

*On Buridan's Alleged Alexandrianism: Heterodoxy and Natural  
Philosophy in Fourteenth-Century Paris*

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In the third and final version of his *Questions on Aristotle's 'De Anima'*, John Buridan devotes four questions near the beginning of Book III to the nature of the human intellect: whether it is the substantial form of the human body (Q.3); whether it is a form inhering in the human body (Q.4); whether there is one intellect by which all men understand (Q.5); and finally, whether the human intellect is everlasting [*perpetuus*] (Q.6). What is unusual about these questions is that they discuss not a problem or puzzle from the actual text of *De Anima*, which was the subject of Buridan's lectures, but a controversy that arose among authorities trying to fill out Aristotle's ambiguous remarks about whether the human soul can survive the death of the body. As is well known, Aristotle says that only the part of the soul that actually does the thinking is "immortal and eternal" when separated from the body (*De An.* III.5.430a23-25). What Aristotle meant by this is difficult to say.<sup>1</sup> But what he could have meant was a matter of enormous controversy in late antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages, when the question of the immortality of the human soul was treated by Christian, Islamic, and Jewish thinkers alike. Indeed, modern philosophical psychology owes much to the intense discussion of this question throughout the medieval period.<sup>2</sup> It is no accident that Descartes arrives at the conclusion that he is a thinking thing; the notion that thinking is somehow bound up with immortality has been with western philosophy almost since the beginning.

Although the vast majority of questions in Buridan's commentaries correspond to lemmas from the text he is lecturing on, only Q.6, the last of the four questions on the nature of the human intellect, is based on

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., D. W. Hamlyn, *Aristotle's De Anima, Books II and III*, Oxford 1968, 139-40.

<sup>2</sup> I have sketched some of the connections in my *Substance and Soul: The Late Medieval Origins of Early Modern Psychology*, in: Stephen F. Brown (ed.), *Meeting of the Minds: The Relations Between Medieval and Classical Modern European Philosophy*, Turnhout 1998, 121-39. See also chapter 13 of my *John Buridan: Portrait of a Fourteenth-Century Arts Master*, Notre Dame 2003.

something Aristotle actually says—in this case the aforementioned ambiguous remark. So we need to ask why he felt bound to raise the issue, devoting several questions to topics hardly even mentioned in Aristotle, given that he was supposed to be lecturing on *De Anima*. The answer is that he was doing what any good teacher would do: diverging from the assigned text in order to help his students appreciate its significance. He is absolutely candid about his intentions here. In the first question of the group, after setting out the initial arguments for and against the thesis that the intellect is the substantial form of the human body, he says, “this question has been raised to distinguish opinions about the intellect, so that we will see how they agree and disagree; later, we will inquire about their differences”.<sup>3</sup>

According to Buridan, “there have been three renowned [*magis famosae*] opinions about this intellect”: that of Alexander of Aphrodisias, that of Averroes, and finally, what he calls “the truth of our faith [*veritas fidei nostrae*]” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.3: 22-23). He proceeds to summarize them for his students. There is the materialist view of Alexander, according to which the human intellect is the material form of the body, and hence unable to survive its death; the monopsychism of Averroes, who argues that the human intellect is a unique, immaterial form able to survive bodily corruption because it is not actually in the body; and the truth of the faith, according to which the human intellect is actually in the body as its form, but also able to survive bodily death and corruption. These appear to be the only “renowned opinions”. No others are mentioned. And only the opinion of the Catholic faith is designated as “the truth [*veritas*]”.

There is a remark in Q.6, the last question of the group, that nicely bookends the entire discussion. “The truth of this question is apparent from the preceding”, Buridan says, meaning the opinion of the Catholic faith that the human intellect is everlasting, “but it has been raised so that everything might be reviewed together”.<sup>4</sup> By way of summarizing the discussion of the previous questions, he then states the conclusions some-

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<sup>3</sup> “Ista quaestio mota est ad distinguendum opiniones de ipso intellectu ut videatur in quo conveniunt et in quo differunt, et quod postea inquiratur de differentiis earum.” All quotations from Buridan’s *Quaestiones in libros Aristotelis De Anima secundum tertiam sive ultimam lectionem* [*QDA*<sub>3</sub>] are from my *John Buridan’s Philosophy of Mind: An Edition and Translation of Book III of his ‘Questions on Aristotle’s De Anima’ (Third Redaction), with Commentary and Critical and Interpretative Essays*, Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University 1989 (UMI #9001313). References are by book, question, and page number.

<sup>4</sup> “Veritas huius quaestionis apparet ex praecedentibus, sed mota est ut omnia recolligantur simul” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 48).

one might reach if he were “to use natural arguments alone [*solum rationibus naturalibus uteretur*]”, by means of principles evident to his senses and intellect, “without a special and supernatural revelation [*sine speciali et supernaturali revelatione*]”.<sup>5</sup> There follows a list of seven conclusions we can reach about the metaphysical attributes of the human intellectual soul on the basis of natural reason alone. Buridan describes them almost as if he is setting out the logical space within which reason can operate:

C1 If the human intellect has always existed, it will always exist in the future.<sup>6</sup>

This is the standard metaphysical claim that the human intellect's everlastingness is bi-directional, meaning that it cannot cease to exist at some future time if it has always existed in the past. It is worth pointing out that on Buridan's view, natural reason does not assent to *anything* having been made through creation. It is properly concerned with things that come into existence through generation only (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 49).

C2 If the human intellect is not everlasting, it would be (i) generated and also (ii) corruptible, (iii) derived from a material potentiality, (iv) materially extended, and (v) numerically many, in keeping with the number of individual human beings.<sup>7</sup>

According to the second conclusion, an intellect that is not everlasting will be metaphysically indistinguishable from its body, as we could substitute ‘body’ for ‘intellect’ above and attributes (i)-(v) would still hold. Indeed, with the addition of the thesis that the human soul inheres in the human body, which seems natural to associate with (i)-(v), we arrive at what Buridan calls as “the opinion of Alexander” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 51).

C3 If the human intellect is not generated (or corruptible, or derived from a material potentiality, etc.), it would be everlasting.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Et enumerato primo conclusiones quas aliquis poneret si sine fide catholica solum rationibus uteretur, per principia ex speciebus habentibus evidenciam per naturam sensus et intellectus, sine speciali et supernaturali revelatione” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 48-9).

<sup>6</sup> “Prima [conclusio] est quod si intellectus esset perpetuus a parte ante, ipse esset perpetuus a parte post” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 49).

<sup>7</sup> “Secunda [conclusio] est quod si intellectus non esset perpetuus a parte ante et a parte post, ipse esset genitus et corruptibilis et eductus de potentia materiae et extensus extensione materiae et multiplicatus multiplicatione individuorum” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 49).

<sup>8</sup> “Tertia conclusio infertur ex secunda praecedendo ex opposito consequentis ad oppositum antecedentis: scilicet quod si intellectus non est eductus de potentia materiae, ipse est

Buridan notes that C3 follows from C2 above by the logical rule permitting us to move “from the opposite of the consequent to the opposite of the antecedent” in a good consequence.

C4 If the human intellect is not derived from a material potentiality, it does not inhere in matter.<sup>9</sup>

C4 follows from C3, we are told, because if an everlasting human intellect inhered in the matter of the body, it would continue to inhere in it when that body becomes a corpse or continuous with the earth—which, Buridan insists, “no one would say [*nullus diceret*]” (presumably because it is contradictory for the human intellect to inform anything other than a living, human body) (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 50). Although he does not explicitly say so, the position described in C3-4 corresponds to what Buridan earlier refers to as “the opinion of Averroes” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.3: 22).

We then move on to a series of ‘meta-conclusions’, or conclusions based on the conclusions already stated in C1-4:

C5 In the following two groups, six attributes are “consequences of each other”:<sup>10</sup>

### The Alexandrian Position

The human intellect is:

- (i) not everlasting
- (ii) generated and corruptible
- (iii) derived from a material potentiality
- (iv) inherent in matter
- (v) materially extended
- (vi) numerically many

### The Averroist Position

The human intellect is:

- (i) everlasting
- (ii) not generated or corruptible
- (iii) not derived from a material potentiality
- (iv) not inherent in matter
- (v) not materially extended
- (vi) not numerically many

Buridan says that these two attribute lists (which I have labeled ‘Alexandrian’ and ‘Averroist’) can be inferred from C1-4. In other words, the meta-

perpetuus; et similiter, si non est extensus, ipse est perpetuus; et si non est multiplicatus, ipse est perpetuus” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 49).

<sup>9</sup> “Quarta conclusio: quod si non est eductus de potentia materiae, ipse non inhaeret materia” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 50).

<sup>10</sup> “Quinta conclusio: quod haec sex se mutuo consequuntur: intellectum esse perpetuum, non esse genitum nec corruptibilem, non esse eductum de potentia materiae, non inhaerere materiae, non esse extensum extensione materiae, et non esse multiplicatum. Et similiter sex opposita illorum consequuntur se mutuo: scilicet, non esse perpetuum, esse genitum vel corruptibilem, esse eductum de potentia materiae, inhaerere materiae, esse extensum et esse multiplicatum. Haec enim tota conclusio infertur ex praecedentibus” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 50).

physical attributes associated with Alexandrian materialism form a logically consistent set, as do the attributes associated with Averroist monopsychism; the members of one set are simply the negations of the members of the other. What Buridan appears to be doing here is presenting the opinions of Alexander and Averroes to his students as *antinomies* of human reason, i.e., as equally plausible positions between which we have no rational grounds to decide. This is the 'logical space' on the question of the soul's immortality alluded to above.

C6 The human intellect inheres in the human body.<sup>11</sup>

Buridan says that this sixth conclusion is "categorical", meaning that it can be asserted all by itself rather than as following from some other assumption about the human intellect, such as its being everlasting or materially extended. He adds that this "was previously posited and proved [*haec fuit prius posita et probata*]", a reference to his presentation in Q.4 of four "natural arguments" against the Averroist position that the intellect is not actually in the body. These arguments are not explicitly identified with the Alexandrian position, although Buridan does think "a pagan philosopher would maintain the position of Alexander [*puto quod philosophus paganus teneret opinionem Alexandri*]" [QDA<sub>3</sub> III.4: 32]. They are:

A1 A separate intellect would not be part of the essence or substance of a human being because it would be extrinsic to it.<sup>12</sup>

A2 A separate intellect would be either one or many; not one since contradictory psychological states would be in the same subject at the same time, e.g., if you believe P and I believe not-P (the argument for this alternative is given in the next question, at QDA<sub>3</sub> III.5: 42-43); not many, because in that case our separate intellects would not move when our bodies do, leading to the absurdity that my intellect is no closer to me than it is to you.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "Sexta conclusio est categorica: quod intellectus humanus inhaeret corpori humano" (QDA<sub>3</sub> III.6: 50). I here drop the possibly spurious addition from several manuscripts, "inheres in the human body *without the matter* (or perhaps, 'inheres in the human body *or matter*'—the manuscripts in question have either '*sine materia*' or '*sive materiae*', and it is hard to tell which, given that the words are virtually indistinguishable in scribal shorthand), a reading which is attested in one of the best manuscripts, Wien, ÖNB 5454.

<sup>12</sup> "Prima est quia aliter illa non esset de essentia hominis, vel homo non esset essentialiter unum aliquid" (QDA<sub>3</sub> III.4: 32).

<sup>13</sup> "Secunda ratio est quia vel poneretur quod esset unicus intellectus omnium hominum, vel quod essent plures secundum pluralitatem hominum. Sed utrumque apparet inconueniens. Primum inconueniens est quod ponatur unicus, sicut post videbitur. Et etiam declaro

A3 Many separate intellects would not explain how Socrates understands something but not Plato, since there is no relation between the intellect and their bodies; therefore, parsimony compels us to posit only one separate intellect (Buridan concedes that this argument is “close” to the preceding one).<sup>14</sup>

A4 A separate intellect would have to be everlasting and unique, since natural reason does not recognize any way for things to come to be in time other than by generation—in which case it would also be corruptible, like the body.<sup>15</sup>

With the shortcomings of the Averroist position now evident, we can turn to the Alexandrian:

C7 The human intellect is generable and corruptible, extended, derived, inherent, and multiplied.<sup>16</sup>

Buridan explicitly identifies C7 as “the opinion of Alexander”, noting that it is “inferred”, although he does not say what it is inferred from (presumably from C6, the categorical assertion of which would yield the other

quod non debet poni alius mihi et alius tibi, si non esset inhaerens, quia: Ponamus quod illi sint A (tuus) et B (meus). Tunc oportet quod sint eiusdem rationis, et quod non sint mobiles ad motum tuum vel meum, cum non inhaereant nobis. Ideo intellectus A non esset tibi proximior vel magis approximatus quam intellectus B est mihi, nec e converso, scilicet antequam uterque nostrum intelligeret. Ideo ratio naturalis non dictaret quod A esset magis tuus quam meus” (*QDA<sub>3</sub>* III.4: 32).

<sup>14</sup> “Tertia ratio est propinqua praecedenti: scilicet quod intellectus Sortis vel movetur de loco ad locum cum Sorte, vel non. Si dicas quod sic, hoc non videtur naturaliter dictum, cum non inhaereat sibi (non enim posset dari modus per quem hoc fieret, utrum tactu vel pulsu; non enim posset dici qualis esset alligatio intellectus ad corpus Sortis, propter quod continue moveretur cum corpore Sortis, hoc non potest dici, specialiter antequam Sortes aliquid intelligeret). Si vero dicas quod non moveretur de loco ad locum cum Sorte, tunc distaret ab intellectu suo. Ideo non posset intelligere per ipsum, nisi tu diceres quod ille intellectus esset ubique per indistantiam, sicut diceremus de deo. Et tunc non esset ponendus nisi unus, quia ita esset mihi proximus sicut tibi, specialiter antequam uterque nostrum intelligeret. Ideo possem per istum ita intelligere sicut tu, et ita esset fictitium ponere alium tibi et alium mihi. Unde ob hoc creditur Commentator quod esset unicus, quod postea improbabitur” (*QDA<sub>3</sub>* III.4: 33).

<sup>15</sup> “Quarta ratio est quia humana ratio, circumscripta fide, aut etiam fides, non dictaret quod intellectus tuus esset antequam tu esses, nisi poneretur perpetuus et unicus, sicut voluit Commentator. Si autem esset factus de novo, hoc aut esset per modum creationis, quod ratio naturalis, circumscripta fide, non dictaret, aut hoc esset per modum generationis naturalis, et tunc esset eductus de potentia materiae et inhaerens” (*QDA<sub>3</sub>* III.4: 33-4).

<sup>16</sup> “Septima conclusio inferitur (quae erat opinio Alexandri): quod est generabilis et corruptibilis, extensus, eductus, inhaerens et multiplicatus” (*QDA<sub>3</sub>* III.6: 51).

five Alexandrian attributes said to be consequences of each other in C5). Notice, however, that Buridan stops short of *asserting* C7, or of claiming that the opinion of Alexander is true, since he has already reserved that judgment for the opinion of the faith. In fact, he says that we must firmly maintain that “not all of these conclusions are true, since they are against the Catholic faith”, even though “the opposing conclusions are not demonstrable without a special and supernatural revelation”.<sup>17</sup>

Our tour of Q.6 is almost complete. The doctrine of the faith is next enumerated in six conclusions or theses parallel to those found in the Alexandrian and Averroist positions. According to this view:<sup>18</sup>

### The Doctrine of the Faith

The human intellect is:

- (i) everlasting
- (ii) not generated or corruptible
- (iii) not derived from a material potentiality
- (iv) inherent in matter
- (v) materially extended
- (vi) numerically many

In other words, the position of the faith on the nature of the human intellect combines the first three attributes (i-iii) of the Averroist position and the last three attributes (iv-vi) of the Alexandrian position. Good logician that he is, Buridan realizes that these attributes cannot be consequences of each other. Therefore, he tells us, “all of the authorities opposed to these conclusions must always be denied, even though we cannot demonstrate their opposites”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “Sed tamen firmiter tenendum est quod non omnes conclusiones sunt verae, quia sunt contra fidem catholicam. Sed credo quod oppositae conclusiones non sunt demonstrabiles sine speciali et supernaturali revelatione” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 51).

<sup>18</sup> “Nunc narrandae sunt sine probationibus conclusiones vel propositiones quae in hac materia secundum fidem catholicam sunt tenendae. Quarum prima est quod intellectus humanus non est perpetuus a parte ante, sed est perpetuus a parte post. Secunda conclusio est quod intellectus non est proprie genitus generatione naturali, sed creatus; nec est proprie corruptibilis corruptione naturali, sed est annihilabilis, et tamen non annihilabatur. Tertia conclusio est quod iste intellectus non est eductus de potentia materiae, nec extensus. Quarta conclusio est quod est multiplicatus secundum multiplicationem hominum. Quinta est quod est inhaerens corpori humano seu materiae quamdiu vivit homo, et est separabilis a corpore et iterum revertetur” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 51).

<sup>19</sup> “Et omnes auctoritates quae hiis conclusionibus opponuntur sunt semper negandae, licet non possumus oppositas earum demonstrare” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 51).

Buridan signals something important to his students by not asserting the opinion of Alexander. For if none of the propositions definitive of the Alexandrian position is categorically asserted, no consequences will follow from them, in which case we can conclude nothing about the nature of the human intellect from his assumptions. For demonstrative proof it is necessary to construct a syllogism, which Buridan defines as a “consequence that asserts the antecedent and the consequent”.<sup>20</sup> Otherwise, whether the human intellect is everlasting remains a dialectical question, where doubt cannot be eliminated. In Buridan’s mind, the difference between the dialectician and the demonstrator is in how they ask their questions. “The dialectician asks his questions in the form of a disjunction of both sides of a contradiction, giving the choice to the respondent”, he says, “but the demonstrator propounds assertively the proposition to be proved, and then it is a question, for it is a dubitable proposition, but the same [proposition] after the demonstration is the conclusion”.<sup>21</sup> Since demonstration is aimed at removing doubt concerning a proposition from the minds of those considering it, there can be no options for the respondent, no alternative ways for the dialectic to unfold. The movement is always from a question or “dubitable proposition, which is turned by a demonstration into a certain and known conclusion”.<sup>22</sup>

Now it might be objected here that the Alexandrian position is demonstrable for Buridan because he asserts C6 categorically. C6 appears to satisfy the fourth member of that position, and we know from C5 that if we can demonstrate just one of the attributes the others will follow because they are all consequences of each other, as follows:

- P1 If anything inheres in matter, it is not everlasting.  
 P2 The human intellect inheres in matter [from C6]  
 C Therefore, the human intellect is not everlasting

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<sup>20</sup> Johannes Buridanus, *Summulae: De syllogismis*, 5.1.3, in: Gyula Klima (tr.), *John Buridan: ‘Summulae de Dialectica’*, New Haven-London 2001, 309: “consequentia consequentis et antecedentis assertive.”

<sup>21</sup> Johannes Buridanus, *Summulae: De demonstrationibus*, 8.3.2, ed. L. M. de Rijk, Groningen-Haren 2001, 64, 17-20: “Dialecticus enim quaerit sub disiunctione de utraque parte contradictionis, dans electionem respondentū . . . Demonstrator autem proponit assertive propositionem demonstrandam, et illa tunc est quaestio, quia est dubitabilis propositio, et eadem post demonstrationem est conclusio”; transl. in Klima 2001 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 20), 666-7.

<sup>22</sup> *Summulae* 8.3.3, ed. De Rijk, 69, 2-3: “dubitabilis propositio, quae per demonstrationem efficitur conclusio certa et scita”; transl. in Klima 2001 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 20), 670-1.

And so on for the other attributes in the Alexandrian position. Buridan thus appears committed to Alexandrian materialism about the human intellect, contrary to everything he has said about the truth of the opinion of the faith.

Obviously, the text of C6 presents an interpretive conundrum. But its significance is much greater in the eyes of Olaf Pluta, who in a recent article argues that Buridan was an Alexandrian materialist about the human intellect who, because of the threat of persecution by Church authorities, “did not dare to give all his arguments against immortality”.<sup>23</sup> Instead, he expresses his materialism obliquely, arguing in favor of Alexander’s position on the basis of natural reason “leaving aside the Catholic faith [*fide catholica circumscripta*]”, and leaving it for “the reader to draw the final conclusion [from C5 and C6] concerning the question of immortality, namely that the human intellect consequently is not everlasting and hence immortal”.<sup>24</sup>

This interpretation is not new. Commentators from Georg Schwartz in the fifteenth century to Konstanty Michalski in the twentieth have read Buridan’s apparent ambivalence towards Alexander as evidence that he was an Alexandrist.<sup>25</sup> But as Anneliese Maier observed in reply to Michalski’s interpretation, “one cannot really say that he [i.e., Buridan] decides in favor of the teaching of Alexander of Aphrodisias; throughout his arguments and conclusions, Buridan goes his own way, and then states only that his results agree with those of Alexander”.<sup>26</sup> As we have seen, Buridan agrees with Alexander only when he tries to imagine what a pagan philosopher would conclude based on natural reason alone. But Buridan is not a pagan philosopher. Indeed, any claim that Buridan was an Alexandrian is going to run headlong into the following facts: (1) he never asserts that Alexander’s opinion on the intellect is true (though he does say this about

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<sup>23</sup> Olaf Pluta, *Persecution and the Art of Writing. The Parisian Statute of April 1, 1272, and Its Philosophical Consequences*, in: Paul J. J. M. Bakker (ed.), *Chemins de la pensée médiévale. Études offertes à Zénon Kaluza*, Turnhout 2002, 575.

<sup>24</sup> Pluta 2002 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 23), 583.

<sup>25</sup> For Schwartz, see Pluta 2002 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 23), 584-5. For Michalski, see *L’Influence d’Averroès et d’Alexandre d’Aphrodisias dans la psychologie du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Bulletin Internationale de l’Académie Polonaise des Sciences et Lettres, Classe de Philologie, Classe d’Histoire et de Philosophie (1928), 14-6.

<sup>26</sup> Anneliese Maier: “man kann auch nicht eigentlich sagen, dass er sich für die Lehre Alexanders von Aphrodisias entscheidet: Buridan geht im Argumentieren und Schliessen durchaus seinen eigenen Weg und konstatiert dann nur, dass seine Ergebnisse mit denen Alexanders übereinstimmen” (*Metaphysische Hintergründe der spätscholastischen Naturphilosophie, Studien zur Naturphilosophie der Spätscholastik*, vol. 4, Roma 1955, 27).

the contrary opinion of the faith);<sup>27</sup> (2) he does assert that “not all [of Alexander’s] conclusions are true”;<sup>28</sup> (3) he says things elsewhere that are incompatible with what he would have known of Alexander’s position,<sup>29</sup> remarking, for example, that Alexander does not posit an immaterial intellect, “as we do [*sicut nos ponimus*]”;<sup>30</sup> and (4) there is never any suggestion in the *Quaestiones in libros Aristotelis De Anima* or elsewhere in his writings that he hopes to redeem Alexander for Christian philosophy, which is surely the sort of project he would take up if he really thought Alexander was right.

But Pluta is undeterred. He argues that Buridan had good reason to *disguise* his true position on the intellect because of the Arts Faculty Statute of April 1, 1272, which he describes as a “landmark statute in the history of persecution of philosophical thought” that became “a forceful instrument to curtail and control any heterodox philosophical thought during the later Middle Ages”.<sup>31</sup> Originally directed against the Latin Averroists, the statute decreed that masters and bachelors in the faculty of arts at Paris could no longer dispute properly theological questions, e.g., concerning the Trinity and the Incarnation, and that when a question concerned both faith and philosophy, it must be determined on the side of the faith, and any arguments going against the faith must be resolved or declared to be simply and absolutely false.<sup>32</sup> Violators of the

<sup>27</sup> “Tertia opinio est veritas fidei nostrae . . .” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.3: 22).

<sup>28</sup> “Sed tamen firmiter tenendum est quod non omnes conclusiones sunt verae . . .” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 51). He does not say which, but presumably he means the first three conclusions (i-iii) of the Alexandrian position.

<sup>29</sup> I say “would have known” because it is relevant to this debate that Buridan seems acquainted with Alexander only indirectly, through Averroes, who discusses and critiques his materialist view in the *Commentarium Magnum in De Anima*, which Buridan knew well. There Alexander’s view is described as an opinion, but it is opposed to the opinions of Themistius and Theophrastus, who seem closer to the position Averroes adopts himself. If Buridan did know some of Alexander’s work directly (a translation of *De Intellectu* by Gerard of Cremona had been around since the twelfth century), he gives no indication of this.

<sup>30</sup> Speaking of the problem of explaining how intelligible species can remain in the soul after the act of thinking is complete and later be recalled at will, Buridan concedes, almost wistfully, “it is apparent to me that this difficulty would not touch Alexander, who does not posit an immaterial soul as we do [apparet mihi quod illa difficultas non tangeret Alexandrum, non ponentem intellectum immaterialem sicut nos ponimus]” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.15: 172). For additional passages, see Rolf Schönberger, *Relation als Vergleich: Die Relationstheorie des Johannes Buridan im Kontext seines Denkens und der Scholastik*, Leiden 1994, 425, n. 31.

<sup>31</sup> Pluta 2002 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 23), 569.

<sup>32</sup> The Latin text of the Statute is cited in Pluta 2002 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 23), 570, n. 21.

statute faced the stiff penalty of being permanently excluded from the faculty and branded as heretics unless they publicly recanted within three days. “Suffice it to say”, Pluta remarks, “that this statute forced the philosophers to modify their writing substantially; they had to start writing ‘between the lines’”<sup>33</sup>

Was Buridan cowed by the threat of exclusion to hide his heterodox beliefs ‘between the lines’? He does seem to think Alexander has the best position if one cleaves only to natural reason, but why do that if you know the truth as revealed in scripture and church teaching? That would be like saying that if I put my telescope away and relied on naked-eye observations, I would conclude that the universe is geocentric—an interesting intellectual exercise, perhaps, but not to be confused with what is actually the case. In addition, the assumption that Buridan was theologically submissive clashes with almost everything else we know about him as a teacher of philosophy. He was a staunch defender of the autonomy of his faculty who, though sensitive to curricular boundaries, frequently crossed them anyway in treating important questions in natural philosophy.<sup>34</sup> Thus, we find in his writings discussions of God as omnipotent, as capable of freely creating other beings *ex nihilo*, as imparting inexhaustible motion to celestial orbs at the moment of their creation, as possessed of a perfect intelligence whose activity makes human understanding possible, and as the source of the beatitude that is the perfection of human happiness. What these examples share, of course, is a creaturely orientation. God is in each case studied in relation to creatures, whose matter and motion naturally draw our minds upwards to their principles, as well as providing us with evident appearances through which the divine author of these principles may be known. This much is proper to the arts faculty. In theology, however, God and creatures are considered through the divine light of revelation: “theology has for its principles articles [of faith], which are believed quite apart from their evidentness [*theologia vero habet pro principijs articulos creditos absque evidentijs*]”.<sup>35</sup> There is an

<sup>33</sup> Pluta 2002 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 23), 571.

<sup>34</sup> See Zupko 2003 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 2), 139-45, and Edith Sylla, ‘*Ideo quasi mendicare oportet intellectum humanum*’: *The Role of Theology in John Buridan’s Natural Philosophy*, in: J.M.M.H. Thijssen and Jack Zupko (eds.), *The Metaphysics and Natural Philosophy of John Buridan*, Leiden-Boston-Köln 2001, 221-45.

<sup>35</sup> John Buridan, *In Metaphysicen Aristotelis Questiones argutissimae*, Paris 1518, Book I, Q. 2, f. 4ra-rb. Rpr. as *Kommentar zur Aristotelischen Metaphysik*, Frankfurt a. M. 1964. The original publication date is erroneously given as 1588 on the frontispiece of the reprint edition.

important practical difference between the two approaches, which can be seen in the way Buridan argues for the existence of intellectual memory in humans without speculating about the role such a faculty might play in a disembodied intellect, or examines the relation between God and creatures without going on to consider the relation between distinct persons of the Trinity. Since the latter questions involve examining the consequences of particular doctrines or articles of faith rather than constructing demonstrations from evident principles, they are off-limits to the philosopher, even if the subject matter is the same.

But perhaps Buridan was not being submissive in endorsing the orthodox position. Perhaps he was only being crafty, saying what needed to be said in public to remain above suspicion, leaving hints of his real views in his commentaries for his followers and other cognoscenti to read ‘between the lines’. Here Pluta invokes the godfather of the hermeneutics of suspicion, Leo Strauss. Citing Strauss’s 1941 essay, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, he contends that the constant threat of persecution made medieval philosophers “particularly inventive in developing techniques of writing, which enabled them to shroud their true beliefs”.<sup>36</sup> One technique Strauss identifies is surreptitious contradiction of the orthodox view:

... if an able writer who has a clear mind and a perfect knowledge of the orthodox view and all its ramifications, contradicts surreptitiously and as it were in passing one of its necessary presuppositions or consequences which he explicitly recognizes and maintains everywhere else, we can reasonably suspect that he was opposed to the orthodox system as such and—we must study his whole book all over again, with much greater care and much less naïveté than ever before.<sup>37</sup>

“As a result”, Pluta argues, “it makes no sense to enumerate passages in which a given author affirms that, for example, the human soul is incorporeal, indivisible, incorruptible, and hence immortal, if the very same author provides strong philosophical arguments for the mortality of the soul somewhere else—without making any attempt to refute these arguments on natural grounds”.<sup>38</sup> The slightest hint of unorthodoxy is sufficient to undermine our assumption that an author means what he says. This reading, of course, effectively turns Buridan’s claims that are inconsistent with Alexander, including his explicit rejection of materialism as regards the human intellect, into evidence *for* the thesis that he was an Alexandrian.

<sup>36</sup> Pluta 2002 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 23), 564.

<sup>37</sup> Strauss 1941, 32; quoted in Pluta 2002 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 23), 568, n. 19.

<sup>38</sup> Pluta 2002 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 23), 569.

It is difficult to know what to say to such an interpretation.<sup>39</sup> It is uncomfortably close to a conspiracy theory, where contrary evidence not only does not count against the theory, but also confirms the existence of a conspiracy. Be that as it may, I do not believe Pluta's interpretation can be sustained on textual grounds. To see why not, we need to return to its source, the interpretive conundrum mentioned above. Recall that Buridan does not actually refute Alexander's heterodox position on the intellect by natural arguments, as seems to be required by the 1272 Statute, but only points to the difficulty of resolving it: "*sed nobis est difficilis solutio*" (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 52). Furthermore, his categorical assertion that the human intellect inheres in the human body seems to entail the Alexandrian position, although he does not actually draw this conclusion. Why does he leave it at that?

To begin with the conundrum, Buridan does not conclude that the human intellect is material because the inference from C6 to the Alexandrian position is fallacious. This is not immediately evident from the text of Q.6, but if we look just two questions earlier we will see Buridan defending, in reply to Averroes, the view that the human intellect inheres in the human body in a definitive or non-commensurable way (i.e., whole in whole and whole in part), rather than circumscriptively (i.e., whole in whole and part in part), as material forms do (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.4: 30-36).<sup>40</sup> Thus,<sup>41</sup>

when it is said that the intellect is moved by contrary motions, we can speak of it just as we speak of the body of Christ in the consecrated host when one priest carries the body of Christ to the right and another to the left. For the body of Christ is neither moved in itself nor by a motion inhering in it, just as the size of the host does not inhere in it

This is exactly what we would expect Buridan to argue if he holds that the human intellect is not a material form. But then the sense of the

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<sup>39</sup> I say this in part because Strauss is not taken seriously by historians of philosophy in the English-speaking world, though his disciples can still be found among 'political theory' specialists in departments of political science (the reasons for this surely owe something to Strauss' own disdain for professional philosophy). The best known critique of Strauss as an interpreter of philosophical texts is Myles Burnyeat's provocatively entitled, *Sphinx without a Secret*, a review essay of Strauss's *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, in the *New York Review of Books*, 39.9 (May 30, 1985), 30-6.

<sup>40</sup> This text is discussed at length in my *How Are Souls Related to Bodies? A Study of John Buridan*, in: *The Review of Metaphysics*, 46.3 (1993), 575-601, reprinted as chapter 11 in *Zupko 2003* (*op. cit.*, above, n. 2), 175-82.

<sup>41</sup> "... quando dicitur quod moveretur motibus contrariis, potest dici sicut de corpore Christi in hostia consecrata cum unus presbiter fert corpus Christi ad dextram et alter ad sinistram. Non enim corpus Christi per se movetur, nec motu sibi inhaerente, sicut nec magnitudo hostiae sibi inhaeret" (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.4: 35).

predicate ‘. . . inheres in matter’ is different between the proposition Buridan categorically asserts in C6 and the fourth proposition of the Alexandrian position. Therefore, the inference fails by the fallacy of equivocation.<sup>42</sup>

Moving to the first point, a much more plausible explanation of Buridan’s concession that it is not easy to refute Alexander’s position by natural arguments is that he was simply being honest with his audience. There are no decisive arguments against the thesis that the human intellect is a material form if we limit ourselves to what appears to be true based on sense, memory, and experience. In fact, none of the three famous opinions—not that of Alexander, not that of Averroes, and not that of the faith—turns out to be demonstrable by natural reason. But this means that the question of whether the human intellect is everlasting has for Buridan the status of a *dubium*, or a question where doubt can always be legitimately be entertained, and demands that his approach to it be dialectical rather than demonstrative. Needless to say, Buridan himself is hardly agnostic on the question, though he realizes that neither he nor anyone else is in a position to demonstrate the truth about the human intellect by means of principles in natural philosophy. Whether it can be demonstrated theologically is another question, which the theologians must resolve for themselves. That is why he points out that “the determination of this doubt pertains more to metaphysics or to the faculty of sacred theology”,<sup>43</sup> in connection with which “several theologians have raised the following quodlibetal question: whether Christ was a human being during the *triduum*, i.e., the three days when his body was in the sepulcher without a soul and his soul was among the dead without a body”.<sup>44</sup>

As for what Buridan actually believed, it seems to me that we must invoke here another hermeneutical principle, the principle of charity in interpretation, which requires that we take his non-assent to the Alexandrian

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<sup>42</sup> Pluta misses this in his discussion, remarking only that “We need not enumerate all the arguments Buridan brings forth against Averroes” (Pluta 2002 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 23), 581).

<sup>43</sup> Pluta correctly points out that there is no discussion of the immortality of the intellect in Buridan’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, though he treats this as further evidence of Buridan’s tacit Alexandrianism (Pluta 2002 (*op. cit.*, above, n. 23), 584, n. 53). But there is again a better explanation: the immortality question is not raised in his *Metaphysics* commentary for the simple reason that Aristotle did not raise it there, and Buridan took himself first and foremost to be commenting on Aristotle.

<sup>44</sup> “Et finaliter dicamus quod determinatio huius dubitationis pertinet ad metaphysicam vel ad facultatem theologiae sacrae. Unde plures theologi moverunt illud quodlibetum: utrum Christus in triduo erat homo, scilicet quando corpus sine anima erat in sepulchro et eius anima sine corpore in inferno” (*QDA*<sub>3</sub> III.6: 53-4).

position at face value, to mean that he was not an Alexandrian. This thesis is neither esoteric nor controversial. Its only virtue is that it fits what Buridan actually says.

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