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PAUL RICHARD BLUM

Ludovico Beccadelli: Philology Safeguards the Unity of Truth*

Research on the doctrine of the immortality of the soul in the Renaissance gravitates towards Pietro Pomponazzi, and justifiably so for his making the mortality of the soul a philosophically solid doctrine.¹ Only recently, a contribution by Ludovico Beccadelli (1501–1572) surfaced,² which provides a new way out of the conundrum that plagued the debate, namely, the potential conflict between revelation and philosophy. Beccadelli was a pupil and secretary to Cardinal Gasparo Contarini who, as a former student of Pomponazzi, had been the first and foremost respondent to Pomponazzi's doctrine of the soul. Beccadelli is also the author of a biography of Contarini, in which he quotes Contarini as saying: "To study the doctrines taught by others is to understand the reasons how they came about, and relying only on authority is not to know but to believe; therefore [Contarini] always aimed at knowing".³ To believe something on the authority of others needs to be superseded by a scrutiny of the reasons that warrant the

* This study is a result of research funded by the Czech Science Foundation as the project GA ČR 14-37038G "Between Renaissance and Baroque: Philosophy and Knowledge in the Czech Lands within the Wider European Context".

¹ On the debate about the immortality of the soul in the Renaissance see, for instance, BLUM, Paul Richard: *The Immortality of the Soul*, in: HANKINS, James (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (= Cambridge Companions to Philosophy). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, 211–33; PLUTA, Olaf: "*Sed hoc non videtur verum in lumine naturali*": *Natural Philosophy's Struggle for the Truth in the Immortality Debate of the Fifteenth Century*, in: SCHMIDT-BIGGEMANN, Wilhelm/TAMER, Georges (eds.): *Kritische Religionsphilosophie. Eine Gedenkschrift für Friedrich Niewöhner*. Berlin: De Gruyter 2010, 85–105. There, older studies are discussed and cited.

² ROSSI, Pietro Bassiano: "*Sempre alla pietà et buoni costumi ha exortato le genti*": *Aristotle in the milieu of Cardinal Contarini (+1542)*, in: BIANCHI, Luca (ed.): *Christian readings of Aristotle from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance* (= *Studia artistarum* 29). Turnhout: Brepols 2011, 317–95 [edition of Ludovico Beccadelli's *De immortalitate animae*, 363–386]; SGARBI, Marco: *Ludovico Beccadelli sull'immortalità dell'anima. Una prospettiva in lingua volgare*, in: *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica* 3 (2014), 657–686 [edition of Beccadelli, *Trattato de immortalitate animae*, 677–686]. As to the arguments (including philological observations), there is no notable difference between the Latin and the Italian text; the Italian, however, is shorter and lacks Greek quotations.

³ BECCADELLI, Lodovico: *Vita del Cardinale Gasparo Contarini*. Brescia: Rizzardi 1746, 27: "[...] l'studiare le dottrine da altri insegnate era intendere le ragioni, per le quali se movevano a così dire, et ch'l fondarsi solamente su'l autorità, non era sapere, ma credere; et però egli al sapere sempre attese [...]". – Beccadelli is the commonly used name; the book has "Beccatello". The first name alternates between Lodovico and Ludovico. On Beccadelli see SGARBI: *Ludovico Beccadelli sull'immortalità*, with references.

doctrine. Knowledge does not abolish the teaching of others but, rather, enhances it.

This approach to knowledge characterizes Beccadelli's own thought. With explicit reference to the major contenders, he raises the question of whether or not Aristotle taught the soul as being immortal.⁴ His arguments, briefly summarized, state: the human intellect works with the senses and the body; the agent and the potential intellect are factually the same; the human mind is being perfected by understanding sense data; the intellect is one with the immaterial things understood (*intelligibilia*); the relation between the intellect and the thought process while in the body is the same as the relation of the common sense to the sensual impressions. As to the debated question concerning the theological validity of Aristotle's tenets, Beccadelli refutes those who held with Alexander of Aphrodisias that it is the possible intellect that dies, whereas the *intellectus agens* is immortal being part of the divine intellect. To the Venetian interpreter, it is counterintuitive to separate from each other what is in terms of *subiectum* the same, just as if one would separate from fire its heat and light, or the dawn from the sun.⁵

Having thus defended that Aristotle meant the human intellect to be immortal, Beccadelli lists a number of differences between the human and the divine intellect: the human intellect can be separated from the body – God is separate from matter; mind is the animation of the body (*animalis*), which is not true of God; God knows without phantasy; the human mind manifests, whereas God produces; in God there is no precedence and difference between potency and act; the question of forgetting or remembering after separation as raised by Aristotle makes sense only regarding the human mind, since God does not forget. The intellect “makes everything” when in actuality, while as a potential it describes the forms, as expressed in Aristotle's simile of writing on a tablet.⁶ Therefore to sever the possible from the agent intellect and claiming it belongs to God alone would be like having letters without a tablet. Eventually the theological implications of the doctrine of immortality are not at all problematic, for teaching the human soul to be immortal does not infringe upon the area of

⁴ BECCADELLI, Lodovico: *De immortalitate animae seu An intellectus humanus ab Aristotele iudicetur mortalis vel immortalis*, in: ROSSI: “*Sempre alla pietà et buoni costumi ha exortato le genti*”: Aristotle in the milieu of Cardinal Contarini (+1542), 363–386.

⁵ BECCADELLI: *De immortalitate*, 369.

⁶ BECCADELLI: *De immortalitate*, 369, lines 241f.: “Intellectus enim in actu omnia facit, et in possibili omnes describit formas”. Similar arguments can be found in Johannes Buridan's *Expositio libri de anima*, lib. 3, tract. 1, c.1–2, in PLUTA, Olaf: *Kritiker der Unsterblichkeitsdoktrin in Mittelalter und Renaissance*. Amsterdam: Grüner 1986, 78–79. Cf. also KESSLER, Eckhard: *Alexander of Aphrodisias and His Doctrine of the Soul: 1400 Years of Lasting Significance*, in: *Early Science and Medicine* 16 (2011), 1–93.

competence of theology. It is true that the human intellect has traits of the divine, but it is not divine. The Alexandrist interpretation of Aristotle's agent intellect assigns something to the divine sphere that is actually specifically human; it makes dubitable claims about God; and most importantly, it fails to explain the working of the human mind, insofar as it is human.⁷ Beccadelli addresses the question of phantasy, which is supposed to supply the mind with data but to recede after death, by stating that the human intellect does not idle then, because "it will continually speculate in God objects that are more precious than those on earth".⁸ This speculation is obviously not the condition in life but its aim to pursue. It is "foolish and unworthy of a philosopher" to investigate what it might be like to know in the state of perfection. It is clear that in this life the mind understands only few things as they are, and the state of understanding everything and itself takes place (*tunc locum habere*) when the mind is, as Aristotle taught, in the state of continually understanding. This future state, however, is certain for Aristotle.⁹

The corporeal condition of the human mind does not allow for hypotheses about the contents of being immortal and intuiting the divine, but it does well allow inferences about what will happen once the soul is liberated from the body. Hence we may conclude that physicalists like Alexander and Pomponazzi should cease to battle against the immateriality of thought and understanding and, instead, ask themselves what would logically follow if the mind were immaterial, even as a hypothesis. Beccadelli's reasoning shows that Aristotle's way of discussing the soul by admitting its immateriality and immortality has more to tell of human thinking than the reduced version of a purely corporeal mind. The permanent conjunction of the possible and the agent intellect in the human mind, as advocated by Aristotle in Beccadelli's reading, implies that a materialist account of understanding misses elementary functions of the process of thought, and, consequently, this unity of potentiality and actuality in the human mind makes a metaphysical interpretation of soul and mind necessary, for the relationship of potency and act is a metaphysical one.¹⁰

Towards the end of his interpretation of *De anima*, Beccadelli reiterates that the question of how the human intellect understands after leaving the body, and whether it will be one intellect or many, is not at stake here, be-

⁷ BECCADELLI: *De immortalitate*, 369, line 228: "Aristoteles loquitur de intellectu humano, ut est hominis, et non Dei".

⁸ BECCADELLI: *De immortalitate*, 370, lines 362f.: "[...] anima non remanet ociosa, quia praestantiora quam sint haec terrena in Deo assidue speculatur [...]".

⁹ BECCADELLI: *De immortalitate*, 370f.

¹⁰ BECCADELLI: *De immortalitate*, 371, lines 306–309: "[...] mens illa passiva a sensu informata corrupta est, sed praestantiora [...] novit et intelligit, et ex his causam vides quare Aristoteles intellectum nostrum ut possibilem et agentem consideraverit, ut scilicet eius naturam distincte ostenderet [...]".

cause it transcends physics and belongs to the area of “the first philosopher, i.e., theologian”.¹¹ So, is he implying some double truth theory? Certainly not, as we will see from this sentence following immediately: Although the state of the mind after death is unknown, he reports that Aristotle, in raising the question of memory of experience in this life, is of the opinion that the mind survives as a single one (*singularem esse et superesse*). That is to say, with Aristotelian natural philosophy we may well make inferences about the transcendent, as long as we do not overstretch their validity. In Beccadelli, the divide exists, but it is not between natural knowledge and faith; it is, instead, one between natural knowledge and metaphysics, whereby he understands metaphysics in the traditional acceptance as theology with philosophical means. He appeals to the dignity of philosophy and human reason in rejecting the mere idea that the human soul might be mortal.¹² Beccadelli does not even allude to the double truth theory, although we can be certain he had it in the back of his mind, since he is close to Contarini and explicitly takes Pomponazzi to task.¹³

So far I have reported on Beccadelli’s treatise by picking samples of his opinion in relation to the issues that separate Pomponazzi from Contarini. It is quite clear that he sides with the latter who was his teacher and employer. What I did not mention is a dramatic shift in method that sets Beccadelli apart from all the other writers on immortality around the decree of the Lateran Council. For the first time we have a thinker who focuses on Aristotle’s text *De anima* and gives it a thorough reading, section by section. Consequently, Beccadelli quotes exclusively the Greek wording and he indicates the exact chapters and page references.¹⁴ While all of the participants in the debate on the soul picked and chose a limited set of standard quotations from Aristotle and his interpreters,¹⁵ now we are guided through all three books of *De anima* with a textual analysis not limited to the issues of the intellect. Beccadelli concludes with a short review of other frequently quoted passages from Aristotle and a summary of the results.

¹¹ BECCADELLI: *De immortalitate*, 382, lines 699–701: “Quaerere autem quomodo hic nos-ter intellectus a corpore seiunctus intelligat et an sit unus vel plures, non est propositi nostril; transcendit enim materiam physicam et ad primum pertinet philosophum vel Theologum”.

¹² BECCADELLI: *De immortalitate*, 382, lines 709f.

¹³ BECCADELLI: *De immortalitate*, 380.

¹⁴ Unfortunately, he does not say, which edition he is using; the editor Rossi refers to the edition of *De anima* by Faber Stapulensis, Basel 1538.

¹⁵ Cf. GILSON, Étienne: *Autour de Pomponazzi. Problématique de l’immortalité de l’âme en Italie au début du XVIe siècle*, in: *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 36 (1962), 163–279, 166–173; on the absence of Greek quotations, 276.

Beccadelli opens with a hermeneutic principle, namely, that Aristotle must have had a consistent and positive doctrine, rather than staging a controversy that entertains everyone without having a firm and clear conclusion.¹⁶ Only on the assumption that the text under scrutiny will be consistent is it worth studying. “It is like a conversation with Aristotle,” in which we listen without contention to what he has to say, given that the truth of what Aristotle actually taught about the soul can only be found out by carefully reading the “nuda sententia” of his *De anima*.¹⁷ Reading the books enhances their interpretation. Philosophy cannot do without philology. Occasionally, he discusses the quality of the extant text and singles out ancient glosses or corrupt passages; he also points out that book 1 of *De anima* should not be mistaken for Aristotle’s teaching, since it contains his doxography of his ancient predecessors.¹⁸

What we learn from Beccadelli in comparison with Pomponazzi and Contarini is a methodical shift in philosophy. Pomponazzi defended a sort of Aristotelianism that allows for a physicalist approach to nature, including the human soul. Contarini challenged philosophy to do justice to the human individual in life before and after death. Under this impression, Beccadelli strives to align the strictly Aristotelian approach with the human and transcendent perspective. And he does so by returning to the source, the work of Aristotle. Instead of adding yet another layer of claims as to what Aristotle’s philosophy is supposed to be – from the ancient commentators via Thomism, Scotism, and Paduan Aristotelianism – he re-reads Aristotle. His working hypothesis, namely, that Aristotle was not an imposter, is based on the philological humanism and it will turn out to be revolutionary in the philosophical debate. For it grants two achievements: for one thing, the debate is taken out of the firing line of the current controversy, in this case *Apostolici regiminis* vs. secular Aristotelianism. By returning to the remote source of the conflict Beccadelli can pretend not to take sides. Of course he does, but the ancient ‘stage’ provides his arguments with an air of objectivity that was hard to claim in the heat of the early modern uncertainty. Second, the philological question: ‘What did Aristotle actually teach?’ may sound positivistic or merely historical; but in combination with the assumption that the historic author did have something to say it amounts to re-thinking the problem free of prejudices.

¹⁶ BECCADELLI: *De immortalitate*, 363, lines 18–20: “Aristotelem in ea materia incertum, nihil diffinitum, nihil apertum de ea sanxisse, sed in scena, ut aiunt, omnibus satisfacere volens [...]”.

¹⁷ BECCADELLI: *De immortalitate*, 364, lines 40–42 and 45–47. Cf. SGARBI: *Ludovico Beccadelli sull’immortalità*, 678: “[...] sarò contento della semplice et nuda opinione d’Aristotele [...]”.

¹⁸ BECCADELLI: *De immortalitate*, 374, lines 403ff., 379, lines 585ff. and 600ff. Cf. SGARBI: *Ludovico Beccadelli sull’immortalità*, 679.

Beccadelli is thinking with the head of Aristotle,¹⁹ whereas his contemporaries intended to solve the problem once and for all. While Pomponazzi had transformed the argument around truth to that of authority, giving the Church equal but incompatible authority as philosophy, and Contarini had argued according to the scholastic pattern of authority supported by reasoning,²⁰ Beccadelli unifies the authority of Aristotle with the rationality of philosophical argument.

Abstract

The recently discovered letters by Ludovico Beccadelli on the immortality of the soul give a new direction to the debated issue. Beccadelli, pupil and secretary of Cardinal Gasparo Contarini, sides with him against Pietro Pomponazzi in arguing for the immortality of the individual human soul, among other reasons on the ground that the possible and the agent intellect are factually the same in the individual. Beccadelli's method is innovative in that he strictly adheres to the text of Aristotle and thus avoids the clash of revelation and reason by having recourse to philology.

¹⁹ Cf. BLUM, Paul Richard: *How to Think with the Head of Another? The Historical Dimension of Philosophical Problems*, in: *Intellectual History Review* 26 (2016) 1, 153–61.

²⁰ Cf. ROSSI: *Aristotle in the Milieu of Contarini*, 334sq.