

NARRATIVE OVERVIEW OF THESIS

Peter Auriol and the Logic of the Future

I have chosen to focus on a single author's treatment of a single philosophical topic. The author is Peter Auriol (c.1280–1322), a French Franciscan whose position as the most important intellectual figure between Duns Scotus and William of Ockham has only been rediscovered in the last few decades. The topic is the perennial problem of future contingents, that is, the question of whether or not statements about the future are currently true or false. The debate goes back to Aristotle, who arguably argued that they were not. In the Middle Ages, Aristotle's position was commonly thought to be incompatible with Christian beliefs: an omniscient god must know what will happen, and no proposition can be known without being true. Peter Auriol is notable as an apparently unique exception to this common opinion.

The purpose of my thesis is to examine Auriol's position in detail from a philosophical point of view. My main source is the *Scriptum*, Auriol's Parisian commentary on Book I of an enormously influential 12th-century theological textbook known as the *Sentences*. The *Scriptum* survives in several manuscripts, including a presentation copy made for Auriol's old friend Pope John XXII. Only a small part of this vast work is available in a modern critical edition, but this includes the most important sections for my purposes; my translations of these sections will appear, together with the facing-page Latin, as an appendix to my thesis.

The primary motivation for Auriol's philosophical position is the importance he places on human free will, which ties in with his theological stance on divine justice: we are responsible for our own salvation or damnation (rather than being predestined to one or the other) because it is up to us whether we choose to meet the conditions for salvation that God has laid down. As Auriol sees it, we cannot be free if there is only one way that things can turn out in the future. But if it is currently *true* that I will have Weetabix for breakfast tomorrow, then that must be how things will turn out, and there is nothing I can do to prevent it; for if, when tomorrow comes, I do not have Weetabix, then it cannot have been true today that I would do.

Auriol finds the idea that the future is thus predetermined 'most insane' (*dementissimus*): we all know from experience that we can choose what to do, so we all know from experience that there is contingency in the world. This is not something that can be proved from more obvious truths; it is in the category of things knowable all by themselves (*per se notus*). If any argument were to be given for the existence of contingency in the world, it would be that otherwise certain human activities – deliberation and advice, which presuppose that a person could behave in various different ways, and punishments and rewards, which presuppose that a person could have behaved in various different ways – would be pointless. However, the fact that humans engage in such activities shows that we already share these presuppositions.

Auriol's contemporaries also believe in contingency, but they try in various ways to reconcile it with the existence of truths about the future. Auriol jettisons the latter because he finds none of the attempted reconciliations convincing: truth, he insists, would render the future inevitable. One consequence of this rejection of truth is that even God does not know what I will have for breakfast tomorrow. Another is that prophetic statements about the future are not true. For a theologian, both of these consequences are, on the face of it, undesirable.

Auriol solves the first problem by stressing the link between language and thought. Human statements express human thoughts, and as such they are inextricably bound up with temporal succession, because humans – and indeed all creatures – conceive of everything in terms of past, present, and future. Auriol's positive account of divine cognition is obscure, but the crucial point is that God, who somehow exists outside time, does not conceive of anything in these terms: His way of thinking 'abstracts from' time. Divine thoughts are therefore not expressible in human languages, and conversely our statements about the future lie outside the scope of God's knowledge. Auriol can thus allow that God has cognition of matters that are future as far as we are concerned, and deny that this confers truth on any of our statements.

In response to the second problem, Auriol distinguishes between what a prophecy literally means and what a prophet intends to convey by uttering it. Taken literally, a prophecy about the future is indeed neither true nor false; but taken as saying that there is in God's mind a certain determination about the future event in question, it may be true. This second reading, which salvages the notion that true prophets are those who speak truly, is uncomfortably *ad hoc*; the only points in its favour are that (a) Jonah's prophecy of the destruction of Nineveh did not come true, and (b) sometimes a prophecy is expressed in a tense that leaves its literal reading obviously false at the time, as with 'Unto us a son is born'. But these points are already accounted for in existing theories of prophecy that Auriol simply ignores.

Auriol's successors tended to be unconvinced by his efforts to show that his position was not heretical; indeed, when his ideas were taken up again by Peter de Rivo a hundred and fifty years later, some of them were officially condemned by the Pope. Nevertheless, his work proved influential, prompting a flurry of responses at Paris and subsequently at Oxford.

Auriol's sharp divorce between divine omniscience and the logic of human statements allows his position to retain direct relevance for philosophers today. My thesis will conclude with some amendments that answer the more intractable criticisms made by his contemporaries and by later commentators, thereby rendering it a serious contender in the modern debate.