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EDIT ANNA LUKACS

## Existentialist Ontology in Henry of Langenstein

Individual human existence has never been considered as absolute. On the contrary: its contingency, fragility, misery, and double limitation triggered many reflections over the most optimistic centuries in history. Medieval philosophy's human being enjoyed one advantage: he was half-eternal, half-unlimited. Though he had a beginning, he was without an end. Set within this framework, the fact that individual non-existence<sup>1</sup> emerged as a subject of inquiry comes rather as a surprise. The medieval setting of this inquiry was eternal damnation. According to common sense, beatitude is desirable. Being happy is a state that everyone naturally wishes to attain, eternal happiness even more so. Its counterpart, eternal damnation, evokes the opposite, and calls for refusal or evasion. Eternal nothingness, non-existence emerges as an option or desire for the damned. Already dead, suffering people are supposed to wish for their annihilation, the same death Bible's Job was asking for.

The eternal dependence on God, the definite end of human freedom tied to states of extreme happiness or intense pain triggered reflections unique to medieval philosophy. Theories thinkers produced on the question are often seemingly unnecessary or implausible: take our starting point, the desire for non-existence while one has eternal being or the idea of rationality or dignity of the damned. Augustine, who first posited the dilemma, described it straightforward as absurd and inadequate. While the utility of such reflections in the medieval context is purely theoretical and limited to afterlife, our times do not lack very concrete cases which they can be applied to. Tobias Hoffmann proposed the examples of preimplantation genetic diagnosis and of cancer patients in the terminal phase, but

This paper is based on my talk titled "Ontological Pluralism in Henry of Langenstein" given at the workshop "Decoding a Medieval Notebook: The Case Study of Ms Basel, UB, A-X-44", which took place on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2019 at the University Babeş-Bolyai in Cluj-Napoca (Romania). It owes much to the thorough comments of its reviewer. My researches were financed by the project PN-III-P4-PCCF-2016-0064 "The Rise of an Intellectual Elite in Central Europe: University of Vienna, 1389–1450" of the Romanian Academy of Sciences.

<sup>1</sup> For the different question, raised cautiously, then with growing precision, as to why there is something rather than nothing see LEMANSKI, Jens: *Cur Potius Aliquid Quam Nihil von der Frühgeschichte bis zur Hochscholastik*, in: SCHUBBE, Daniel *et alii* (eds.): *Warum ist überhaupt etwas und nicht nichts? Wandel und Variationen einer Frage*. Hamburg: Meiner 2013, 23–65.

one could refer the reflection to people imprisoned in KZ lagers during 2<sup>nd</sup> World War too.<sup>2</sup>

My main concern in this paper will be Henry of Langenstein's contribution to the issue. Writing toward the end of the fourteenth century at the University of Vienna, Langenstein gave a singular answer to the question as to whether a person in infinite sin and pain should want to remain in this state. In introducing ontological and categorical notions to an unprecedented extent, he moved the issue's ethical foundations toward the concepts of rationality and freedom and created an existentialist approach to the issue. As his approach engages with both the earliest and the contemporary reflections on the topic, I will start with a brief overview of the question's history in the Middle Ages.

The dilemma as to whether one should want to desire non-existence rather than existence was first tackled by early Christianity's Augustine in the *Treatise on Free Will*.<sup>3</sup> Inquiring about the will of the blessed and of the wicked, Augustine stated that it is impossible to choose something in-existent. Moreover, existence is a perfection that human being receives from God and shares it with him. Even miserable existence is therefore a greater good than non-existence. After Augustine, the preoccupation disappeared for a considerably long period, and it seems that, just like suicide, the issue of non-existence was not treated at any length again until the end of the twelfth century.<sup>4</sup> Afterwards, Augustine continued to play an outstanding role in almost every discussion on the topic, which remained framed by references to him until the early modern theories of the humanists. More importantly, Western philosophy kept with Augustine's affirmation that existence is better than non-existence. Only a very few authors attempted to think non-existence as such; they all followed Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm framed the dilemma as if existence could be weighed against moral badness. In the *Cur Deus homo* and from its perspective on the history of salvation, Anselm viewed the sinful individual's non-exis-

<sup>2</sup> See HOFFMANN, Tobias: *The Pleasure of Life or the Desire for Non-Existence. Some Medieval Theories*, in: *Res Philosophica* 90 (2013), 323–346, at 343 and 345–346. The second perspective owns to Daniel A. Di Liscia. I intend this paper to be the first in a series, in which I shall investigate different aspects of an existentialist philosophy in the late Middle Ages. This investigation, the starting point of which is the assumption that only afterlife allowed medieval thinkers to conceive both the ontological and existentialist dimensions of the human being, will include an analysis of the difference between rationality and freedom of the human being in the present world and in the afterlife, in heaven and hell.

<sup>3</sup> AUGUSTINE: *De libero arbitrio* III, 6, 18 and 20. See also ZUM BRUNN, Émilie: *'Être' ou 'Ne pas être' d'après Saint Augustin*, in: *Revue d'Études Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 14 (1968), 91–98.

<sup>4</sup> MURRAY, Alexander: *Suicide in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, vol. 2, esp. 101–102.

tence as preferable to an offence of God.<sup>5</sup> This option scattered especially in the fourteenth century.

Meanwhile, the thirteenth century witnessed the introduction of distinctions into Augustine's initial reflection: the will and the desire, the misery of punishment (*miseria poenae*) and the misery of the fault (*miseria culpae*) were the two most important of them. Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas both considered the question in passing. For Bonaventure, Augustine's desire for non-existence was not (positive) desire, but (negative) avoidance. For Thomas Aquinas, the damned cannot choose, but wish for their non-existence as the end of their suffering. With Henry of Ghent, the question arrived at a turning point. Henry's innovation in *Quodlibet* I, question 20 was twofold. First, he introduced Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to the discussion and confronted him with the authority of Augustine. The question was put into the perspective of Aristotle's pagan point of view, in which existence or life is pleasure.<sup>6</sup> Second, Henry divided eternal damnation into the misery of punishment and the misery of the fault. In the latter sense, eternal damnation was a moral consequence and as such preferable to non-existence. Thus, while afterlife remained definitely moral, Henry of Ghent, as Thomas Aquinas, legitimated pain and suffering as matters of choice over life and death. Quite uniquely in this series, the Franciscan Richard of Menneville considered the issue on a scale of values, and concluded that the evil of the fault outweighs the evil of the non-existence of the damned. Durand of Saint-Pourçain repeated the same conclusion in his commentary on the *Sentences*, but John Duns Scotus contested Middletown's view. For Scotus, no objective scale of values existed, only the will of God. Further, Scotus made an otherwise interesting point. While the Christian tradition evidenced without exception that people in state of irrevocable and extreme suffering will desire their non-existence, Scotus remarked that the damned do experience joy too, namely the pleasure of their voluntary opposition to God.<sup>7</sup> Later in the fourteenth century, interest in the issue reached its peak: at both the University of Oxford and the University of Paris, bachelors of theology disputed over preferring misery to non-existence at unexpected length, using on both sides of the Channel mathematical calculations of sin, misery, and pain. While the method of proving one's point changed, hardly any new

<sup>5</sup> See JACQUETTE, Dale: *Anselm's Metaphysics of Nonbeing*, in: *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4/4 (Winter 2012), 27–48.

<sup>6</sup> For an approach to Henry's question see PORRO, Pasquale: *Essere o non essere? Dubbi amletici tra le questioni scolastiche*, in: PERFETTI, Stefano (ed.): *Scientia, fides, theologia. Studi di filosofia medievale in onore di Gianfranco Fioravanti*. Pisa: ETS 2011, 342–356.

<sup>7</sup> On Bonaventure, Aquinas, Menneville, and Scotus see HOFFMANN: *The Pleasure of Life*, 325–340; on Durand see GULDENTOPS, Guy: *Spätscholastische Antworten auf die Hamlet-Frage*, in: *Salzburger Jahrbuch für Philosophie* 61 (2016), 9–51, here 34–35.



approach can be singled out.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough, in the early modern theories, only the focus moved on suicide, melancholy and other emotions, while the core of the discussions was held with the same sources, content, and answers as those used and formulated by the earliest medieval authors.<sup>9</sup>

Henry of Langenstein (1325–1397),<sup>10</sup> a native German, studied and taught at Paris from the 1360s. A few years after the outbreak of the Great Schism, he left the French capital and returned to Central Europe. Upon the re-foundation of the University of Vienna with a Faculty of Theology in 1384, Langenstein settled with teaching on the first book of the Bible, Genesis, and continued until his death in 1397. These fourteen years of lectures resulted in eight volumes based on the verse-by-verse interpretation of Genesis 1 to 3:19, and were concluded by two philosophical treatises Langenstein read at the university as part of his commentary.<sup>11</sup> From these lectures, the German master emerges as an exceptional figure of his times. The diversity of themes he treated ranges from biblical hermeneutics to biology, astronomy, and legal matters. He was not only the sole Hebraist at the University of Vienna, but was also acquainted with local Jewish thought. In addition, he was a poet, and a rarely talented, uncompromising rhetorician. An overview of the diversity of what Langenstein wrote is transmitted in one witness written down by the Dominican Henry of Rheinfeld.

Henry of Rheinfeld's relationship to Henry of Langenstein is not specified in any academic or administrative document, but Rheinfeld studied at the university at times Langenstein was exercising a powerful influence. Rheinfeld came to Vienna in 1392 as student of the Dominicans. He held

<sup>8</sup> BRINZEI, Monica/SCHABEL, Chris: *Better Off Dead. The Latitude of Human Misery in the Oxford Replicationes of the Dominican Robert Holcot and the Parisian principia of the Cistercians Jean de Mirecourt and Pierre Ceignons*, in: *A Question of Life and Death. Living and Dying in Medieval Latin Philosophy, 1200–1500*, forthcoming. Thomas Buckingham's "Utrum Deo frui sit summa merces cuiuslibet creaturae beatae" in the *Questiones solertissimi* contains additional elements of the debate at the University of Oxford in the fourteenth century.

<sup>9</sup> GULDENTOPS: *Spätscholastische Antworten*, 9–51.

<sup>10</sup> On Henry of Langenstein see LANG, Justin: *Die Christologie bei Heinrich von Langenstein: eine dogmenhistorische Untersuchung*. Freiburg: Herder 1966; STENECK, Nicholas H.: *Science and Creation in the Middle Ages: Henry of Langenstein (d. 1397)*. Notre Dame (Ind.): University of Notre Dame Press 1976; GABRIEL, Astrik L.: *Heinrich von Langenstein, Theoretiker und Reformator der mittelalterlichen Universität*. Leipzig: Karl-Marx-Universität 1984; KREUZER, Georg: *Heinrich von Langenstein: Studien zur Biographie und zu den Schismatraktaten*. Paderborn: F. Schöningh 1987; SHANK, Michael H.: "Unless You Believe, You Shall Not Understand". *Logic, University, and Society in Late Medieval Vienna*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1988. See also SULLIVAN, Thomas: *Parisian Licentiates in Theology, A.D. 1373–1500: a biographical register*. Leiden: Brill 2004, vol. 2, 311–314.

<sup>11</sup> The *Tractatulus de somniis* and the *Tractatus de necessitate fatali* are parts of Langenstein's late lectures on Genesis; they are extant in two autograph manuscripts: Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 4657 and Cod. 4718. The edition of the *Tractatus de necessitate fatali*, a most original writing and significant witness to late fourteenth century philosophy, is planned by the author of this paper.

his first, cursory lecture on the Bible in 1396–1397, and spent the winter semester 1397 at Basel. Upon his return to Vienna, he read the Sentences in 1398–1399, became bachelor in 1400 and master of theology in 1401.<sup>12</sup> According to the acts of his order,<sup>13</sup> in 1402, he became regent master at the *studium generale* at Cologne. From 1405 until his death in 1433, he lived in Basel, where the manuscripts he wrote and gathered at Vienna are still kept. One of these manuscripts is Basel, UB, A-X-44, the richest extant notebook on the early history of the University of Vienna.<sup>14</sup> Dates in the manuscript range from 1394 to 1397 indicating that Rheinfeld took the notes during his student years. Besides transcripts of disputations by both major (Henry Totting of Oyta, Paul of Geldern, Nicholas of Dinkelsbühl, etc.) and minor (Thomas of Clevis, Nicholas of Honharczkirchen, Petrus de Walse, etc.) figures from the early University, around thirty to forty folios of the codex are devoted to Henry of Langenstein's notes, extracts from his works, the treatise *De dici de omni*, his sermons, and disputed questions.

One of the first of Langenstein's texts in the manuscript is the question on the recto and verso of folio 14 titled "Whether it is better to avoid (*magis fugibile*) simple non-existence than to be miserably damned". This text of approximately 1,500 words follows the traditional structure of a disputed question: pro and contra arguments are outlined briefly; seven propositions are stated, from which there follow three inferences, each accompanied by one to five corollaries.<sup>15</sup> There is no responsive conclusion, which suggests that the question might not have been disputed publicly and was only written as preparatory reflection. Langenstein indeed talked to the issue in his university lectures. In the exegesis of Genesis 3:19 "for you are dust, and to dust you will return", along with several questions on legal death sentence, old age, killing, and suicide, Langenstein raises the same question in a slightly different wording: "Whether it is better to avoid (*fugibilis sit*) non-existence absolutely than to be miserable."<sup>16</sup> Langenstein's

<sup>12</sup> On Henry of Rheinfeld, Henricus Rhinfeldia, also referred to as Henricus de Basilea OP see FRANK, Isnard: *Hausstudium und Universitätsstudium der Wiener Dominikaner bis 1500*. Wien: Böhlau 1968, 196–197; and the database with further literature quoted there: <https://societas-universitatis-viennensis.univie.ac.at/datenbank/universitas-studiorum-et-magistrorum/> (30.08.2020).

<sup>13</sup> KEUSSEN, Hermann: *Die Matrikel der Universität Köln*. Köln: Publikationen der Gesellschaft für rheinische Geschichtskunde 1931, III 8.

<sup>14</sup> See the collective volume: BRINZEL, Monica (ed.): *The Rise of an Academic Elite: Deans, Masters, and Scribes at the University of Vienna before 1400*. Turnhout: Brepols (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> The University of Vienna's statutes prescribed concision in public disputations, asking questions with short titles and inducing a maximum of three inferences with three corollaries: KINK, Rudolf: *Geschichte der kaiserlichen Universität zu Wien*. Vol. 2. Statutenbuch der Universität. Wien: C. Gerold und Sohn 1854, 107f.

<sup>16</sup> "Utrum fugibilis sit non esse omnino citra ipsum misere esse." Wien, ÖNB, Cod. 4679, fol. 11<sup>v</sup> sqq. On the fact that this manuscript is the partially autograph version revised by Langenstein and read at the University of Vienna see SHANK, Michael H.: *Academic*

lectures on Genesis 3 can be dated to around 1395. The first part of the Basel manuscript, which transmits the question's earlier version, witnesses dates from 1394. The hypothesis of a first draft of the question in the Basel manuscript before its rewriting for a public lecture on Genesis is the most plausible.

The question Rheinfeld transcribed and the question transmitted in the Genesis commentary are both brief, although the latter is even sketchier than the Basel question. In the lectures on Genesis, Anselm, who is quoted only in the margins of the question transmitted in the Basel manuscript, becomes the main authority who stands against Augustine. Augustine, who is treated as the main authority in the subsequent pages on suicide too, preferred eternal misery as the rational choice, while Anselm opted for non-existence instead of the eternal and infinite sin of the damned.<sup>17</sup> In the end, the answer Langenstein prefers corresponds to the one he defended in the Basel version of the question: the eternal misery of the wicked is preferable to non-existence.

In the question in Basel, UB, A-X-44, Langenstein's direct inspiration seems to have been the thirteenth-century Parisian master, Henry of Ghent. Ghent and Langenstein had the same wording of the question, which they developed on the opposite issue. Henry of Ghent asked whether one should rather seek (*magis eligibile*) not being at all than being in misery (which he rejected). For Langenstein, the question was oriented at the opposite: whether simple non-existence is a greater evil (*magis fugibile*)<sup>18</sup> than the misery of the damned. But in the first answer he gives, the text matches the beginning to Henry of Ghent's quodlibetal question: Langenstein assumes that non-existence is better than the existence of e.g. Judas, according to Matthew 26:24. The Bible and the biblical tradition of the Glosses seized the starting point of human existence, birth, as allowing for non-existence.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the Bible not only states that it is possible for the birth of an individual person not to have taken place—and for non-existence to take the place of a potential existence—, but also that not having been born is preferable to a miserable life or the existence of bad humans.

*Benefices and German Universities during the Great Schism: Three Letters from Johannes of Stralen, Arnold of Emelisse, and Gerard of Kalkar, 1387–1388*, in: *Codices Manuscripti* 7 (1981), 33–47, here 42. The more legible option is the mid-fifteenth century Benedictine copy Wien, ÖNB, Cod. 3902, fol. 4<sup>r</sup> sqq. Langenstein indicates different sources in the Genesis lectures than in the Basel question: for Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, chapters 1 to 28 (*sic*); for Anselm, *Monologion*, chapter 11. For the quotes in the Basel question see the Annex. There is no discussion of the issue of being vs. non-being in Langenstein's commentary on the *Sentences*.

<sup>17</sup> On late scholastics' understanding of Augustine and Anselm as opposed, see GULDENTOPS: *Spätscholastische Antworten*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> "Ergo quod est magis fugibile est magis malum. Culpa autem fugitur propter penam, et sic pena magis fugitur." THOMAS AQUINAS: *De malo*, q. 1, a. 5.

<sup>19</sup> The issue of being born remains an actual philosophical preoccupation; see most recently STONE, Alison: *Being Born. Birth and Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019.

This perspective is close to Anselm's. Langenstein proposes the contrary position as second answer: no, eternal damnation is a lesser evil than simple non-existence. He quotes Augustine's *locus classicus* from the *Treatise on Free Will*, in which eternal misery is viewed as the more rational and true option compared to non-existence. When he provides a final answer in favour of Augustine, Langenstein does not contradict the Bible. Rather, in a masterly move, he reconciles the biblical and the Augustinian opinion in presenting it as his own.

After these pro and contra arguments, Langenstein outlines seven propositions and three inferences. The first proposition is the only one to mention God; it concerns God's power to annihilate existing beings. Langenstein, echoing Thomas Aquinas, states that divine will justly submits rational beings to eternal misery instead of annihilating them.<sup>20</sup> The very perspective of non-annihilation remains the framework of Langenstein's reflection throughout the question. What is then human choice about? Langenstein provides the answer only progressively.

With the second and third propositions, the acts of the will are tackled. First, Langenstein parallels nilling and willing as equal potencies with regard to an object (anything that can be nilled can also be willed).<sup>21</sup> Second, he qualifies the concepts of good and bad: something good *in se* can turn into a bad thing through its possession. The next propositions define the ontological setting. The fourth and fifth propositions characterize non-existence: annihilation might cause pain while it takes place, but non-existence does not affect the state of the non-existent. Furthermore, as non-existence *in se* is a neutral ontological concept, *i.e.* neither good nor bad, its attribution to a substance would not affect the substance's state. The sixth and seventh propositions balance substance, accident, and perfection. The sixth proposition does so in introducing a more sophisticated argument:

It is more eligible for rational creatures to exist as bare substances than it is avoidable that they lack every act or habit of accidental perfection. This is obvious, since every act or habit can be removed from the rational creature

<sup>20</sup> The Bible refers to two related desires: 1) not having been born, 2) ending a miserable life with suicide. There is only one exception, which concerns precisely the desire of dying by the eternally damned. It is in John's Apocalypse and will be discussed below.

<sup>21</sup> Analogous discussions were lead about the capacities of the blessed' will: see KITANOV, Severin V.: *Is it better for the king of England to be a king of England than a duke of Aquitaine? Richard FitzRalph and Adam Wodeham on whether beatific enjoyment is an act of the intellect or an act of the will*, in: DUNNE, Michael W./NOLAN, Simon OCarm: *Richard FitzRalph. His Life, Times and Thought*. Dublin: Four Courts Press 2013, 56–78. For the Viennese follow-up of the same discussions see LUKACS, Edit Anna: "Contuli cum magistro meo reverendo Nicholao de Dinckelspuhel". *Die Principia des Walter von Bamberg OCarm aus 1400–1402*, in: *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 29 (2018), 479–504, here 485–503. Significantly, the purgatory is entirely absent from these discussions.



without its being sinful; therefore, it can be created in its purely essential state without moral badness.<sup>22</sup>

Rational creatures are substances without moral qualifications; also, moral acts qualify substances as their accidents. If substances can exist without accidents, then substances and accidents do not have the same mode of being.<sup>23</sup> Still, as soon as accidents are linked to substances, they overweight the qualification of the substance as a whole. In this way, lower substances with higher moral values are to be preferred to higher substances with no or negative moral value:

As the state of a morally good human is more eligible than the state of a supreme angel with respect to his essential perfection, so is any just human simply better and more deserving than an essentially more perfect bad angel. The second part is obvious, since otherwise Lucifer should be held in higher regard than the Virgin Mary.<sup>24</sup>

The seventh and last proposition of the series confirms the ontological prevalence of substance and ontological pluralism as such. Accidental perfections *in se* are less eligible than essential perfections, but it is more eligible to be in a state of accidental perfection since it includes substantial perfection. In emphasizing that in general “a substance is better than an accident”, Langenstein ascribes more existential qualities to substances than to accidents.<sup>25</sup> Confirming the hint at the Aristotelian structure of being, a marginal note in the manuscript refers to *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 6, where Aristotle notably discusses the modes of being, especially of the good. Significantly, the Aristotelian passage is different from the one Thomas Aquinas comments on in the same context.<sup>26</sup>

Before proceeding to the conclusion he placed in the third inference, Langenstein outlined one inference on the habit of the divine will toward the bad creature and another on the habit of the human will toward his own misery. With regard to the first inference, he distinctly emphasizes human dignity and choice. On the one hand, humans inflict more misery on themselves than God can or does inflict on them. As known from Henry

<sup>22</sup> See Annex, lin. 29–34. All translations from the Latin are mine.

<sup>23</sup> There were harsh discussions at the University of Paris in the fourteenth century about the ontological status of accidents vs. substances: BERGER, Harald: *Über Entstehen und Vergehen der Sachverhaltsontologie im Spätmittelalter*, in: LEIBOLD, Gerhard/LÖFFLER, Winfried (eds.): *Entwicklungslinien mittelalterlicher Philosophie*. Wien: Verlag Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky 1999, 208–221, here 218.

<sup>24</sup> See Annex, lin. 43–48.

<sup>25</sup> See TURNER, Jason: *Ontological Pluralism*, in: *The Journal of Philosophy* 107 (2010), 5–34, here 5 and 7. It is important to underline that the late Langenstein was a pluralist regarding the ontology of rational essences; on the early Langenstein see SHANK: “*Unless You Believe*”, 132–136.

<sup>26</sup> See ARISTOTLE: *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 6 (1096a20). On the connection of Aquinas and Aristotle see HOFFMANN: *The Pleasure of Life*, 345.

of Ghent's distinction, God inflicts the damned only with punishment, but the damned also have to suffer from the misery of their guilt, which is bigger according to Langenstein. On the other hand, Langenstein insists on the gift of rationality as the innermost principle of human dignity, for which creatures have to remain grateful to the creator. With regard to the second inference, namely the habit of the created will, Langenstein introduces the right decision of reason into the argumentation. This argument, included in the first corollary to the second inference, proceeds from the parallel between temporal and eternal punishment:

As man is able to will the possession of eternal misery, so in the aforementioned case he has to will it rationally. We prove this as follows: since, through the reason of justice, he is able to will temporal misery or reward, and since eternal misery is no less justly attributed to the mortal [sin] which someone has in dying, he therefore can will it through the right decision of reason.<sup>27</sup>

Further additions are made in a similar note in the margin. In a section beginning with Apocalypse 9:6 ("they shall desire to die, and death shall fly from them"), right reason is said to choose annihilation or to desire death only when corrupted. This corruption comes from the force of sadness and pain in damnation, consequent to which one develops an appetite for non-existence.<sup>28</sup>

At this point, we can summarize Langenstein's theses as follows: based on proposition two, human beings can choose to act badly. Once they are punished with eternal pains for their acts, they are still left with one alternative (men appear at no moment of their existence, finite or infinite, as completely unfree). This alternative is not existential, since God has already decided not to annihilate them. This alternative is existentialist (an existentialist choice is a choice that qualifies existence with moral values). It concerns the choice of the will, over which reason presides, to suffer eternally for the reparation of the sin instead of giving way to irrational passions and desiring one's own annihilation. Therefore, the damned are less free in hell than they were on earth, but they are more moral beings when they are punished and suffer than while they were simply bad in the

<sup>27</sup> See Annex, lin. 94–99. In the second corollary to the second inference, Langenstein introduces an argument that proves his acquaintance with contemporary discussions of the issue: misery's intensity can be calculated as a middle degree and can generate latitudes of different figurations (Annex, lin. 103–108). See BRINZEI/SCHABEL: *Better Off Dead*, forthcoming; on the origins of calculations from the middle degree see SYLLA, Edith D.: *The Oxford Calculators' Middle Degree Theorem in Context*, in: *Early Science and Medicine* 15 (2010), 338–370, although Langenstein's direct inspiration was Parisian theology. On Viennese teaching on the latitudes and Langenstein's role in it, see DI LISCIA, Daniel A.: *The Latitudes breves and the Late Medieval University Teaching*, in: *SCIAMVS* 17 (2016), 55–120, here 63–65.

<sup>28</sup> See for example "ex vehementia passionis ut tristitie vel doloris", "et sic appetitu alibi erroneo appetunt potius non esse" (Annex, n. 45). Cf. DURAND DE SAINT-POURÇAIN: *Scriptum super IV libros Sententiarum*, IV, 50, 2, ed. Thomas Jeschke. Leuven: Peeters 2012, 426–433.



human present. It also has to be assumed that hell is not a homogeneous place. It is rather a place, where different mortal sins receive their different punishments and different human beings react differently to their being in pain. Some desire their own annihilation, but this happens only due to the corruption of their reason, while all the damned suffer as a consequence of their rational option for badness during their past life on earth.

We finally have to consider the conclusion to the main question placed in the third inference. As already noted, Langenstein's final answer to the question as whether the damned should rather avoid non-existence than eternal misery is affirmative: non-existence is worse (*fugibilis*) than eternal misery. Contrary to what was stated at the question's outset, this positive answer to the question is not Langenstein's own, but also stands in line with what Augustine had made clear centuries earlier. Reason, as will or nature, arbitrarily, by law, or absolutely, brings about the preference for remaining punished and miserable when compared to non-existence. Here, the absolute mode is perhaps the most interesting one. Absolutely speaking, non-existence does not include any good or well-being, while being miserably does. Being miserable implies God's differentiation into 1) being, 2) being a substance, 3) being an intellect, and 4) being free with freedom of choice.<sup>29</sup> In choosing non-existence, God or the damned do not choose anything. In choosing existence, God and rational creatures do choose at least one good thing: existence. The final answer is rather Augustine's; and it is unchanged.

Langenstein's arguments carry no practical value. They do not offer guidelines on how to preserve one's will from turning toward the desire of self-annihilation and prevent despair in states of extreme and infinite pain or sadness. It is only clear that infinite pain or sadness is the opposite of neither existence nor non-existence. Privation is not as bad as a habit is good, and there is no such thing as a *summum malum*, while there is a *summum bonum*. In this unbalanced ontology, in neutralizing non-existence, the initial opposition of the Bible and Augustine gets dissolved. From it, Langenstein's hell emerges as a particular place. It is a place of pain, but there is neither extreme sorrow, nor unbearable sadness.<sup>30</sup> Rationality, the very gift of God and an inalienable quality of humans, remains the essential condition that preserves even bad human beings from both complete misery and non-existence.

More surprisingly, the damned have to be grateful to God for their being rational creatures. Langenstein noted already in the first inference: "Even when a rational creature knows that God wants to send him to dam-

<sup>29</sup> The fourth element, the freedom of choice (*libertas contradictionis*) is a typically fourteenth-century concept traceable to John Duns Scotus; the other three elements were already accessible to Augustine and the scholastics.

<sup>30</sup> There is no maximal punitive sorrow, as opposed to the highest delight of the most blessed (but the "crooked damned" exist): see Annex, lin. 195–197.

nation, he has to be grateful for he still owns to God his being rational.”<sup>31</sup> Thus the damned are equal to the blessed not only in their being rational, but also in their being grateful: as the blessed are grateful blessed people, the damned are grateful damned people. While with gratefulness, Langenstein’s hell stands out among conceptions of eternal misery as singular; through rationality the infinite negative prolongation of existence already establishes itself as one of the most surprising and productive opportunities in the Middle Ages to emphasize the existentialist dimensions of human beings.

### *Abstract*

*In the Middle Ages, theologians frequently addressed the question whether simple non-existence is preferable to the eternal misery of the wicked. In the 1390s, Henry of Langenstein spoke repeatedly on the issue, but only in a version framed as a disputed question did he adopt an ontological approach. In Langenstein’s opinion, not only do men remain, in the image of their creator, eternally reasonable and free, but it is also for this very same – existentialist – reason that they always have to opt for their existence. With this statement, Langenstein’s hell becomes a particular place.*

<sup>31</sup> See Annex, lin. 85–87.

## APPENDIX

The appendix contains the edition of Henry of Langenstein's – referred to as "Henricus Hesse", "HH" in the margin of the manuscript next to the text – question "Utrum sit magis fugibile simpliciter non esse quam dampnabiliter misere esse". It is based on the unique manuscript witness of the question in Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, A-X-44, fol. 14<sup>r-v</sup>. The orthography follows the manuscript. Corrections, variant readings, and marginal notes are indicated in the notes; uncertain readings are marked with an asterisk. Critical notes use the following abbreviations:

*a. c.*: ante correctionem

*add. sed del.*: [manuscriptum] addidit, sed delevit

*in marg.*: in margine

*iter.*: iteravit

*ms.*: manuscriptum

*p. c.*: post correctionem

*sin.*: sinistra

*sup.*: superioris

*suppl.*: supplevi

*supra l.*: supra lineam

## HENRICUS DE HASSIA

UTRUM SIT MAGIS FUGIBILE SIMPLICITER NON ESSE QUAM  
DAMPNABILITER MISERE ESSE

- 5 <14<sup>r</sup>><sup>1</sup> Quod sic patet Matthei 26<sup>2</sup>: “Melius illi erat, si natus non fuisset”;  
ubi dicit Glossa:<sup>3</sup> “Melius est non esse quam male esse.” Et simile dicit  
Glossa super illo Ieremie 20:<sup>4</sup> “Maledicta dies in qua natus sum.”  
Oppositum patet per Augustinum *De libero arbitrio* libro 3<sup>5</sup>: “Si dyabolo  
daretur optio secundum rectam rationem, potius deberet eligere semper  
10 misere esse quam non esse”; et dicit capitulo 21: “Si quis dixerit, ‘Non esse  
quam misere esse mallet’, respondebo: ‘Mentiris’.”  
Propositio prima: Deus potius voluit rationalem creaturam pro culpa eter-  
naliter misere esse quam ipsam redigere in non esse. Secunda: Qualitercum-  
que est a creatura nolibile, taliter est ab eadem volibile. Patet, quia omne  
15 nolitum vel nolibile potest occurrere in casu sub ratione boni.  
Tertia: Non penes idem attenditur esse eligibile et fugibile penes quod bo-  
num et malum. Probatur, quia non quam bonum est aliquid in se est bonum  
cuilibet habenti. Patet, quia aliquod bonum in se est malum habenti.  
Corollarium: Quamvis angelus sit essentialiter melior homine, melius ta-  
20 men<sup>6</sup> est Sorti hominem esse quam angelum malum<sup>7</sup> esse.  
Quarta: Licet per redigi in non esse possit alicui male esse, tamen nulli per  
non esse potest bene vel male esse. Primum patet, quia redactio in non esse  
potest<sup>8</sup> alicui dolorosa esse. Secundum patet, quia nec quando res est, nec  
quando non est.  
25 Quinta: Sicut non esse non est in se bonum nec malum, ita nulli est nec  
esse potest bonum vel malum, quia si non esse esset in se malum, tunc ab  
eterno fuisset infinitum malum.  
Sexta: Eligibilius est rationali creature nude substantialiter esse quam eidem  
sit fugibile omni actu vel habitu accidental<sup>9</sup> perfectionis carere. Patet, quia  
30 omnis actus vel habitus potest removeri a rationali creatura sine eius culpa-

<sup>1</sup> quod] HH *in marg. sin.*<sup>2</sup> 26] Mt 26: 24<sup>3</sup> Glossa] Glossa super Mattheum 26: 24 (*Glossa Ordinaria*, Venice 1603, vol. 5, p. 426).<sup>4</sup> 20] Glossa super Jeremiam 20: 14 (*Glossa Ordinaria*, Venice 1603, vol. 4, p. 727).<sup>5</sup> 3] AUGUSTINUS: *De libero arbitrio* III, 6 (= Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 39: Aurelii Augustini Opera, pars II, 2. Turnhout: Brepols 1970, 286).<sup>6</sup> tamen] *supra l.*<sup>7</sup> malum] mutatum\* *ms.*<sup>8</sup> potest] patet *a. c.*<sup>9</sup> accidentalis] *p. c.*

biliter esse, igitur. Similiter potest sine eius morali malo in nudibus essentialibus creari.

Corollarium primum: Omnis actus et habitus accidentalis iustitiae aufferri potest sine malo culpabilis miserie.

- 5 Secundum: Licet fugibilis sit non esse quam imperfecte seu incomplete quoad accidentales perfectiones esse, ut patet ex propositione, tamen moraliter aliquem bene esse cum precisione a substantialiter perfecte esse<sup>10</sup> non est aliquo modo eligibiliter esse. Patet, quia sine substantialiter esse illud impossibile est esse.
- 10 Tertium: Sicut eligibilior est status hominis moraliter bene habentis quam status supremi angeli ratione sue essentialis perfectionis, sic quilibet iustus homo est simpliciter dicendus melior et dignior quolibet essentialiter perfectiore malo angelo. Patet secunda pars, quia alias concedendum esset quod Lucifer esset melior Beata Virgine.
- 15 Septima propositio: Accidentaliter perfectio creature est in se minus eligibilis quam eiusdem perfectio essentialis. Patet, quia substantia est melior accidente. Quilibet enim preeligeret esse substantia rationalis quam quaecumque accidentia. Cum qua propositione stat quod eligibilis est aliquem accidentaliter bene esse quam substantialiter perfecte esse. Patet, quia primum inseparabiliter includit secundum et non e converso.
- 20

*Prima conclusio de habitudine divine voluntatis  
respectu mali creature*

- Conclusio: Sic Deus omnem dampnatum in miseria culpe relinquit quod illam non infligit, sed solum miseriam dolorose pene. Prima pars patet
- 25 Iohannis 1<sup>11</sup>: "Sine ipso factum est nichil"; et per illud Augustini 83 *questionum* questione 3<sup>12</sup>: "Deo auctore nullus fit deterior." Secunda pars patet de afflictione reali vel intentionali ignis et aliis cruciatibus inferni; similiter de detentione potentie intellective dampnati in consideratione intensa ignis. Licet enim ignis formaliter differat locum secundum ipsum spiritum, solus
- 30 tamen Deus locat ipsum effective et determinat ipsum ad illud ubi, prohibendo ipsum ab alio, igitur Deus est immediata causa illius detentionis definitive perpetue. Similiter de detentione intellectus in consideratione intensa ignis: Deo cum intentione obiectaliter movente est causa positiva, quia ignis non subordinatur voluntati dampnati in continuando considerationem, ymo
- 35 contra voluntatem eius movet tamquam subordinatum immediate divine voluntati.

Corollarium: Quilibet dampnatus maiori miserie seipsum subiecit quam Deus ei infligit vel infligere potuit.

<sup>10</sup> esse] *suppl.*

<sup>11</sup> 1] Jh 1: 3

<sup>12</sup> 3] AUGUSTINUS: *De diversis questionibus*, q. 3 (= Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 44: Aurelii Augustini Opera, pars XIII, 2. Turnhout: Brepols 1975, 12).

Secundum: Non sicut dampnati suberunt eternaliter miserie culpe sine pena sensus, ita aliqui stabunt eternaliter in pena pro dimissa culpa.

Tertium: Quamvis Deus rationali creature sine sua culpa potest dare eternam miseriam, tamen nulli dabit talem nisi consequenter ad culpam.

- 5 Quartum<sup>13</sup>: Rationalis creatura licet sciret Deum se dampnare velle, adhuc teneretur sibi ad gratiarum actiones eo quod debet ei rationaliter esse.

*Secunda conclusio de habitudine create voluntatis  
respectu sue miserie*

- 10 Sicut voluntas potest ferri in aliquid vel in aliqua nulla movente ratione boni vel mali, ita potest volitive in malum sub ratione mali. Prima pars<sup>14</sup> patet de levante festucam; secunda pars patet ex suppositione secunda.

- Corollarium: Sicut homo eternam miseriam habere velle potest, ita in casu dictante ratione hoc velle debet. Probatur, quia ratione iustitie temporalem miseriam seu punialem velle potest et debet, sed non minus iuste eterna miseria datur pro mortali peccato<sup>15</sup>, in quo quis moritur, igitur potest et habeat et in casu recto iudicio rationis velle. Prima pars patet ex conclusione, et secunda ex suppositione.

- 20 Secundum: Stat duas misérias penales esse equales intensive et extensive, et tamen unam esse fugibiliorem quam aliam. Patet, quia una<sup>16</sup> <14<sup>v</sup>> potest<sup>17</sup> esse uniformis, et alia uniformiter difformis per equale tempus, cuius

<sup>13</sup> Quartum] Quarta *ms*

<sup>14</sup> pars] *suppl.*

<sup>15</sup> peccato] *suppl.*

<sup>16</sup> una] "Desiderabunt mori et mors fugiet ab eis." [Apc 9:6] Ysaías. Verum est iudicio erroneo rationis proveniente ex vehementia [rationis *a. c.*] passionis ut tristitie vel doloris, et secundum tale iudicium dampnati magis eligunt non esse quam misere esse, et sic appetitu tali erroneo appetunt potius non esse quam perpetuo penaliter esse.

Secundum dictamen rationis eligibilis est perpetuo inflicitive penaliter esse quam simpliciter non esse. Patet, quia pena inflicta est bonum iustitie et ad decorem universi; modo bonum iustitie est ab omnibus recte rationis tramite appetendum. Item: Minus fugibile est perpetuo culpabiliter esse quam simpliciter non esse. Patet, quia non esse nichil [eld *a. c.*] eligibilitatis includit, quia nichil bonitatis, sed culpabiliter esse implicat esse, ergo implicat bonum, quia ens et bonum convertuntur [ens *add. sed del.*], quia bonum [dicitur *add. sed del.*] equaliter dicitur enti, I *Ethicorum* capitulo 6 [ARISTOTELES: *Ethica Nicomachea* I, 6 (1096a20)].

Nota: Minus fugibile est perpetue dampnabiliter et culpabiliter simul esse quam solum culpabiliter esse. Patet cum pena sit culpe remediativa. Nec obstat illud: "Bonum erat ei, si natus non fuisset homo ille," [Mt 26:24] quia illud non intendit aliud nisi quod minus fugibile fuisset ei quod mortuus fuisset in utero quam quod fuit natus, quia nullam maculam actualis vitii contraxisset, si in utero mortuus fuisset, et per consequens longe minus supplicium habuisset. Et illud allegat Anselmus pro sua opinione in libro *Cur Deus homo*.

<sup>17</sup> potest] Augustinus libro III *De libero arbitrio*, capitulo 11, 12 et 13 dicit: "Si dyabolo daretur optio secundum rectam rationem, potius [habet *a. c.*] debet [*supra l.*] eligere semper misere esse quam non esse." Nam ut dicit capitulo 11: "Si quis dixerit: 'Non esse quam miserum esse me mallet', respondebo: 'Mentiris'." Et capitulo 13 probat tripliciter. Primo sic: Qui dicit: Mallet hoc quam illud, eligit aliquid. Non esse autem non est aliquid, igitur nullo pacto potest quis recte eligere non esse. Secundo: Quod est alio preeligendum, melius est eo;



gradui medio correspondet illa uniformis: ita de aliis latitudinibus diversarum figurationum.

Tertium: Sicut stat rationalem creaturam secundum intellectum quodammodo feliciter bene esse et secundum voluntatem dampnabiliter misere esse, sic stat rationalem creaturam in uno diversorum locorum esse feliciter, et in alio dampnabiliter misere.

Quartum: Fugibilis est cum summa delectatione esse in culpa quam sine ea in quacumque tristitia.

*Tertia conclusio de comparatione miseriarum  
penes fugibilis et minus fugibile*

Tam voluntate ut natura quam arbitraria, tam stante lege quam absolute est recto rationis iudicio fugibilis non esse quam penaliter misere esse. Patet per Augustinum *De libero arbitrio*: "Si quis dixerit: 'Mallem non esse quam misere esse', respondebo: 'Mentiris'." Et multa alia ponit ibidem, ex quibus apparet illam<sup>18</sup> conclusionem esse de eius intentione. Et probatur de voluntate arbitraria stante lege, quia nullus debet appetere non esse ad fugiendum iustum et bonum, cum sit ordinativum et punitivum culpe, igitur<sup>19</sup>. Probatur etiam quod absolute quia propria et adequata ratio<sup>20</sup> eius quod est non esse simpliciter, nichil boni aut bene esse includit, sed omne tale tollit, veram tamen potentiam huiusmodi, ac per hoc nullam participationem divine bonitatis habet. Propria vero ratio eius, quod est rationalem creaturam misere esse, inseparabiliter includit participationem multiplicem divine bonitatis, ut esse, esse<sup>21</sup> substantiam, esse intellectum, esse contradictione liberum, que sunt perfectiones divine ad extra communicate, igitur misere esse includit multa que sunt eligibilia; aliud autem nullum tale, igitur misere esse magis appropinquat eligenti<sup>22</sup> quam non esse.

Item: Unicuique secundum veritatem sue nature<sup>23</sup> magis est fugibile illud quod<sup>24</sup> ei ex toto opponitur quam illud quod non ex toto, sed in multis secum communicat. Sed non esse rationalis essentie ex toto opponitur esse eiusdem, et non sic eius misere esse, ut notum est, igitur. Verbi gratia

quod autem non est, melius esse non potest, igitur. Tertio: Quod quis eligit appetendum cum ad illud perveniret, necesse est ut melior fiat. Melior autem esse non poterit qui non erit, igitur. Ille sunt rationes beati Augustini ad probandum quod eligibilis sit miserum esse quam non esse. *Infra. in marg. sup.*

<sup>18</sup> conclusionem] questionem *a. c.*

<sup>19</sup> igitur] dicitur *add. sed del.*

<sup>20</sup> ratio] ARISTOTELES: *Ethica Nicomachea* I, 6 (1096a20).

<sup>21</sup> esse] *p. c.*

<sup>22</sup> eligenti] eligeri *a. c.*, eliginti *ms.*

<sup>23</sup> nature] ANSELMUS: *Cur Deus homo* I, 15 in: *Sancti Anselmi Opera Omnia*. Rome 1946, vol. 2, 73.

<sup>24</sup> quod] ARISTOTELES: *De libero arbitrio* III, 6 (= Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 39: Aurelii Augustini Opera, pars II, 2. Turnhout: Brepols 1970, 286).

calidum magis fugit frigidum simpliciter, nichil participans de caliditate quam frigidum aliquos gradus caliditatis.

Item: Deus sua infallibili ratione dictante maluit absolute rationali creature dare esse, licet sciret ipsam eternaliter misere esse, quam ei non dare esse, ut patet<sup>25</sup> ex suppositione prima, igitur primum est simpliciter melius et absolute.

Corollarium: Sicut omni dampnato incomparabiliter peius est per culpam quam per penam a culpa distinctam esse<sup>26</sup>, ita dampnato minus male est per culpam reformatam iusta punitione quam in culpa sine pena remanere.

Prima pars patet, quia sicut bonum honestum melius est quolibet bono commodi, ita malum culpabile est peius malo incommodi. Secunda pars patet ex prima, quia in secundo nullum est bonum, nisi nature, quod etiam vitiatur per malum culpe; in primo est aliquod bonum ultra bonum nature, scilicet iusta correspondentia pene reformans culpam.

Secundum: Fugibilior est culpa sola quam cum pena iusta. Sequitur ex predicta, et patet per Boetium IV *De consolatione*, prosa 4<sup>27</sup>: "Infeliciores sunt improbi iniusta<sup>28</sup> impunitate donati quam iusta ultione puniti." Item: "Feliciores", inquit, "esse improbos supplicia lucentes quam si eos nulla iustitie pena coerceat."<sup>29</sup>

Tertium: Sicut nulli<sup>30</sup> dampnato tam male est<sup>31</sup> per penalem miseriam quam bene est minimo beato per rectitudinis gloriam, ita incomparabiliter melius est beato per habitum beatitudinis quam male est dampnato per privationem eiusdem. Prima pars patet, quia omni beato tam bene est quod nichil mali habet, sed nulli dampnato tam male est quod nichil boni habeat, sicut patet ex probatione conclusionis. Secunda pars patet ex prima parte et eius deductione.

Quartum: Malitia privationis non est universaliter mensuranda per bonitatem habitus oppositi. Sequitur ex predicto, et probatur, quia habitus videtur esse ita bonus habenti sicut eque intensus habitus contrarius est vel<sup>32</sup> esset ei malus, et e converso; modo habitus contrarius est peior privatione. Patet, quia illam infert seu includit. Igitur privatio est minus mala quam habitus est bonus, quod fuit probandum.

<sup>25</sup> patet] *suppl.*

<sup>26</sup> esse] *suppl.*

<sup>27</sup> 4] BOETHIUS: *De consolatione Philosophiae* IV, prosa 4, 21 and 13 (= Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 94: Anicii Mantii Severini Boethii Opera, pars I. Turnhout: Brepols 1957, 75 and 74).

<sup>28</sup> iniusta] in illius solius iusta *a. c.*

<sup>29</sup> puniti] "Multo infeliciores improbi sunt impunitate... ultione puniti." *iter. in marg. sin.* Item: "Feliciores... pena coerceat." *in marg. sin.* (BOETHIUS: *De consolatione Philosophiae* IV, prosa 4).

<sup>30</sup> nulli] nullum *a. c.*

<sup>31</sup> est] *supra l.*

<sup>32</sup> vel] esse potest *add. sed del.*

Item: Privatio forme asini non est materie hominis ita mala sicut positio eius esset ei bona vel eam perficeret; et ita in multis.

Item: Habitus scientie mathematicalis delectat scientem et honorabilem reddit, et tamen nescientia seu privatio illius non contristat, nec inhonorabilem reddit.

5

Item: Omne fugibile est eo fugibile, quia oppositum est eligibile, igitur; et eligibilitas est causa fugibilitatis, igitur prestantior.

Item: Impossibile est esse purum malum sicut reperitur purum<sup>33</sup> bonum; nec sicut reperitur summum bonum, potest esse aliquod summum malum, igitur bonum excedit malum et bonitas essendi malitiam non essendi.

10

Item: Ad iustitiam beati et visionem Dei sequitur semper positiva delectatio, et ad culpam et privationem visionis<sup>34</sup> non sequitur punitiva tristitia, ut patet de dampnatis pravis.

Quintum: Quamvis sit minus eligibile desinere esse quam culpam committere<sup>35</sup>, tamen magis fugibile est non esse quam in culpa ut pena semper esse.

15

<sup>33</sup> purum] primum *a. c.*

<sup>34</sup> visionis] versi *a. c.*

<sup>35</sup> committere] dimittere *a. c.*