

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE
ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY.
NEW SERIES. - VOL. VII**

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VARIOUS

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ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY.

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*Containing the Papers read before the Society during the
Twenty-Eighth Session, 1906-1907.*

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PAPERS READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY,
1906-1907.

NICHOLAS DE ULTRICURIA, A MEDIEVAL HUME.

By DR. H. RASHDALL.

Two causes have prevented full justice being done to the philosophical penetration and originality of the Schoolmen. Their acuteness, their subtlety, and their industry have been sufficiently praised. It has even been recognised that beneath a thin veil of orthodoxy—the thinness of which was sometimes appreciated, sometimes not even suspected, by the thinker himself—much bold speculation really went on in the medieval Schools. But it is sometimes forgotten that the acknowledged Doctors of the Church were not the only thinkers who once taught and lectured and disputed in the Rue du Fouarre at Paris or our Oxford School Street: perhaps these were not always the most brilliant or the most original. One cause which has tended to give an exaggerated impression of the orthodoxy and deference to authority prevalent in the medieval Schools is the fact that the heretics, though at one time they often enjoyed considerable vogue, were at length as a rule more or less suppressed, so completely sometimes that nothing remains of their writings but the propositions for which they were condemned and which in most cases, but not always, they eventually retracted. The other is the great advantage which the regular clergy possessed over the seculars in diffusing

their teaching throughout Europe and getting them copied, circulated, preserved, and handed on after their deaths—eventually, after the invention of printing, printed and brought within easy reach of the modern scholar. The secular Master of Arts or Doctor of Theology could not so easily transfer himself and his lectures from Oxford to Paris, and from Paris to Prague or Vienna, while it was a regular part of the Mendicant system to transfer their Lecturers from one convent to another. Every famous Oxford Friar, sooner or later, taught at Paris, and what was known in Paris was soon known to the world. Once accepted and approved by his Order, the Mendicant Doctor was provided with an organised army of disciples, pledged by the spirit of monastic loyalty to diffuse his teaching during his lifetime, and to hand it down to posterity after his death. The great rows of costly folios which represent the Schoolman to the modern historian of Philosophy are for the most part the works of Mendicant Doctors: the works of the secular thinkers, from whom in many cases it is known that these Doctors received their first inspiration, remain unprinted and unexplored in the MS. presses of our University and College Libraries, when their heresies were not conspicuous enough to procure for them the greater distinction of the bonfire.

A most conspicuous instance of the success of well-regulated persecution in condemning thought to oblivion is supplied by the fate of Wycliffe's writings. Wycliffe was, even before the date of his open quarrel with the Church, about the most famous Schoolman of his day: he was famous as a pure Philosopher, a Logician, and a Metaphysician, before he wrote Theology at all; and he was famous as a Theologian before he was famous as a heretic. Yet, in spite of all his fame, his works, with the exception of a few of the most popular, have remained in MS. till the Wycliffe Society began its valuable labours in connexion with the quinquacentenary of his death. Even now that his works occupy a whole shelf in our Libraries, no historian of Philosophy has discovered the existence of such a thinker: even

his name does not appear in Prantl or Erdmann or Ueberweg or Hauréau's History of the Scholastic Philosophy. But the most curious instance of this process of inverted natural selection which has come under my notice is the fate of the writer whom I wish to take this opportunity of introducing—perhaps I may venture to say for the first time—to the notice of modern Philosophers. It might seem hardly credible that a writer of the 14th century should have anticipated the main theses of Berkeley and of Hume, and yet occupy but a line or two in the recognised histories of Philosophy. But such is the fact. This Society exists, no doubt, primarily to promote the study of Philosophy, not of the history of Philosophy;—to say nothing of so antiquarian a department of that history as the Philosophy of the 14th century. Still, the ideas of this neglected Schoolman are so curious and interesting that I hope I am not mistaken in supposing that the members of this Society might like, by way of diversion from the more actual and present-day controversies which usually claim their attention, to hear a little about a forgotten chapter in the history of thought.

In one of the great folios of du Boullai's history of the University of Paris, there is printed a brief document in which one Nicholas de Ultricurua (elsewhere spelt Autricuria) retracts certain propositions which he had maintained in the Schools of Arts at Paris, and for holding which he was deprived of his Mastership of Arts and declared incapable of proceeding to the degree of Doctor of Theology. The document as there printed is only a fragment: the whole of it now appears in the second volume of the magnificent *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, edited by the late Father Denifle and M. Chatelain. The document even now occupies but ten quarto pages. One letter of his to a philosophical opponent is printed in St. Argentré's *Collectio Judiciorum de novis erroribus*:* two remain in MS. at Paris. This is all that remains of the activity of one who

* *Tom. I, p. 358.*

appears to have felt all the philosophic doubts which, as developed by Berkeley and Hume, all subsequent Philosophy has been seeking either to confirm or to remove. No doubt the ability of a thinker is to be determined not by the theses which he propounds but by the arguments which he uses in defence of them: the arguments used by Nicholas are very inadequately preserved. But what remains makes it clear that if his penetration was not equal to that of Berkeley and Hume, he had fairly entered upon the line of thought which is now associated with their names. Of the man himself scarcely anything is known. He came from Autricourt, in the diocese of Verdun, and may therefore, I suppose, be set down as a German. He performed a disputation for the degree of Doctor of Theology some time before 1342.* In 1340, with five others, one of them being an Englishman—Henricus Anglicus, of the Cistercian Order—he was summoned to the Papal Court at Avignon to answer certain charges of heresy; he is now described as a Licentiate of Theology, *i.e.*, he had all but completed the elaborate course which then conducted to the degree of Doctor in that Faculty. Eight years before, being then a Bachelor of Theology, he was “provided” by the Pope to a Canonry at Metz. This, it may be mentioned, was at the time the usual way of securing a maintenance for University Teachers in the Northern Universities. No endowments expressly designed for University Chairs at present existing, Prebends and College Fellowships (which last at Paris ceased when the D.D. degree was taken), were the only means of subsistence available for such Teachers. His case was referred to a Cardinal,† and the affair apparently lingered on, *more Romano*, for six years. It was not till 1346 that judgment was given to the effect already mentioned. Retractation in a beaten Controversialist at that time involved no disgrace; it

* *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, T. II, No. 912, note.

† *Ib.*, No. 1041 and notes; *cf. Auctarium*, T. I, c. 11.

was looked upon very much in the same light as the act of a modern politician or newspaper editor who retracts a libel which he has found himself unable to justify to the satisfaction of a Judge or Jury, though he may still retain his private opinion that it is true. Nicholas retracted his errors at Avignon in 1346; on St. Catherine's Day, November 25th, 1347, he publicly recanted them in a sermon at the Dominican Church in Paris, and with his own hand burned the theses and the tractate in which they had been defended. His moderation was not unrewarded. In 1348—two years after his condemnation—he is Dean of Metz, and the friends who had shared his errors seem for the most part to have likewise achieved satisfactory ecclesiastical careers.

There is only one more point which has possibly to be added to this jejune record. A certain MS., supposed to be a discourse of Pope Clement VI, bearing the date 1343, declares that Nicholas had fled to the Court of Louis of Bavaria, the anti-papal claimant of the Imperial crown.* Father Denifle appears to doubt the story: yet, if true, it would account for the long delay in pronouncing his condemnation. And the fact would fit in with all that we know of the political and ecclesiastical events of the time. Nicholas was certainly a disciple of William of Occam, who likewise joined the party, and lived at the Court of Louis of Bavaria, and died unreconciled with the Holy See in 1347. The still bolder anti-papalist thinkers Marsilius of Padua and John of Jandun and many other more or less suspected Theologians were members of the group which rallied round the enlightened but unfortunate Louis of Bavaria.

However, our interest lies not in the life of Nicholas of Autricourt but in his theses. The first list of errors charged against Nicholas of Autricourt are 32 in number. To this is appended a further list of admissions made by him in the

* See the Note in *Chart. Univ. Paris*, T. II, p. 720.