

## Reason and the Divine

### Week two: the Medieval Mind

In 1347, the University of Paris issued a condemnation of the following view –

That it is plausible, by the natural light, that there are no accidents distinct from substance ... and that if not for the faith this view should be held as plausible, or could be held as plausible.

The target of this condemnation was a Cistercian monk and theology master at the University of Paris, John of Mirecourt. A recent commentator on the philosophy of the period, Robert Pasnau of the University of Colorado, has described this event as blocking the route to modern philosophy for 300 years, and says that for this reason, “the year 1347 deserves to be remembered as one of the great milestones in the history of philosophy.”

I think it is probably fair to say that it is not exactly clear just what is being condemned here, and understanding this, and why, according to Pasnau, it was such an important event in the history of philosophy, will be one of our tasks this evening. But first, we need to look backwards from 1347, and see what happened to European thought in the centuries between the death of Aristotle and the fourteenth century.

## I

I do not want to suggest that philosophy inhabits some realm of pure thought, somehow existing and developing independently of the culture and historical events that surround it. Indeed, one of our themes this evening is the way in which one major historical and cultural shift, the rise of Christianity, decisively influences the history of Western philosophy. But I do want to suggest that from our lofty and summarising perspective, one major historical event, the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, did not influence greatly the development of philosophy.

This is mainly because of the unusual deference paid to the Greeks by the Romans, who, when they conquer Greece around about 150BC, largely leave the existing political administration intact, and indeed in large measure adopt Greek culture as their own. The military might of Rome is indisputable, but culturally, they are imitators. The greatest of Roman philosophers, Seneca or Sextus Empiricus, inhabit Greek modes of thought, and whilst we see a certain amount of literary refinement, no school of philosophy is established during the Roman period that has not already appeared in Greece.

Even with the rise of Christianity, although the metaphysical underpinnings of Christian theology provide much new material for philosophers to work on, the template for philosophical thought still remains firmly Greek, in ways that we will explore this

evening, with a succession of Christian thinkers, all the way through our period, attempting to mould Plato and Aristotle to revealed religious truth.

There are two aspects of this that bear emphasis. Firstly, the natural inclination of thinkers we will examine is to look to the past as the repository of wisdom. Even as we moderns bemoan that things ain't wot they used to be, our culture views human understanding as on an upward trajectory. This, note, is a claim about our attitude towards knowledge. We are used to looking backwards as far as our artistic culture is concerned, which seems to be going perennially downhill. This quote from Godfrey Goodman expresses a sentiment we will all find familiar –

“For all arts whatsoever, the best authors are the most ancient, even unto the present day.”

‘The present day’ for Godfrey Goodman was 1616., not long after the death of Shakespeare. Notwithstanding such cultural pessimism, we moderns tend to assume that we will know more in the future than we did in the past, and we look backwards, when we do, mainly to understand where we have come from rather than in the hope of regaining knowledge that has been lost. Like all generalisations, this is not completely true, and the sense that there is some ancient wisdom that somehow slipped our mind has never entirely disappeared; nevertheless, the inexorable progress of science and our technological mastery over the world, combined with the dominance of the capitalist mode of economic organisation with its emphasis on constant growth, has made us future orientated. New is good, often precisely because it is new.

The prevalent view during the entirety of the period we are looking at this evening was the opposite of this. New was bad, often precisely because it was new. Culture was orientated towards the past, and thinkers looked backwards not simply to discover the primitive roots of contemporary understanding, but in the hope of regaining what had been lost.

This was the case, partly, because it was true. As the weeds grew through the ruins of Rome it was apparent to everyone that the high water mark of human civilisation had come and gone, and that history was on a downward slope. But when all developments of human thought have to be understood in relation to the templates of the past, as they do when this backwards-looking attitude is firmly in place, the attitude becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the task of contemporary thought becomes to preserve, and the thinkers of the Greek and Roman golden age assume an unassailable authority. As was pointed out in the discussion last week, this occurred in many areas, one thinks of Galen in medicine, and it happened in philosophy too. We simply will not understand the Medieval mindset unless we keep this backward orientation of culture firmly in mind.

The second aspect of the nature of philosophical thought in the Medieval period that bears emphasis is the role that revealed religious truth played in circumscribing the permissible parameters of thought. It would be a mistake to think even of Ancient Greece as a paradise of free philosophical speculation, Socrates was after all condemned to death

for disbelieving in the gods of the state, but all the thinkers that we looked at last week were suspicious to various degrees of the prescribed state religion, and saw the use of reason as the proper way to approach even religious matters. Whilst the religious authorities of the Medieval period were hardly averse to imposing their authority by force, and whilst there is an obvious and often explicit political dimension to much of the familiar religiously inspired violence of the time, it has to be recognised that most if not all thinkers of the Medieval period accepted the revelations of faith without question. Even those who found elements of their thought condemned by the religious authorities, such as John of Mirecourt, did not do so from a position of heterodoxy, still less from a position of covert atheism; controversy arose at the disputed boundary between philosophy and theology rather than over the status of revelation as a source of knowledge of the divine.

Speaking personally, I am much more Greek than Christian as regards revelation. To say that something can only be known by faith seems to me to acknowledge a lack of rational support that I find troubling. With the very need for rational support removed, faith is too promiscuous, too arbitrary in the beliefs it permits; the Moslem and the Christian, believe very different things on the basis of faith, and they cannot all be true at once (the Christian accepting and the Moslem rejecting, for instance, the divinity of Christ). What one accepts on the basis of faith seems to me to depend largely, although admittedly not exclusively, on cultural and historical factors.

But this is not the place to criticise faith as a basis of knowledge. If we are to enter into the Medieval European mind, the role of faith in providing an unquestioned framework of theological truth needs simply to be recognised. If this is an attitude that we find difficult or undesirable to attain, that is another fundamental respect in which we differ from our forebears in the Middle Ages.

Such an attitude towards religious revelation is understandable perhaps in the context of a religiously homogenous Medieval Europe, where the adherents of other religions did not present themselves to the imagination as benign fellow seekers after spiritual truth but as dangerous invaders threatening the integrity of Christendom. To what degree this was actually true, rather than a product of the somewhat fevered European imagination of the time, is a question of some historical subtlety; medieval Islam by the standards of the time was remarkably tolerant of both Christians and Jews, although its expansionist tendencies are also undeniable. But since our focus is on the way Medieval Europeans saw the world, this question can largely be side-stepped. What is far more interesting for our purposes is the question of how such an absolute attitude towards faith arose in the far less religiously homogenous context of the late Roman Empire in the early centuries AD.

To a certain extent, of course, the certainties of faith can be explained, reductively, as a response precisely to chaos. In a world where Roman authority is slowly dissolving, and any number of religious sects are proclaiming their differing roads to salvation, uncertainty is far more effectively dispelled by dogmatic faith rather than rational

investigation. Without dismissing this psychological aspect of the matter, I would also wish to emphasise the roots of this attitude in the philosophical developments of the time.

As we saw last week, Plato argued that reality was other-worldly. What most truly and fundamentally exists for Plato is the world of the forms, and its existence is separate and independent of the world apprehended by the senses. For Plato himself, though, remember, this other world is knowable precisely through the use of reason. But what we find in later developments of Platonic thought, in the writings of neo-Platonists such as Plotinus and Porphyry, is an emphasis on the mystical elements of Plato's writings. Plato's form of the good, symbolised by the sun in the allegory of the cave, and in some sense the source of all other forms, becomes referred to increasingly by the neo-Platonists as 'the One', that is the undivided, unlimited, and eternal fundamental principle of existence, and furthermore it is increasingly emphasised that, whilst reason can reveal some facets of the world beyond the senses, true understanding of the One cannot be attained by the rational mind, but only by giving oneself over to ecstasy. This leaves the door wide open to religious revelation, and it is unsurprising to see the first great philosopher of the Christian era, St Augustine (354-430AD) trace a path through neo-Platonism to a divinely inspired Christian orthodoxy he did so much to create. And one of Augustine's maxims captures perfectly the genuinely new, Christian idea that revelation is not some optional add-on to understanding, but rather absolutely essential to it. *Nisi credideritis, non intelligitis*, he wrote. "Unless you believe, you shall not understand."

I have some sympathy with the idea that reason can get us only so far. At any rate, I see no reason simply to assume that human understanding will be able to comprehend the whole of reality. Where I part company with the religious attitude, as I have already mentioned, is in its further claim that revelation can make up the deficit. Once again, my personal views are not relevant so long as we note that this attitude, that reason is limited and needs to be supplemented by revelation, marks a decisive transition from the classical Greek frame of mind, carving out a distinct realm for theology separate from philosophy and thereby creating a boundary between the two that is disputed right up to our own day. It bears emphasis how this distinctive attitude is linked to the Christian notion of a separately existing creator God (the two clearly developed hand in hand and it is meaningless to ask which caused which). As long as there is a Platonic world of the forms, the *demiourgos*, or artisan god, moulds the matter of the universe with one eye on the forms and is constrained by them. Because the forms are apprehensible by reason, then so is the universe as a whole. But once we develop the idea of a genuine creator God, who creates the universe from nothing in an act of freedom and love, there is no inherent guarantee that the universe will be understandable through reason. To be sure, God's love for us no doubt entails that it is understandable through reason to some degree, but it is entirely possible that the all-powerful and all-loving God of Christianity will also require that we exhibit faith in order to understand the deepest mysteries of the universe.

## II

The time between the death of Aristotle in 322 BC and the conventional end of the scholastic period midway through the seventeenth century is, let us not forget, the best part of two thousand years. Conventional histories of philosophy deal surprisingly little with this period, vast as it is, and I have tried to indicate in my previous remarks how the backward-looking orientation of Medieval European culture, coupled with the emphasis on revelation and faith as the appropriate route to knowledge of the most fundamental (religious) aspects of reality, served to render philosophical innovation that much harder to achieve. Viewed at from a distance, with the kind of synoptic attitude forced on us by our time constraints, it is not entirely misleading to say that only one thing of note happened to philosophy between Augustine and Descartes, which was the adoption of Aristotle as the basis of the philosophy curriculum in the thirteenth century, due in no small measure to the magisterial work of Thomas Aquinas.

As philosophical innovation, its credentials are hardly unalloyed, consisting as it does of the adoption of the already ancient figure of Aristotle as supreme authority in matters philosophical. But whilst this is no doubt a secular, philosophical version of the dominant authoritarian religious attitude, it also represents a significant change, in ways that are not immediately apparent, but that I will try for the rest of this evening to explain.

Neo-Platonism had become a philosophical dead-end, which, when not playing to the tendency of Christian theology to revel in mystery, produced instead the increasingly arcane and of necessity secret hermeticism of astrology and gnostic thought. The venue for our talks leads me to emphasise that I do not mean to suggest that astrology and gnosticism are any more irrational than the theology I will concentrate on, only that they develop in parallel to the events that I am describing, separate and subterranean because viewed by Christian authority as heretical. There is an alternative history of hermeticism of great interest and importance to be told, but I, unfortunately, do not have the expertise to tell it, and so I have to leave it aside.

What we see first in the work of Anselm in the eleventh century and a hundred years later in much more depth in Aquinas, is the development of the thought that reason can be used in support of theological truth. Anselm is the first in the great tradition of Christian natural theology that seeks to provide rational arguments for the existence of God, arguments that move from general and seemingly irresistible features of the natural world to the existence of the deity, although it is significant that one of the most important of these arguments, the First Cause argument, is found in Aristotle.

One of the reasons natural theology takes so long to get going in the Christian world is that it seems to imply, however faintly, that the existence of God is somehow doubtful, in need of rational demonstration. And Anselm is very careful in his writings to dispel this impression. The atheist, towards whom Anselm's so-called ontological argument is directed, is referred to as 'the fool' (this is taken from *Psalms* 14:1, where the fool is one who says in his heart that there is no God), and the whole enterprise is couched not as supporting a proposition that is otherwise doubtful, but as demonstrating the divine

harmony of reason and revelation. As the Islamic scholar, Ibn Rushd, better known by the Latinized version of his name, Averroes, asserts a little later, “demonstrative truth [that is, truth as shown by reason] and scriptural truth cannot conflict”. He goes on to say that “the religious thinker must make a preliminary study of logic ... and logic must be learned from the ancient masters [he has in mind here primarily Aristotle] regardless of the fact that they were not Moslems.” This insistence that religious truths are capable of rational demonstration is exactly what is found in Anselm, and marks a move away from Platonic mystery, although we don’t find the explicit reference to the authority of ‘the ancient masters’ until Aquinas a little later. And, for Anselm, this use of reason does not, remember, imply any deficiency in faith – if reason can provide us with rational grounds for the existence of God, that only shows that God has, in His grace, bestowed us humans with enough wit to discern divine truth through our understanding as well as through revelation. It has to be said that Averroes is less insistent on this; he says, in the same work from which I have been quoting,

“If the apparent meaning of Scripture conflicts with demonstrative conclusions it [Scripture] must be interpreted allegorically, ie metaphorically.”

This goes way beyond what Anselm or Aquinas would have been prepared to accept; indeed, Spinoza is getting into trouble for arguing that the Bible cannot be interpreted literally five hundred years later. This is one example of the more advanced nature of Islamic thought at the time, and there are others. Indeed, we will meet Averroes again shortly, in connection with another troublesome doctrine.

Anselm’s ontological argument attempts to demonstrate that the very idea of God, which even the fool possesses, entails God’s existence. (The argument was actually first put forward by the Islamic philosopher Avicenna.) The argument is really quite simple to state, although discussion of it rapidly becomes complex. Anselm describes the idea of God as the idea of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. If this is not your idea of God, take it as a definition – if Anselm really can demonstrate the existence of such a being, it will clearly have relevance to God as more standardly conceived.

So the idea of God is defined as the idea of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. But Anselm then says that if we were to conceive of such a being as not existing, we would be able to conceive of a being greater than this being after all, i.e. a being than which nothing greater can be conceived that also exists; but this contradicts the very definition of God as that being than which nothing greater can be conceived, and so a being defined in such a way must exist. As Anselm himself puts the matter, “assuredly, that than which nothing greater can be conceived cannot exist in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality, which is greater.”

If you have the sense of some logical wool being pulled over your eyes, you are not alone. Indeed, Anselm himself had critics, including the monk Gaunilo, who mischievously applies the very same line of argument to ‘the perfect island’, that is an island than which no greater island can be conceived, saying that this island cannot by definition exist in the understanding alone, but must also exist in reality. If this were the

case, this would reduce Anselm's argument to absurdity, showing that it cannot be correct.

The problem that Gaunilo points to is the problem of moving from existence in the understanding, as an idea, to existence in reality. Merely having ideas of islands, no matter how perfect, does not ensure that they exist. But the idea of God is claimed by Anselm to be different (this is how Anselm replies to Gaunilo's criticism), for the idea of God is the idea of a necessarily existing being. The contrast between necessary and contingent existence can bear some elaboration. Something that exists contingently is something whose non-existence is possible – so, although I exist, my non-existence is possible; if my parents had never met, for example, I would not be here now. By contrast, something that exists necessarily is something whose non-existence is not possible. Clearly, necessary existence is a pretty special property, and one standardly attributed to God, and put to use in arguments very like Anselm's by thinkers such as Descartes, and most magisterially by Spinoza, as we shall see next week.

Gaunilo is not saying, of course, that God does not exist, rather that this argument of Anselm's does not prove His existence (which is not in doubt in any case). Likewise, Aquinas rejects Anselm's argument without in any way calling into doubt that God exists, and indeed, whilst rejecting the ontological argument, Aquinas puts forward not one but five arguments for the existence of God in his *magnum opus*, the *Summa Theologica*. One of these plays on the distinction between necessary and contingent existence in a slightly different way to the ontological argument, since it relies on a fact about the world, albeit the most general fact possible, the very fact that there is something that exists. The existence of most things being contingent, says Aquinas, their existence relies on something else. This something else may also only have contingent existence, but if so, its existence must further depend on something else, and so on. But this chain, says Aquinas, cannot go on for ever, and must ground out in the existence of something that depends on nothing else for its existence, i.e. that necessarily exists, and this, says Aquinas, everyone will call 'God'.

Another of Aquinas' arguments for the existence of God is known as the First Cause argument, and although its structure is similar to the argument from necessity sketched above, it is worth describing since it reveals something of the relationship between Medieval thought and the philosophy of Aristotle, which Aquinas remember, was responsible for resurrecting, in Europe at least.

Aristotle argued that the universe could have no beginning in time. For if it did, there would be a first cause of everything, which itself would have no cause. This, says Aristotle, is absurd, and the chain of cause and effect must therefore extend backwards in time for ever. Aquinas takes over this argument in almost every respect, except its conclusion. Since the idea of an infinite chain of cause and effect is what is absurd according to Aquinas, the chain of cause and effect must end somewhere, with a first, uncaused cause, and this, says Aquinas, everyone will own is God. In such a manner was Aristotelean thought appropriated by Medieval thinkers and bent to theological purposes far removed from Aristotle's intentions. (Similar perplexities of course attend the

scientific theory that the universe began with the big bang. For what caused the big bang? A good question, and one to which science has, seemingly, no answer; at the very least, the options that face science, that the big bang was an uncaused first cause, or that it was merely the beginning of a new phase in an infinitely existing universe do not seem to differ importantly from the that faced Aristotle and Aquinas.)

I have described these arguments for the existence of God as a way of showing how the philosophical reason of the Greeks, especially Aristotle, begins to be pressed into the service of Christian theology during the Medieval period. To be sure, this Aristotelean turn leaves much about the nature of God to the theologians, but at the very least the existence of God is visible to reason, in contrast to the neo-Platonic idea that God can only be known through revelation and that reason plays no role in our knowledge of the divine. But Aquinas' significance in the history of philosophy does not consist solely in his reshaping old Aristotelean arguments about the First Cause.

Instead, Aquinas' great achievement in his magisterial *Summa Theologica* and the other over four million words of his writings is to integrate the whole of Aristotelean metaphysics, in what it says about the fundamental metaphysical structure of this temporal world that we inhabit, into the framework of Christian theology in a way that not only makes it seem as if the two were made to go together, but that inaugurated a decisive change in the direction of European thought up to, and I would argue beyond, Descartes and the dawn of the scientific revolution.

The vindication of that last statement will have to wait until next week, but before we see in a little more detail the nature of Aquinas' achievement, we should leaven the metaphysics with a little bit of biography.

### III

Aquinas was born in 1225 into Southern Italian nobility. His decision to become a Dominican did not go down at all well with his family, who imprisoned him in a tower, where they sent a prostitute to seduce him. The young Thomas chased her away with a burning stick, and it is said he was later visited, poor lad, by two angels who appeared to him as he slept and strengthened his decision to remain celibate. His family reluctantly let him go eventually, and he travelled to Paris to study.

His first forays into public disputation were not all that successful, Albertus Magnus exclaiming "We call him the dumb ox" before adding prophetically that "but in his teaching he will one day produce such a bellowing that it will be heard throughout the world."

A life of writing and teaching in various European cities, Paris, Rome, Cologne, and so forth, was somewhat enlivened by controversy. His second stint as regent of the University of Paris between 1268 and 1272 seems to have been a particularly turbulent one. He was tasked with dealing with an outbreak of 'Averroism' in the university.



Averroism, the doctrine of the Islamic philosopher Averroes, was a form of Aristoteleanism – the works of Aristotle were preserved through the European Dark Ages by Islamic philosophers, who instituted the practice of writing commentaries on Aristotle, a practice which, after Aquinas, was to become common all over Europe as well. These commentaries were line by line explanations of the often obscure works of the master, and so in providing them the commentator, whilst respecting the thought of the original, indeed whilst subjecting it to detailed critical scrutiny in the attempt to discern its precise meaning, could develop Aristotle’s thought in ways which were quite original to the commentator, and that diverged significantly and often fundamentally from the interpretations of other commentators. Averroes had discerned in Aristotle the claim that the soul that exists after death, the very same soul that Christian eschatology was so concerned with, could not be at all personal, and that life after death would consist in nothing more than the merger of our pure intellect with a universal rational mind. (See how Plato is always there in the background somewhere!)

This was unambiguous trespass on theological territory, and could not be allowed to stand. Aristoteleanism thus presented itself to the authorities as, in this extreme form, dangerous. Aquinas repudiated Averroism whilst accepting a milder Aristoteleanism, but this was a difficult position for him to finesse, and he was much criticised. Many were suspicious of Aristoteleanism in general as corrupting the purity of the Christian faith, and the bishop of Paris in 1270 went so far as to condemn thirteen Aristotelean and Averroistic propositions and to threaten with excommunication anyone who propounded them. Aquinas stuck to his Aristotelean guns, but was called “the blind leader of the blind” by William of Baglione for his troubles.

Aquinas died shortly after these events, in 1274, whilst giving a commentary on the *Song of Songs*, but not before undergoing some kind of mystical experience that led him to say that “all that I have written seems like straw to me”. Perhaps he caught wind of Plato’s ghost towards the end, but his legacy was a solid Aristoteleanism that continued to seem dangerous. Just as nowadays we can find it difficult to distinguish between Islamic radicalism and more moderate forms of political Islamic expression, the authorities began to suspect ever more moderate forms of Aristoteleanism, and by 1277, the updated condemnation issued by the bishop of Paris contained twenty of Aquinas’ own propositions, a forceful statement that God’s absolute power transcended any principles of logic that Aristotle or Averroes might place on it.

The threat that the authorities discerned in the promulgation by Aquinas and others of Aristoteleanism in particular, and the idea of using reason in the service of theology more generally, can be seen in these following propositions that were condemned in 1277, and whose import is reasonably clear. It was forbidden to teach that

“Nothing is to be believed unless it is self-evident or can be established from what is self-evident”

presumably because many theological propositions were not self-evident and could not be demonstrably proven from what was self-evident. It was also forbidden to teach that

“One should not be satisfied to have certainty on any question through authority”

which may strike us today as nakedly self-serving, but expresses starkly the dominant view that (religious) authority was a permissible route to knowledge. No wonder that philosophical innovation was so hard to achieve.

But the transformation that Aquinas in his writings helped bring about was unstoppable, and the religious authorities had no choice but to adapt. Just fifty years later, Aquinas was made a saint; after that, his reputation only improved. At the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, his *Summa Theologica* was placed on the altar alongside the Bible; in 1879, Pope Leo XIII stated that Thomas's theology was a definitive exposition of Catholic doctrine.

So what was this Aristoteleanism that Aquinas proposed, that at first seemed so dangerous, and that later was decreed by the pope to be the one true Catholic metaphysics? It will not surprise you to learn that the full story is complicated, and we will have to focus once again on only one feature of it. This will enable us to see in a little more detail how theology and philosophy intersect, and also to examine the condemnation of John of Mirecourt with which we began.

Recall from last week Aristotle's fundamental distinction between matter and form. I said then that this distinction allowed Aristotle to reconcile the real existence of both persistence and change, and in order to do this one is led to draw a distinction between substance and accident. When an object, say a gold ring, changes, by becoming broken perhaps, it loses the accident, or property, of being intact and gains the property of being broken. The ring itself persists through this change. For Aristotle, and Aquinas after him, change is to be understood in terms of this fundamental distinction – an object changes when its accidents change, but the object persists since some substance remains constant throughout that change.

Now, if we are concerned to draw up a catalogue of the kinds of things that exist, as Aristotle and Aquinas were concerned to do, one would certainly include both substance and accidents as existing. But we might wonder whether they can exist apart from each other. Common sense would, I suggest, say not – you cannot have a property without some *thing* that has that property, nor can you have a substance that has no properties at all. Whilst we may be able to make a metaphysical distinction between the two by saying that substance and property are inherently different kinds of existent, one would not expect that they will ever be found apart. In fact I would go further. Common sense probably has, mercifully, no opinions on the matter, but it seems to me natural to think that this inseparability of substance and property is necessary; that it is simply not possible, as a matter of logic, for properties to become unglued as it were from the substances they are properties of.

We are now in a position to look once more at the proposition for which John of Mirecourt was condemned in 1347. It is, let me remind you, this

That it is plausible, by the natural light, that there are no accidents distinct from substance ... and that if not for the faith this view should be held as plausible, or could be held as plausible.

Lets take this by stages. The proposition that Mirecourt asserts, is that it is plausible by the natural light (that is, that it is obvious) that there are no accidents (that is properties) distinct from substance; this is exactly the view about properties not being able to exist independently of substance that I presented in the previous paragraph as common sense. And it is this proposition, this little piece of common sense, that is condemned by the church. You are not allowed to hold it. Not only that, you are not even allowed to say that it is plausible, or even that it would be plausible if it wasn't for the fact that it was contrary to faith, or even to say that someone else may think of it as plausible.

Perhaps the condemned proposition is not that common sensical. Perhaps you find your common sense has no real opinion on the question of whether properties can exist apart from the things they are properties of. Even so, the question still arises, what is the church doing getting involved in such an abstract metaphysical question?

The answer is that the possible separate existence of accidents, properties, is required by the officially sanctioned explanation of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, remember, after consecration, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. The substance of the bread and the wine cease to exist and are replaced by the substance of the body and blood of Christ. But the properties of the bread and the wine, their taste, their smell, their texture, remain. Since it is inconceivable that the body of Christ might taste like bread, or his blood smell of wine, these properties of the bread and wine must continue to exist in the absence of any substance for them to be properties of.

It is, actually, indicative of how far Aquinas has become rooted in Christian theology by 1347 that it is not thought sufficient simply to describe the Eucharist as a mystery and leave it at that. The introduction of Aristotelean metaphysics into the Medieval mind has indeed had the consequence that even the Eucharist, the moment of transcendental contact of the worshipper with God incarnate needs to be fitted into the scheme in some way. Perhaps this is what Aquinas' opponents meant when they said Aristoteleanism would corrupt the (Platonic) purity of the faith. Nevertheless, although it is felt necessary to provide some explanation of the Eucharist, the form that explanation takes is circumscribed by the church, and the possibility of denying that transubstantiation occurs is not even countenanced.

It is important to emphasise that the condemnations of 1347 are not an example of the church imposing its authority on recalcitrant or heretical philosophers. As mentioned before, atheism is inconceivable, and no philosopher of the time professes it. Not only that, but the authority of the church in theological matters is never questioned at this time. Durand of St Pourcain goes as far as it is possible to go in the fourteenth century when he writes (in 1317), "any human being who sets aside reason for human authority falls into beast-like ignorance", he immediately goes on to say that scripture, being the word of God, transcends human reason. There is a paradox lurking here. When William of Ockham says that "no-one should solemnly condemn or forbid purely philosophical

assertions that do not pertain to theology”, he is expressing precisely the conviction that there should be a sphere of philosophical autonomy where one can say what one thinks that I have been arguing is the result of the work of Aquinas, and that constituted the Medieval cutting-edge. But everyone in the period agrees that such autonomy has limits, and those limits are reached when a philosophical view has implications for the faith. And the only way to judge whether a philosophical view has implications for the faith is to enter into the theological details. As Robert Pasnau says, “The safest, most direct argument for intellectual autonomy is to insist that philosophy and theology are separate domains. But the only way to *show* that they are separate domains is to engage the theological issues. In doing so, the philosopher undermines the very separation that he seeks.”

Nothing much happened to Nicholas of Mirecourt. He was not burnt at the stake, although the penalty was open if he did not recant, which he promptly did, sensible man. So why does Pasnau, in discussing this episode in his wonderful study of the period, describe 1347 as having such significance for the future course of philosophy?

I think it is for this reason. The reintroduction of Aristotle by Aquinas was a genuine innovation. Not in the sense, of course, that Aristotle’s thought was new, but in the sense that it opened up possibilities of thought that had lain dormant for a thousand years. Medieval thinkers grasped the Aristotelean framework, and, through the practice of writing commentaries on the works of Aristotle described earlier, began tentatively to question the Aristotelean framework itself. Pasnau himself spends nearly eight hundred pages unearthing the works of early (pre-1347) scholastics, many never translated from the Latin, consulted in many cases in original manuscripts that hardly look as if they have been read for over six hundred years, and in doing so shows the diversity of thought that Aquinas’ revolution ushered in. But this wide-ranging exploration of new possibilities, made possible by ancient wisdom, lasts no more than seventy years, and ceases abruptly after the condemnations of 1347. All of a sudden, the separation between theology and philosophy that Aquinas made possible becomes narrowed once more, or at least complicated. It is not that philosophers are forced into religious orthodoxy by the threat of violence, or even of removal from their teaching positions. Orthodoxy is too internalised to require such measures to be carried out, in the vast majority of cases. Rather it is that, fully accepting the truths of faith, one is unable easily to recognise the point at which philosophical speculation shades into theological error. Thus one should be cautious, and one should let one’s speculations be guided by religious authority. The revolution inaugurated by Aquinas thus runs into the sand, and after 1347, the brief innovative period of scholasticism is replaced by something much more closely approximating the caricature of sterility that is usually attributed to the whole of Medieval philosophy. 1347 represents the moment when the role of authority could have been questioned, but wasn’t. If it had been, the truly revolutionary developments of the seventeenth century could perhaps have happened three hundred years earlier. Just what those developments were, and how they stemmed from the very scholastic framework that had seemingly ossified since 1347, we shall have to wait until next week to discover.