

Siger of Brabant

**Excerpts from
QUAESTIONES IN METAPHYSICAM:
On Philosophy and Theology¹**

Part I. “On Fables and Falsehoods in Religion”²

Text 1: Commentary (On Metaphysics Λ.3.994b32/1.993a30ff.)

The effect which lectures produce (Contingunt autem auditiones). From the outset of Book 2 he determines two things: one, that the knowledge of the truth is in one way easy, and in another way hard; two, that this is the case in any genus of cause. And one argument for this was that if this were not the case, there would be no knowledge.

Contingunt autem. He shows what the method (*modus*) of inquiring after the truth is. For the intellect proceeds from one thing to another as if by a single intermediate path. But it is possible, as regards the path, to act rightly or to err. Therefore he intends to show what the correct way is, and he intends to do this by eliminating the erroneous ways. But in Bk. 1 of his *De caelo*, Averroes says that the thing by which humans are hindered from the knowledge of the truth in the case of the first principles is not of small moment, but rather, of the greatest. For this reason one would do well to remove that hindrance and thereby remove the erroneous way too. Therefore he teaches the correct way and removes the erroneous ways. But he proceeds in this way, first touching upon many ways of which some are correct and some are erroneous: once he has touched upon the diverse erroneous ways, he then shows the correct way. The first part is divided into as many parts as there are errors. The first way which is posited is erroneous; he then specifies what it is. The first way is as follows: some people posit something as the truth because of the custom of hearing it, and this is an erroneous way, because when humans obey those things which they are accustomed to hear, although they are false, they nonetheless believe them to be true and their opposites false. Aristotle proves that this is true in the case of human laws, saying that human beings can see that because people are more accustomed to crass things³ than to anything else, therefore they believe them more than anything else. It is true that the law offers many bad considerations, insofar as law is said to be concerned with action (*active*), like the law of Pythagoras, which posited that the soul of a human being would enter the body of a beast unless a person's actions in the human body were good. Therefore, the ancient poets amuse us with many fables concerning the punishments of souls. The reason for this is the one that Aristotle gives in Bk. 12 of the present work: the lawgiver does not posit things about the first

¹ Translation © Deborah L. Black; Toronto, 2009.

² *Quaestiones in Metaphysicam*, ed. William Dunphy (Louvain, 1981), Bk. 2, q. 17 and *Commentum* (pp. 80–83) (Text 1); and Bk. 3, q. 16, *Commentum* (pp. 137–38) (Text 2). See also A. A. Maurer, “Siger of Brabant on Fables and Falsehoods in Religion,” *Mediaeval Studies* 43 (1981): 515–30, Appendix, 527–30.

³ Reading *crassis* with the apparatus rather than *truffis* with the text.

principles according as he believes them, but rather, according as they are more beneficial to human beings, and according as they can instruct them more in the good. But sometimes human beings can be made good by means of false and frivolous things. For this reason in *Nicomachean Ethics* Bk. 2, Aristotle says that some human beings become good by nature, others by learning, others by frivolities, others by punishments and blows. Some also become good on account of the punishment attached [to an act] which they fear will follow. For just as a human being should flee what will make him sorrowful, so too will he choose what is delightful, and the converse. Thus, if a punishment is attached to something, the good will be effected bit by bit. Nor are these three ways sufficient; but there is a need for human laws, so that the person who is a brigand will have a punishment hung on him. Hence, wishing to prove this, Aristotle does so from its effect.

*Whether the Custom of Hearing Falsehoods Makes One Believe Them*⁴

1. Concerning the first it seems that it does not, because in Bk. 2 of the *De anima*, in giving the difference between believing (*opinari*) and imagining, he says that it is up to us to imagine that something is thus or not thus, but to believe it is not.⁵ However, if the custom of hearing falsehoods were to make us believe them, it would be up to us to believe that something is thus or not thus. Therefore, etc.

2. Again, custom cannot remove something natural, as Aristotle observes when he says that nature does not become accustomed to contraries. But the first principles are naturally known to us, as the Commentator intended above. Therefore the custom of hearing the opposites of the principles cannot produce belief in them.

3. Again, we form an opinion about a real thing (*de re*) from what appears to us concerning it, and the same things always appear to us concerning a real thing. For this reason, to become accustomed to the opposites of those things which appear to us concerning a real thing cannot make us believe (*opinari*) them.

Aristotle intends the opposite position in the letter of the text. For he says that “we demand the language we are accustomed to, etc.”

I say to this that the custom of hearing falsehoods, even the opposites of those things which are self-evident (*per se nota*), can cause belief in them (*facit credere ea*). This is what Aristotle proves here through its effect. For those things in human laws which one is accustomed to hear, although fabulous and false, are more tenacious in the soul than are the true things in them. The reason why false and fabulous things are sometimes handed down in human laws is because the lawgiver does not always posit things according to what is believed (*opinatur*) from first principles, but according to what is more able to make citizens fit for good morals. But what is false and fabulous can sometimes make human being fit for the good, because according to Aristotle in Bk. 10 of the *Ethics*, some people are by nature fit for goodness, whereas others become good through instruction, and others are made good by lashes and threats, to the extent that just as sensation seeks after what is delightful, so too does it flee what is sorrowful. And therefore in the law of Pythagoras it was handed down as a threat that the soul of a good human being after death would enter another good body, whereas the soul of an evil person would enter the body of another beast; which was not true, but was posited to inspire terror.

The reason why the custom of hearing falsehoods makes one believe them is this: that to hear something, and especially from someone famous, constitutes a sort of probable argument (*est quaedam ratio probabilis*); for this reason, authority is also a dialectical topic. Therefore, from such authority, or by hearing things from someone famous, as much as through a probable

⁴ I follow the Maurer text for the question; it does not contain the comment, but rather, incorporates some of its details into the solution. The solution in the Dunphy version is truncated so as not to repeat the comment.

⁵ *De anima* 3.3.427b14–21. Following the order of the Arabic versions of the *De anima*, some medieval authors treated 3.4 as the beginning of Bk. 3.

argument, a habit which is an opinion is formed; and with the multiplication of probable arguments, opinion is multiplied. And since, through being accustomed to hearing them, some false things are multiplied as if they were an act of probable reasoning, it is reasonable [to expect] the opinion concerning these false things to be confirmed and multiplied in those hearing them. But the custom of hearing such things from childhood especially makes one believe them, because children, on account of the weakness of their intellects, cannot adjudicate the truth. And according to the Commentator says on this passage, custom in such things can make one believe the opposite of first principles and of self-evident propositions, as he understood Avicenna to have done. For on account of custom in such matters, Avicenna was led to deny that forms have matters which are proper to them (*appropriari*), and conceded that a human being could be generated from earth. But the reason why the custom of hearing falsehoods makes one believe the opposite of first principles is because someone generally possessing a habit of the intellect is disposed to what is commensurate with that habit. But the opposites of the first principles are commensurate with the intellect which has been habituated by the habit of hearing falsehoods. For first principles are in some way naturally possessed by us, and habit has the force of nature; for this reason, the custom of hearing falsehoods makes us believe, as if naturally, the opposites of those things which are self-evident.

[Responses to objections]:

To the first argument, it must be said that in that passage Aristotle understands that opinion does not obey the command of will in every way, as does imagination. However, nothing prevents the will from operating in some way so as to believe some things which it is accustomed to hearing.

To the second it must be said that it is more innate to our intellect to receive knowledge of the first principles than of their opposites; however, it is not so determined to the principles that it cannot err. Whence some things are natural which are equally innately suited to either of two opposites, as are those things which are natural according to matter alone, in such a way that matter is equally in potency to the two contraries. But in such things nature is accustomed to contraries. But it is in the first way that the first principles are naturally possessed by us.

To the third it must be said that we accept an opinion concerning a real thing from those things which appear to us concerning it, and not only from those things which belong essentially to the thing, but also from those things which are accidental to it. But it is accidental to it that false things can be said about it. And therefore from the fact that false statements appear to us concerning a real thing, we can accept such an opinion about a thing through custom.

2. Text 2: *Whether it is fitting for those philosophizing to speak of the divine in fables?*⁶

But it is asked whether, in the light of the foregoing, it is fitting for those philosophizing to speak of the divine in fables?

And this seems to be [fitting] from the fact that Plato and many others transmitted their truths under metaphors and fables.

Aristotle seems to say the opposite in the text. For he says that it is not worthwhile to attend studiously to the fables of sophists.

It is true that some people do happen to speak of divine things in fables because of the weakness of their intellects. For since they are not able to raise their intellects to those things which are of an intellectual nature, having been lowered to images, they contemplate intellectual things as if they were sensibles. But other people happen to do this, not because the intellect cannot rise to those things which are of an intellectual nature, but because they wise to conceal the truth, as perhaps happened to Plato and the others.

But is this fitting for those philosophizing? I say that it is not. And there is a threefold reason for this. First, because to persuade through metaphors and fables is the lowest mode of persuasion. For it is most properly the mode of the poet, producing a certain light suspicion, which is less than opinion, which dialectic produces through exhortations. And this is clear from Aristotle's *Poetics*. But it does not belong to the philosopher to hold the lowest mode of persuasion, but rather, the highest. Secondly, because the truth is concealed beneath metaphors and fables. And therefore in this passage Aristotle says that we should ignore those who speak through the aforementioned metaphors. For it is not proper for philosophers to conceal the truth, but rather, to manifest it. For it is the duty (*opus*) of the wise person not to lie about what he knows. Thirdly, because those who teach the truth under metaphors and fables can sometimes lead the learners into error, by making them believe that divine and intellectual beings are as they have been said to be fabulously and mythically.

However, understand that it is legitimate sometimes to teach the truth under fables and metaphors, for two reasons. For when our intellect cannot grasp the fullness of some intelligibles on account of their excellence and the disproportion of our intellect to them, as the author of the *Liber de causis* [asserts when he] says that the first cause is above every account (*narratio*), then it is legitimate to reveal it in those things that are like it; but the most similar things are to be used, as it is said in the *De causis*'s comment that the first cause can be recounted in that which immediately proceeds from it, and which is most similar to it.

Secondly, sometimes the truth is known completely to the intellect of the teacher, whereas the hearers, owing to the weakness of their intellects, cannot contemplate it in itself. Then it is legitimate to propound the truth to them under metaphors.

⁶ Bk. 3, q. 17, Maurer, 529–30. Cf. Dunphy, *commentum* on B.4.1000a5, pp. 137–38.

Part II: How the theology which is sacred scripture differs from the theology which is a part of philosophy.⁷

Consequently, it is asked how the theological science which we have in our hands before us, which is part of philosophy, and the theological science which is not a part of philosophy, but which is sacred scripture, differ, and whether both can be called “theology”? Therefore, how do they differ?

It must be said that, as it appears to me now, they differ in six things:

1. With respect to their modes of consideration.
2. With respect to the things considered in each.
3. Because the theology which is sacred scripture is more universal than the theology which is a part of philosophy.
4. Because it is also more certain.
5. Because it is also practical, whereas the theology which is a part of philosophy is not practical.
6. Because the theology which is sacred scripture is more a wisdom than this theology.

[1.] Therefore, I say that they differ with respect to their mode of consideration, because the mode of consideration in that theology which is a part of philosophy is to proceed from principles which are known to us by way of sensation, memory, and experience, from the light of natural reason (*ex lumine et ratione naturali*). But the mode of consideration in that theology which is sacred scripture is not to proceed from principles which are known by way of sensation, memory, and experience and by a natural light, but rather, one proceeds in it from principles which are known through divine revelation, as they have been known to many saints through divine revelation. But then, from these principles, thus known through divine revelation, it proceeds through human investigation by applying those principles to other things, as if to the conclusions of that science.

[2.] They also differ with respect to the things considered in them, because this theological science which is a part of philosophy does not extend its consideration any farther than to those things which can be known by us through human reason and from creatures alone. But that theological science which is sacred scripture extends its consideration to those things which are above human reason and which cannot be known through creatures alone. For as was said above, it considers those things which can only be known through divine revelation. For this reason, whatever things are knowable (*scibilia*) by way of divine revelation, be they natural beings, divine beings, mathematical beings, or whatever, insofar as they fall, or can fall, under the mode of knowing and understanding (*sub modo sciendi vel cognoscendi*) them through divine revelation, the theological science which is sacred scripture and not a part of philosophy can consider them.

[3.] They also differ in a third way, because the theology which is sacred scripture is more universal, which is clear from what preceded. For if it considers all things whatever which fall under the notion of divine revelation (*sub ratione divinae revelationis*), then they will include not

⁷ Bk. 6, comment 1, Dunphy ed., 359–61.

only the principles of particular sciences, but also the conclusions of the particular sciences. But the theological science which is part of philosophy does not import anything into itself of the conclusions of the other particular sciences, as the Commentator says. Therefore that theological science is more universal than this [philosophical] one.

[4.] They differ in a fourth way, because the theology which is sacred scripture is more certain than that theology which is a part of philosophy. And this is also clear from the foregoing, because, as it has been said, the theology which is a part of philosophy proceeds from principles known by way of sensation, memory, and experience, and in this way error can occur in the knowledge of its principles. The result is that when the principles are known in this way, in the same way will [all the things] which are in this science be known.⁸ But scriptural theology proceeds from principles known through divine revelation. But in such knowledge no error can fall. And therefore, because the principles from which the theological science which is sacred scripture proceeds are better known and more certain than the principles from which the theological science which is part of philosophy proceeds; and [because] if the principles of something are better known, its conclusions are also better known and more certain; consequently the whole science is more certain. This is why scriptural theology is more certain.

[5.] They also differ in a fifth way in that one is practical, whereas the other is not. And that the theology which is sacred scripture is practical and not only speculative is clear for two reasons. The first of these is that, as has been said, it considers all things which can be known through divine revelation. But they can be not only speculative things, but also practical things, that is, things to be made or done. Therefore it considers practical things or things to be done insofar as they can fall under divine revelation, or under some knowledge which comes through it. Therefore it is in some way a practical science. This is also clear for another reason, for if it considers those things which are imprinted in us through divine revelation, then from that impression it is clear that it is active in this way: for just as the theology which is a part of philosophy is one speculative science, so the theology which is sacred scripture is one practical or active science, and not only speculative, as is clear from the foregoing. But this [philosophical] theology is in no way practical. Therefore, etc.

[6.] They also differ in a sixth way through the fact that the theology which is sacred scripture is more a wisdom than this theology. This is clear as follows. For Aristotle says in the first book of the *Metaphysics* that that science is called wisdom which considers the first causes and first principles, so that it is concerned with God and the other separated substances. Thus I argue: That science will be more properly called wisdom which has greater and more certain knowledge of the first principles of being. But as it is clear from the foregoing, the theology which is sacred scripture has greater and more certain knowledge of those things than does this theology, since they are known in it through divine revelation, to which knowledge human reason cannot attain through itself, whereas this is not the case for the theology which is a part of philosophy, since it considers, through human investigation and reasoning, only those things which can be known by the light of natural reason. Therefore sacred scripture is more wisdom than is this.

⁸ The text is very compact here, and I have translated loosely.

Therefore, as it now seems to me, they differ in these aforesaid six ways. From what has already been said, it is clear that those people proceed most inappropriately (*pessime*) who wish to proceed, in respect to all things in this science, by the demonstrative method. For the principles of demonstration should be known by way of sensation, memory, and experience. But the principles of this science are known, as it has been said, through divine revelation.