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Gasparo Contarini's Double Access to the One Truth, as Seen in His Letter on Predestination*

Not only in his response to Pietro Pomponazzi's *On the Immortality of the Soul*, but also in his other philosophical and theological works Gasparo Contarini energetically opposes the notion of an opposition between truth gained by the natural light of reason and divine revelation. His letter on predestination, addressed to Lattanzio Tolomei in Siena, is a key text.¹ It not only confronts directly one of the most haunting theological questions of the time and describes his own take on it, which is complex enough to cause both Catholics and Protestants to claim Contarini as their own.² Rather, it contains the whole man *in nuce*: his aims, his way of reasoning, and his intellectual temperament. While short, concise, and to the point, the text is multi-layered, and requires a reading on different planes and through different lenses. From a philosophical point of view it investigates the various modes of causation as related to the first principle (God). From the perspective of dogmatic theology it offers a viable solution for the conflict between sustainers of human free will and responsibility for their salvation on the one hand, and of universal predestination and religious fatalism on the other. It is a textual exegesis on St. Paul's *Romans*, and at the same time in a certain sense an *imitatio* of it. It gives pragmatic advice for public preaching and is itself a homily against the vice of pride, seen at the root of all human sin and misery, last but not least of the intellectual error manifest in both extremist views on predestination.

Here we come full circle, in perfect consonance with Contarini's conviction that man's various ways of accessing truth are not contrasting, competing, and ousting each other, but need to be carefully applied each in its proper place, to form a harmonious whole. In his objections to his former teacher's Pietro Pomponazzi treatise *On the Immortality of the Soul*, Contarini had written:

[...] this immortality of the soul is surrounded by many implications, which natural reason cannot achieve to demonstrate, but it can make certain conjectures in tracing them [...]. Therefore I think it befits a sound man to ack-

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¹ STELLA, Aldo: *La lettera del Cardinal Contarini sulla predestinazione*, in: *Rivista di storia della chiesa in Italia* 15 (1961), 411-441.

² STELLA: *La lettera*, 419 with notes 32 and 33.

knowledge the deficiency of the natural light and to believe that humans need some teaching that relies on a higher light, from which that what is naturally unknown to us can be found out.³

And: [...] Hence we conclude that the human intellect is absolutely immortal and multiplied according to the multiplication of humans can be known through natural reasoning. As to the consequences from the immortality of the intellect, as there is: what and how it operates after death, and whether or not it existed before the body, natural reason cannot attain these in any way, except by some probable opinions. Therefore, since natural reason fails in such issues, where knowledge is of peculiar importance to humans for attaining their aims, I believe it suits a sound person best to trust that God the Best, who cares to provide for everything, i.e. to guide everything towards its aim by the appropriate means, gave humans a different sort of cognition of these things: from supernatural revelation and supernatural light of faith.⁴

Finally: We do not find it inconsistent that we can arrive by natural reason at knowledge of an antecedent, while we cannot be assured by the same light about its consequences. [...] But this we believe to be true philosophizing, and this philosophy that knows its shortcoming we estimate to be the perfection of the soul. On the other hand, that philosophy, which believes that the natural light must be self-sufficient in everything and rejects its incipient knowledge because it cannot attain perfect knowledge, we hold to be a rather dangerous philosophy and one that can instill into the soul the toxic and noxious poison of unbelief and ungodliness.⁵

The different faculties and perspectives are meant to cooperate towards a joined clarification, if not a definitive solution of a vital problem, be it the survival of the individual soul, or, as in the letter on predestination, how to establish the scope and limits of human spontaneity inside the universal divine plan, taking into account the entire complexity of man's actual situation: natural temporality, perversion of will, the persevering inborn "seeds of eternal life," and the justification by grace. The text of the letter to Lattanzio Tolomei is built up with philosophical metaphysics at the foundation, positive theology as its walls, negative theology as the capstone, and a resulting moral precept as the enclosed interior space of the whole edifice.

The letter responds to Tolomei's complains about some friars of obvious evangelical inclinations who, by publicly preaching divine predestination in Siena, induced simple minds to fatalism and moral indifference. Contarini does not start it by censuring both the seducers and the seduced, but by giving a balanced overview on the actual state of the controversy (which incidentally resembles the historical situation in Rome,

³ CONTARINI, Gasparo: *De immortalitate animae*, in: *Gaspari Contarini Opera*. Paris: Nivellius 1571, 193 D-194 H.

⁴ CONTARINI: *De immortalitate animae*, 201 C.

⁵ CONTARINI: *De immortalitate animae*, 231 C.

when St. Paul wrote his famous letter). There are two extremist positions, both equally wrong and presumptuous, which threaten to tear Christianity apart. In St. Paul's days the baptized Jews claimed superiority versus the baptized Gentiles, and vice versa. At Contarini's time, the contending parties are those who (misinterpreting St. Augustine) side with protestant determinism and abolish human free will, and those who, in fighting back, fall into the opposite extreme of Pelagianism, attributing salvation to human decisions and actions, thus diminishing the impact of Grace and the redeeming sacrifice of Christ.⁶ While the presumption of the latter position is obvious, the former, which reduces human decisions to insignificance, has a semblance of humility. But, apart from making God in the last consequence the first cause of sin, it arrogates positive knowledge of the nature of divine causation, i.e. it limits God's infinity to a human will and a human way of action. Reversely, it elevates human actions and passions from the all-embracing contingency reigning over single events in the sublunary sphere to an undue necessity. As Contarini wrote in his *Compendium primae philosophiae*:

[...] in the highest intellects and the heavens nothing is contingent, there is no contrariety, but the highest agreement of all, nothing is fortuitous, but everything proceeds according to highest and certain reason [...]. On the other hand, in those things that are under the heaven, there is contingency. For owing to the stubbornness, so to say, and inequality of matter, which is next to non-being, the effect does not wholly correspond to the impression and efficiency of the agent. [...] Moreover, since besides the matter, wherein the effect is received there concur, in addition to the heavens, also particular agents which are material, and whose concurrence has no certain cause, therefore many things coincide [*contingunt*] while not all necessarily convene. Thus the reason for contingency in the lower [sphere] comes from the imperfection or non-being, to which these lowest beings are closer than the higher ones, and for the same reason these lower things which we perceive to be under the heaven are even mutually contrary.⁷

Accordingly, also the letter to Tolomei offers a brief survey of the different kinds of causality and of how they proceed from the First Principle:

But to better understand what we have begun, we first must know [...] that the Divine most simple and in the highest degree *one* goodness and infinite greatness contains inside its amplitude every other kind and nature of causes, some of which are contingent, others necessary, some are endowed with free will, some are deprived of it, and others again are casual and indeterminate and infinite by their nature; all these kinds of causes are contained and ruled by this first [cause], which is not of any of these natures, but exceeds all these causes that are limited to a certain nature [...]. Therefore the philoso-

⁶ “[...] dovemo avertite che la astuzia [...] avene sterili.” CONTARINI: *La Lettera*, in: STELLA: *La lettera*, 422.

⁷ CONTARINI: *Compendium primae philosophiae*, in: CONTARINI, *Opera*, 167 B–D.

phers and Christian teachers all agree to conclude that in every action of the lower agents and causes – as far as it is action, and not the effect in the action – God the Highest is the first efficient cause of this action, and the other causes, secondary and limited to a certain nature, are like instruments of the Highest God, who produces them by that said simple and unique unlimited action of his. All effects, however, are produced by it [divine action] according the mode corresponding to their nature, as well as by the means of inferior causes corresponding to these effects. Thus this unique cause produces the necessary effects through necessary causes and in a necessary way, the contingent [effects] through contingent causes, the free ones through free causes, and likewise the casual ones through indeterminate and infinite causes; but He excels over all these natures, and His mode of causation, considered in itself, exceeds every nature and is incomprehensible for our intellect, which understands what it understands through determined species and natures.⁸

It is noteworthy that, both here and in the *Compendium primae philosophiae*, Contarini uses the term *nature* to describe a limitation or, as he calls it, a *contraction*. Far from that solemn concept of *Nature* of Lucretius as the sacred power representing, or rather substituting God in the world (which will be taken up by Bruno, Spinoza, and Enlightenment philosophers, and seems to lurk in the background of Pomponazzi's *De immortalitate*), here the nature, or rather natures of things just signifies what is due to them by definition, owing to their proper forms. Even more clearly than in his objections to his teacher, Contarini here avoids the double truth argument by de-emphasizing and limiting the impact of natural being and natural knowledge. Things gain a certain nature by their privation of the opposite features. They attain relative perfection according to this their nature only by being deprived of absolute perfection, by participating in non-being. Their own nature depends on their inclination towards multiplicity and contrast, and ultimately towards the nothingness from which they were called into being. But also the different modes of causation have each their own nature and are defined and limited. To describe the act of the first principle as *necessary* is a fallacy, though an almost inevitable one, due to the limits of human intellect that cannot think otherwise but in defined species.

If nature is *to be not everything*, not everything is nature. To provide for the area his narrow concept of nature will not cover, Contarini introduces the category of the supra-natural endowment, which is not miraculous or exceptional, but perfectly normal as a reliable integral part of the universal order:

[...] in constituting the things and natures of the universe, divine bounty has given to some of them some aims belonging to their natures and has also given them instruments by which they can naturally attain their aim, though

⁸ CONTARINI: *La lettera*, in: STELLA: *La lettera*, 422–423.

not without that influence and power of the first cause mentioned above. To other natures it gave in addition to their natural aims the capacity to be raised up to aims and goods that exceed their nature, as for instance to air and water, above the perfection, i.e. the form and act of air and water, it has given a quality by which they are transparent and thus capable of light, which however exceeds their nature and is participation in that light that is a quality of the celestial bodies.⁹

Other examples of such aims or capacities exceeding natural properties are the gift of some birds to learn and utter words of human speech and the stunning ability of some other animals (dogs, horses, elephants) to be trained to understand commands and to perform tasks far beyond their purely natural activities. It is clear that the capacity of human souls to survive the separation from the body and to attain beatific vision is such a supernatural aim, but interestingly it is not mentioned here as the most excellent and outstanding case, but only later on between supernatural aims of things of various degree, starting from the lowest level, the elements, up to the celestial intelligences, whose beatific vision also exceeds their natural properties. Unlike Pico's famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Contarini does not show man as the great exception in the universal order of things: though a highly favored child who ought to be most grateful, he is not the only favored child.

Since such aims exceed the nature (or rather natures) of the beings in question, they can only be reached by the agency of external causes:

Now by themselves and through their own powers these [elements and animals] could never attain these higher aims on their own, nor even move towards them; rather, in addition to that influence from the first cause common to all, they need a particular action from the external agent, as the air and water from a shining body present to them, the birds and dogs etc. from humans to teach them.¹⁰

And, as Contarini adds immediately, creatures are not always capable to attain even their natural perfection: some are sick, maimed, corrupted. Sound creatures, according to the quality of their natures, act in a sound and integer way, while sick and corrupted natures only achieve diminished, maimed, and corrupted actions.

The metaphysical base is completed by recalling to mind the temporality of everything terrestrial, including human cognition, as opposed to the supra-temporal character of the divine, not only in its knowledge, but also in its acts (Divine providence in both meanings of the term). The proper meaning of universal (pre-)destination is that all things, including mankind, are ordained by God towards God, not so much before all times

⁹ STELLA: *La lettera*, 432.

¹⁰ STELLA: *La lettera*, 424.

(which would be fate or necessary determinism), as above and beyond all time:

[...] thus also this His action is not in any time or any part of it, but exceeds all time not as earlier or later than time, in the way the year of Christ's birth is earlier than this our year, or the year of Antichrist will be later than this year. To this understanding we are urged by the lowness of our intellect, the working of which is connected to the imagination and thus frees itself with extreme difficulty from time and continuous quantity. But [Gods action] exceeds all time as superior to it without any succession and contains in itself all succession, and one cannot say about it: *it was*, or *it will be*, but only: *it is*, like Plato says in the *Timaios*. Nor is that divine *IS* similar to our present time, of which we say: *it is and passes away* [...]. By these means we strain at our best to make the mode of divine action somewhat clearer, while being more than most certain that, however we try to expand our intellect and separate it from the lower natures, still all concepts we conceive of it [i.e. divine action] are infinitely more narrow, low, and multiple than what it is in itself, exceeding every intelligible nature.¹¹

We can see that human cognition with its transition into spheres where faith in divine revelation and inspiration takes over, corresponds structurally to the order of being. The transparency of air and water, i.e. their capacity for the celestial light, can also be read as an image for the capacity of human reason to admit supernatural illumination. But in good scholastic tradition this does not extinguish the natural light, but supplements it and leads it to perfection.¹² Indeed, the "incoationes," the premises accessible to natural human reason, are indispensable, since they give the mind the direction towards higher spheres of reality. By natural reason we can know *that*, but not *what* God is, *that*, but not *how* He is the universal cause, *that*, but not *how* the soul exists after corporal death, etc.

In his exegesis of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans Contarini will indicate the points of transition from a reasoning on the human level to the inspired speech on the superhuman level. Speaking of God's election as a first cause to be humbly and gratefully received as a free gift and repaid by faith and good deeds, but which cannot and must not be questioned any further, Contarini states:

[...] man, proud, but utterly incapable of this divine sphere, [...] believing to apprehend that vastness in his narrowness, will immediately rise up and demand the reason why God predestines the one and not the other.¹³

¹¹ STELLA: *La lettera*, 424.

¹² As St. Thomas of Aquino sang in the Hymn for the feast of Corpus Christi, *Pange lingua*: "Praestet fides supplementum sensuum defectui." Also available: <http://www.corpusthomaticum.org/pcx.html> (11.11.2016).

¹³ CONTARINI: *La lettera*, in: STELLA: *La lettera*, 431.

At which point Paul, “burning with zeal,” crushes further demands by the famous simile of the potter and the pot. A human rebuke to human impertinence rather than a true portrait of God’s absolute superiority and power over His creature, since here Paul

“descends to the human sphere to the way we have to govern ourselves and how, willy-nilly, our actions and the effects that follow thence will continue, he leads us to the way of faith, not to arrogance about our deeds and the knowledge of the Law. [...] Then finally, transcending the human sphere and passing over to the divine sphere, not in a presumptuous and bestial way, like our new doctors of ignorant people and the crazy people who follow them, but with reverence he exclaims: ‘O altitudo divitiarum sapientiae Dei, quae incomprehensibilia sunt iudicia eius et quam investigabiles viae eius.’”¹⁴

Contarini’s tendency to stress rather the complementariness than the opposition between the natural and the supernatural plan is also evident in his specific use of the seed-metaphor. The notion of seeds of virtue and of knowledge, which however need to be gradually perfected by men themselves, is of stoic tradition and became quite popular in the theological anthropology of the time, especially, but not exclusively, with heterodox thinkers.¹⁵ Contarini rejected Luther’s extreme claims that man’s will is never free, but a slave of either good or evil. With baptism and conversion, man “may begin his own spiritual and heavenly life [...] and do deeds meritorious of eternal happiness, since these proceed from grace and from the seed of the Holy Spirit, introduced by Christ into our hearts.”¹⁶ These seeds of grace, or “seeds of celestial life” which enable man, both in the state of original justice and of redemption, to first develop towards his natural and supra-natural perfection (participation in divine beatitude “exceeding without proportion his nature”)¹⁷ are the *semina aeternitatis* mentioned by St. Ambrose¹⁸ and St. Bernhard¹⁹ as temporal deeds with eternal validity. On the other hand they bear a close structural similarity to the notion of a beginning (*inchoatio*) of cognition of the supra-natural implanted in our natural reason, referred to in the objections to Pomponazzi’s *On the Immortality of the Soul*.²⁰

¹⁴ STELLA: *La lettera*, 431.

¹⁵ For more details see HOROWITZ, Maryanne Cline: *Seeds of Virtue and Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998.

¹⁶ STELLA: *La lettera*, 427.

¹⁷ STELLA: *La lettera*, 425.

¹⁸ “Honoro ergo in carne martyris exceptas pro Christi nomine cicatrices; honoro viventis memoriam perennitate virtutis; honoro per confessionem Domini sacros cineres; honoro in cineribus semina aeternitatis [...]” AMBROSIUS: *Sermo LV*, MPL 17, col. 739–743; 743A.

¹⁹ “Nec enim opera nostra transeunt, ut videntur; sed temporalia quaequae velut aeternitatis semina iaciuntur.” BERNHARD OF CLAIRVAUX: *Sermo de conversione ad clericos*, cap. 8, n. 17, MPL 182, col. 843 D.

²⁰ CONTARINI: *De immortalitate animae*, 296 C–D, 230 H, 231 C.

Temporal existence, for Contarini, is more adequately described by developments and gradual transitions than by strict demarcation lines. A natural foe to all extreme fundamentalist positions, he insists on the provisional, transitional, discursive, and contingent character of human action and cognition as a whole. As seen from the human perspective in this world under the condition of temporality, salvation by grace is not a definitive happy ending (as it appears in the protestant determinist understanding of predestination), but a first starting point for our moral development. Though the will suffered most of this “sickness of a bad love of self [...] root of all evil,” retaining “that inclination towards evil so often referred to in Sacred Scripture, which Aristotle mentions in his *Politics* and everyone experiences in himself,”²¹ it is through the will that divine grace works the remedy, because God leads all things to their aims in the mode corresponding to their natures, and “since man is by nature of free choice and will, which does not move only by the extrinsic mover, but by itself, following the cognition it has [...] it was necessary that [...] the author of nature moved its inclination, i.e. the will, from inside,”²² also because “the inclination towards the aim depends rather on a shared nature or conformity with that aim impressed in the soul than on cognition, indeed, cognition of the aim in things to be done depends on the inclination of desire and will.”²³ We see again, how the holistic principle applies: Collaboration of the human with the divine, and, inside the human, collaboration of all forces towards the one aim.

To conclude: It is the One Truth both in the multiplicity of created beings and in cognition that can and must be pursued both for theoretical and practical ends, employing all faculties of the entire person. Neither the isolated human reason, nor the entire man is self-sufficient. Apart from his obvious dependence on divine grace, he is inevitably dependent on the next man. As Contarini wrote to Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga, when he sent him a copy of this letter on predestination:

I make use for Your Grace of that council of which I cannot make use for myself nor can anybody use it as well for himself as for another: it was God's will to connect us mutually in charity, making one require the other's work: I never heed myself as I will heed Your Grace, and you, likewise, may heed me better than yourself. Thus I expect from you the returns; nor are these pretty words, but most true ones.²⁴

²¹ CONTARINI: *La lettera*, in: STELLA: *La lettera*, 425.

²² STELLA: *La lettera*, 425.

²³ STELLA: *La lettera*, 426.

²⁴ CONTARINI, Gasparo: *Letter to Ercole Gonzaga of Jan. 19, 1538*, in: STELLA: *La lettera*, 421.

Abstract

Not only in his response to Pietro Pomponazzi's treatise on the immortality of the soul, but also in his other philosophical and theological works Gasparo Contarini energetically opposes the notion of an opposition between truth gained by the natural light of reason and divine revelation. Natural reason itself points towards the truth granted through supernatural enlightenment. This corresponds to a cosmological model in which some things can exceed their merely natural aims.