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Jean Gerson, moral certainty and the Renaissance of ancient Scepticism

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In the last decades a veritable academic industry has emerged, busily investigating Renaissance and post-Renaissance scepticism. Its production is focused on the revival of the Pyrrhonian and Academic branches of ancient Scepticism in humanist and enlightenment thought. In comparison, connections between early modern sceptical and scholastic ideas have hardly been investigated. Yet parallels between the renaissance of ancient Scepticism and the vast expansion of early modern Catholic casuistry exist. Catholic moral theology supplied casuistry with (scholastic) Probabilism (*doctrina probabilitatis*), a novel doctrine for dealing with moral uncertainty. Both early modern Neo-Pyrrhonism and Probabilism undermined in different ways older practices of weighing reasons. Neo-Pyrrhonism attacked the idea of a reliable weighing of reasons head on, while Probabilism legitimized acting on the basis of inferior reasons as long as a certain standard of justification was preserved. In both cases the old requirement to follow the best reasons was abandoned. It is also remarkable that Neo-Pyrrhonism and Probabilism flourished roughly for the same time and had similar practical functions. Probabilists were even attacked for propagating a peculiar brand of Scepticism, and their defences reveal that they were aware of the affinities between Probabilism and sceptical thought. This suggests that the often-quoted Pyrrhonian crisis in early modern philosophy may well have been a much broader crisis of uncertainty that befell early modern humanism and Scholasticism alike – a topic that I have more fully discussed elsewhere.[1]

The present chapter will follow the idea of a conjoined development of sceptical and scholastic approaches to uncertainty back to the late Middle Ages. It is well known that new directions of governing consciences, and hence of casuistry, became fashionable in the first half of the fifteenth century. In this period, theologians like Jean Gerson, Johannes Nider, and Antonino of Florence prepared the ground for later developments that, step by step, led to Probabilism (which was conceived in 1577 in Salamanca by Bartolomé de Medina). Did these developments in moral theology have any influence on

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[1] See Rudolf Schüssler, *Moral im Zweifel* (Paderborn: mentis-Verlag, 2006), Vol. 2.

the rediscovery of ancient Scepticism? Did they nourish an interest in Scepticism that may have contributed to its renaissance in the sixteenth century? These are the questions which the present inquiry will broach and, hopefully, answer at least partially for Jean Gerson, the eminent theologian and chancellor of the University of Paris at the beginning of the fifteenth century.

In the first section, I will briefly address medieval Scepticism before (in the second section) introducing Jean Gerson (1363–1429), the person and the scholar, and presenting him as innovative director of consciences who coined the term 'moral certainty' (*certitudo moralis*) and launched a tradition of benevolent casuistry. Gerson was aware of a 'criterion problem' which, according to Richard Popkin, was resurrected for the first time since antiquity during the Reformation and became a driving force of humanist interest in ancient Scepticism. For Popkin, the Reformation was the primary stimulus for the insight that no clear criterion for discerning true from false theological claims exists.[2] But a similar criterion problem had already afflicted Christianity during the Great Western Schism (1378–1417), as the writings of Gerson document. Moreover, this problem was tied to long-known difficulties of distinguishing divine from demonic inspirations. Last but not least, Gerson made interesting remarks about Academic Scepticism. These remarks are explicitly linked to the scholastic concept of moral certainty and show that a limited defence of Academic Scepticism and scholastic methods of dealing with uncertainty went hand in hand for Gerson.

SCEPTICISM IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Before we come to the guiding questions of this inquiry, their medieval background deserves some comment. There are two main approaches towards the study of Scepticism in the Middle Ages.[3] The first is concerned with sceptical tendencies in Scholasticism. In the nineteenth century, students of medieval philosophy and theology became aware that sceptical arguments were prominent in the work of late thirteenth and fourteenth century theologians. Henry of Ghent, Peter Olivi, Nicolas of Autrecourt, Jean Buridan and above all William of Ockham rightly or wrongly became famous – or notorious – for holding sceptical views. This assessment, combined with the assumption

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[2] Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3, uses the phrase 'criterion for true and certain religious knowledge' and ascribes the problem to Luther. In recent extensions of Popkin's theses, the rediscovery of the criterion problem is backdated to Savonarola, but Luther remains more important in Popkin's eyes.

[3] On medieval scepticism see Luciano Floridi, *Sextus Empiricus. The Transmission and Recovery of Pyrrhonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Karl Heim, *Das Gewißheitsproblem in der systematischen Theologie bis zu Schleiermacher* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1911); Terence Hunt, *A Textual History of Cicero's Academici Libri* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1998) as well as Dominik Perler, *Zweifel und Gewißheit. Skeptische Debatten im Mittelalter* (Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006) and J. Thijsen, 'The Quest for Certain Knowledge in the Fourteenth Century. Nicholas of Autrecourt against the Academics', in: J. Sihvola (ed.), *Ancient Scepticism and the Sceptical Tradition* (Helsinki: Philosophical Society of Finland, 2000), 199–223.

that the spread of Scepticism was a sign of disease, contributed significantly to the picture of a demise of high Scholasticism in the fourteenth century. Recent studies of sceptical ideas in medieval Scholasticism come to a less pessimistic result. A detailed study by Dominik Perler, for example, breaks with the view that Scepticism is an indicator of decay. Instead, the emergence of sceptical arguments in the late Middle Ages is regarded as a sign of an innovative capacity of Scholasticism that was not only preserved throughout the fourteenth century, but did survive deep into the early modern era. Perler identifies four groups of sceptical issues in scholastic debates between 1267 and 1377:[4] doubts about the possibility of absolutely certain natural cognition; general doubts about absolute certainty; doubts concerning knowledge by intuition; doubts concerning demonstrative knowledge. For our present purposes it is not necessary to pursue the details of these debates and to discuss the complex epistemological models at the heart of the issues. In any case, close inspection shows that the conceptual stock of Scholasticism allowed for a mitigation of sceptical arguments, in a manner often resembling modern rejections of radical Scepticism.

The second major approach to Scepticism in the Middle Ages focuses on the fate of ancient sceptical texts, positions and terms. Research on these issues often takes the form of a hunt for unknown occurrences of the word 'sceptic' or for missing links in chains of textual and doctrinal transmission. By now a fairly stable picture has emerged, showing that Pyrrhonism was scarcely mentioned and never discussed throughout the Middle Ages. Academic Scepticism was known because it was discussed by Cicero and Augustine, but no extensive discussions of Academic Scepticism (for example, like Pedro de Valencia's in the sixteenth century) can be found.[5] New studies indicate that this state of affairs did not simply result from a lack of appropriate texts. Latin translations of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines* did exist in the west since the thirteenth century and Cicero's *Academica* were extant, but they attracted no deeper philological or philosophical attention.[6] Luciano Floridi assumes that this attitude changed as late as the 1430s, when the first full Latin translation of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives* appeared and Greek scholars coming to the West had Sextus Empiricus' writings in their baggage.[7] It is an interesting question, why available sources of ancient Scepticism were apparently not used in the Middle Ages although sceptical issues were lively discussed among Scholastics. I believe that a satisfactory answer has to take the state of scholastic methods

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[4] Perler, *Zweifel und Gewißheit*, 28. Perler explains the temporal boundaries of his study by pointing out that Part 1 of Aquinas's *Summa* was written in 1267 and that Pierre D'Ailly wrote his commentary of the *Sentences* in 1377. For my present purposes it is of greater significance that Perler's period of observation ends right at the outset of the Great Western Schism in 1378.

[5] See Pedro de Valencia, *Academica* (Antverpiae: Moretus, 1595).

[6] See Perler, *Zweifel und Gewißheit*, 16, who corrects Floridi's, *Sextus Empiricus*, attribution of all early Latin Sextus translations to the fourteenth century, and Charles B. Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus. A Study of the Influence of the Academica in the Renaissance* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1972).

[7] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1995).

of coping with moral uncertainty and scientific conjectures into account. The well-developed state of these methods suggests that Scholastics would regard the ancient sceptical challenge as too undifferentiated and crude in practical matters and in the methodology of the sciences, as well as in metaphysics and epistemology, where a well-equipped scholastic arsenal of answers to sceptical challenges existed.

We should not conclude, however, that the study of medieval thought has no bearing on the resurrection of ancient Scepticism. Inquiries into the transmission of texts have generated valuable insights into this subject. Apart from this, we may learn from the positive or negative attitudes with which Academic Scepticism is mentioned by Scholastics. Positive scholastic assessments may have created a conductive atmosphere for the renaissance of ancient Scepticism. We will see that this presumption finds support in the writings of the eminent late medieval theologian Jean Gerson.

JEAN GERSON (1363–1429)

Jean Gerson was born of humble origins in northern France. At the University of Paris he became the favourite pupil of the rising star theologian and future cardinal Pierre D'Ailly. Gerson was appointed chancellor of the University of Paris at the age of 32, and from this position he fought for a dominant role of the Paris theologian faculty in the church, assuming that its members were best suited to develop a master plan for ending the Great Schism which divided western Christendom after 1378. His considerable efforts to overcome the Schism were partially rewarded at the council of Constance (1414–1418), where Gerson was present as one of the foremost theologians of Europe.[8] The council healed the Schism, but it took a quite un-Gersonian course in church policy. Despite this personally frustrating result, Gerson's reformist scholastic theology with well-integrated humanist and mystical elements became probably the most influential theological trend of the fifteenth century.[9] Martin Luther and the reformation were as much influenced by Gerson as early modern Catholic moral theology.

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[8] See Christoph Burger, *Aedificatio, Fructus, Utilitas. Johannes Gerson als Professor der Theologie und als Kanzler der Universität Paris* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986); Douglass Taber, *The Theologian and the Schism. A Study of the Political Thought of Jean Gerson* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1985).

[9] On Gerson's life and thought see Brian McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005). There is, to my knowledge, no systematic study of Gerson's influence on early modern moral theology. As far as I can assess from scholastic sources, it was vast. The most important Dominican moral theologians of the early fifteenth century, Johannes Nider and Antonino of Florence, follow his treatment of moral problems often verbatim. It seems correct to classify Gerson as a theological conservative (see Wolfgang Hübener, 'Der theologisch-philosophische Konservatismus des Jean Gerson', *Miscellanea mediaevalia*, 9 (1974), 171–200). He tried to revive the ideas of twelfth- and thirteenth-century theology. But he was a reformist conservative, well aware of the need to cope with the exigencies and discussions of his times. Thus the labels 'nominalist', '*modernus*' and 'supporter of the scholastic *via antiqua*' that have been attached to Gerson are all true from appropriate perspectives. Gerson the Scholastic and Gerson the Renaissance humanist do also coexist peacefully in the same person.

For our present purposes we will focus on Gerson's ideas about moral decision-making under uncertainty and his attitude towards Academic Scepticism. The main point is to show that both were connected. This will provide some evidence for my thesis that the new methods of treating moral uncertainty in Scholasticism and an interest in ancient Scepticism did not arise in separation.[10]

<center>*Gerson on moral decision-making under uncertainty*</center>

In matters of conscience, Gerson is widely recognized as an innovator who paved the way for Catholic high casuistry. Gerson's innovations in the field of conscience arose from peculiar historical circumstances. In the early fifteenth century, theologians who regarded themselves as guardians of conscience were preoccupied with the problem of scrupulosity. Luther said that Gerson was the first who dealt with the problem of the scrupulous conscience seriously.[11] The term 'scruples' (*scrupuli*) was used in the Middle Ages as a term for exaggerated anxious agitations of the soul caused by the idea of a moral or religious insufficiency of their bearer. The waves of plague that depopulated Europe in the fourteenth century, economic calamities, wars and the Great Western Schism have variously been held responsible for the spread of scrupulosity in the late Middle Ages.[12] The Schism is of special interest for the present inquiry, simply because it is so often linked to the problem of scrupulosity by Gerson himself (in contrast to the plague, which he encountered but did not discuss). Gerson noted that the Schism seemed to create an almost irresolvable perplexity. Disobeying a legitimate pope could lead to hell, as could obedience to an illegitimate pope.[13] But how could well-meaning Christians judge the legitimacy of a pope? Both the Avignon and the Roman popes had arguments and competent lawyers on their side. Furthermore,

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[10] Evidence from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is discussed in Schüssler, *Moral im Zweifel*, Bd. 2, Chap. 1.

[11] See Sven Grosse, *Heilsungewissheit und Scrupulositas im späten Mittelalter: Studien zu Johannes Gerson und Gattungen der Frömmigkeitstheologie seiner Zeit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 1. In the mid-fourteenth century, influential guidebooks of consolation like Johannes of Dambach's *Consolatorium theologicum* (Colonia: Martinus de Werdena, 1502) already had faced the problem of exaggerated anxiety. But Dambach deals with scrupulosity in far less detail than Gerson, and it was Gerson who instigated new trends in moral decision-making under uncertainty in order to cope with scrupulosity.

[12] The literature on a 'culture of anxiety' in medieval and early modern Europe emphasizes the role of the epidemics that swept through Europe in these times (see Jean Delumeau, *Le péché et la peur* (Paris: Fayard, 1990)). Mysticism also had something to contribute. It made many persons deeply concerned with their inner agitations – the mystically inclined Gerson being no exception.

[13] See Jean Gerson, 'De schismate', in P. Glorieux (ed.), *Œuvres complètes*, 10 vols. (Paris: Desclee, 1960–1973), Vol. 6, 43: 'Quia non debent fideles se exponere discrimini; amans enim periculum peribit in illo, inquit Sapiens. Sed obedire homini schismatico vel haeretico ut vero papae, esset discrimen peccati moralis ut videtur; et non obedire eidem, si sit verus papa et non schismaticus, est similiter discrimen.' And later in the same text, 50: 'Ex his rationibus hinc inde tactis et insolutis, perspicuum est in quali labyrintho vix egressibili positi sumus, et vinculis vix extricabilibus irreti quasi videlicet posuerimus pedes in retibus et in maculis eorum ambulemus, juxta verba Job.'

no independent jury for deciding the case existed. Gerson tried to advertise the faculty of theology in Paris as arbiter, but he had no success – not even among his fellow theologians in Paris. No wonder that Gerson thought that the theological and moral puzzle of the Schism spread inner anxiety among good Christians. He was one of the infected, and he continuously assured himself that it was right to take vigorous action against the Schism, despite the perplexing intricacies of the problem.

However, nobody before Gerson seems to have looked for a method of reconciling vigorous action and inner anxiety. Gerson's precursors suggested various therapeutic exercises against scrupulosity, but he was the first to choose an approach that implied a change in doctrines of moral decision-making under uncertainty. An opinion was by scholastic definition an act of assent to the truth of a sentence accompanied by the fear (*formido*) of being wrong. If this fear exceeded its backing reasons it became a scruple by definition. In order to appease the fear of being wrong, and hence reduce the risk of lapsing into irrational anxiety, Gerson employed an innovative strategy. First, he restricted the range of traditional requirements of moral risk-avoidance, above all in matters where a danger of mortal sin existed. Scholastic approaches towards moral risk and moral uncertainty had taken shape in the thirteenth century. Divine law and natural law formed a pillar of scholastic morality, with mortal sin being understood as a violation of divine precepts and laws.[14] Moral uncertainty was conceived as an uncertainty concerning the sinfulness of actions, which mainly arose because the validity of precepts was often disputable in concrete cases. In fact, moral disputes among experts of moral theology and church law proliferated from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries onwards and became building blocks of early modern high casuistry. Nevertheless, although it was agreed that moral uncertainty could hardly be avoided in matters of practical morality, unnecessary engagement in morally risky activities was regarded as a mortal sin by medieval theologians. In other words, all good Christians had a duty to avoid moral risks. Since total risk avoidance was not feasible, 'hedging' against sin required the use of a risk-averse decision rule, the *regula magistralis*: 'In doubt choose the safer side' (*in dubiis tutior pars est eligenda*). This rule demands to prefer the alternative with the lowest sin potential (that is, the least grave sin) in cases where the sinfulness of one or all action alternatives was open to doubt. A case in point could be a morally doubtful business transaction, where the renouncement of the transaction bore hardly any moral risk and was thus to be preferred.

Gerson pointed out that the *regula magistralis* was only designed for doubts of a special kind, in which the reasons for and against the sinfulness of an action were of almost equal weight. He buttressed this interpretation with the

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[14] On medieval scholastic treatments of uncertainty see James Franklin, *The Science of Conjecture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Ilkka Kantola, *Probability and Moral Uncertainty in Late Medieval and Early Modern Times* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 1994); Rudolf Schüssler, *Moral im Zweifel* (Paderborn: mentis-Verlag, 2003), Bd.1.

authority of the early thirteenth-century Scholastic Guillaume d'Auxerre, indicating an early awareness of the fact that exaggerated risk-aversion is incompatible with a normal social life.[15] For Gerson, clearly, the medieval standard understanding of the *regula magistralis* entailed mitigated rather than maximal risk aversion. This clarification of the *regula*'s meaning is a good example of the problems of classifying Gerson as a theological conservative or a morally flexible innovator. In the first half of the fifteenth century it was easy to be both at the same time. Gerson belonged to a growing number of theologians who tried to revive the ideas of twelfth- and thirteenth-century theology because they were disappointed with the highly sophisticated, logically and metaphysically demanding theology that was taught at late medieval universities. In their eyes, the good balance between spiritual and metaphysical concerns that had characterized the first peak of Scholasticism had been lost during the fourteenth century. The old ways (*via antiqua*) of theology, however, did not unconditionally suit a world that had considerably changed after the horrific 1348 plague pandemic. Gerson and many like-minded theologians in the Franciscan or Dominican observant movement tried to adapt the older ideas in an open-minded manner. They did not hesitate to blend the *via antiqua* with new modes of scholastic and humanist thought, as long as a focus on the spiritual welfare of Christians prevailed against a preoccupation with analytical progress in philosophical theology. Hence, it is significant that Gerson expressly follows Guillaume d'Auxerre in his interpretation of the *regula magistralis*. He could thereby think of himself as heir of the sound practices of the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, his clarification of the *regula magistralis*'s scope contributed much towards the subsequent rise of new casuistic practices in Catholic moral theology.

Gerson's remarks on the *regula magistralis* helped to dispel excessive fears of moral failure. All those who did not doubt in an evenly balanced way had no strict duty to avoid moral risk.[16] To this Gerson added a licence to base moral decisions on a rather limited amount of information. Gerson and his contemporaries were highly aware that a wealth of incompatible opinions regarding right moral action existed among theologians and lawyers. Formerly, it had been scholastic best practice to dissolve the dissent of moral experts by looking for the opinion of the greatest number of top ranking experts. The results of this weighing had often been questionable, but the Schism created an almost unbearable impasse. During the Schism, two (and finally three) separate hierarchies of experts and authorities existed that contradicted each other. Unfortunately, they had somehow to be merged if a unified weighing of

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[15] See Jean Gerson 'De praeparatione ad missam', in: *Oeuvres*, Vol. 9, 38.

[16] Opinion implies assent, but the equal strength of reasons for both sides of a question that is constitutive for doubt implies suspension of assent for Scholastics – at least until the sixteenth century (when Cajetan introduced the doctrine that we may assent at will in doubt, a version of doxastic voluntarism, see De Vio's commentary in Thomas Aquinas, *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis opera omnia* (Rom: Ex Typ. Polyglotta, 1891), tom.VI, 426.

opinions was looked for. Gerson abandoned the attempt to produce such an overarching result and opted for freedom of choice instead. He allowed all moral agents to adopt bona fide the opinion they regarded as most reasonable, as long as it was supported by a reputable group of experts. From the perspective of epistemic morality, this released decision-makers or their moral advisors from screening the whole scholastic discussion on a moral problem, allowing them to stop after finding a small but authoritative and (in their eyes) convincing set of supporters of an opinion. Obviously, any rational fear of missing crucial information was considerably weakened by such a licence, and irrational anxieties that resulted from the exaggeration of such fears were mitigated.

Gerson's generous attitude towards the intellectual duties of ordinary Christians was shared by many colleagues with respect to the theological fallout of the Schism, but Gerson extended it also to business behaviour. He allowed merchants to assume the legitimacy of contracts if there was no countervailing consensus or overwhelming expert vote against the contracts' moral or legal legitimacy. Under these premises, Gerson regarded a split vote of experts as insufficient to restrict the freedom of contract and he explicitly drew a parallel to the Great Western Schism in the justification of his judgement.[17] Hence, the shock of the Schism was indeed instrumental in generating a new trend in practical ethics, and it seriously undermined the scholastic weighing of expert opinions. In general, a moral agent had only to do what was up to him in a certain context to avoid sin.[18] It was up to a merchant to seek the advice of competent theologians or lawyers, but he did neither have to know the overall balance of expert opinions nor did his advisors have to embrace a majority position. Gerson, although being a theological conservative in many ways, thus became a champion of an approach in moral theology that declared Jesus' yoke to be soft (*iugum suave*). This approach gained much ground in early modern Catholic moral theology and became, after almost two centuries, a pillar of the doctrine of Probabilism.[19]

Scrupulous people, always given to worries, might question Gersons's approach. They might point out that they were required to act with a safe conscience. And how could they reach safety (in scholastic terminology a

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[17] See Jean Gerson 'De contractibus', in P. Glorieux (ed.), *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 9 (1973), 402: 'Argumentum sumptum ex consilio solo vel dubio unius doctoris, quod in illo dubio contrahere sit peccatum mortale, non est efficax sed temerarium et negandum. . . . Itaque non quodlibet dubium facti sufficit ad causandum peccatum mortale, si quid agatur illo dubio stante; igitur nec quodlibet dubium juris. . . . Ponatur iterum casus qui est creberrimus; quod dubium sit apud doctores aliquos ex una parte, quod hoc debeat agi, dicentibus aliis in pari numero quod oppositum fieri debet, sicut in facto schismatis contendentium de papatu, saepe fuit.' Gerson's followers retained the close connection between a liberal guidance of uncertain consciences and the schism even after its end, see Antonino of Florence (Antoninus Florentinus), *Summa theologica*, 4 Bde (1740; repr. Graz: Akadem. Druck u. Verlagsanstalt, 1959), pars I, tit. 3, cap. 10, 197–203.

[18] See Jean Gerson 'De praeparatione ad missam', in: *Oeuvres*, Vol. 9, 37.

[19] See Antonius Terillus, *Fundamentum totius theologiae moralis*, (Louvain: Ioannes Hovius, 1669), q. 31, n. 4 where Gerson is listed as a forerunner of the benevolent approach (*sententia benigna*). Terillus was one of the most ardent Probabilists.

'certainty') on the basis of a quite limited set of information? Gerson pointed out that different levels of certainty were required in different disciplines. According to Gerson a good Christian could act with a safe conscience even if the moral legitimacy of a course of action could not be established with absolute certainty. This was, as Gerson remarked, an obvious implication of Aristotle's dictum that in ethics we should expect less certainty than in mathematics or in the theoretical sciences. In fact, Aristotle did not write about certainty, but about precision, in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but medieval translations rendered the Greek term *akribeia* as *certitudo* and thus turned Aristotle into a witness for the scholastic treatment of moral uncertainty.[20] A descending scale of certainties was widely accepted long before Gerson. Most influential was a sequence of three steps – to be found, for example, in Buridan – that led down from mathematical (or metaphysical) over physical to practical certainty. But apparently it was Gerson who coined the term moral certainty (*certitudo moralis*) for a certainty that suffices for action. To my knowledge, no earlier occurrences of the term *certitudo moralis* have been found.[21] More important is that Gersonian moral certainty differs in a significant respect from Aristotelian practical certainty. Moral certainty provides insurance against sin. In its Gersonian meaning, it signifies a level of certainty where moral risk avoidance becomes unnecessary and an agent is entitled to trust his beliefs without fear of error. Remaining anxieties of sinning are irrational, they cannot be dispelled by rational decision procedures but need therapy – or consolation, as late medieval theologians said.

In any case, a level of certainty high enough to provide moral insurance to an average agent is not necessarily the maximum level of certainty attainable in a practical discipline. It may be assumed that the average moral agent cannot reach the level of certainty of the best experts in politics or ethics. Hence, the Aristotelian–scholastic limit of certainty (or precision) that can be reached in politics or ethics is designed to be much higher than the level of Gersonian moral certainty. With his definition of moral certainty Gerson thus thwarted a possible overburdening of moral actors that could arise from the Aristotelian methodology of the practical disciplines. Moreover, his lowering of moral requirements proved to be highly influential. His concept and interpretation of moral certainty spread rapidly during the fifteenth century and became one of the pillars of Catholic high casuistry in the early modern era.

On this basis we may now begin to look for parallels to ancient Scepticism. A first analogy is already obvious. Gerson's treatment of scrupulosity can be called a 'therapy of opinion'. Like the ancient Sceptics he tells people to get rid of unjustified opinions that trouble the mind. His enterprise converges with the ancient Sceptics' quest for inner calmness. Inner calmness is reached

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[20] For this and the following see Schüssler, *Moral im Zweifel*, Bd. 1, Chap. 1.
[21] See Grosse, *Heilsungewissheit und Scrupulositas*, 83; Sven Knebel, *Wille, Würfel und Wahrscheinlichkeit* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2000), 55.

by transforming the opinions of the troubled, suggesting a reflective method of attaining assurance through epistemic practices. The ancient Sceptics, of course, intended to purge all opinion by suspending assent. Gerson distinguishes between justified and unjustified fears, advising to purge only the latter, part of which was to abandon the unjustified opinions on which irrational anxieties were based. Of course, Gerson did not ask his audience to suspend assent. On the contrary, he allowed his audience to follow justified opinions on the basis of moral certainty, his prime standard of justification, which does not exist in ancient Scepticism. The analogy between Gersonian and ancient sceptical therapy of opinion does therefore not carry far. But this is not the last thing to be said concerning Gerson's relation to Scepticism, a fact that will become clear when we now turn to the renaissance of the sceptical criterion problem.

Gerson and the criterion problem

In his influential writings on the history of Scepticism, Richard Popkin claims that the early modern rebirth of sceptical philosophy helped to break with the scholastic past and launch modern philosophy. A major role in this process is assigned to a criterion problem that arose because of the Reformation and resembled the criterion problem of the ancient Sceptics.[22] The criterion problem of the Reformation was the challenge to establish clear and controllable criteria for the truth of personal religious beliefs or for correct bible exegesis. The ancient sceptical criterion problem was the quest for a fail-safe criterion of truth that did not fall prey to sceptical prevarications. Both problems are obviously related. Hence, the existence of a criterion problem of the Reformation should not be denied. Moreover, Popkin is certainly right in pointing out that this problem did not only exist but was actively entertained in the debates between Protestants and their Catholic opponents.[23]

   What seems questionable is the claim of novelty for the criterion problem that plagued the Reformation. Of course, in some sense novelty is assured by the fact that it was a problem of the Reformation. But apart from the connection with a historical sequence of events originating at some time in the town of Wittenberg, problems of criteria for the truth or validity of religious beliefs were not new. Popkin himself acknowledges this implicitly by including Savonarola in his account of the rise of early modern Scepticism. Savonarola and his followers are simply too important for the recovery of ancient Pyrrhonian

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[22] See Richard Popkin, 'Prophecy and Scepticism in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 4 (1996), 1–20, 11: 'What I believe was crucial for the other historical development [i.e., the early modern rise of scepticism] was first the form of the sceptical problem of the criterion of religious knowledge that arose in the early conflicts between Reformers and the Counter-Reformers, second the availability of the texts of Sextus through their being printed in Latin in 1562 and 1569, and third the forceful presentation of scepticism by Montaigne in his "Apology for Raimond Sebond".'

[23] See Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 67.

Scepticism to be ignored, and Savonarola had a criterion problem of his own. Popkin relegates it to the struggle between the Florentine monk and Pope Alexander VI, whom Savonarola could ask for a criterion that justified the papal claim of privileged access to religious knowledge.[24] If so, the matter would have been hardly new, because medieval conciliarists challenged the popes on the same ground by regarding the judgment of a council of the Church as more reliable than papal judgement. But for Savonarola a second equally pressing criterion problem existed. In fact, he was asked to provide criteria for his claim to prophecy. How could he know that he was not deceived by evil demons or the devil himself in his visions?

This question leads us back to Gerson, who wrote several tracts on discerning divine from demonic apparitions. The subject was called the 'discernment of spirits' (*discretio spirituum*) in the Middle Ages. Most writers on the subject acknowledged that there was no single fail-safe criterion.[25] Demons could mimic angels and other divine messengers very convincingly.[26] The best a would-be visionary could do was to test her/himself, or allow her/himself to be tested, with a set of indicators that were positively correlated with visions that came from God and negatively with others that came from hell. The result would, of course, remain uncertain, and assent to one side would be given in full consciousness of its fallibility. With Gerson's definition of moral certainty this uncertainty could be reduced to a level that admitted guilt-free action. However, the acceptance requirements for divinely inspired knowledge were apparently tightened in Gerson's times, largely because some visionaries became deeply involved with church politics. Two famous female visionaries, Brigit of Sweden and Catherine of Siena, used their spiritual authority in attempts to end the Schism. As a consequence, both women and their status as divinely inspired visionaries were attacked by political opponents.

The indicator set method of 'discerning spirits' shows that Scholastics like Gerson did not opt for an ancient sceptical solution to their criteria problems. They did not abandon knowledge claims because of lacking criteria for fail-safe discernment – but neither did Protestant pastors. Many pre- and post-

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[24] See Popkin, *Prophecy and Scepticism*, 11: 'Savonarola and his followers did not challenge the Church's criterion of religious knowledge, but did challenge that the personage who was seated in St Peter's chair was entitled to apply the criterion.'

[25] For this and the following see Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 26, 278, 289; and in general Paschal Boland, *The Concept of Discretio Spirituum in John Gerson's 'De Probatione Spirituum' and 'De Distinctione Verarum Visionum A Falsis'* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1959); Cornelius Roth, 'Richter, Ratgeber und Reformer. Jean Gerson als Lehrer geistlicher Unterscheidung', in Jan Aertsen/Martin Pickavé (eds.), *Herbst des Mittelalters?* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 321–39. Caciola, *Discerning Spirits* can be used as a general introduction to the field of the discernment of spirits in the Middle Ages.

[26] Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 4, connected his exposition of the Reformation criterion problem – apparently without such an intention – with the discernment of spirits when we wrote that Luther regarded Thomist opinions to be less than absolutely certain, even if they were declared by an angel from heaven. The question whether the apparition of an angel guarantees certain knowledge is one of the classical topics of the *discretio* literature.

Reformation Christians grounded knowledge in faith, and the discernment of spirits was helped either by some supernaturally infused ability or by probabilistic doctrinal and empirical checks. Nevertheless, the problem of discerning spirits did spark an interest in sceptical arguments. In *De distinctione verarum revelationum a falsis* Gerson asks rhetorically: Do you want to have a great vision? And then he reminds his readers that they should follow Socrates in knowing that they don't know. In a long passage of the same text, he compares the problem of distinguishing divine from demonic visions with the problem of distinguishing between dreaming and being awake. Gerson begins by quoting the experience of Augustine's mother in discerning visions from dreams. This, he says, is to be done by looking at several experiences rather than by having a fail-safe criterion. Then Gerson raises the question of knowing whether a person dreams or is awake. He points out that dreams may contain discussions, arguments and reflections. If somebody is asked how he knows that he is awake, he will simply answer: I know it. If he is further pressed to declare how he knows this, he will just say: I experience it. In final consideration, he can do no better than adduce his experience that the impressions of a person who is awake are stronger and brighter (*fortior scilicet atque lucidior*).[27] Gerson accepts here that the quality of perceptions of persons who are awake may ground knowledge instead of mere opinion. But I do not think that he regards this knowledge as infallible. His initial remark about using a collection of impressions indicates that experience may dispel the fear of error through accumulation of information but it does not thus become infallible.

In any case, when Savonarola began to regard himself as a prophet after a protracted process of self-questioning, he did not stumble upon a criterion problem that had been unknown for long. We have seen that Gerson had dealt with the question whether a single fail-safe criterion was needed and opted for a network of indicators instead. Savonarola, a brilliant scholastic

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[27] For the whole passage see Jean Gerson, 'De distinctione revelationum', in P. Glorieux (ed.), *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 3, (1973), 48: 'Augustinus quoque refert in suis Confessionibus matrem suam isto modo inter veras et falsas nocturnae quietis imagines et visiones discrevisse. Cur ergo mirabitur aliquis si regula universalis aut doctrina certa et infallibilis nequeat tradi super hac materia, de discretione spirituum, aut de revelationum veritate, cum ista res plus in experientia et conditionum particularium, quae infinitae sunt, concursu quam in arte versetur. Videamus similem in re pari, immo longe faciliori difficultatem. . . . Petamus ab aliquo dari nobis sub arte et doctrina universali per quam sciri poterit evidenter de seipso vel alio semper quando somniis illuditur aut veris vigiliis exercetur. Attende imprimis quod visiones somniorum plerumque discursivae sunt, rationales et super se reflexae: nam quaerit homo si somniat; utrinque insuper arguit et tandem deliberate concludit quod vigilat. Adde quod tanta nonnumquam est somnii ad vigiliam propinquitatis similitudo, ut haesitat homo etiam vigilans ac visa secum retractans, si tunc vere dormiebat. . . . Interroga aliquem ex vigilantibus quomodo scit an vigilat. . . . respondebit substomacans: bene scio. Persiste ultra et dic: quomodo bene scis? Dicet quod maxima est inter somnium suum et vigiliam dissimilitudo. Si similitudines varias adduxeris quas praetegimus, aestimo quod nullus suae responsioni alius erit exitus quam ut dicat: certe scio, quia sic experior. . . . Quod si amplius protervire et contraniti volueris dicens: ita nunc, o bone vir, etiam tu falleris quamquam ignorans, videat ipse quid ultra obmutire aut sufficienter allegare valeat ad liberandum pedes suos ab hoc labyrintho, praeter solam experimentalem notitiam ipsius vilgiliae, quae valde dispar est a somniis, fortior scilicet atque lucidior, per quam non se tam opinatur quam scit et intelligit vigilare.'

philosopher who became a political leader and would-be prophet, did the same when he defended his prophetic claims in *De veritate prophetica*.[28] He introduced a set of indicators in neat analytical fashion and tried to show that his claim to prophecy was to be considered rational by any standard. His manner of argumentation remained thoroughly scholastic and there is no sign of a new understanding of the criterion problem. If at all, Savonarola may have looked into Sextus Empiricus' *Outline of Pyrrhonism* in order to find material on the experiences of dreamers and visionaries or similar problems that had already puzzled Gerson. Hence, Sextus probably did not spark a new intellectual outlook among Savonarola's followers but supplied them, as they saw it, with material for use in an established debate.

If the criterion problem presented itself as a shock at some time in late medieval or early modern Europe it was probably not in the context of prophecy but in connection with the Great Western Schism. Many good Christians asked themselves how they could distinguish the legitimate pope among two or three contenders. As mentioned, this question was often regarded as a matter of eternal life or death. Those who followed an illegitimate claimant ran the risk of eternal damnation. Accepting this risk was a mortal sin under certain conditions that were not generally well understood. One can imagine how people with sensitive consciences suffered under the impasse that arose from the protracted competition of rival popes, each with authoritative supporters and large parts of Europe on their side. Many Christians must have longed for a fail-safe criterion of right religious authority. Among the scholastic elite, however, it was known that no such criterion existed. We have already seen that a network of indicators rather than a single criterion was accepted as solution of the problem of discerning spirits. Pierre d'Ailly, Gerson's mentor, regarded the Schism as a sign that the art of discerning good from bad spirits was in decay.[29] This shows that the choice of the right pope required competence in discerning spirits and was to be handled accordingly. But neither a single fail-safe criterion nor a network of indicators did, in fact, help to pick the right pope. If an epistemological shock was needed to create an interest in Scepticism, the Great Western Schism was thus suited to provide it at the outset of the fifteenth century, only a few decades before the revival of ancient Scepticism indeed began.

Gerson on Academic Scepticism

We have seen that Gerson discussed sceptical arguments in his writings on the discernment of spirits, but he did not explicitly allude to ancient Scepticism

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[28] Girolamo Savonarola, *Verità della profezia/De veritate prophetica dyalogus* (Firenze: Sismel, 1997), 34, analyzes the problem of discerning dreams in a way that seems to be informed by Gerson.

[29] See Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 174, quoting D'Ailly *De falsis prophetis*: 'The art of recognizing hypocrites of this type . . . appears to be especially useful in modern times, since already there appears a decline of this kind within the Church: to wit, the division of the schism. This truly is to be feared, lest it be a preamble to the Antichrist.'

there. Fortunately, he did so in other places. Like most of his fellow scholastics Gerson has not much to say about Academic Scepticism, and he does not mention – or apparently know – Pyrrhonism. But scant references are one thing and the attitude they convey another. The remarks concerning Academic Scepticism that I found in Gerson's writings are all positive. Gerson explicitly connected Academic Scepticism with the names of Socrates and Cicero, two philosophers he held in high esteem. And in contrast to other scholastics, who occasionally alluded to 'the Academics' without discussing their doctrine at all, Gerson at least took up some points for discussion. The contrast is especially vivid in comparison with Gerson's teacher Pierre D'Ailly. D'Ailly simply brushed the Academic Sceptics away with the assertion that already Augustine had disproved them.[30] Gerson's remarks on the Academic Sceptics reveal a deeper interest.

A nuanced remark concerning Academic Scepticism can be found in *De consolatione theologiae*, where Gerson distinguished three kinds of certainty:[31] supernatural, natural, and moral or civil. Supernatural certainty guarantees infallible belief and comes in three forms. One is the clear and intuitive knowledge of blessed souls in heaven, the next pertains to revealed but evident prophetic knowledge, the last is a supernatural certainty of faith which is based on God's authority. Gerson remarked that not even God's absolute power could render supernatural certainty, which was unknown to the ancient philosophers, fallible. Next follows natural certainty.[32] Assent to propositions is naturally certain if its wrongness would conflict with the nature of things. Aristoteles, the Peripatetics, and the Stoics assume this certainty for first principles of the kind, for example, that something is or is not. Furthermore,

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[30] Pierre D'Ailly, *Quaestiones super libros sententiarum* (repr. Frankfurt: Minerva, 1968), In I, q.1, a. 1, fol. D, section E.

[31] Jean Gerson, 'De consolatione', in P. Glorieux (ed.), *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 9, (1973), metrum I, prosa II, 9: S. 230f. I discuss *De consolatione* before the earlier *De vita spirituali* because of expository reasons. Mark Burrows, *Jean Gerson and* De Consolatione Theologiae (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991) deals extensively with *De consolatione*, touching mainly upon supernatural certainty at pages 56, 119, 245.

[32] Jean Gerson, '*De* consolatione', 231, on natural and moral certainty: 'Porro certitudinem alteram quae naturalis dicitur invenimus, quae talis est quod non stat per naturam quod aliquis taliter assentiat et fallatur. Hanc Aristoteles et Peripatetici, hanc et Stoici philosophi posuerunt nobis possibilem in primis principiis per se notis, cognitis videlicet ex sola terminorum apprehensione, ut quod quodlibet est vel non est. Posuerunt etiam in conclusionibus demonstratis, et in evidenti consequentia deductis per talia principia, quemadmodum dixerunt mathematicam scientiam esse certissimam. Academici vero, in quibus Socrates, Carneades et Cicero, dehinc posteriores aliqui novam visi sunt induxisse scientiam, nihil scire, immo nec hoc scire quod nil scimus. Ita tollere voluerunt e medio certitudinem omnem, dicentes de omni re ad utramque partem ex aequo disputari posse; et ita neque de primam de qua locuti sumus certitudinem supernaturalem, neque naturalem putabant ullam esse. Denique certitudo quae moralis dici potest vel civilis tangitur ab Aristotele una cum praecedenti certitudine in Ethicorum suorum principio. Cujus sententia est: Disciplinati esse in unaquaque re certitudinem quaerere juxta exigentiam materiae. Aeque enim vitiosum est, inquit, persuadentem quaerere mathematicam et moralem demonstrantem: non enim consurgit certitudo moralis ex evidentia demonstrationis, sed ex probabilibus conjecturis, grossis et figuralibus, magis ad unam partem quam ad alteram. Talem certitudinem si penitus negaverint Academici, si non eam praeterea sufficientem dixerint ad aliquid moraliter operari, viderint qua ratione praesumpserint aliquid vel agere bonum, vel omittere malum, conformiter ad judicium rationis, quale debet esse certum, sicut certa est in se virtus, alioquin virtus non est.'

it is the certainty of correct mathematical deductions. At this point Gerson introduced the Academic Sceptics, of whom he mentioned Socrates, Carneades and Cicero in particular. The Academic Sceptics professed to know nothing at all, not even that they know nothing. Thus, they denied the possibility of supernatural and natural certainty. However, Gerson reminded his readers that a third kind of certainty exists, discussed by Aristotle in the Ethics. This certainty may be called moral or civil (the already discussed *certitudo moralis*). It does not arise from mathematical proof but from probable and gross reasoning. If the Academics should deny that moral certainty suffices for moral action, they would have to abandon all rational attempts to strive for the good and avoid the bad, and thereby make virtue impossible.

There is much implicit in these passages. From the esteem in which Gerson held Socrates and Cicero we may conclude that he does not attribute a denial of moral certainty to the Academic Sceptics.[33] Socrates and Cicero – to be sure – did not abandon all ethics and virtue. Hence the counterfactual argument that leads from the rejection of moral certainty to the destruction of virtue should be understood as a *reductio* that supplies reasons to deny the antecedent. Gerson seems to have assumed that the Academic Sceptics did implicitly accept the possibility of moral certainty, and he regards the Academics as too intelligent to have done so without noticing the inacceptable consequences of a denial.

In light of this reasoning from *De consolatione theologiae*, the above-stated conclusion concerning the incompatibility of Gerson's scholastic approach to moral uncertainty and ancient Scepticism has to be reconsidered. It remains true, of course, that the ancient Sceptics had no concept of moral certainty and modern scholarship may assure us that such a concept is incompatible with ancient sceptical thought. But the revival of ancient Scepticism in the fifteenth century has to be understood on the basis what late medieval authors believed, rather than on our convictions of what they had good reasons to believe. Thus, if Gerson thought that moral certainty and Academic Scepticism could be reconciled by a form of reasoning that we might call a rational reconstruction of Academic ethics, the discourses of scholastic moral guidance and of Scepticism were less hostile to each other than modern observers tend to assume.

However, before taking this point any further, we should look more closely at natural certainty, the second issue concerning Academic Scepticism in the quoted passage from *De consolatione theologiae*. At first sight, Gerson's choice of examples indicates that he regarded natural certainty as infallible. Surely nobody can fail who believes that the same thing cannot be and not be at the same time. On the other hand, his remark that even God's absolute power

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[33] Bonaventura whose lead Gerson followed in his epistemology, as we will soon see, did also defend Cicero and Socrates against unjust attacks, see Andreas Speer, 'Sapientia nostra', in Jan Aertsen *et al.* (eds.), *Nach der Verurteilung von 1277* (Berlin: De Guyter, 2001), 248–275, 258. On the general importance of Bonaventura for Gerson see Sven Grosse, 'Johannes Gerson und Bonaventura. Kontinuität und Diskontinuität zwischen Hoch- und Spätmittelalter', in Aertsen/Pickavé, *Herbst des Mittelalters?*, 340–50.

cannot destroy supernatural certainty stirs up some irritation. If only super-natural certainty is explicitly declared immune from God's absolute power, then what about natural certainty? A set of remarks from *De vita spirituali animae*, where Gerson also referred to Academic Scepticism, may help to answer this question.

In *De vita spirituali animae* Gerson assumed that the knowledge of first principles has to be 'stabilized' by divine law and light. Again, he mentioned the Academic Sceptics, who denied all dictates of right reason. They would be guilty of intolerable error if they wished to exclude all truth and rightness unconditionally. But it would be disingenuous to credit them with such plunder, unless it is assumed that they already knew God without glorifying him (an assumption that can be rejected for the pre-Christian era). Thus, it seems better to assume that their denial points towards a higher truth. Gerson suggested that if the Academics felt rightly about their ignorance, they must have (obliquely) noticed that only God is stable enough for grounding absolute truth, because without him there can be no stable knowledge.[34]

In this second passage on Academic Scepticism Gerson clearly relied on mystical (or, if you like, Augustinian–Platonic)[35] aspects of his epistemology. Theories of a stabilization requirement for human knowledge date (at least) back to the thirteenth century and assumed, often suggesting a mystical union of God and man, a direct dependence of human knowledge on God's knowledge. They were championed by Bonaventura, who is quoted by Gerson, and Henry of Ghent, a known instigator of sceptical debates in the Middle Ages.[36] Nevertheless, we should not conclude that Gerson regarded all naturally certain knowledge as fallible. God's stabilization of natural knowledge does not necessarily mean that natural knowledge must be fallible or that his absolute power could destabilize it. Gerson did not tell us how analytical sentences, like 'The whole is larger than its parts', could be falsified or erroneously believed –

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[34] Jean Gerson, 'De vita spiritual animae', in P. Glorieux (ed.), *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 3, 137: 'Et aliunde forsan istud suadere possumus ex hoc quod talium principiorum [the principles of knowledge; R.S.] indita est notificatio creaturae rationali per immediatam divinae lucis suae irradiationem, . . . , et Bonaventura declarat pulcherrime in suae Itinerario mentis in Deum, ostendens nullum esse dictamen rectae rationis solidum et obligatorium nisi in prima lege et luce stabiliatur. Propterea philosophorum maximi et praecipui, inter quos floruerunt Socrates et ceteri Academici, ingenue professi sunt nihil in rebus mutabilibus se scire, nullam in eis reperire veritatem et nullum esse dictamen rectum rationis. Quod si per hoc omnem a nobis veritatem et rectum dictamen simpliciter excludebant, errabant intolerabiter; quod de tantis investigatoribus veritatis sentire nefas est, nisi pro quanto forsan Deum cognoscentes et non sicut Deum glorificantes, neque gratias agentes quia quae abscondita ejus erant manifestaverat eis, dati erant jam in reprobum sensum et deficiebant scrutantes scrutinio. Sentiebant igitur, si bene sentiebant in hac tanta confessione ignorantiae, quod solus Deus sicut est immobilis ita est veritas stabilis et lex certa et constans in qua videmus quae bona sunt et vera, consonantes in hoc prophetae eximio qui postquam praemiserat: multi dicunt quis ostendit nobis bona, resondens subintulit: signatum est super nos lumen vultus tui, Domine.'

[35] This is the terminology used by Heim, *Das Gewißheitsproblem*, in dealing with 'the problem of certainty' of the Scholastics.

[36] On Henry of Ghent and sceptical arguments, see Perler, *Zweifel und Gewißheit*, Chap. 1. On Henry of Ghent's and Bonaventura's views on certain knowledge, see Emery Kent, 'The Image of God Deep in Mind', in Aertsen *et al.*, *Nach der Verurteilung*, 59–124, 117; Andreas Speer, 'Sapientia nostra', in Aertsen *et al.*, *Nach der Verurteilung*, 248–75.

and it is hard to see how they could. But he assumed that the set of naturally certain beliefs varies with the purity of the believer's mind.[37] Hence, impure minds contain at least *some* false beliefs that they deem naturally certain.[38] In consequence, the Academic Sceptics were at least partially justified in attacking the idea of a naturally certain knowledge whose truth is infallibly evident to all observers. To some Christian observers they thus became witnesses of the inherent self-destructive powers of pagan philosophy. Gerson, the mystic who harboured serious doubts concerning the force of unaided natural reason, cherished this humiliation of theology's handmaiden who had become too proud in the universities. He tried to rehabilitate the Academic Sceptics as allies of faith and suggested a pious interpretation of their teachings. It seems remarkable that this argumentative strategy foreshadows the use that Gian-Francesco Pico della Mirandola, a follower of Savonarola and the first thinker who commented extensively on the writings of Sextus Empiricus, made of Pyrrhonian Scepticism in the sixteenth century.[39]

CONCLUSION

Following in the footsteps of Gerson we have seen how important the Great Western Schism (1378–1417) was as a shock that engendered new ways of dealing with epistemic and moral uncertainty. The Catholic faith assumes that the unified body of the Church as a collective actor is able to guarantee truth in a way no single person can. The pope is infallible only in so far as he is regarded as head of the Church. During the Schism, the Church had two (or even three) heads, each with its own partially formed body. As a result, traditional communitarian and hierarchical modes of intellectual assurance, which were regarded

[37] See Jean Gerson 'Notulae', in P. Glorieux (ed.), *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 3, S. 211: 'Consequenter dicendum quod intelligentia simplex quae de sua natura est lumen quoddam naturale sine alio lumine, praesertim si sit in integritate sua, potest faciliter ex conversione sua super intellectum possibilem modo dicto statim judicare de primis principiis et communibus animi conceptibus, quia non requiritur nisi apprehensio simplex terminorum; et secundum quod plus est expedita et purificata, secundum hoc plura et de pluribus potest cognoscere ex tali conversione sua super phantasmata aut super species intelligibiles in ratione, convertendo se ad lumen superius. [. . .] Hinc est quod in statu innocentiae fuisset judicium de multis clarum quae nunc non videmus in umbra nostrae corruptionis.' This looks like all human beings facing the same post-lapsarian restrictions on intellectual vision. But then Gerson adds: 'Lumina scientarum acquisitarum juvant lumen illud naturale et inditum.' Thus, the natural light of those who know more (and better) science shines brighter. See André Combes, *Jean Gerson commentateur dionysien. Les 'Notulae'* (Paris: Vrin, 1940) for a general analysis of the 'Notulae'.

[38] It is instructive to compare this interpretation with the reply which Pierre D'Ailly, Gerson's mentor and teacher, gave to the Academic scepticism (see Perler, *Zweifel und Gewißheit*, 188.). For Ailly, sentences like 'The whole is larger than its parts' are absolutely evident and true. But some naturally certain beliefs are only conditionally evident, albeit absolutely so. They are absolutely evident under the condition that nature remains as it is. Should God change nature with his absolute power, these sentences would become false. Hence, they are fallible in principle, although we have no grounds for rational doubt (because we have no reason to believe in an imminent change of nature). Such solutions leave room for regarding the Academic sceptics' glass of argumentative success against the ancient dogmatists alternatively as half full or half empty.

[39] Gianfresco Pico della Mirandola, 'Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium', in Giovanni und Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Opera Omnia*, Tom. II (1557; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1969). See also Lorenzo Polizzotto, *Elect Nation. The Savonarolan Movement in Florence 1494–1545* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Charles Schmitt, *Gianfresco Pico della Mirandola (1569–1533) and His Critique of Aristotle* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1967).

as roads to probability and truth, failed. Gerson's answer to this problem was to abandon the close nexus between opinion aggregation and the normative control of actions. He approved actions that were based on the counsel of some good experts, even if equally good counsel existed for the other side. This was a major step towards a moral and intellectual pluralism that was later unfolded by so-called benevolent guardians of conscience in the early modern era. Gerson furnished them with his concept of moral certainty, providing a means for a safe conscience on the basis of a satisfactory, but not necessarily burdensome, process of opinion formation. The pluralism that resulted from such methods was to a considerable extent taken up by Jesuits who educated the new elite of philosophers and enlightenment thinkers. In this way, the historical career of intellectual pluralism is linked to the momentous break-up of the unity of the Catholic Church during the Great Western Schism.

The Schism also exacerbated the criterion problem of knowing whether a person speaks the religious or prophetic truth. The problem of discerning divine from demonic prophecies antedates the Schism, but during the Schism a pope could no longer act as a reliable arbiter of truth. Moreover, the divisions within the Catholic Church promoted the rise of visionaries who felt the need to reform the Church and heal the rift between its factions. Western Christianity did therefore not have to wait until the Reformation in order to face a significant religious criterion problem. Gerson recognized this problem explicitly but, in typical scholastic manner, chose a multi-criteria solution rather than looking for a single fail-safe criterion.

As a further effect, the shock of the Schism probably motivated a positive attitude towards ancient Scepticism, of which Gerson only knew the Academic variety. Gerson adapted his views of Academic Scepticism to his scholastic understanding of uncertainty, using the new concept of moral certainty as key for a positive valuation of Scepticism. He thought that moral certainty, which he and his fellow scholastics regarded as indispensable for right moral action, was not effectively denied by the Academic Sceptics. Therefore, a benevolent interpretation of Academic intentions could save the positive moral image of Socrates and Cicero. This outlook surely helped to remove barriers against a positive attitude towards ancient Scepticism among reform-oriented theologians for whom morality mattered much more than subtle metaphysical speculation. It seems significant that Academic Scepticism apparently received very little positive comment from sophisticated medieval epistemologists. Hence the late medieval trend of reformist scholasticism, of which Gerson was such an outstanding representative, probably provided crucial support for the renaissance of ancient Scepticism. This may even help to explain why Pyrrhonian Scepticism, the second branch of ancient Scepticism, was rediscovered shortly after Gerson's death in Florence in an atmosphere that was strongly influenced by Gersonian thought and by Catholic reformist theology.

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