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EXPERIENCE IN THE ANTI-ASTROLOGICAL ARGUMENTS
OF JEAN GERSON*

1. – Mistaken are, and deny *experience* those who think that the sky is a beautiful clock made by the supreme craftsman, or that it is a wise book copied from the eternal and infinite book of life¹.

2. – Some constellations have not been repeated enough times so that they produce secure *experience*².

3. – Mistaken are those, as *experience* teaches, who claim to have certain knowledge where only rhetorical probability can be achieved³.

4. – Some deny the existence of demons, even though there are many opposite *experiences*⁴. (emphasis mine in all cases, BL)

Two things can be observed in the above propositions. The first is that the notion of experience plays a fairly crucial role for the author who wrote them. The second is that we are confronted here with a radically different notion of experience from the one we use today.

All four statements occur in the anti-astrological and anti-magical argumentation of Jean Charlier Gerson (1363–1429), chancellor of the University of Paris in the first decades of the fifteenth century⁵. Gerson was involved in almost every important issue of his

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1. Gerson 1973, 93: *Errant et experientiam negant sentientes oppositum, cum coelum sit sicut horologium pulcherrimum compositum ab artifice summo cum sit etiam liber sententiosissimus exemplatus ab exemplari libro vitae infinito et aeterno.*

2. Gerson 1973, 95, cf. note 22.

3. Gerson 1973, 95, cf. note 25.

4. Gerson 1973, 100, cf. note 34.

5. On Gerson, cf. McGuire 2006; Bonney 1971.

age, and he was a prolific author⁶. He intended to purify several fields, for example, he aimed to differentiate between true and false revelations and visions (among others, in the cases of Ermine de Reims, Jeanne d'Arc, and Brigitta of Sweden and tried to decontaminate religion of popular superstitions⁷. Consequently those of his texts that discuss astrology and magic occupy only a little place in the oeuvre⁸. One of the primary reasons to choose Gerson's anti-astrological texts from the abundant similar literature of late medieval scientific discourse is that he quoted, summarized and rephrased the most significant opinions of his age, and thus his oeuvre mirrors very well the late medieval debates.

A crucial motivation for Gerson to write about and against astrology was certainly that his friend and master, the previous chancellor of the University of Paris, Pierre d'Ailly (c.1350–c.1420) got involved enthusiastically in astrological studies in the last twenty years of his life, and made serious efforts to prove the concordance of astrology, theology, and historical knowledge⁹. Many of Gerson's statements are explicit answers to the writings of *Pater Dominus Cardinalis Cameracensis*, alias *Magister Petrus de Alliaco* as he is referred to in Gerson's texts.

*Attamen est probabilis opinio et subtilis quod Deus praescius futuri casus hominum descripsit in coelo quasdam congruentias concurrentes in decursu totius mundi usque ad finale iudicium. Et hoc intenderunt illi qui voluerunt concordare astrologiam cum theologia sicut reverendissimus pater dominus Petrus cardinalis Cameracensis [...] sensisse videtur*¹⁰.

6. They were published in the eighteenth century in five huge volumes, and republished in the nineteen-sixties and seventies in ten volumes, cf. Gerson, 1706, and Gerson 1961–1973.

7. Bonney 1975.

8. Jean Charlier Gerson's treatises on magic and astrology: *Trilogium astrologiae theologizatae*, Gerson 1706, I, col. 189–203; Gerson 1973, 90–109; *Tractatus contra superstitionem innocentium*, Gerson 1706, I, col. 203–206; *Opusculum adversus doctrinam cuiusdam medici delati in Monte Pessulano, sculptentes in numismate figuram leonis cum certis characteribus pro curatione renum*, Gerson 1706, I, col. 206–208; Gerson 1973, 131–34; *De observatione dierum quantum ad opera*, Gerson 1706, I, col. 208–10; *Contra superstitionem dierum observantiam*, Gerson 1973, 116–21; *De erroribus circa artem magicam et articulis reprobatis*, Gerson 1706, I, col. 210–19; Gerson 1973, 77–90; *An liceat christiano initia rerum observare ex coelestium syderum respectu*, Gerson 1706, I, col. 220–25.

9. Petrus de Alliaco 1490; *idem* [Gerson] 1706; see also: Boudet 2002; Smoller 1994. For the relationship of Pierre d'Ailly and Jean Gerson, see Préaud 1984, especially, Chapter 10, «Partisans et adversaires de l'astrologie à la fin du Moyen Age»; Guinée 1987; the same book in English, Guinée 1991.

10. *Trilogium astrologiae theologizatae*, Gerson 1973, 92.

Demons are existing entities, argues Gerson (according to natural philosophy: probably, and according to the truth of faith: certainly): *Probabile est in philosophia naturali, et secundum veritatem fidei certum est daemones esse*¹³. And they are extremely dangerous, because they only pretend as if they were constrained by magical means, and in reality they deceive magi: (...) *addens daemones non cogi per artes magicas, sed ita fingere se cogi ut colantur sicut dii, et hominis fallacia multiplici decipiant*¹⁴. With this opinion, Gerson refuses explicitly the widespread conviction shared by necromantic manuals, that having strong faith and following adequate methods magicians can compel or constrain demons¹⁵.

There would be, of course, another way of speaking about magic, using the concept of «natural magic» that implies that through the secret correspondences of the world, nature can be manipulated without any demonic help¹⁶. Clearly this concept of magic is of no use for Gerson who is just about to condemn in fact, and not to save astrology – whatever he claims to do: he mentions natural magic only once. The application of mirrors that can be called natural magic, he says, is mentioned as something that can be to some extent tolerated. Even though it is not dangerous, since it does not need demonic help, it is still better to avoid it, because it involves human curiosity.

*Neque tamen ego negaverim quosdam plerique nimis leviter ea daemonibus adscribere quae fieri a causis materialibus rationabiliter dicerentur, nam multas et miras in rebus sensibilibus efficacias, multas virtutes existere quis abnegaverit, ex quorum combinatione, alteratione et configuratione fiunt effectus mirabiles, sicut ex applicatione varia speculorum, sicut ex celeri motu et jactatione quarumdam rerum, sicut ex immutatione diversa imaginativae potentiae in hominibus, [...]. Quarum operationum notitia dici potest magica naturalis, de qua investigare, quamvis saepe curiosum esset et maioris boni impeditivum, immo et ad errores pronum, non est tamen fidei nostrae contrarium dummodo philosophia suis contenta limitibus nihil impium, nihil mendosum nefariumve miscuerit*¹⁷.

13. *De erroribus*, Prima consideratio, Gerson 1973, 79.

14. *Trilogium*, propositio 14, Gerson 1973, 98.

15. See for example: Kieckhefer, 1997. The view of inquisitors is summarized by Nicolaus Eymeric in his *Tractatus contra daemonum invocatores* which has not yet been published, it is, however, outlined in: *Le manuel des inquisiteurs* 1973, 66 and 139. Another summary of the same opinion: Iohannes de Francofordia, 1901.

16. For the parallel histories of magic, cf. Kieckhefer 1994, 813–36.

17. *De erroribus*, Gerson 1973, 82.

In addition, we should not draw conclusions and formulate laws on the basis of such constellations which have never happened or which happened only once or twice:

[...] *praesupposita creatione mundi [...] non potuit per observationes astrologicas inveniri. [...] Et ita de calculationibus aliarum constellationum, quae non potuerunt totiens repeti ut facerent experientiam certam et naturalem astrologis de talibus effectibus consequentibus huiusmodi constellationes quarum aliquae nunquam fuerunt, aliquae raro, aliquae semel aut bis [...]*²².

Furthermore, heavenly phenomena cannot be truly examined because the light crossing different spheres is so much diverted, refracted, and broken, that the real position of heavenly bodies cannot be observed.

*Coelum cum sideribus et planetis suum lumen inflixivum pro varietate fractionis et refractionis radiorum luminarium ex diversitate mediorum diversificare, et non veros situs aspicientibus ad terram monstrare. [...] Sunt et aliae difficultates motionis planetarum in suis augibus, epicyclis, excentricis secundum ascensum, descensum, stationem, retrogradationem, titubationem, circumgirationem in centro proprio; quae omnia punctualiter observare poterit nemo, in quibus et similibus divina se sapientia ludere dicit et ostendit*²³.

Last but not least, Gerson goes on, one cannot speak about the significance and meaning of constellations at all, because, due to the incommensurability of heavenly motions, constellations are never repeated:

*Coelum habere commensurabiles vel incommensurabiles motus, signorum insuper et planetarum dominia huic vel illi genti prorsus incertum esse*²⁴.

Or more exactly astrologers cannot be sure whether these motions are commensurable or not; therefore, they should not pretend certitude where there is only probability:

*Erraverunt, ut experientia docuit, certitudinem afferre volentes, ubi solam posse haberi rhetoricam probabilitatem deducit magister Nicolaus Oresme et post eum Dominus Petrus cardinalis Cameracensis, sumens exinde radicem unam difficultatis astrologicorum iudiciorum*²⁵.

For these last arguments Gerson is indebted to Nicole Oresme's anti astrological arguments, as he presented them in his *Tractatus de*

22. *Trilogium*, propositio 8, Gerson 1973, 95.

23. *Trilogium*, propositio 10, Gerson 1973, 96.

24. *Trilogium*, propositio 9, Gerson 1973, 95.

25. *Trilogium*, propositio 9, Gerson 1973, 95.

*commensurabilitate vel incommensurabilitate motuum celi*²⁶. An important conclusion of the incommensurability of celestial motions, is that the world-year that would last 36000 years, cannot exist either, as it has already been declared by Étienne Tempier in his ominous list of 219 condemned entries, in 1277: [...] *non potuit per observationes astrologicas inveniri saltem quoad effectus, calculatio magni Anni quam Plato posuit XXXVI. millium annorum* [...] ²⁷.

Further problems arise concerning the nature of celestial causation. Those who believe that sky is not efficacious, but serves as a sign, are mistaken, because it is in fact the tool of God who governs by this help the lower world.

*Coelum esse velut instrumentum Dei gloriosi et per ipsum machinam mundi corruptibilis regulariter gubernari. (...) Erraverunt hic aliqui dicentes coelum nihil agere, sed tantummodo signum esse*²⁸.

Here Gerson argues explicitly against the standpoint of his master, Pierre d'Ailly, who believes that the sky is a *Liber naturalis* written by God, in which the celestial bodies are written as letters in order to signify those things that happen in a natural way:

*Pro cuius declaratione sciendum est quod figura coeli seu dispositio, est velut quidam Liber naturalis, manibus Dei scriptus, sicut a principio tactum est, in quo tanquam litteras, seu quasi scripturas legibiles fecit luminaria coelestia, sicut ipse per Moysen testatur, ut essent in signa et tempora. Ibi ergo representantur futura, non quacumque, sed naturaliter fieri possibile, et respectu istorum, sunt in coelo signa, non quidem ad placitum, sed naturaliter significantia*²⁹.

As long as an event has supernatural causes, says d'Ailly, one cannot conclude to it from the sky; however, if it is of terrestrial nature, it is possible to find it in the sky. This is the reason why d'Ailly thinks that the nativity of Christ, as a man, can be drawn, even though he stands – as God – outside the realm of astrology³⁰. Gerson is strongly against this semilogical explanation of astrology, and denies that history is written on the sky with star letters: *Erraverunt hic aliqui dicentes coelum nihil agere, sed tantummodo signum esse*³¹.

26. Cf. Grant 1971, 131; Grant 1974, 529–39. For Oresme's influence regarding astrology, cf. Caroti 1979, Hansen 1985, 114–19.

27. *Trilogium*, propositio 8, Gerson 1973, 95.

28. *Trilogium*, propositio 2, Gerson 1973, 91.

29. Petrus de Alliaco 1706, col. 789.

30. Petrus de Alliaco, *Elucidarius*, c. 2, in Petrus de Alliaco 1490.

31. *Trilogium*, propositio 2, Gerson 1973, 91.

exist, even though there are many opposite experiences. Their thinking is so much dominated by bodily and sensible things and particular and visible causes, that they cannot think about universal and primary entities and spiritual substances³⁵.

Porro negare daemones esse, negare eos plurimorum effectuum operatores existere, damnatur apud christianos ut erroneum, ut impium et sacris litteris adversum. Qua in re ridendi sunt, immo dure corrigendi, qui theologos derident mox ut de daemonibus sermonem faciunt, mox ut eis effectus quosdam attribuunt, quasi fabulosa sit eorum responsio. Provenit error iste apud quosdam litteratos tum ex defectu fidei, tum ex debilitate seu infectione rationis. Gerunt proprie animam taliter occupatam circa corpus, circa res sensibiles ac earum sollicitas curas, vel ita in causarum particularium et visibilium perscrutatione consistunt quod de universalibus et primis entibus et substantiis spiritualibus nihil credere vel sapere, nihil tenuiter et elevate cogitare possunt.

Last but not least, he is against any kind of curiosity about future events and other secrets of nature, because those people who wish to know such things will become easily the victims of demons:

Reperit quosdam ex hominibus falli magis idoneos, [...] quorum alii ad curiositatem libidinosam sciendi futuros rerum eventus aut alia naturae secreta damnabiliter aspirant. Tales cum aspexerit daemon, intendit nunc aperte, nunc occulte ad observandum quaedam instituta sua, quibus mediantibus fidem habeant optata consequi³⁶.

That is also in harmony with the medieval scientific worldview, but not with modern science. Advice should be received through prayers to God and angels, and not through curious investigations from the constellations:

Angelos per devotas ad Deum preces potius quam per curiosas inspectiones vel observationes constellationum posse consiliari, et per ipsos opem hominibus dari³⁷.

Experience is not a methodical way of collecting empirical data about nature's secrets, but something completely different. And this is not surprising for any historian of science who is well aware of the dangers of looking for forerunners of certain ideas, particularly the forerunners of modern scientific methods.

More interesting is, however, the following question: why does Gerson emphasize experience so decidedly in his anti-astrological text, while in his other writings he noticeably uses it less? Apparently, the notion of experience plays a crucial role in his opinions

35. *De erroribus* Gerson 1973, 78.

36. Gerson 1973, 80.

37. *Trilogium*, 20, propositio, Gerson 1973, 99.

on astrology, it is an important source of knowledge, that cannot be ignored, and that should be regularly referred to in the argumentation, and yet, he is somewhat ambivalent with this notion.

My point is that the main reason for using so often this particular word is the topic he is just discussing. Astrology, for Gerson as well as for many of its late medieval opponents, is a suspicious discipline that keeps boasting with the many pieces of experience, the many positive empirical data on which its theories are based. Against each critical remarks, it can always defend itself emphasizing its experimental nature, the confirming evidence that three thousand years provided. This is why Gerson feels obliged to show that it is exactly experience that shows that astrology is mistaken.

This picture of astrology is characterized a whole century later by the Polish Matthaeus de Szamotuly, who notes, in his commentary to the *Sphere* of John of Sacrobosco, that astrology is of lesser value than astronomy, exactly, because it relies merely on experience:

*Astronomia firmissimas habet conclusiones, siquidem eius probationes per certissimam Arithmetice geometrieque scientiam fiant. Astrologia soli experimento inmittitur*³⁸.

This difference between something that relies on the science of arithmetic, and something that relies only on experiments is quite significant for the late medieval scientist. On the one hand, in the Aristotelian scientific paradigm, experiment has lower position than theoretical-logical conclusions, reached by mental tools, correct syllogisms. On the other hand, experience in mainstream scholasticism does not involve interference in the natural processes, the construction of experiments (in the Galileian sense of the word), and it does not lead to certain knowledge about nature. It is well known how deeply this low appreciation of experience is rooted in the

38. Matthaeus de Szamotuly 1522, 1-2: *Primo quod astronomia causas speculatur, astrologia vero effectus respicit. Non considerat autem astronomia celestia ut cause sunt horum inferiorum, sic enim et effectum necessario cognosceret, sed motus dumtaxat et configurationes nulla operationis ratione habita. Quod vero talem vel alium producant effectum sic vel sic disposita, astrologo ad discutendum committitur. Secundo: Astrologia est de hiis rebus que uniforme (quod vere scientie proprium est) eandemque semper servant permanentiam. Nam motus celestes uniformes perpetuo sunt duraturi [...]. Astrologia vero de illis est que non in eadem continua dispositione permanent. Considerat enim mutationes et opera que contingunt. Tertio Astronomia scientia in se completa est quam possibile est absque astrologia comprehendere. At astrologia in se insufficiens est, astronomicus enim presupponit speculationes, super quibus tanquam in fundamento solido sua iacit pronostica.*

dichotomy of *ars* and *natura* inherited from Aristotle: artificial constructions in general are not believed to say anything about natural phenomena before Galileo and Francis Bacon³⁹. The legitimate way of acquiring knowledge is not the imitation of the pattern of a certain natural process and its repetition in other circumstances, because this would yield knowledge only about artificial processes (*ars*), and not about nature (*natura*). This notion of experience is helpfully described by Peter Dear, in his discussion of experiment and experience⁴⁰.

In the academic world [...], an 'experience' was a universal statement of how things are, or how they behave. It did not refer to immediate perception because, as Aristotle said in the *Posterior Analytics*, 'One necessarily perceives an individual and at a place and at a time, and it is impossible to perceive what is universal and holds in every case'. Therefore, 'since demonstrations are universal, and it is not possible to perceive these, it is evident that it is not possible to understand through perception'⁴¹.

The perception of the individual case is not valid enough for a scientific theory to be built on. If astrology relies on individual cases, it is not a proper science. The perception of the particular events produces experience via memory. Experience is a generalization which is dependent on social factors. As Peter Dear puts it: «Experience and social accreditation were never sharply distinguished»⁴². This explains clearly why experience could prove the existence of demons for Gerson; demons for him belonged to the socially accredited conviction.

39. Even though this dichotomy was not unchallenged, see for example the debates related to alchemy. Cf. Newman 1989.

40. Dear 1995, 21–28.

41. Dear 1995, 22.

42. Dear 1995, 23.