AUGUSTINUS TRIUMPHUS’ ALLEGED Destructio OF THE PORPHYRIAN TREE

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1. Remarks on the Author and His Works

For anyone interested in the Porphyrian tree—either theoretically or historically—the finding of a title such as Destructio sive Eradicatio totius Arboris Porphirii should be an intriguing event, especially in view of the figure immediately following the title, here reproduced (in reduced size):

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Destructio sive Eradicatio totius Arboris Porphirii. Magni philosophi ac sacre Theologi Doctoris exu mi Augustini Anchoritani ordinis Fratrum Heremi tarum Sancti Augustini: Cu quaed Decretali eiusdæ.
The destructive monk is Augustinus de Ancona (d. 1328), also known as Augustinus Triumphus. The illustration on the title-page of the 1503 printing is not the product of the phantasy of the editor or publisher: the author himself uses the term securis (ax) at least twice in the first chapter. For example:

Haec arbor illa famosa dicta Porphyrii: quae ab antiquis philosophis in scientiarum horto plantata: communita a subsequentibus docitis diligentissimo studio exculta consistit: quae non solum infructuosa sed perniciosa et noxia plurimum repetitur amoribus veritatis. Quod ergo diu in animo volens: licet in me iam esset securis ad eius praecidendum radicum in infra [...] non tamen audibam ad eius totalem avulsionem assurgere: ne forte terminos antiquos transgridi puteram...


After the title-page (with title, monk and tree) there is a three-page letter-introduction by the editor, Augustinus de Placentia. The Destructio occupies the subsequent thirty pages, and is divided into ten chapters. The exposito catusdam decretalis follows in six additional pages. At the bottom of the last page the explicit tells us that the edition was revised by Alexander Achillinus (a name already mentioned by the editor in his preface) and impressa Bononieae in 1503.

I have used a microfilm of a copy in the Vatican Library. Kürzinger mentions another copy in the Stadtbibliothek, Munich. According to Ministeri's edition of the Destructio contains a double error concerning the composition date of the original. Apparently, the 1503 is the only printed edition of this work and no manuscripts are known (this concerns in particular the codex antiquissimus that Augustinus de Placentia says he used for the 1503 edition).

There is apparently nothing written on the Destructio or on the other logical pieces by Augustinus de Ancona. Prantl’s two pages for

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1 For this late cognomen cf. B. Ministeri, De vita et operibus Augustini de Ancona O.E.S.A., (†1328), Roma: Analecta Augustiniana, 1953. Cf. also Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani: “Agostino Trionfo”.


Chapters two and three aim at the obliteration of the top bifurcation of substantia into corporea (corpus, body) and incorporea (spiritus, mind); chapter four targets the branch substantia-corporea; chapters five, six and seven are devoted to the branch animal-rationale, while chapter eight attacks the division of animal rationale into mortale and immortale.

Our author refers to earlier critics (plures sancti doctores, chapter one) who were unhappy about the bifurcation homo-deus from the node animal rationale (animal rationale + mortale = homo, animal rationale + immortale = deus). Thus we read in chapter one:

Nam cum in huiusmodi arboris expansione ramorum ponatur animal rationale pro generis eiusque divisionibus differentiae mortale et immortale sint species his constitutivae: mortale animal homo: immortale deus: quod ipse Porphyrius exponens ait “Sumus itigur rationes nos et di: sed mortale appositum separat nos ab illis” [Porphyrii Isagoge p. 11, 4a, 2–3] ubi sive deos putet ydola manufactus quae ab antiquis gentibus pro diis sunt adorata ... sive deos dicat coelestia corpora ... sive deos existimet substantias spirituales: angelos ... Haece omnia ad accelerat fitillum Memtes piae. Properea ut dixi rami aliqui huius arboris sanctis doctoribus sunt praeclari.

This attitude may be contrasted with, for example, Cajetan’s tolerance; the post-medieval cardinal, in fact, agrees to keep, just exempli gratia, the erroneous ranking together of both homo and deus under the same genus.5

Augustin’s task is not merely to do more pruning than his sancti predecessors. His intention is to carry out a full eradication. How can this be claimed by Augustin, if (as the “x’s” indicate in our figure) he has not removed all the branches? The answer is simple: Augustinus regards the top (substantia) as the radix (chapter two): Huius arboris radix sive stipites ponitur substantia: genus generalissimum: cuius prima divisio est in corpoream et incorpoream, corporea substantia corpus, incorporea spiritus.

This is indeed what we would do according to our contemporary notion of a tree-structure, but it is contrary to a persistent tradition in the diagrams illustrating the Porphyrian doctrine, where the individuals are depicted as being the roots of the tree.

Thus, Augustin thinks that once he has destroyed the top bifurcation of substance into body and mind, his job is done: arboris praefatae sic avulsa radice non videretur ulteriorius insistendum ad praecessionem ramorum. Nam stipite eius exciso radice effossa: rami vigorem non obtinebunt, sed in se deficientes exsicabantur (beginning of chapter four).

Augustin’s fatal blow on the radix is accomplished as a sequence of three arguments, not too clearly separated (in the 1503 edition). There is first, by way of general premis, a dense fifteen line passage (in the second page of chapter two) in which the author talks first about abstraction (abstrahentium non est mendacium, omne prius abstrahi potest per intellectum a suo posteriori, unde animal abstrahi potest ab homine) and secondly about forma generis imperfecta, inchoatio formae perficiendae, ratio seminalis. Augustinus is aware of being too succinct in the display of this preliminary material, but he observes: ea quantum potui angusta apud creatas ea non latere phisicalis doctrina inburus. For those who are not experts, however, the connection between abstrahentium non est mendacium and forma imperfecta or ratio seminalis is not obvious. On the one hand substantia abstrahi absum dubio per intellectum potest ab utraque [ab corporea vel incorporea], on the other hand the abstracted substantia will behave like a genus with all the consequences that the author will draw in his subsequent three arguments.

Once Augustinus has stated his preliminary material, he proceeds as follows (ex praemissorum consideratione sic arguo):

First argument. If substance is genus with respect to corpus and spiritus, then spiritus is “educible” from a previous matter per actionem naturalis agentis, which is impossible, since anima and angelus are created immediately by God.

Second argument. If substantia is genus with respect to corpus and spiritus, then the forma substantiae spiritualis is essentialiter in materia praeiacenti secundum rationem seminalis, which is impossible since eilibet singulari substantiae spirituali est simul cum ea sua materia concreta.

Third argument. If substantia is genus commune with respect to corpus and spiritus, then there must be some essentia common to corpus and spiritus [otherwise per illud genus nihil importaretut], but whatever essentia they have in common, however far be corpus from spiritus, one can be made out of the other [ex uno illorum poterat alterum fieri], if not by nature at any rate by God. But God cannot do this.

The third argument appears to be the fundamental one. The crucial point is the “limitation” imposed on the divine omnipotence by the last sentence. Augustin feels that, in fact, this requires additional explanation (till the end of chapter two and the first half of chapter three).

Underlying the thesis on God’s power to make one entity out of another there is a certain ontological alchemy, revealed by such phrases as “facere de uno aliud”, “convertere”, “transmutare”, “commutare”, etc. This alchemy is possible for God between any two bodies or any two minds, but not from a body to a mind or vice versa. For the alchemical transmutation from X to Y it is required that there be something common to X and Y. Let this something common be P. Then God starts his work by “peeling off” from X everything until he reaches P; at that moment, God starts the reverse process, namely the building of Y out of P. Not any predicate “P” true of both X and Y seems to be sufficient for the possibility of transforming X into Y and vice versa. Augustin seems to presuppose that the common ingredient must be a genus, a genus commune, which secures the existence of an essentia common to X and Y. It is taken for granted that it is possible to somehow isolate that common ingredient.

If we return to the last sentence of the third argument: God cannot make a body into a mind or vice versa, and we ask “why”?. Augustin’s answer appears to be: because there is not a common genus to body and mind. This however makes the third argument circular. The first argument lacks any force unless the immediate creation by God of anima and angelus is the only way for them of coming into existence, that is, if God cannot make them ex aliquo but has to create them ex nihilo; then the first argument reduces to the third. The same applies to the second argument. Hence the attack on the radix, the eradicatio, is a failure.

The second part of chapter three is devoted to the following objection: amplius cum substantia praedicari dicatur de utsche scilicet corporali et spirituali: non accidentaliter sed substantialiter: ergo eam genus esse videtur. Triumphus’ answer to this is the assertion that nonquem de utsche substantia unicece praedicabitur; the predicate “substance” that we say of God, angels and horses, preserves in this variety of predications solum unipartem nominis sit vocis: idea nullo modo poterit dici genus.

If the eradicatio attempted in chapters two – three is a fiasco, then the further pruning in chapters four – ten becomes less redundant than the author thinks.

In chapter four the branch substantia-corpus is attacked on the ground that corpus belongs in the category of quantity, not of sub-

stance. Chapters five and six discuss the division of the node animal into rational and irrational. Augustin brings in the idea (stated by Porphyry himself) that the differentiae are potentially in the genus. In the history of philosophy this idea led to difficulties inasmuch as the qualification “potentially” was weakened or dropped altogether; contrary differentiae would then coexist in the genus (the triangle which is both isosceles and equilateral etc., as in Locke’s famous example). For Augustinus the problem created by the “potential” being of the differentiae in the genus is more akin to the doctrine he defended in chapters two and three. His concern is that, if the differentia rational is in the genus animal, then: ratione educetur de materiae potestate quod est impossible. Our author claims that the problem is difficililimum...multi conati sunt eius difficiatum diversis viis evadere. Augustin presents, discusses and rejects three solutions. His preferred approach seems to be the total rejection of rational as differentia divisa animalis seu hominis constitutiva (chapter six) together with the introduction of a differentia innominata (ibid.), which should preserve the truth that anima cum sua ratione immediate a deo creator, nec est aliquathenue in naturae tel generis potestate.

While in chapter seven Augustin completes the discussion of chapters five and six by considering an objection to the view that anima rationalis is omnium formarum nobilissima, in chapter eight he undertakes the praesidio of the branches mortale and immortale. Here the argument is different; Augustinus’ objection to Porphyry is that mortal is really accidental, and that immortal would make a better differentia for homo.

After discussing in chapter nine quomodo angeli dicit sunt animalia, in chapter ten Triumphus wants to excuse rather than to reprehend (reprehendere) the cultores of the tree, inasmuch as they had a pedagogical purpose in mind.

As suggested above, the negative evaluation presented in this paper might have to be revised by an examination of the other logical writings of Augustinus. It may be added that Ministeri seems to make some positive comments about Triumphus’ eradicatio project in his summum: rationes validas et acutas inducet auctor, quibus arboris praefatae culturae ipsim est judicat de scientiarum horto a veritatis cultoribus il- lam esse exiripandum; it turns out however that these words are taken literally from Augustin’s text (end of chapter one) except for the phrases inducet auctor and illam esse, so that it is Augustinus himself who asserts that Augustinus’ rationes are validae et acutae.

6 Ministeri, op. cit. p. 66.