the Renaissance is indicated in its renewed condemnation by the Fourth Council of the Lateran⁶.

The object of St. Thomas in writing the two polemical works above-mentioned was precisely to show the nature of this new «autonomous»

1. The same subjects are treated in *Contra Gentes*, I, cc.31-37; II, cc.70-71, 76-81; III, cc.43-45.—*Q. D. de Anima*, tot.—*Q. D. de Spiritualibus Creaturis*, aa.2, 3, 9, 10.—*Ia*, q.76, aa.1-2; q.79, aa.4-5, etc.

2. We confine ourselves to Siger as St. Thomas knew him, that is, the Averroist of the «manière forte». The Siger «manière mitigée» revealed in later works presented by F. VAN STEENBERGHE (*Siger de Brabant d'après ses œuvres inédites*, I, *Les œuvres inédites*, Coll. LES PHILOSOPHES BELGES, XII, Louvain 1931), is no longer fully representative of the radical tendency we are here concerned with. Cf. M. DE WULF, *Histoire de la philosophie médiévale*, 6e éd., Louvain 1936, t.2, nn.270-277, pp.185-201.

3. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *A Study in the History of Renaissance Ideas* in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol.III, 1942, nn.2, 3, pp.135-136. Permission to quote has kindly been granted by the Editors.

4. *Ibid.*, p.136.

5. *Individuum und cosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*, Leipzig, Teubner, 1927, p.135.

6. DENZINGER, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 1932, n.738.

physics. According to Cassirer, there is nothing in the principles of Averroism that could raise any problem for the philosophic reason.

The problem only arises and can only continue to exist, if reason makes no use of its basic right, the right of independent critical examination, but surrenders itself to dogma. Within the limits prescribed by the medieval picture of the world, Averroism is the attempt at a rational explanation of nature¹.

The true significance of the fundamental assumption of what Cassirer calls «the basic right of independent critical examination» in Averroism is laid bare by St. Thomas and it goes far deeper and has a far greater extension than even Cassirer suspected. To him it is a conception «prescribed by the limits of the medieval picture». Its influence extended through to the Renaissance but was destined in Cassirer's mind to be superseded by a new conception eliminating the so-called «Subjekt-Objekt» conflict. St. Thomas saw its roots extending back to the primordial revolt of man and its off-shoots becoming a nesting place for a revolt extending indefinitely beyond his own time. He saw farther than Cassirer, although the latter arrived on the scene many centuries later.

Averroism, and more particularly Latin Averroism, is only one facet of a more comprehensive drive for the emancipation of mind. In fighting Siger de Brabant, the contemporary leader of the Parisian Averroists, St. Thomas was at once meeting the challenge of modern thought and continuing the work of the Founder of his Order. One of the main occupations of St. Dominic's life was his preaching against the Manichaean doctrines of the Albigenses and the Cathari. One of the most significant positions of the Manichaeans was that the *electi*, those who submitted themselves to all the demands of their religion, were themselves redeemers of their own person. In this the Manichaeans concur with and rejoice Pelagianism.

What were these fundamental tendencies in Parisian Averroism which so aroused the apprehension of St. Thomas and provoked the stern language of his polemics? They are found in the propositions condemned in 1270, themselves contained principally in Siger de Brabant's work, *De Anima intellectiva*. They may be summed up under four headings: Denial of divine Providence in the order of contingency; eternity of the world; numerical unity of the human intellect; denial of free will. A further elaboration of their contents brings to light the following doctrines: God knows nothing of what is outside Himself. God does not know singulars. Human actions are not subject to divine Providence. The world is eternal. There was no first man. There is numerically only one intelligence for all men. It is false or improper to say that it is man who understands. The soul which is the form of man as such is destroyed by death. God cannot give immortality or incorruptibility to a thing which is corruptible and mortal. The separated soul after death cannot suffer by corporeal fire. All that takes place in the world is subject to the influence of the

1. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *loc. cit.*, p.135.

heavenly bodies. The will of man wishes or chooses under the empire of necessity. Free will is a passive not an active power, and is necessarily moved by its desires¹.

All these notions can be derived from the notion of the intellect in Averroistic doctrine. It is of such a nature that it supersedes God and divests the individual man of responsibility for his actions. This doctrine is contained in the treatise *De Necessitate et contingentia causarum* of Siger's school. The first cause produces of itself, immediately and necessarily, the first intelligence, which is thus co-eternal with it. It is the sole immediate effect of the first cause which produces all other beings through the mediation of subordinated causes. Whatever thus proceeds is produced necessarily but in a certain order. It follows that the production of the world and its coexistence with the first cause are necessary and eternal. Furthermore, once God has produced the world which proceeds from Him by necessity of nature as opposed to free creation by science and will, He has no further control over it, since the first cause produces its effects only through intermediary causes such as the celestial bodies. The effect of these causes can be impeded and sometimes is. Thus contingency reigns in the world and the only necessity here recognized is due merely to the *fact* that an effect is not impeded, i.e. things happen here below of necessity only when no obstacle happens to prevent them from happening necessarily²!

Hence, God is no Lord of the world, can have no concern for it, and in this sense can be said to have no connection with it. While He is mediately its cause, yet the world has the independence of being necessarily produced by Him and as eternal as God Himself. There is, then, a respect in which the creatures are commensurate with God, and in this they are independent of Him. They are subject to no laws since their necessity is none other than the necessity of the world's being. And even the very truth concerning the universal nature of these beings is posterior to, and dependent upon their givenness in singular concretion. Thus the statement «man is rational animal» can be true only if man actually exists³. In other words, the creature becomes, in its own physical being, the very measure of any universal truth concerning its nature. This again brings out sharply a radical independence.

At first sight, the Averroistic strife for the emancipation of man seems to be just the opposite of the emancipation and self-redemption of man, since its teaching of the numerical unity of the human intellect involves

1. Cf. MANDONNET, *Siger de Brabant*, 1ère partie, p.112.

2. Cf. MANDONNET, *op. cit.*, pp.163-164. St. Thomas rejects this kind of necessity as absurd: «Sciendum etiam quod quidam definierunt esse necessarium, quod non habet impedimentum; contingens vero sicut frequenter, quod potest impediri in paucioribus. Sed hoc irrationabile est. Necessarium enim dicitur, quod in sui natura habet quod non possit non esse: contingens autem ut frequenter, quod possit non esse. Hoc autem quod est habere impedimentum vel non habere, est contingens. Natura enim non parat impedimentum ei quod non potest non esse; quia esset superfluum».—*In II Physicorum*, lect.8, n.4.

3. Cf. MANDONNET, *op. cit.*, pp.117, 131.

the denial of personal immortality and personal responsibility. But, as will be seen, this was merely a logical and wholly plausible detour during which momentum would be gathered for an ever more bold and open self-assertion. How, then, do the Averroistic positions attacked by St. Thomas contribute to the modern idea of the emancipation of man, and, more particularly, how does the denial of personal immortality function in this emancipation?

Averroism, at least Latin Averroism, presents a paradox at every step. To say, for instance, that it stands for freedom and autonomy in philosophy is an over-simplification of the question. The natural reason of the Averroists is not at all the natural reason St. Thomas distinguishes from faith, as Cassirer would lead us to believe, and as the Averroists themselves would have us believe. The Averroistic conflict between reason and authority is actually a conflict between the *authority* of human reason and the authority of supernatural faith. The Averroists' authority of human reason is that of Aristotle, and they argue from Aristotle for their positions concerning the unity of the human intellect and the eternity of the world. It is from human authority that they argue for the absolute independence of human reason. A few citations from Averroes will suffice to make evident that Aristotle's authority is for the Averroists synonymous with the absolute independence of human reason. Thus his genius is vested with an absolute and inerrant quality.

Credo enim quod iste homo fuerit regula in natura, et exemplar, quod natura invenit ad demonstrandum ultimam perfectionem humanam in materiis.—Aristotelis doctrina est summa veritas, quoniam eius intellectus fuit finis humani intellectus, quare bene dicitur, quod fuit creatus et datus nobis divina Providentia, ut sciremus quidquid potest scribi.—Laudemusque Deum qui separavit hunc virum ab aliis in perfectione, appropriavitque ei ultimam dignitatem humanam, quam non omnis homo potest, in quacumque aetate attingere.—Composuit alios libros in hac arte (physica), et in logica et metaphysica; et ipse invenit et complevit has tres artes (that is, the totality of science in the Aristotelico-Averroist classification). Invenit, quia quidquid invenitur scriptum ab antiquis in hac scientia, non est dignum quod sit pars artis huius, nec ambiguitas etiam, nedum quod principia essent. Complevit, quia nullus eorum, qui secuti sunt eum usque ad hoc tempus, quod est mille et quingentorum annorum, nihil addidit, nec invenit in eius verbis errorem alicuius quantitatis. Et talem virtutem esse in individuo uno miraculosum, et extraneum exitit. Et haec dispositio, cum in uno homine reperitur, dignus est esse divinus magis, quam humanus.—Et per hanc virtutem divinam inventam in ipso, fuit ipse inventor scientiae, et complens, seu perficiens eam, et hoc raro invenitur in artibus, quaecumque ars fuerit, maxime in hac arte magna. Sed diximus quod ipse fuit inventor et complens, nam dicta aliorum Antiquorum de his rebus non sunt digna ut sint dubitationes in his rebus, et a fortiori ut sint principia.¹

This servile submission to a human authority in matters of natural reason, this rational dogmatism, is extremely significant, both from the point of view of emancipation and from the polemic point of view. So long as «rerum veritas» is the norm, reason itself is independent of any human authority, and we cannot argue scientifically for the truth from any philosopher no matter how great. But when reason is centered in authority, then reason may claim, in some definite matter, freedom to assert what is or is not, even before it has discovered the true reason for

1. Apud MANDONNET, *op. cit.*, pp.153-154.

the assertion. Hence, even in the face of a given revealed truth, we would claim the *right* to hold a contradictory opinion. Thus one is confronted with an absolute right, prior to reason, that is, prior to strictly scientific evidence for the position one might hold. Thus man has to give no other reason for his positions than this right.

St. Thomas' concept of the freedom of natural reason is wholly opposed to this authoritarianism. A conflict between faith and reason can arise only in the realm of opinion, as distinct from science. Reason must reject its positions only when they are but opinions. This primacy of reason in matters of natural *science* on the one hand, and the Averroist's primacy of the authority of human reason in the person of Aristotle on the other, explains the difficulty St. Thomas had to cope with and of which one is vividly aware in every page of the *De Unitate intellectus*.

One feels that even when St. Thomas shows that the Averroists cannot even invoke the *littera* of Aristotle in favor of their position, he will fail to impress them. To what St. Thomas calls reason, that reason which is either the «why» of things, or our own reason which is posterior to things and prior to Aristotle, the Averroists substitute the primacy of the letter. St. Thomas supposes that even in reading an author such as Aristotle, reason comes first. The author's positions are to be judged in the light of truth. «*Studium philosophiae non est ad hoc quod sciatur quid homines senserint, sed qualiter se habeat veritas rerum*»¹. To this is opposed the notion of the authority of the philosopher, and in particular Aristotle, by Siger and Averroes. «*Quaerendo intentionem philosophorum in hoc, magis quam veritatem, cum philosophice procedamus*»².

Hence, in theory, the Averroist prescinds from reason as understood by St. Thomas, and any primacy accorded to reason in this sense will be an imposition, a tyranny imposed over and above that philosophy, that truth, which lies in the authority of the letter. Logically, then, reason may not be appealed to for the sake of interpreting the letter as to its truth or error. The truth is true *a priori*, and reason must conform to this truth. What the letter asserts, and what is, so far as we are concerned, are identical. Hence any reason prior to the letter must be wholly subjective. The authority of Aristotle thus frees the Averroist from the «tyranny» of reason, and the use of this reason in the reading of the letter, either to agree with it or to disagree with it, will be interpreted as reading subjective reason into the letter.

Yet we ask: Whence comes the knowledge of the letter? Necessarily from him who constitutes himself the custodian of the authority of the letter. Whence comes the meaning of the letter? Necessarily from the arbitrary reason of the custodian thus self-constituted. Thus reason, and even the reason of Aristotle himself, is excluded by the authority of Aristotle, since Aristotle himself is not used in the interpretation of the letter. So

1. *In I de Caelo*, lect.22, n.8.

2. Apud MANDONNET, *op. cit.*, p.145.

much is implied in the supposed power and right of the reason to contradict even supernatural faith which has a necessity, if not based upon human reason, at least consonant with it. In other words, what we would call arbitrariness of interpretation becomes, in the hands of the Averroists, the freedom of reason, *the freedom of reason from reason itself*. The reason which contradicts this absolutely independent reason will be called arbitrary. Thus, in the end, the Averroistic freedom of reason will make the letter express what arbitrary reason, the freedom of reason, wants it to express. In the name of freedom from authority, the tyranny of arbitrary reason is imposed, a reason limited by nothing but its own good pleasure, as against the strictures of valid science, and genuine authority which is, if not subject to human reason, at least reasonable.

This arbitrary interpretation of Aristotle in the name of the authority of reason unfettered is further confirmed by what the Averroists actually hold Aristotle to teach concerning the unity, or unicity, of the human intellect, and the truth of a proposition such as «man is rational». We insist upon the unity of truth, which is the measure of intellect in speculative matters. The divine intellect is the cause of the truth of things and it is one. Our intellect, however, is subject to opinion. For the Averroist, human reason is one and it shines forth so completely in Aristotle that what the letter of Aristotle says becomes the authority for all future thought. Aristotle's letter becomes as the temporal measure for all human learning. Thus, the human intellect becomes prior to the things themselves from which knowledge should come to us, and its unity is substituted for the unity of truth. In making this *rapprochement* between the divine unity of truth and the unity of the Averroistic intellect, one is only drawing the very conclusion that St. Thomas drew in his *Opusculum*, namely, that the Averroistic intellect is not only separated but is God Himself¹.

According to the Averroists, that intellect which is the best in man, is eternal. Along with the world, it is necessarily co-eternal with God. In this absolutely necessary universe, the separated intellect of man is as secure as God Himself. Hence the Averroistic insistence, from the philosophical point of view, on the eternity of the universe. The Thomistic position that, from the viewpoint of philosophy, it is impossible to ascertain whether the world is eternal or not, since this depends upon whether God freely wills it to be from all eternity or not, was to the Averroists a blemish both on the being and on the power of the human intellect left to itself. Such uncertainty would mean that, without revealed truth, one cannot determine by oneself the actual condition of what is greatest in man. It is only if the one intellect is both eternal and able to demonstrate its necessity, its eternity, that it can make a complete *reditio ad principium* to itself as to an absolute self even in the face of God. Whether this intellect is ours in the personal sense or not, the important thing is that it is «in us», and that we can hold up that which is in us as self-possessive in its necessary

1. *De Unitate intellectus contra Averroistas parisienses* (ed. KEELER), Rome 1936, pp.69-70.

eternity. The eternity of the world and of the human intellect is thus an emancipation from all contingency, an exaltation of the self in the uncreated super-self at the expense of God's freedom and of His concern for us. This emancipation from contingency is thus at the same time an emancipation from the absolutely necessary being that is God. Man cannot raise himself above himself, by himself, without diminishing the divinity itself.

Averroism not only emancipates the intellect and the world as a whole from God by conferring upon them absolute necessity, but it deprives God of the knowledge of singulars and of that which is left of contingency in the universe. This too is an emancipation of the world from God. Divine government does not reach the singulars, nor does it reach human actions. In our necessity, the realm of singulars and contingency is really ours. The world of man is thus complete in itself. Man is fully at home with himself. Actually, the Averroist holds that God should concern us no more than we concern Him. One is left to wonder why God should be at all. Indeed Averroism is much more radical than the Critique of Kant who still held firmly the necessity of belief in God and immortality as an indispensable condition of the practical life. The immediate implications of Averroism are so «advanced» that only the temporary authority of Aristotle and the temporal authority of the time seem to have prevented the «modern spirit» in the Middle Ages from openly eliminating God and boldly asserting the complete independence and self-sufficiency of man.

Since Averroism has been presented as the medieval form of the seeking for, and emancipation of, the self, of the exaltation of the absolute dignity of the self, how can such an effort at complete self-possession involve the denial of personal immortality? The coincidence of these two ideas is more logical than first appears. They are a typical illustration of the idea that the exaltation of the self leads ineluctably toward self-destruction, toward spiritual suicide.

Dignity means *bonitas propter se*. The intellectual creature, St. Thomas says, surpasses all other creatures both in the perfection of his nature and in the dignity of his end. The intellectual creature surpasses others by the dignity of his end because the rational creature alone by its own operation attains to the last end of the universe, namely by knowing and loving God, whereas other creatures cannot attain to the last end except by a remote participation of His likeness¹. Hence the true dignity of man comes from his ability to reach this end, and the full achievement of this dignity is accomplished only in the actual attainment of this end.

The Averroistic intellect, however, is entirely self-sufficient. It is not merely incorruptible, it is necessarily eternal. Yet this very self-sufficiency is accompanied by the destruction of the individual soul's personal immortality. The exaltation of the first entails the destruction of the latter. Such an attempt is a true case of the alienation by which Feuerbach will explain away God. The one intellect is as a means of

1. *Contra Gentes*, III, c.111.

escape from any form of subjection to God Himself. Whether, in Averroism, the intellect is mine or not is not important. The main point is that there be freedom.

This idea will be pushed to its most logical conclusion in Marxism. So far as my person is concerned, why should not the Averroistic intellect become identified with the eternal necessity of matter, provided that it emancipates my person from God? Why not submit my own actions to necessity, why not subject myself to the indignity of irresponsibility, provided that this frees me from the divine law?

St. Thomas, in his *Opusculum*, attacks the Averroists on the two-fold score of both misinterpreting the letter of Aristotle and of abusing reason itself. The first refutation is completed by the second. For while it is conceivable that a person could innocently misinterpret the letter of Aristotle in an erroneous way and unintentionally contradict the truth, if this interpretation is shown to militate against obvious reason, it is necessarily a deliberate effort to conceal and establish a purely arbitrary interpretation under the authority of an author. The Averroists openly recognized St. Thomas and St. Albert the Great as their adversaries, since Siger in his writings pays them the unheard-of compliment in medieval writing of naming his two contemporaries explicitly: *Praecipui viri in philosophia, Albertus et Thomas*. On what grounds does he attack them? Not on the grounds of reasoning incorrectly, but on the grounds of misinterpreting Aristotle: *Isti viri deficiunt ab intentione Philosophi, nec intentum determinant*¹. In other words, they are accused, not of reasoning incorrectly, but of violating the authority of the letter of Aristotle, which, as interpreted by the Averroists, assumes a truth of its own, independent of rational truth or supernatural truth. *Quaerendo intentionem philosophorum in hoc, magis quam veritatem, cum philosophice procedamus*². That this Averroistically interpreted letter of Aristotle is the norm of all truth is evident from the previously cited words of Averroes.

Thus St. Thomas, in demonstrating that the Averroists pervert the meaning of Aristotle, does not attribute to them an honest error, as he does in refuting other authors, but accuses them of deliberate and therefore arbitrary misinterpretation. After showing that the Averroistic interpretation, involving as it does the erection of the independent mind into God Himself and the denial of personal immortality, is not only against the sense of Aristotle, but also against the interpretation of other commentators as equally qualified as Averroes, such as Themistius, Theophrastus, cited by Themistius, and Avicenna and Algazel, St. Thomas concludes: *Unde miror ex quibus Peripateticis hunc errorem se assumpsisse gloriantur, nisi forte quia minus volunt cum ceteris Peripateticis recte sapere, quam cum Averroae oberrare, qui non tam fuit Peripateticus quam philosophiae Peripateticae depravator*³. Throughout the *Opusculum*, Averroes is treated to: *perverse exponit*.

1. MANDONNET, *Siger de Brabant*, p.174.

2. *Ibid.*, p.145.

3. *De Unitate intellectus*, p.38.

In refuting the Averroistic interpretation by reason, St. Thomas exposes the manifest absurdities they involve. If the intellect is separated, so also is the will, and morality perishes. Reflecting, and making laws become vain, and social and civil life is destroyed¹. Thus those who followed Siger's doctrines could say that if St. Peter was saved, all men were saved and there was no need for any special striving on the part of the individual. Likewise it would be impossible to learn anything from a teacher or from experience, since by the unity of the intellect one would already possess the teacher's knowledge and the separated state of the intellect would dispense with the phantasms of experience. Thus truth becomes independent both of science and experience. The separated intellect becomes God, since all knowledge is one both objectively and numerically. Likewise, since knowledge is a knowledge of species, i.e. of the means of knowing, not of things, knowledge is not truly objective, as Kant was later to announce as a great discovery².

St. Thomas terminates his *Opusculum* by a famous challenge to the Averroists to come out in the open and refute what he has said of them. *Si quis autem gloriabundus de falsi nominis scientia, velit contra haec quae scripsimus aliquid dicere, non loquatur in angulis nec coram pueris qui nesciunt de tam arduis judicare; sed contra hoc scriptum rescribat, si audet; et inveniet non solum me, qui aliorum sum minimus, sed multos alios veritatis zelatores, per quos ejus errori resistetur vel ignorantiae consulatur*³.

That the errors of the Averroists were far from smothered is evident from an attack upon them in a sermon which St. Thomas preached before the University. In it he accuses them of proposing doctrines against the faith and giving the words of Aristotle as justification, without, however, daring to openly admit the implications of the contradiction. *Inveniuntur aliqui qui student in philosophia, et dicunt aliqua quae non sunt vera secundum fidem; et cum dicitur eis quod hoc repugnat fidei, dicunt quod Philosophus dicit hoc, sed ipsi non asserunt, imo solum recitant verba Philosophi*. The authority of the letter alone must suffice, especially when a clear affirmation would have been extremely dangerous. Aristotle could not be pursued, but Siger de Brabant could. What does St. Thomas say of this tactic? *Talis est falsus propheta, sive falsus doctor, quia idem est dubitationem movere et eam non solvere quod eam concedere; quod signatur in Exod. (xxi, 33), ubi dicitur quod si aliquis foderit puteum, et aperuerit cisternam et non cooperuerit eam, veniat bos vicini sui, et cadat in cisternam, ille qui aperuerit cisternam teneatur ad eius restitutionem*. That one of the doctrines attacked was that of immortality is evident from St. Thomas' citation of it as a source of confusion in pagan philosophy which the Averroists would make coin of to oppose the limpidity of the faith. *Plus scit modo una vetula de his quae ad fidem pertinent, quam quondam omnes philosophi. . . . Sed quae vetula est hodie quae non sciat quod anima est immortalis? Multo plus potest*

1. *De Unitate intellectus*, p.57.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.70-73.

3. *Ibid.*, p.80.

*fides quam philosophia: unde si philosophia contrariatur fidei, non est acceptanda*¹.

The pit opened by the Averroists who proposed the letter of Aristotle as a reason which could without further substantiation oppose faith and natural reason had not been laid open in vain. While Siger did not dare to defend openly its implications, his less cautious followers did it for him. Thus, among the statements condemned by the Papal Legate in 1276 there are the following: Theology is founded on fables; the only wise men in the world are the philosophers; Christianity is an obstacle to science; the only happiness is in this world; death is the end of all; one should not pray; fornication is not a sin.

This then is what Cassirer calls «an attempt at a rational explanation of nature . . . 'science' pure and simple»: a reason which does not dare to reason, which seeks to hide behind authority, a reason which denies the very rights of reason. This duplicity is evident since the Latin Averroists, after concluding that their doctrines are substantiated by reason, promptly assert their readiness to hold the contrary by faith, which while making the faith hold the impossible, is also to completely disown the validity of reason, something St. Thomas never did. «Adhuc autem gravius est quod postmodum dicit: *Per rationem concludo de necessitate, quod intellectus est unus numero; firmiter tamen teneo oppositum per fidem*»².

When faith has been supplanted by force, the successors of the Averroists will be equally willing to throw over reason for force. With reason jettisoned in the name of arbitrary authority masquerading as the freedom of reason, that is, freedom to contradict itself, there is nothing left to prevent man from serenely plunging to destruction in the name of emancipation. God and the immortality of the soul, the two most fundamental truths natural reason can demonstrate, are dismissed without regret. The philosopher is then left with the eventually hopeless task of ruling a world he did not make and delighting his soul with the nourishment of worms.

PIERRE HYACINTH CONWAY, O.P.

1. *Sermo III: «Attendite a falsis prophetis . . .», Opera omnia* (ed. FRETTE), Paris, Vivès, t.32, p.676.

2. *De Unitate intellectus*, p.79.